MMag.[a] Simone Puff

What's in a Shade?:
The Significance of Skin Color in *Ebony* Magazine

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1. Begutachter:	Ao. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Heinz Tschachler
Institut:	Anglistik und Amerikanistik
2. Begutachterin:	Ao. Univ.-Prof. Dr.[in] Brigitte Hipfl
Institut:	Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaft

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For my Grandma
(1925 – 2012)

Black is beautiful,
White is too,
Depending not
On what's in view,
But what's beneath
And deep within
That black or white –
Encasing skin.

~ Mary Turnbull, *Ebony* 1970

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Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it. ~ William A. Ward[1]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After almost four years of working on this project I have come to refer to my dissertation with the metaphor of a giant jigsaw puzzle: It was made of a million tiny pieces that came without the picture on the box. When I first started out, the task seemed daunting at best, discouraging at worst, and downright impossible in between. After shuffling and re-shuffling the heaps of puzzle pieces, some began to stand out. Slowly, I could group more and more pieces around the ones that seemed to fit together. One by one, individual sections took shape, and finally, I started to see the proverbial bigger picture. As bell hooks[2] maintains, "[t]rue intellectual work is done in solitude. It takes hours of thought, study and reflection, then it takes time to write" (2010, 139). While I agree with the importance of solitude in principle, I could not have done anything without a number of people who helped me to embark on this long but exciting journey with the final destination called Ph.D.

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[1] Quoted from *ThinkExist.com*.
[2] She intentionally spells her name with lower-case letters, a practice that I respect throughout this work.

ularly present my work in her dissertation seminar and for always finding encouraging words that left me with a restored sense of self-confidence after each and every meeting with her. I would also like to thank Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt for helping me finance two three-month research trips to the United States. I am especially appreciative to my department head, Dr. Jörg Helbig, for allowing me to re-schedule some of my classes so I would be able to go abroad.

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When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action[.]
~ bell hooks (1989)

PREFACE

Studying American Studies as a non-American means studying a culture to which one does not belong. Going one step further and metaphorically crossing the color line to study African American culture as a non-African American is a "risky practice," as Samira Kawash notices in the preface to her book *Dislocating the Color Line* (1997, viii). While there is no need for trying to defend my research interests *per se*, as a white Austrian media and American Studies scholar I see a need for positioning myself adequately within the cultural framework with which I am working. Additionally, a study like mine would be remiss without making transparent why I am interested in African American studies in general and colorism in the Black community in particular. The words of bell hooks linger in my consciousness here: "When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (1989, 43). It is the thought process of the "ethics" of my action that I will try to reflect in this preface, hoping that by doing so it will become clear that I am working against the "dominating" system, rather than perpetuating it.

People often speak about books that changed their lives. bell hooks's *Feminism Is for Everybody* (2000) was such a book for me. I read it in my "Introduction to Women's Studies" class, which was taught by a Black sociologist at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, Florida while I was an exchange student there in the fall of 2005. As a self-identified, although then still quite young feminist, it changed my outlook on the world. It probably also changed my career path because it ignited an interest to study other "feminisms" than focus on its mainstream white version to which I had previously been exposed as a white Austrian in a European educational context. Eventually, hooks's book brought me to the topic of my master's thesis, which was studying the Black Feminist Movement(s) in the U.S. It was then that

I first consciously learned about institutionalized racism and the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender. It was also then that I read Patricia Hill Collins's seminal work *Black Feminist Thought* (2000 [1991]), which led me to think more about controlling images and stereotypes of Black women, both in the media and in the overall American society. In one section of the book, Hill Collins also mentions intra-racial color hierarchies within the Black community, and the social "value" of being lighter-skinned (2000, 97-101). Looking at the American media with more critical awareness, I found myself surrounded by images of "light is right," and started to actively question the pervasive reverence for white European standards.

As an undergraduate student of English and American Studies at Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt in Klagenfurt, Austria I wrote a literary seminar paper about (skin) color references and colorism in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying* (1993). Research for this paper provided me with a basic understanding of the system of privilege and prejudice based on skin color and other phenotypic features that some scholars have come to call *colorism*.[3] Delving more deeply into this subject, I soon realized that skin tone stratification is global and is rooted in concepts of white supremacy in the forms of colonization and/or slavery – from India to Brazil to the Caribbean to the United States – rather than a sociologically pathological behavior that developed *within* communities of color. Obviously, my focus on American Studies, which stems as much from personal interest as from teaching and working in a department of English and American Studies, has led to my focus on the United States. Within that cultural and geographic realm I chose to study the Black community and its complex relationship to skin color because I wanted to look specifically at how racism and the legacy of slavery continue to influence discourses of skin color.[4]

[3] I will explain in the introduction why I think this is mostly an academic term, with Black people often using a different terminology, although it gained favor in the public discourse in recent years.
[4] For other studies on different racial and ethnic groups and their relationship to color and colorism in the U.S. see, for example, Hall (2009) and Rondilla and Spickard (2007).

To this day, the white people[5] of the United States are accomplices in feeding into colorism by encoding beauty almost exclusively in terms of light skin and straight hair, which everyone is encouraged to emulate. This is one reason why I, being a part of the group seen as the "oppressor," wish to raise awareness for these kinds of biases, particularly as a current teacher of American literature(s) and culture(s) in a more or less homogeneously white classroom at an Austrian university. As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant aptly put it, "[t]o oppose racism one must remain conscious of race" (1994, 157). The same, I would like to argue, goes for colorism, which needs to be seen as an outgrowth of racial formation and racism. Understanding realities of people different from oneself "can make [one] more caring, conscientious, and compassionate;" it can also enable teachers to "foster dialogue and build relationships between groups," in the words of Regina E. Spellers (2010, 300). Working to further this dialogue is a goal that I am pursuing personally as well as academically in order to contribute my share to a more equitable and socially just society.

While reading countless articles from the two most widely-circulated African American monthly magazines, *Ebony* and *Essence*, I came across a remark that very much resonated with me because it characterizes how I feel towards my approach to this topic. My position as an Austrian researcher allows me to stand "outside of the pressures of American culture," which is a phrase that I borrow from an article by Lerone Bennett, Jr., published in the November 1980 issue of *Ebony* ("What is Black Beauty?" 160). As such, this position provides me with a different viewpoint and a lens through which I am able to look without the cultural background (and bias) of having been raised in an American society. While it seems certainly easier to do research on and with people from a culture that one is a part of, I would like to quote African American literary scholar Nellie Y. McKay, who once asserted that, "[t]here is also something of value in having the perspectives of outsiders to a culture as participants in the critical discourse evaluating its productions" (2005 [2004], xiii). It is this "something of value" that I hope to be able to bring to the table in my work as one more perspective worth examining. I hope my research will contribute to a dialogue between scholars harboring a sincere interest

[5] The history of who got to be part of the "white club" in the United States is a complex one that will be discussed in more detail in chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.3.

in studying the discourse of skin color in the Black community, regardless of their racial, ethnic and/or cultural heritage. In this spirit, the closing words in the epilogue of *The Color Complex* (1992), a seminal book on colorism in the Black community, will be my opening words for this dissertation: "The first step is awareness" (166), an awareness which I hope my readers will gain from this dissertation and which should help all of us to work together to end systems of discrimination and domination, in the United States and elsewhere.

In the final section of this preface, I would like to explain my use of racial labels in this dissertation. This is particularly important when dealing with a group that, for a long time, was not given the right to choose their own names but rather had to adopt racial labels that were used – often in derogatory ways – by white people: In my work the words *Black* and *African American* are used interchangeably to reflect the current usage of both these terms in the Black community in the U.S. Like many other scholars, I choose to capitalize the term *Black* when it refers to a racial group with a shared history. The collective past and linked fate of this marginalized and subjugated group in the United States is also the reason why the term *Black community*, although used in the singular form, is to be understood as a collective label for a heterogeneous group in the United States, as opposed to a monolithic conception of Black people's racial identity. The term *Black community* is obviously a construct, but one that was formed out of necessity in order to establish a group cohesiveness necessary in a society largely based on the subjugation of its people of African descent. People in the Black community are a diverse group coming in all shades. However, because of the transatlantic slave trade and the subsequent institutionalization of slavery on the North American continent, familial ties were broken, communities were destroyed, and people's ancestry was lost, which gives people of African descent in the United States a shared history and binds them together in what Signithia Fordham called a system of "Skinship" (2010). Similarly, because of a "common political agenda and culture," although differently experienced by individuals, Patricia Hill Collins speaks of Black people in the U.S. as a "heterogeneous collectivity" (2000, 112).

As mentioned before, the term *Black* is capitalized; however, in a deliberate rejection of the term *white* being the default category, I choose to spell it with a

lower-case "w." When used to refer to people, the label *white* has always been considered the human "norm," and continues to be used for the group of people that is considered as having no race, as being unmarked, and as being attributed with all the power ever since the institutionalization of slavery (see, for example, Dyer 1997, 1-4). I intentionally want to draw the reader's attention to that social imbalance by lower-casing the term. This is certainly not done in an attempt to offend any white readers of this dissertation. Rather, I simply wish to indicate and honor Black people's shared history in the United States that calls – at least in my opinion – for an emphasis to be put on the term *Black* that I believe to achieve by capitalizing it. Along similar lines, I will also capitalize other racial and ethnic group names, again with the only exception of *white*, seeing it as a term that carries so much weight and importance in Western society that it does not need the extra capital letter. Moreover, anti-racist scholar Frances Kendall voiced concern in the preface to her book, *Understanding White Privilege*, that capitalizing the term *White* has also been common practice of white supremacists (2006, xiii-xiv). Taking my cue from her, I simply choose to reject the capital "w."

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

In an environment where there are so many color-prejudiced whites, there are bound to be a number of color-prejudiced blacks.
~ Wallace Thurman, The Blacker the Berry *(1929)*

Without racism, colorism would not exist.
~ Virginia R. Harris (1995)

INTRODUCTION: "IF YOU'RE LIGHT, YOU'RE ALRIGHT"

When it comes to forms of social oppression and discrimination, racism, sexism, and classism are some of the words most often heard in American society. Less known as a term, perhaps, but still widely recognized among people of color, is another "ism"[6] that can be added to this infamous list: colorism. The term is believed to have been coined in 1982 by novelist Alice Walker, who defined it as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people" (290). The concept as such, however, is an age-old hierarchy, which for people of African descent in the United States has its roots in slavery. It is based on different shades of skin color primarily *within* a racial or ethnic community.[7] In this hierarchy, lighter skin is generally perceived to be better and more desirable than darker skin. Despite the obvious reference to skin color in the name, sociologist Mark E. Hill emphasizes that the meaning of colorism by far surpasses one's complexion: "'Color'," he maintains, "is used … to refer to physical traits commonly associated with racial ancestry such as skin tone, hair texture, and facial morphology" (2000, 1439). It is in light of this definition that colorism is seen here, thereby also including the

[6] The vocabulary of "isms" is considered problematic by some scholars: Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis, for example, list several reasons why speaking of "isms" does not reflect the true nature of different systems of domination and subordination based on race, gender, class, or color. Perhaps the most important reason they give is that it creates an illusion of all these "isms" as comparable to each other and thus as interchangeable, which is simply not the case (1996). While taking this as a valid argument, it needs to be stated that language will always create difficulties and any term chosen allows for unintended interpretations. Yet, in order to move the discussion forward a terminology has to be adopted that is widely understood. Additionally, highlighting instead of neglecting the differences between the various forms of "isms" seems a worthwhile approach.

[7] Some legal scholars insist on the fact that colorism can, of course, also be performed *inter*-racially. People may, for example, favor someone from a different racial or ethnic group based on their lighter shade of skin, and, in turn, discriminate against another person based on their darker hue (see, for example, Jones 2000, 1498-1499). This work, however, is primarily concerned with colorism as an *intra*-racial issue.

significance of so-called "good" and "bad" hair, in other words straight versus tightly curled hair, eye color, as well as other physical features such as the shapes of lips and noses.[8]

This form of intra-racial prejudice and bias that generally favors light skin over dark skin and adheres to other white Eurocentric beauty ideals is a global phenomenon.[9] It is, however, particularly prominent in the African American community. During the era of slavery, people of African descent learned that lighter skin equals more privilege in the United States (see chapter 1.2.1 on the difference between "house slaves" and "field slaves"), and this concept has been perpetuated. As Marita Golden asserts, there are many different expressions that describe "African Americans' pernicious, persistent dirty little secret – *colorism*, *color-conscious*, *color-struck*, *color complex*" (2004, 7; original emphasis). The term *colorism* seems to be mostly scholarly in nature, although it has become more popular in the twenty-first century (Wilder 2010, 185).[10] No matter which term is used, the core issues always center on "the culture's obsession with White-defined beauty" (Golden 2004, 7) and the rejection and ostracism of, and discrimination against those who are dark-skinned.[11] A common, yet hurtful, children's rhyme sums up this attitude: "If you're light, you're all right, if you're brown stick around, if you're Black get back." This saying reflects how African Americans have been historically perceived in the racist America in which they were raised. Today, it still

[8] Just like with labels for different shades of skin color, words used when describing hair texture need to be seen as not neutral but often racially charged and provocative, especially when used by non-Black people. Out of respect for this sensitive issue, I will follow Maxine Leeds Craig's model of using the label "tightly curled" when referring to the curly texture of Black hair, and will avoid terms like "nappy" and "kinky," which are largely viewed as derogatory when used outside of the Black community (Craig 2002, 21).

[9] Three arbitrarily chosen contemporary examples should demonstrate the global significance of yearning for light skin: One, in 2010 a Facebook application in India was launched which promises to lighten one's profile picture and is promoted in connection with a bleaching cream by Vaseline ("Vaseline Launches Skin-Whitening Facebook India App" 13 July 2010). Two, in 2011 a front-page article of the Jamaican newspaper *The Weekly Gleaner* reported of job advertisements seeking light-skinned employees (Barrett and Reid 2011). Three, while attending a conference in Paris in 2011, I saw and took pictures of beauty parlors in the city's *Château d'Eau* neighborhood, which caters to the Afro-French community with a "Fair & White Center" and product placement in shop windows for skin bleaching cosmetics called "Topsygel," "Whitening Wipes," a "Lightening Mask," and others (for pictures see appendix, pages 241 – 242).

[10] At this point I would like to disagree with Ronald Hall who is quoted to have referred to colorism as a "folk term" in a *TIME* magazine interview (Sachs 11 September 2008). As Wilder and Cain write, colorism "is not part of everyday language" (2011, 578), and thus cannot be a folk term.

[11] Colorism, of course, goes both ways. Light-skinned African Americans often report of being discriminated against because of their biracial heritage and being called equally derogatory names as their darker-hued contemporaries (see Golden 2004; Hunter 2005; Russell, Wilson and R. Hall 1992).

has serious implications for Black people in the U.S., particularly for Black women (see chapter 1.3). In a society that continues to be dominated by the racialization of all its non-white citizens, paired with the fact that said society is based on a patriarchal system that makes female beauty a form of "social capital" (Hunter 2002), it comes as no surprise that one such valuable currency is light skin color.

As varied as the names for the term *colorism* is the set of vocabulary with which different shades of human skin are described in the Black community. In his seminal 1946 study on "color names," sociologist Charles H. Parrish identified more than 140 names to describe variations in skin color, ranging from household names like "high yellow" (a variant of that being "high yaller"), "brownskin," and "blue black" to lesser known and – at least in his study – more rarely used terms such as "ink spot," "teasing brown," and "tar baby"[12] (Parrish 1946). When JeffriAnne Wilder carried out a similar analysis for her 2008 dissertation (published as an article in 2010), she found striking similarities in the names used as well as their connotations, both positive and negative (Wilder 2010). This indicates that there has been little change in the discourse in over six decades. Often, food nomenclature is used to describe shades of skin color within the Black community. Commonly used words are *caramel*, *honey*, or *café au lait* for light skin, with more exotic versions including *ginger*, *cinnamon*, and *peach*, as well as many others. When talking positively about dark skin, terms such as *chocolate*, *cocoa*, and *brown sugar* are used. Among other terms, Langston Hughes celebrates women the color of *plum*, *licorice*, and *blackberry* in his poem "Harlem Sweeties" (2001 [1942]).

While color may be as empty a signifier as race, for both are social constructs, and ideological concepts rather than biological categories, both carry meaning in the American racialized society, as do gender and class.[13] Verna M. Keith describes the U.S. as a society where "distinctions based on skin color have historically intersected with racism, sexism, and class" (2009, 25). It is these intersections of different forms of oppression that add metaphorical fuel to the fire and thereby enable the practice of colorism. The problem, as Margaret Hunter

[12] Obviously, the term *tar baby* gained some notoriety with the publication of Toni Morrison's 1982 novel by the same name.
[13] There are, of course, other important categories that inform one's identity, most notably sexual orientation, religion, age, and (dis)ability. Yet for the purpose of this analysis which can not go into detail with specifics of each of these, only race, gender, class, and color will be highlighted.

maintains, is deeply entrenched in society: "White beauty is normal beauty and white beauty is ideal beauty" (2005, 63). If white is the norm, however, everything else is seen as deviant and abnormal, with people who fall into that category being required to try to live up to this norm. Charles Mills reminds us in this context of the need for an "aesthetic norming" of the body that helps one to approximate the somatic norm of the white body in order to not be "stigmatized as aesthetically repulsive and deviant" (61). Failing to approximate oneself to this norm, however, can gravely distort one's sense of identity and self-love. In her essay "An Aesthetic of Blackness," bell hooks speaks about color politics and "the ways racism has created an aesthetic that wounds us, a way of thinking about beauty that hurts" (1990, 113). This aesthetic is determined by a pervasiveness of dominant white values. This is why, in general, colorism needs to be seen as a variation of white racism, as it can be equally destructive. Michael Vannoy Adams even calls colorism a form of essentialism: "The assumption is that an outer appearance (skin color) is an indicator of an inner essence. The essentialist fallacy effectively restricts … all individuals – 'white,' 'black,' or whatever color – to a collective 'natural' identity" (1996, 246). In her autobiographical book *Don't Play in the Sun* (2004), Marita Golden relates to this fallacy, which is always based on a subjective interpretation of skin color: "Color is in many ways an illusion. It is a game we play. It is subjective. We judge color not with our eyes but with our emotions. Our prejudices. Our longings. Our fears. Our hearts" (13).

To this day, an honest discussion of colorism is still often informed by the notion of not wanting to "air dirty laundry" in public. While certainly an open secret among African Americans, colorism is at the same time considered a taboo, often for fear of being seen as a pathology among Black people. In his well-acclaimed autobiography *Dreams from My Father* (2004 [1995]), Barack Obama assesses the color consciousness based on his own experiences in college and claims that the conversations were there, yet never took place when whites were present:

> … to admit our doubt and confusion to whites, to open up our psyches to general examination by those who had caused so much of the damage in the first place, seemed ludicrous, itself an expression of self-hatred – for there seemed no reason to expect that whites would look at our private struggles as a mirror into their own souls, rather than yet more evidence of black pathology. (Obama 2004, 193)

As such, colorism has been a perennially popular topic, albeit one that was better discussed in private, and certainly not among white people. However, as Margaret Hunter observed, "[t]he popular media has frequently taken up the issue of colorism … in the African American community with countless articles in black magazines," listing *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence* as examples (2005, 50; 131). When colorism is publicly addressed in these outlets, often questions on Black identity and Black "authenticity" are raised, in other words, being "not Black enough" versus being "too Black."

Media outlets of the Black press in the United States, particularly traditional magazines like *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence*, frequently make an attempt to combat white hegemonic representations of the Black body as the "Other." These magazines commonly offer self-affirming, positive images of a diverse Black aesthetic. This is done by embracing different forms – and shades – of Blackness and concepts of the Black self. At the same time, these images have often been influenced by the very hegemonic ideologies that the Black press has tried to oppose. Thus, it comes as no surprise that representations of Black bodies in the media have sometimes morphed with internalized views based on "rejecting blackness" (hooks 1992, 18). This is seen, for instance, in advertisements for bleaching creams, or "dark spot removers," to use a twenty-first century euphemism for cosmetics intended to lighten one's skin. Particularly the commodification of female beauty has made it difficult to discard the old idea of "light is right."

In this dissertation I shed light on the significance of skin color in Black America as reflected in a systematic study of articles and some selected advertisements of the Black press. I set out to analyze the discourses of skin color in *Ebony* magazine over a period of forty-one years (1970 – 2011). This is done in order to uncover how skin color was and is represented in one of the oldest and most influential print media outlets in Black America. Basically, there are two reasons for this time frame: One, 1970 marks an important milestone for the purpose of this study. It ushers in a new decade in which "Black is Beautiful" largely changed the self-perception of Black America.[14] At the same time, 1970 also

[14] Based on the calls for "Black is Beautiful" and "I'm Black and I'm Proud" of the late 1960s and early 1970s that echoed a message of Black self-love throughout the country, colorism should actually be an anachronism, and the social significance attached to skin color should have evaporated with the

witnessed the beginning of *Essence*, America's first magazine dedicated solely to the Black woman. This created a viable alternative to *Ebony* for Black female readers who were longing for positive portrayals that did not reflect the objectification of Black female bodies which *Ebony* expressed on a regular basis.[15] Reason number two is that only after the Civil Rights Movement had gained its legal successes, most importantly with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, was an inward focus on the Black community even possible. Before, articles necessarily focused mostly on race relations, in other words, the interaction between the Black and white races. This was done in an attempt to tackle the more pressing issues of overt racism, institutionalized segregation, and blatant discrimination (see Click 1975). With some of that discrimination being outlawed in the late 1960s, from the 1970s onward the focus in *Ebony* could shift a bit more towards looking at problems and issues *within* the community. This also allowed for more intra-racial reflection on Black people's identity, which had obviously been shaped by the anti-Black racism in the United States that extends back to slavery.

Being the highest circulating African American magazine in the United States (Guskin, Moore, and Mitchell 2011), *Ebony* has always situated itself in direct opposition to mainstream (white) media outlets. However, based on the magazine's economic dependencies of having to gain advertising revenue in order to survive, it naturally falls prey to capitalist pressures. These pressures seem to sometimes make it difficult to criticize a patriarchal capitalist system that perpetuates a specific image of (female) beauty in American society, particularly when this manifests itself in the value ascribed to lighter skin. In my study I will trace the discourse of skin color over the period studied, unveil ambiguities between celebrating Blackness and commodifying (Black) beauty, aim to interpret the blind spots of the discourse (the "not sayable") and, based on my research findings,

change in Black people's self-perception. Nevertheless, despite all the progress that was made during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and the subsequent "Black is Beautiful" movement, Black people, as bell hooks argues, "continue to be socialized *via* mass media and non-progressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values" (1992, 18).

[15] Prior to the 1960s and even throughout the decade, yet with more vocal criticism on behalf of its readers, white beauty standards were celebrated in *Ebony*. This manifested itself in explicit forms, such as the high number of ads for bleaching and skin lightening creams, which – at that point in time – clearly devalued dark skin. Their messages geared at potential customers were clear in terms of dark skin being considered as ugly, unattractive, and undesirable (see chapter 4.1).

ultimately reflect on the significance of skin color in Black America as represented in articles from the media outlet under review. While feature articles encompass the primary unit of analysis for this study, commentaries and letters to the editor, as well as a few selected examples of advertisements for skin bleaching products are also studied.

For the last two decades, colorism has been the subject of an ever-growing body of scholarly literature across a variety of disciplines. There are various studies documenting correlations between socio-economic factors such as education, levels of employment, and income with skin color (Herring, Keith, and Horton 2004; Hall 2008). Others examine psychological effects of the color complex, often with a particular focus on Black women's sense of identity (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1986; Robinson and Ward 1995; Thompson and Keith 2001), or focus on the billion dollar beauty industry selling bleaching creams and hair straightening products (Glenn 2009; Hunter 2002, 2005). Ample research on colorism also exists for African American literature. In that area, literary critics have been looking at how the complex meaning of skin color has been employed by African American writers, all the way from William Wells Brown's light-skinned tragic mulatta characters in *Clotel* (1853) to Toni Morrison's dark-skinned protagonist Pecola and her wish for blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), to contemporary literature by and about African Americans, such as Sapphire's *Push* (1996) or Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998). Media scholars, then, have directed their attention, for example, to the advertising or film industries and their perpetuation of the white beauty ideal. Other forms of popular culture, such as the Black music industry, particularly hip hop videos and rap lyrics, have recently been receiving a burgeoning interest from scholars examining skin color stratification (see Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang 2009; Ford 2011). When looking specifically at studies in the realm of media, the focus has obviously been on visual representations. Prime examples are magazine advertisements for cosmetic products, which have been closely studied to explain societal concepts of Black beauty. This kind of research, however, disregards, for the most part, what is said or written *about* colorism.

While journalistic articles from *Ebony* and *Essence* have been used selectively to support specific arguments and to provide testimonies to the

prevalence of a skin color hierarchy in the Black community, never, so far, has there been a systematic analysis of articles on the significance of skin color in Black America. In other words, the representation of skin color and its social significance in articles from influential Black magazines has not yet been adequately explored. In an attempt to fill this scholarly gap, my dissertation sets out to analyze the discourse(s) of skin color in a selected body of articles from a primary Black monthly magazine.[16] The aim is to evaluate in what respect the print coverage of the discourse of skin color mirrors its significance in Black society. Hence, this study will look at how articles on colorism in the Black community constitute and are themselves constitutive of social reality. More specifically, the question is if and how the discourse of skin color in the Black community is determined by a definition by others, a definition of self, or a celebration of self. The results of this study will shed light on how, if at all, this has changed over the past four decades as reflected in print media coverage. By performing a critical discourse analysis on selected articles, I will look both at the written and the visual discourses surrounding skin color in the selected texts (see chapter 3 for detailed explanations on the methodological aspects of my research). Among other things, I present evidence for conflicting messages that result from the complex entanglements of the skin color discourse with discourses of beauty, identity, and status, as well as ever-present economic pressures.

At this point, it should be made clear that I do not wish to argue about the continued relevance of skin color and significance of colorism in the Black community, which has been studied elsewhere. While there are slightly differing views on the extent of the effects skin color still has on members of the Black community (see, for example, Gullickson 2005), one thing seems clear: Colorism is not yet an issue of the past, in the sense that the Black community is no more "post-color" than the American society at large is "post-race." Over the years, a complex

[16] While the original idea was to conduct a comparative analysis of *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines, this approach – unfortunately – had to be given up in the course of working on this project. Contrary to initial expectations, the body of relevant material in both magazines was extensive. Based on the large amount of data available, within the limited scope of this doctoral dissertation it became clear that conducting the analysis in the detailed manner any qualitative research study calls for would not have been possible. Obviously, comparing the findings from this study at hand with the discourse of skin color in *Essence* would make for an interesting contribution to the field, particularly because *Essence* as a Black women's magazine offers a unique outlook on the discourses of Black female beauty and identity. Such a comparative analysis is current work in progress of this writer, who hopes to be able to expand her research in this area.

web of biases, hostilities, and other ill-spirited feelings based on shades of skin color has been created, which is still nurtured by the white media's continued focus on white standards of beauty. Hence, it is not surprising that even in today's purportedly post-racial society Black people in the U.S. recognize the benefits that light skin color entails, suggesting that "racial formation," as Michael Omi and Howard Winant call it, is still ubiquitous (1994, 3). Following this logic, it can be assumed that skin color and its meanings will also continue to be of importance within ethnic communities, merely reflecting what is going on in the U.S. society at large.

Instead of producing yet one more study that supports the claim of the continued relevance of colorism, whichever cultural or sociological realm is studied, I am interested in how colorism is represented in a popular Black print media outlet and how articles in *Ebony* magazine either challenge or affirm the ideological mindset of the discourse of color. Overall, this study is driven by the following main research question: How is the *discourse of skin color* represented in the Black periodical under review? This question includes looking at the overall message as well as any contradictions and/or elements of the "not sayable" in the articles studied. Parallel to that, I will establish the main discourse strands that inform the discourse of skin color as well as look at discursive events that shaped the skin color discourse over the time period analyzed. Other areas I investigate are related to how readers are made to think of colorism, how – if at all – critical awareness for the issue has developed over the past forty years, and whether there are any power hierarchies that become visible upon studying these articles.

Following this introduction, chapter one provides an extensive overview of the socio-historical context that shaped understandings of race and skin color in the U.S., particularly with regards to Black women. To adequately trace the ideological foundations of race and racism, it is pertinent to analyze the genealogies of race and racism in the "Old World" in Europe before looking at the historical antecedent to colorism in the United States, that having being slavery. A study like this would also be remiss without giving adequate attention to the deconstruction of white privilege, which needs to be made visible in order to understand its power. After relating the origins of racism as well as looking at the proverbial other side of the

coin, that being white privilege, different time periods of relevance to this dissertation will be looked at in a chronology of color consciousness in the Black community. As the origins of colorism in the United States can be related to the institutionalization of slavery,[17] the differences established between "house slaves" and "field slaves" serve as the starting point to this section. Briefly covering the Jim Crow era, I then go on to focus on the significance of the "Black is Beautiful" years before contextualizing the conservative backlash that followed in the 1980s. Last but not least, I look at the contemporary United States through a critical lens that challenges the notion of America being "post-racial" in what many refer to as the "Age of Obama."

The contextual and historical perspective of the meaning of race and (skin) color in the United States is separated from the actual literature review that is pertinent to this research project, by reviewing relevant studies in the realms of African American literature, sociology, and the media, all of which form chapter two. This separation of the larger historical context from specific scholarly research is undertaken in an attempt to provide the necessary details to understand a complex and sensitive issue such as colorism from the perspective of an outsider. Moreover, this ensures that the system of privilege and prejudice based on different shades of skin color is understood as a direct outcome of white racism and a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. As can be seen from the extensive research synthesized in the literature review, the significance of skin color manifests itself not only in countless works of Black literature but also in social institutions from everyday social relations in the family, the school, the church, and the workplace to political, governmental, and business institutions as well as in the media.

After the literature review I explain my research design in a chapter on critical discourse analysis as method and methodology (chapter 3). Norman Fairclough calls discourse analysis a "multidisciplinary activity" (1992, 74), which is

[17] Of course, white skin has been associated with higher class status and attributed with more value than dark skin throughout the world long before the North American continent was even "discovered." In *The Color Complex* (1992), for example, the authors discuss the value of "pale" skin in countries around the world before any contact with white people (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 57-58). As the focus of this study is colorism in the Black community, I choose to follow the conventions of scholars like Shirlee Taylor Haizlip who describes colorism as a "poisonous legacy of slavery" which "reflects the persistent Eurocentric bias in U.S. culture" (1998, 115).

one of my reasons for choosing this approach, as I conceive of my work as both multi- and interdisciplinary. In doing so, I rely mostly on theories from media and cultural studies, sociology, literature studies, as well as Black feminist thought and various other race theories. The methodology chapter serves two main purposes: On the one hand to delineate relevant theory on discourse analysis and on the other hand to elaborate on my specific research design. While the former concerns itself mainly with what other scholars said about critical discourse analysis as method and methodology, the latter is my appropriation of the theory and encompasses everything from contextualizing the research questions for this project, to the collection of data, to explaining the different stages in my analysis, which range from structural to detailed to synoptic.

In a comprehensive analysis (chapter 4), which is divided into several sub-sections, I then present my analysis of selected articles and advertisements from *Ebony* magazine. I intend to reveal how discourses of beauty, identity, and status are entangled in discourses of skin color, and how colorism is critically discussed in the editorial [18] content of the magazines while still perpetuated in the advertisements printed in this African American media outlet. As a trained media scholar and former journalist, albeit for a newspaper and not a magazine, I am familiar with the news selection process and what can be considered entertainment values. Additionally, I am aware of the gate-keeping process that is at play in any media institution, an awareness which will – I hope – enable me to critically look at what gets reported and what does not. Ultimately, I will locate colorism as an ongoing issue in the United States, which has been repeatedly, although erroneously, labeled as a "post-racial" society. As such, I will demonstrate that even Black magazines that are supposedly committed to race unity and a positive portrayal of self perpetuate contradictory messages on the discourse of skin color to this day.

[18] Editorial content in print media is usually defined as any journalistic content, in other words, everything but advertising.

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin to such extent that you bleach to get like the white man? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? ~ Malcolm X (1962)

The legacy of the past - of conquest, slavery, racial dictatorship and exclusion - may no longer weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living, but it still lingers like a hangover or a sleepless night that has left us badly out of sorts. ~ Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994)

1 THE (EN)GENDERING OF (SKIN) COLOR: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Harvard University philosopher and race critic Cornel West, just like Malcolm X in the epigraph to this chapter, talks of Black people as being trained in self-hatred by a white supremacist majority: "No other people have been taught systematically to hate themselves … for the primary purpose of controlling their minds and exploiting their labor for nearly four hundred years" (1994, xiii). The notion of racial self-hatred as something that is taught is a useful one, because it suggests that self-hate based on physical looks and features is a learned behavior rather than something inherent to any group of people. As Marita Golden once stated, "Racism is learned. Colorism is learned. We can unlearn it" (Audrey 2004, 202). It goes without saying, however, that one can not unlearn what one does not understand. In order to comprehend the significance of skin color in U.S. society, which is viewed as a key marker of racial identity, it is first necessary to understand the meaning of race in the United States in its broader socio-historical context.

When looking at the discourse of race today, there generally seem to be two opposing viewpoints. Either race is and – if one believes the scholarship that is readily available – will always be central to African Americans (see, for example, Bonilla-Silva 2010; Omi and Winant 1994), or race is in the process of being sur-

passed by class, thereby lessening its weight in the Black community (Fields 1982; Wilson 1980)[19] As usual, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. In an age when the class divide in both Black and white America keeps increasing ever so quickly, the influence of class should certainly not be underestimated. Yet the continued relevance of race as a social category is beyond all question (see, for example, hooks 2000). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. stressed in his documentary *America beyond the Color Line* (2003), "color is fractured or compounded by class" (Percival and Crisp 2005 [2003]). At the same time, scholarship by Black feminists and other women of color reminds us that gender as a social category must not be neglected either.

In the public discourse of race the discussion has been predominantly led by men.[20] When it comes to race politics, but not only then, Black women have been marginalized. bell hooks is one of the few strong Black female voices on race in the United States that seems to be also heard outside of feminist circles. It comes as no surprise, then, that she broaches the absence of recognition given to Black female scholars in a scathing critique of America's discourse of race politics. hooks contends that according to male sexist reasoning, race and racism have traditionally been considered "male turf" and "hard politics," thereby constituting "a playing field where women do not really belong" (hooks 1995, 1). Thus, it is only fitting that she claims her right to enter what she calls dirty male locker rooms and invokes other Black women to do the same (1-3). Under the conditions given, intersectionality theory is a veritable tool for analyzing the complexities of oppressions affecting modern human subjects. It is not conducive to engage in what some call "oppression Olympics" (Martínez 1993), in other words, ranking oppressive factors in society. As a consequence, race should not be deemed more important than, for instance, gender or class. Different forms of oppression in U.S. society are intersecting and cannot be viewed as single analytical categories; yet for the purpose of the following historical chronology, race is highlighted in an attempt to better explain what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call "racial formation" in the United States (1994).

[19] Back in 1996 Anthony Kwame Appiah still held that class was the "most neglected of American identities" (Appiah and Gutmann 1996, 80), yet with all the scholarship on class now available this statement no longer seems to hold true.

[20] As might seem obvious, the majority of these men are African Americans, yet there are a few white males that contribute to the conversation. Among these is Tim Wise, whose books attract a lot of attention, in the media and otherwise (see, for example, Wise 2005, 2009, 2010).

An endeavor like this, however, is more complex than it appears at first glance. First of all, this "engendering" of the meanings for (skin) color needs to be seen in the creation of meaning(s) for the complex idea of race. Such an undertaking has to start out where it all began: in the "Old World," that is, in Europe. In doing so, the chapter "Tracing Race" will map out what scholars today see as the "illusion of race,"[21] all the way back to the Enlightenment, the key figures of which created a European subject and a Black Other. There is broad consensus that only against this backdrop of white persons and non-white sub-persons (Mills 2011, 97) can modern race theory in the United States be comprehended properly. It is precisely this juxtaposition of the Western subject to the non-self-actualized "Other" that shaped our understanding of the world and the people who live in it. After having established this background in a larger geographical frame, the focus will turn to the United States and continue to explore the meaning of race. When examining the modern-day meaning of race, another illusion will be dismantled, this being the notion of America as now "color-blind" or "post-racial." And, last but not least, it is important to critically and self-reflexively look at the phenomenon of white privilege, and try to unpack what Peggy McIntosh notably coined as the "invisible knapsack" of privilege (McIntosh 2011 [1988]).

Once the basic history of "racial formation" is established and its genealogies are looked at in both a larger and a more narrowly defined geographical context, the section "Color Consciousness in the Black Community" will focus on the main topic of this dissertation and elucidate how colorism was established within Black America. What really needs to be seen as an "outgrowth of the slave system," as Marita Golden maintains (2004, 127), started with the differentiations made between "house slaves" and "field slaves." The chronology thus covers different historical periods from the slave regime to the Jim Crow years and the Black is Beautiful era all the way up to the Age of Obama. It will also delineate the origins for widely-known concepts such as "passing" and the notorious paper bag test.

Last but not least, the commodification of (female) beauty, which is tied to an aesthetic of Caucasian beauty, must be appropriately contextualized. In doing so,

[21] I borrow this term from the California Newsreel documentary *RACE – The Power of an Illusion* (2003).

the final chapter in this section, "Black Women and Colorism," will place the emphasis on Black women and their characterization as the reverse side of white beauty, and therefore the ultimate "Other," by mainstream U.S. society. On the whole, the commodification of white female beauty has made it difficult to discard the old idea of "light is right." Additionally, by exploring the "hair-itage" of Black women's hair and how that feeds into the ideas of "who is the fairest of them all," I hope to shed light on female "herstories," which can be read as "hair-stories," and which need to be seen as a part of the larger framework of the meaning of color in the United States.

Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing. ~ Toni Morrison (1998)

For the sake of one's children, in order to minimize the bill that they *must pay, one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion – and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion. ~ James Baldwin,* The Fire Next Time *(1963)*

1.1 TRACING RACE: THE GENEALOGY OF AN ILLUSION

Susan Sontag perhaps went too far when declaring the white race to be "the cancer of human history," a statement she once made in relation to the Vietnam War (qtd. in Ching and Wagner-Lawlor 2009, 58). Nevertheless, although used out of context here, I would like to agree with her metaphor in the sense that, historically speaking, white supremacy has proven deadly for a large number of people across the globe. Moreover, racism itself has often been described as cancerous, with the metaphor used by Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Lyndon B. Johnson, respectively (Santa Ana 2002). As such, racism is a sickness we have not yet been able to find a cure for, not even in the twenty-first century. But how did white people come to claim racial superiority in the first place? Where does the idea for race as one of several principles of social hierarchy come from? And what truth is there behind this construct, this illusion of race? These and other questions will be answered in the ensuing three sub-chapters which offer an overview of some of the most relevant literature on race to this day. The purpose of this section is to revisit the creation of the Black Other in Europe and how this Other came to be viewed in the United States. Furthermore, it will also address what happened once those abstract ideas of Blackness and whiteness became part of an internalized hegemonic ideology that considered white privilege as the invisible asset that came as a birthright. As such the genealogies of race will be traced, yet more in the Foucauldian sense of genealogy being not a linear search for origins and truths of cause and effect, but rather being entangled in a set of cultural and historical forces that require meticulous uncovering (Foucault 2011 [1984], 341).

1.1.1 How It All Began: The Creation of the Black "Other" in Europe

Although this study has the United States as its geographical focus, it is necessary to locate the conceptualization of the Black Other among influential intellectuals of the "Old World." It is their ideas that are now seen as the foundation for whites claiming racial superiority over other racial groups. Enlightenment thinkers in the likes of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, followed by nineteenth century philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the French aristocrat Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau established, developed, and cemented the ideas of an advanced white Western subject and an underdeveloped dark or Black Other. They did so by creating binary oppositional and mutually exclusive meanings for the terms of *Black* and *white*: "Whereas the former was associated with barbarism, savagery, heathenism, and ugliness, the latter was praised as representing civilization, modernity, Christianity, and beauty" (Hunter 2005, 20).

As noted by Emmanuel Chukwude Eze in his introduction to *Race and the Enlightenment*, the use of binary logic to characterize people dates back to antiquity.[22] He relates to Aristotle's juxtaposition of the "cultured" aristocratic Greeks with the "barbaric" non-Greeks as one example of an early dichotomy between the self and the "Other" (1997, 4).[23] This basic reasoning was adopted by philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment to establish the idea of Europe as the cradle of civilization and reason. Europeans had seen the light and basked in it, while people from Africa were referred to as primitive, barbarian, and unenlightened, thus living in a state of darkness (Eze 1997, 4-6). The latter notion ultimately results in the idea of Africa as the "Dark Continent." The creation of this dichotomy, as Michelle Wright convincingly argues, is not based on objective observations of the facts but rather on the need to create the image of a positive self that carries agency and that presupposes a proverbial other side of the coin: "In order to posit itself as civilized, advanced,

[22] This reader is an extensive and both culturally as well as geographically diverse body of texts addressing the discourses on race established during the Age of Reason of eighteenth-century Europe. It is worth noting that in his introduction Eze recalls the idea to name the collection *Racist Enlightenment*. He changed his mind in favor of the less provocative current title because despite what by today's standards are outrageously racist remarks, all texts need to be seen as a product of their time. This calls for an understanding of the ambiguous relationship of Enlightenment reasoning to diversity based on race, which needs to be placed in an appropriate historical context (Eze 1997, 2).

[23] Historian Nell Irvin Painter also maintains that ancient Greece was white-washed by Western historians; in other words, ancient history was written down as white history, even though we now know that the reality looked vastly different (Painter 2010).

and superior, Western discourse must endlessly reify Africa and the Black as its binary opposite" (Wright 2004, 27).[24]

Following Wright's analysis, two variations of a Black Other stand out, one developed by Hegel in the eighteenth century and the other by Comte de Gobineau in the mid-nineteenth century. Both helped explain this process of racialization globally and particularly in the United States, where both theories – as flawed as they are – had an enormous influence on colonial and imperial practice, one aspect of which was slavery, in the "New World". In appropriating terminology used by French philosopher Étienne Balibar, Wright calls Hegel's Black Other, which is based on the Africans' incapability to progress on their own, the "Other-from-without" (2004, 31). This Other is located outside a Western sphere, standing in opposition to the Hegelian subject, and is thus characterized by an absence of reason. It needs to be lifted from its "developmental stasis" and rescued by Western civilization (29). Such an outcome, as was Hegel's conviction, could only be achieved through slavery, which might help Africans acquire subjectivity and sentience and thus help them to enter a "higher stage of development" (Hegel 1981, 184).

By enslaving the Black Other, as well as exposing "it" to Christianity, which was believed to be the ultimate refinement of Black heathens, the Black Other would eventually reach a higher state of civilization (Wallinger 2011, 34). Or, as Mills puts it, "the darkness of the Dark Continent is not merely the absence of a European presence but a blindness to Christian light" (1997, 46). Such notions highlight the fact that religion played a vital role in the enslavement of African heathens, because white people saw their roles as missionaries that were to "civilize and Christianize" those who could not save their own souls (Wander, Martin, and Nakayama 2011, 35). This brings to mind two lines by poet Phillis Wheatley, who was sold into slavery as a child, and in 1773 wrote what today is believed to be an ambiguous homage to "being brought from Africa to America," in short, the transat-

[24] A concise and accessible overview of the most prominent European Enlightenment thinkers and their race theories can be found at the beginning of Hanna Wallinger's essay "The Africanist Presence in Nineteenth-Century German Writers" (in: Diedrich and Heinrichs 2011, 29-48). For a broader review of the history of racial classification in the U.S. for different racial and ethnic groups, including African Americans, Jews ,and Chicano/as, see part two of Paula S. Rothenberg's seminal anthology on white privilege, which is titled *Whiteness: The Power of the Past* (2011, 27-103).

lantic slave trade: "Remember, *Christians*, *Negroes*, black as *Cain,* / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (Wheatley 2005 [1773], 13; italics in original). It was believed that just like raw minerals, the Black Other could be refined and therefore improved. To achieve that, however, subjugation and conversion to Christianity were necessary before subjectivity and freedom could be granted by the dominant society; if not in the here and now, then at least in the hereafter, as Wheatley's poetic rendition suggests.

While Hegel, who Wright calls the grandfather of the white subject and the Black Other (29), emphasized the wrongness of slavery per se, he was convinced it was that very institution which would make the African "mature." This he described in 1837 when he wrote that "Slavery is unjust in and for itself, for the essence of man is freedom; but he must first become mature before he can be free" (Hegel 1981, 184). In other words, the only road to freedom for the African was to be walked in chains, as they "need to learn how to be free" (Wright 2004, 34). Ironically, slavery was the very thing that turned Africans into objects, symbolizing ultimate dehumanization. As a matter of fact, it is easy to view Hegel's reasoning as one way of covertly legitimizing colonialism and the exploitation of African slave labor.[25]

In contrast to Hegel's Black Other that can be seen as a vindication of slavery, Comte de Gobineau's "Other-from-within," as Wright calls it, can be used to justify fear of race mixing, or miscegenation, to use the now notorious term for interracial relationships. The "Father of Modern Racism" (Wright 2004, 30), who developed the theory of the Aryan master race, claimed in 1853 that the dilution of pure bloodlines would be a threat to the noblest of all groups, this being the whites. Furthermore, he held that too much mixing with an inferior group would lead to the decline of the dominant one (Wright 2004, 43). In the same vein, Comte de Gobineau viewed Black people as the most inferior "species"[26] and supported his arguments with outrageous pseudo-scientific claims and fake anecdotes that do not even

[25] Another popular argument is the Biblical story of Noah's "Curse of Ham," which actually was the curse of Ham's son Canaan and all his descendants by Noah (Genesis, 9:20-25), and which came to justify Black people's state of perpetual servitude (see, for example, Fredrickson 2002, 44-45).
[26] Using the term *species* instead of the word *race*, reveals Comte de Gobineau's belief that Negroes are of subhuman nature.

merit repetition here.[27] In effect, he saw the "Negroid variety" as the lowest group which "stands at the foot of the ladder" (Comte de Gobineau 2003 [1915], 195). As Wright claims, "the Negro is evoked as a threat from within that has contributed to the degeneration of the Aryan race and consequently the decline of civilization" (2004, 46). Applied to a U.S. American context, such beliefs merited the establishment of segregationist practices that became *de facto* legislation after the Civil War. Concurrently, Comte de Gobineau also stresses the beauty of the mixed-race, hence light-skinned, "mulatress," which creates a striking contradiction to what he thinks about race mixing in the first place. It is this paradox that lends itself to the obsession with phenotypic characteristics and the valorization of light skin. The idea is that such a "superior breed of Negro" (Wright 2004, 51) contributes to an elevated status of those of mixed race within the Black community; an idea of which colorism appears to be a direct outcome.[28]

1.1.2 Is This How It Ends? The Meaning of a Construct in the United States

The discourse of race in the United States has a convoluted and complex history. It is, as the sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, both a tangible as well as an elusive concept, in the way that everybody knows but nobody really knows what it is: "Everyone 'knows' what race is, though everyone has a different opinion as to how many racial groups there are, what they are called, and who belongs in what specific categories" (3). This is complicated by the fact that racial categories often changed over time. In 1856 Ralph Waldo Emerson noticed the difficulty of assorting people in different race groups and contends that "every writer makes a different count" (Emerson and Lopate 2011 [1856], 33). Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's classification of different races of mankind, which he developed in his doctoral dissertation in 1775 and expanded to his theory of five distinct races in a second edition, and Charles Pickering's premise that there are eleven distinct groups are only two of the most diverging examples (Blumenbach et al. 1969

[27] What merits attention, however, is his obvious class prejudice that allows him to concede that some individual members of what he calls the "Negroid race" might surpass individual members of the French peasantry or even the bourgeoisie in social standing (see Wright 2004, 47).
[28] Ultimately, the question as to whether racial mixing raises or lowers one's social rank remains a charged one, and is always a matter of perspective, as Wright concludes (50).

[1789]; Pickering 1848). More recent changes in the racial taxonomy can be observed by studying the different categories the U.S. Census Bureau employed in the past century.[29] Not only do designations for people of color differ throughout time, also the group of people that is entitled to call themselves white is not a firm construct. There is a vast body of literature dedicated to explaining, for example, how the Jews and Irish became white (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995), how come Hispanics were assigned what Neil Foley calls a "'separate but equal' whiteness" (2011, 59), and how in general the category of American whites came to include more and more groups over the years (Painter 2010; Roediger 2005, 2007). This lack of fixed meaning when it comes to racial categories echoes Stuart Hall's idea of race as a "floating signifier" (Sut Jhally 1998).

What has not changed, however, is the prime value placed on whiteness in the United States (see also chapter 1.1.3). The constant celebration of everything white against the backdrop of the non-white "Other" makes the U.S. "an extremely 'color conscious' society" (Omi and Winant 1994, 1). What Omi and Winant argue is that the United States has been race-conscious ever since the institutionalization and concurrent racialization of slavery, which made race a prominent, if not the most prominent, category in society.

As is well known today, the Founding Fathers of the United States had distinct, even though often divided, views on race. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, is notorious for his deliberations on what he believed were physical and moral differences between the races, which would make them unable to harmoniously live together in one country. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) he insists on the natural inferiority of the Black race, culminating in such racist deliberations as to likening them to animals, and concluding his so-called "scientific" observations by maintaining that "the blacks … are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind" (Jefferson 1787, 239).[30] As discussed earlier, Enlightenment think-

[29] Painter quite provocatively calls the difficulty of using appropriate labels in the census a "taxonomic meltdown" (2010, xii).

[30] At the same time, however, he is now believed to have had a relationship with Sally Hemings, one of his Black female slaves, and historical evidence suggests that he may be the father of some of her children (see, for example, Gordon-Reed 1997; Lewis and Onuf 1999). While the rumor of this relationship dates back to Jefferson's presidency, evidence is not fully conclusive and allows for the ongoing controversy as to whether it was Jefferson himself or rather one of his male relatives who fathered

ers in Europe had similar ideas based on quasi- or pseudo-scientific findings of the day, whose impact upon Jefferson is apparent. With David Hume proclaiming that Negroes were "naturally inferior to the whites" (1793, 289)[31] and Immanuel Kant maintaining that "[h]umanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites" (qtd. in Eze 1997, 63), it should not be surprising that Jefferson arrived at his own distorted and racist conclusions.[32]

Obviously, today we conceive of race as a social and cultural construct, a category created by mankind,[33] as first argued by historian Barbara J. Fields (1982). Modern science shows that the idea of race as having any biological roots is a myth. Moreover, genetic differences among people of the same "race" are often greater than those between people of different races.[34] Yet the idea of race as being inherent to one's biological essence, thus rooted in nature, and reflecting certain hereditary characteristics, has not yet been entirely eradicated. Examples of such notions can be found in the controversial, yet commercially successful book *The Bell Curve* (1994), published by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. As flawed as the authors' ideas of cognitive differences deriving from genetic differences were, the book's instant success is reminiscent of the popular ideas on cranial capacity in the nineteenth century. Then, physician Samuel Morton measured the size of people's skulls and derived a racial hierarchy of intelligence from his pseudo-scientific findings (Morton and Combe 1839).[35] More than 150 years later, even though based on different methods of analysis, Herrnstein and Murray established a similar hierarchy based on "genetic" differences that were predisposed among the races.[36]

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one or more of Hemings' children (see, for example, Scholars Commission on the Jefferson-Hemings Matter and Turner 2010).

[31] This comment first appeared in a footnote to the 1753 version of his essay "Of National Character."

[32] Despite his obvious belief in the inferiority of the "Black race," Jefferson's views on slavery were conflicted. In the section of his *Notes* that is titled "Manners" he seems to condemn slavery, although it appears that his concerns are more for the master and what might happen, should the slave's spirit be "rising from the dust" (Jefferson 1787, 272).

[33] Here the term *mankind* in favor of the politically correct *humankind* is more fitting, as it takes into account that early advocates of scientific methods to support their race (and racist) theories were all men. This was, of course, due to societal conventions of the time, while the views as such were certainly harbored by both men and women.

[34] See, for example, the California Newsreel documentary *Race – The Power of an Illusion* (2003).

[35] Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981) refutes Morton's findings and even accuses him of deliberate fabrication of his results.

[36] Even in the twenty-first century pseudo-scientific views seem appealing to some. In May 2011 Satoshi Kanazawa, a social scientist from the London School of Economics, claimed in a blog that "Black women are … far less attractive than white, Asian, and Native American women," a statement he based on alleged findings of an online study (Kanazawa 16 May 2011). It goes without saying that this set off an immediate nation-wide firestorm of criticism in the U.S. Apart from that, however, the

Despite such evident backlashes that border on racist thinking from the era of social Darwinism in the nineteenth century, the belief in race as a social construct with several sociologically determined "racial groups," yet only one biological race – that of the human race – is widely accepted today (Brooks 2009, 9-10). Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, insists that there are no races, merely racial identities that are ascribed onto people (Appiah and Gutmann 1996, 30-105). This view is in accord with what historian Robin D. G. Kelley said in the documentary *Race – the Power of an Illusion* (2003): "Race was never just a matter of how you look; it's about how people assign meaning to how you look" (Larry Adelman 2003). Consequently, Amy Gutmann's concept of race as a "morally dangerous fiction" (1996, 114) appears to be particularly appealing, as these ascriptions or assigned meanings cannot be based on objective facts. In a related vein, historian Matthew Frye Jacobson calls race a "fabrication." In his introduction to *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998), a study on European immigrants to the United States, he invokes the one-drop rule, one of the greatest paradoxes in the history of race in his view: "Why is it," Jacobson asks, "that in the United States a white woman can have black children but a black woman cannot have white children?" (1998, 1-2).[37]

Following Jacobson's reasoning that racial categories are invented and therefore arbitrary, as well as "designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating peoples along lines of presumed difference" (1998, 4), it could then be argued that Blacks, just like Caucasians, are "made and not born" (ibid.). Such an interpretation might stretch Jacobson's argument, which was based on the construction of whiteness only. Yet in light of the racial classifications introduced by the majority society, it seems to be equally applicable to Black people. These notions of construction evidently harken back to the rule of hypo-descent and what went down in history as the assumption that one drop of "black" blood was enough to make one Black. This is most infamously seen in the 1898 Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld racial segregation to keep African Americans

fact that his statements were first published on the *Psychology Today* website speaks volumes about the insensitivity toward racism and racist ideologies on behalf of the mainstream media.

[37] Jacobson took this example from Barbara Fields's essay "Ideology and Race in American History" (1982).

"in their place," and essentially away from white establishments.[38] While Homer Plessy was not physically perceived as Black, his racial ancestry and the "one-drop-rule" made him such. And so it is worth noting, as Jacobson reminds us, that race is both *conception* and *perception* (9). Or, to draw on a quote from Allan G. Johnson: "What matters is who other people *think* we are, which is to say the social categories they put us in" (2011, 116; italics in original). This resonates well with a comment made by then Senate hopeful Barack Obama, when asked about his racial affiliation in 2004:

> When I'm catching a cab in Manhattan they don't say, there's a mixed-race guy, I'll go pick him up. Or if I was an armed robber and they flashed my face on television, they'd have no problem labeling me as a Black man … So if that's my identity when something bad happens, then that's my identity when something good happens as well. (qtd. in Kinnon 2004, 198)

It merits attention in this regard that the perception of one's racial belonging also varies among different nationalities. In some countries of the Caribbean, Latin America, and on the African continent, where racial formation operates based on different premises than in the U.S., a light-skinned man like Barack Obama might not be considered "Black" at all (see Telles 2004). Thus race is both "a public fiction" based on certain ideologies in a society at a given point in time, as well as a form of "social currency"[39] (Jacobson 1998, 11). When seen as a type of capital, race comes with a specific exchange value for the person carrying it. Based on its state of always being in transition and subject to change, Omi and Winant advocate for the rendering of race as a conglomerate of "unstable" and "decentered" social meanings. These are in a state of flux based on political struggle (Omi and Winant 1994, 55) and social transformation. Their model definition of "race" therefore focuses on the representation of social conflicts: *"[R]ace is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*" (ibid.; italics in original). Such conflicts and interests, then, are contingent on the social and historical context that shapes all systems of racial categorization.

To this day, a number of race scholars allude to the historical environment of the early twentieth century, a time when racial segregation caused *de jure* as well

[38] It was not until more than 50 years later that this "separate but equal" doctrine was legally overturned by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; and it took the good part of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s to eliminate legal segregation in all public facilities.
[39] The notion of skin color also being a form of social currency, or, as Margaret Hunter calls it, "social capital" (2005), particularly for women, is discussed in chapter 1.3.

as *de facto* second-class citizenship for Black Americans in a legal system of racial apartheid. It was at the dawning of that century that America's foremost African American intellectual of the day, W.E.B. Du Bois, asserted that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (1994 [1903], v). Many scholars across all disciplines agree today that Du Bois, the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard, was entirely right, albeit too optimistic with his prophetic statement, as the problem had not been solved by the end of the twentieth century. Du Bois obviously could not have thought as far ahead as to the new millennium when writing *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, but it seems clear today that the said color line is not yet a thing of the past. Some scholars even argue that it is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth.[40] Cornel West, for one, invokes Du Bois in the preface of the 2001 edition of *Race Matters* by claiming that "the problem of the twenty-first century remains the problem of the color line" (2001, xiv). And, John Hope Franklin clarifies that

> [t]o suggest that the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of the color line is not to ignore the changes that have occurred … It is merely to take notice of the fact that the changes have not been sufficient to eliminate … the most tragic and persistent social problem of the nation's history. (1993, xiii-xiv)

In this dissertation, the focus is on what can be called an intra-racial color line, but in order to understand that, the color line and its ramifications between Black people and white people needs retracting. In doing so it becomes clear that despite acknowledging race as constructed and thus fictional to a certain extent, race and its effects are very real for individual people (see Fields 1982; Mills 1997). To put it in a different way, the concept of race can only be abandoned in an ideal society, not in real America. It is seen as a pillar on which the American society and its racial hierarchy were founded, which is why the disregard or abolition of race as an analytical social category is neither conducive nor possible, at least not for the foreseeable future.

In view of all this, it becomes obvious that the U.S. society still operates on a color-coded system of privilege and discrimination, notwithstanding all the pro-

[40] Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson wrote an editorial in *The New Republic* in January 2000 in which he contradicts this view by predicting that "the social virus of race will have gone the way of smallpox" by the mid-twenty-first century, while ultimately arguing for class to become the dominant social category (2000, 6). For more on this topic see also William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978).

gress that has been made in the past century. All recent attempts to advocate a so-called "color-blind" society, which dismiss any preconceived notions linked to people's phenotypes and other morphological differences, therefore fall short of reality and only help to create a "new" or simply "color-blind" racism (Hill Collins 2004, 53-85; Bonilla-Silva 2010). Race, as Omi and Winant point out, is "present in every institution, every relationship, every individual" (1994, 158). This, I would like to argue, has not changed since the book's first publication in 1986 more than 25 years ago, and certainly not with the election of a Black man as President of the United States in 2008. The notion of America as being post-racial can only be seen as a faux-fairytale, because the United States is a nation whose very existence benefited from the systematic enslavement and absolute dehumanization of one of its people for hundreds of years. Roy Lavon Brooks's "poker game metaphor" is a useful analogy in this context: In a game of poker that a white and a Black player have been playing for almost 400 years the white player amassed an unfairly high amount of poker chips by cheating. When the white player announces that he will play fair as of now on, the Black player asks what will happen to the poker chips: "'Well,' says the white player … 'I'm going to keep them for the next generation of white players, of course'" (Brooks 2009, 10). It is false reasoning to think that the noble aspiration of "all men are created equal" has finally become reality, for only a mere sixty-some years ago racial apartheid was legal and African Americans – although citizens of the country – were not granted the same civil rights that had already been celebrated in the nation's founding documents.

Obviously, the forms of racism have changed and drastically so. Generally speaking, the number and severity of individual overt racist acts have decreased greatly.[41] Furthermore, racism is no longer seen as much in individual overt racist behavior as it is rooted in the system, and expressed in what people call systemic or institutional racism. Sociological studies provide us with data supporting the claim that systemic inequality disproportionately affects people of color in the U.S. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, for instance, draws from such studies to conclude that "Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life" (2010, 1-2). To support this argument, three such "hard" facts shall be

[41] Yet again, individual racist behavior geared towards people of color still exists, as knows anyone following the news.

given here: First, statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau showed that in 2010 African Americans on average earned about 40 percent less than whites (see, for example, Christie 30 July 2010).[42] Second, in 2010 the poverty rate for Blacks was 27.4 percent, whereas it was only 9.9 percent for non-Hispanic whites, making African Americans almost three times more likely to be poor than whites (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011).[43] Third, in that same year African Americans were twice as likely to be unemployed than whites, with the unemployment rate standing at 16.7 percent for Blacks and at 8 percent for whites. This figure reportedly makes the Black unemployment rate in 2010 the highest in twenty-seven years (Censky 2 September 2011).[44]

Often when such statistical data is presented, the media make an attempt to blame disparities on individual failure and pathological behavior within the specific – in this case Black – minority group. This essentialist view of the world is reflected in what Louis Menard once stated in a critique of the nature vs. nurture debate in *The New Yorker*. The easy way to explain something without threatening the present state of affairs – as Menard wrote – is to blame it on the individual rather than the society, as in: "It can't be the system. There must be a flaw in the wiring somewhere" (2006, 76). It should be vice versa, however, because it is this very system which needs to be changed so that new ways are found to challenge the status quo in society, a society which bell hooks refers to as the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1992, 22).

Accordingly, as long as race plays such a dominant role in U.S. society, "colorblindness" cannot be the desired solution to racial injustice, a viewpoint that is shared by many contemporary race critics (see Bonilla-Silva 2010; Gutmann

[42] To provide an accurate picture it needs to be added that also the income gap within the Black community has widened, especially since many affluent African Americans are moving from the cities to the suburbs.
[43] The overall poverty rate in 2010 was 15.1 percent, compared to 14.3 percent in 2009 (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011, 14).
[44] According to the latest statistics to this date, which were released in February 2012, the unemployment rate dropped slightly, thus reflecting an improvement of the overall economic situation in the U.S. Nevertheless, the gap between the Black unemployment rate and the overall unemployment rate is still significant. According to the Labor Department the rate for Black men over the age of 20 was 12.7 percent in February 2012, whereas it was just 6.9 percent for white men of the same age group (Rushe 3 February 2012).

1996; Wise 2010).[45] Quite the contrary: In order to actively oppose racism, it is inherently necessary to notice race and understand its meaning, and to have open conversations about it that help bridge the divides, rather than rely on the fact that systemic inequality will vanish with time and on its own.[46] To do this requires raising awareness of an issue that is often rendered invisible, yet deeply "woven into the fabric of society" (Rothenberg 2011, 5), the issue of white privilege.

1.1.3 The "Other Side of Racism": Unpacking White Privilege

Paula Rothenberg opens her collection of critical essays on white privilege and its power by calling it "the other side of racism" (2011, 1). It is acknowledging this flipside on behalf of white people which is needed for an honest discussion about race and color politics. In this situation, it is useful to once again emphasize the institutional and systemic character of racism and white privilege. This precludes the erroneous belief of racism and race privilege being only based on individual behavior, which is not helpful to dismantling the system that nurtures both. In this vein Frances Kendall talks about white privilege as "an institutional, rather than personal, set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who hold the power positions in our institutions" (2006, 63). Doubtlessly, the extent to which every white person holds power is also contingent on other social categories such as gender, class, age, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness. Still, no white person can claim to not be on the receiving end of this birthright, simply because Western societies are all built on a racial hierarchy that places whites in positions of power.

If every white person reaps advantages, one way or another, from white privilege, it might be easier to understand bell hooks's admittedly bold statement that "[a]ll black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness" (hooks 1992, 175). While the equation of whiteness with terror may seem harsh to some, the grim realities of racial profiling, of a racialized criminal court system that accounts for the

[45] In contrast to colorblindness, Gutmann uses the term color consciousness, which, for her is not what in the context of this dissertation is used synonymously with colorism. Rather, being color conscious for Gutmann is the awareness of race being still a relevant category to combat social injustice.
[46] For a recent attempt across racial lines see, for example, Markus and Moya (2010).

vast over-representation of Black people in America's prisons, or of exclusionary practices on the housing and job market (Bonilla-Silva 2010) all qualify for labeling the situation as such. This speaks to the fact that although race and white privilege are socially constructed (see Rothenberg 2011), they are manifested in a "*social* reality" (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 9). Often they come with a set of tangible benefits that provoked law professor Cheryl Harris to refer to whiteness as a form of property (1993) and historian David Roediger to speak of "wages of whiteness" (2007).[47] Another way of looking at this is by taking up Charles W. Mills' argument that *"Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations"* (Mills 1997, 127; italics in original).[48] These power relations are determined by what Mills calls a "Racial Contract,"[49] which benefits all whites (1997, 11). For the most part, however, white people in their reign of global white supremacy remain oblivious to the existence of such a contract with white privilege working in their favor. Instead of noticing it, they are likely to take the status quo for granted as a natural order of things (Tatum 1999; Mills 1997; Dalton 2011). Like the fish that do not see the water in which they swim, as Mills proposes, "whites do not see the racial nature of a white polity because it is natural to them, the element in which they move" (76). His analogy helps explain the "invisible knapsack" of advantages that whites carry around on a daily basis. This now popular catch phrase, coined by Peggy McIntosh in her seminal essay on "White Privilege" (2011 [1988]), can be seen as akin to Mills's Racial Contract.

More than anything else, it is the character of invisibility that grants whiteness its power. While everyone else is raced, white people do not (need to) conceive of themselves as having a race and are considered as the human norm (Dyer 2011, 10). Whiteness thus comes as a "privileged signifier" (hooks 1992, 167) and a "birthright" (Dalton 2011, 18), with white people merely being assigned an ethnic identity, not a racial one. Richard Dyer even goes so far as to say that "[o]ther people are raced, we [whites] are just people" (1997, 1). Despite the failure to name it as such, whiteness in general and white supremacy in particular should be understood as

[47] Roediger obviously takes his cue from Du Bois, who in 1935 first mentioned the "psychological wages" of whiteness (1935, 700-701).
[48] Mills takes this even a step further by distinguishing between the lower-case *whiteness*, which he simply sees as the phenotype, and *Whiteness* with a capital "W," which he describes as the "political commitment to white supremacy" (126-127).
[49] In line with Mills's usage, upper-case spelling is used for his term.

simply "the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today" (Mills 1997, 1). Unlike the ideal social contract of the Western civilization, which Mills argues is based on scholars like Hobbes, Locke, and Rawls, the Racial Contract does not include everyone. Put another way, "We the People" – as the memorable Preamble of the Constitution declares – translates into "the people who count, the people who really are people ('we the white people')" (Mills 1997, 3). This is aptly expressed by the satirical cartoon in Figure 1, which – as some race theorists might argue – still mirrors the state of affairs today.

Illustration 1: "We the People"
(http://www.freewebs.com/sprav/fathers.gif)

Just like race, whiteness, too, is "a matter of ascription," as Richard Dyer argues, in the sense that "white people are who white people say are white" (1997, 48). Looking at such founding documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – both of which were written during the era of chattel slavery – reveals the ideological foundations of modern-day racism. We are conditioned to believe in the fantasy of whiteness representing goodness and blackness standing for badness and

evil. At the same time, "[s]ystems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating" (hooks 1992, 166). It is through this internalization that colorism is established in communities of color, in this case, the Black community. White supremacy and white racism are what Hunter calls the "fundamental building block of colorism" (2). Chapter 1.2 now provides a chronology of this color consciousness, from the era of slavery until today.

He [the Black artist] is never taught to see … [his own] beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns" ~ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)

Does it really matter if you're caramel, or chocolate, or cinnamon, or butterscotch, or café o lait?
~ Tyra Banks (2010)[50]

1.2 COLOR CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY: A CHRONOLOGY

Although it is still sometimes considered a taboo issue (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992; Brown 2009), there are numerous (written) personal accounts of Black people recalling colorism, often in the private spheres of a home or community. Marita Golden openly speaks about the color complex in her own family, with negative remarks regarding her skin color coming from someone as close to her as her own mother (Golden 2004). bell hooks recalls discriminatory remarks from her (light-skinned) grandmother who was "colorstruck" (1995, 122), as does Lawrence Otis Graham, who admits in *Our Kind of People*: "At age six, I already understood the importance of achieving a better shade of black" (1999, 4). Even Maya Angelou writes in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that she sometimes wished as a child to wake up from her "black ugly dream" and find the "too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair" gone and replaced by a beautiful white girl (1969, 4-5).[51] Yet in order to fully comprehend the value placed on skin color in the Black community, it is imperative to trace its genealogy. This means going back to its roots that are found in the colonization and enslavement of Africans by white colonizers, and – once on U.S. soil – by white Americans. As such, the history of intra-racial tensions goes as far back as that of inter-racial ones, and therefore starts with

[50] Qtd. in "The Tyra Banks Show" (24 April 2008).
[51] It is no coincidence that the majority of these testimonials (with the exception of Lawrence Otis Graham's) were made by women. To this day Black women are known to be more afflicted by internalized notions on what and who is beautiful and what and who is not, something that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1.3.2.

the institutionalization of slavery in the British colonies in the seventeenth century. It was in those times of the institutionalized and exclusive enslavement of Black people that the seeds were planted for internalizing a repressive system that valued some and devalued others, solely on the basis of their phenotypic appearance. The following chapter attempts to provide a chronology of the emergence of a distinct color hierarchy that would continue to exist throughout wars, a civil rights movement, a period of Black consciousness and Black self love, and into the twenty-first century that some people like to call "post-racial."

1.2.1 Planting the Seeds: The House, the Field, and the Back Door

The beginnings of intra-racial color discrimination most certainly can be traced to the early days of American colonization and the enslavement of imported Africans. In an essay on "internalized racism," bell hooks offers that this might even be considered household knowledge today:

> All black folks, even those who know very little, if anything at all, about North American history, slavery, Reconstruction, etc., know that racist white folks often treated lighter-skinned black folks better than their darker counterparts and that this pattern was mirrored in black social relations. (hooks 1995, 120)

While the difference in phenotypes that hooks talks about was in part based on a natural diversity in appearance among African slaves, who were trafficked from various geographic parts of the African continent, often it was sexual violence in master-slave relations that resulted in lighter-skinned, mixed-race offspring. Those slaves, as sociologist E. Franklin Frazier puts it, "bore even in their physical features the mark of the master race" (1949, 273). Obviously, some of the early black-and-white relations were based on consensual feelings of love, and sometimes mixing occurred between enslaved Africans[52] and members of the Indigenous nations. Nevertheless, sexual violence against Black women on behalf of white slaveholders was by far the most common reason for mixed-race progeny (Hunter 2005; Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). In essence, the rape of Black female slaves by their slave

[52] When possible, the word *slave* is replaced by the compound noun *enslaved African*, drawing attention to the fact that despite the utterly dehumanizing nature of chattel slavery, we are – after all – still talking about people. Additionally, using the compound points to the existence of an agent, someone who did the enslaving, in this case, members of the white supremacist American society (see Brooks 2009, 9-10, who relates to Orlando Patterson's rejection of the term slave).

masters served three main purposes: Apart from plain sexual gratification, it was used as a violent means of social control – read terror – of both Black women and Black men to prevent slave revolts and other uprisings. Additionally, institutionalized rape was practiced to increase slave labor, which by definition meant a slave holder's property value. The latter was possible because according to the rule of hypodescent, all children born from a mixed union inherited the status of the subordinate parent, in this case the mother's legal condition of a slave (Hunter 2005, 17-21).[53] If combined, interracial relationships and the slave trade are the two main reasons for the great range of skin colors and shades among Black people in the U.S. today.

Despite the cruel reality of slavery even some of the most brutal slave holders were habitually inclined to treat their illegitimate offspring a little better than their other slaves. Whatever the motives of those slave masters were, whether they acted on behalf of paternal love, moral concerns, or simply a sense of duty, they often manumitted their own slave children. Additionally, they sometimes sent them to the free states in the North and provided them with opportunities for an education, either at home or abroad in Europe (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 696). It goes without saying that some of those who went to school in Europe became the first Black educators when they returned to the U.S. But, even if the biracial children remained on the slave plantation, they often profited from being accorded a higher social rank.[54] Light-skinned slaves were generally perceived to be more intelligent because they had white blood running through their veins, which was equated with intellect and civilization. This made them less threatening and more suitable to interact with whites, thus eligible for labor in and around the "Big House" (Drake and Cayton Jr. 1945, 506). It was their work as cooks and cleaners, and butlers and maids that earned them the designation of "house slaves."[55] Light-skinned slaves also reportedly sold for the most money at slave auctions (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 695-696). In the South, particularly in Louisiana, it was not un-

[53] Additionally, the "one-drop rule" classified every person with Black ancestry, no matter how far back in the gene pool, as Black.
[54] This is not to deny that they did not also suffer enormous hardships, for example when they were subject to sexual abuse on behalf of the slave master, or exposed to the wrath of the slave master's wife who had uncovered her husband's infidelity, or when they suffered from not fully belonging to either one of their parents' cultures (see, for example, Hughes, who addressed this latter issue in several of his literary works).
[55] Early variations of the term obviously incorporated the "N-word," reflecting the racist language of the day.

common to sell mulatto women as concubines to white men, who looked for them at so-called "quadroon balls" (Lake 2003, 20).[56]

In contrast to the "house Negroes" or "house slaves" was the category of "field slaves." These slaves were the ones to toil in the tobacco, cotton, and sugar cane fields, and were used for road and house building as well as various other jobs of hard manual labor (Graham 1999, 6). Outside laborers and field hands ranked lowest in the slave hierarchy (Frazier 1949, 271). Their mostly dark skin, which was emphasized by the scorching Southern sun, was likened with physical strength so that slave masters and overseers felt entitled to work them like the horses and mules they were regarded as being. Moreover, they bore the brunt of negative stereotypes, as the lighter-skinned and mulatto slaves were considered more refined.[57]

The practice of favoring one group of slaves over the other was part of the divide-and-conquer strategy employed by slave owners to prevent slaves from organizing in large-scale uprisings (Hunter 2005, 13). Later, this was explained by the "Willie Lynch Syndrome." This is a reference to a speech that was purportedly given by a white West Indian slaveholder by the name of William Lynch, which many historians now believe to be a complete fake (Adams 22 February 1998). Despite several obvious anachronisms in the language used as well as a lack of information with regards to its authenticity, the document made its way into the public consciousness ever since its re-discovery by a librarian in the 1990s. People as prominent as Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam and organizer of the Million Man March to Washington D.C. in October 1995, referred to the speech several times, thus lifting its status from an urban myth to an allegedly authentic text. Its main message of how to "pit" slaves against each other based on their skin color, age, and gender continues to be cited as a reference for divisions in the Black community until this day. It thus relates to the color-based divisions between "house

[56] The practice of interracial affairs in the South was known by the name of *plaçage*, a system that – although not officially recognized by law – was very common (Lake 2003, 20).
[57] Charles H. Parrish also reminds us of the tradition to view a dark-skinned slave as having more physical strength and thus being more fit for work in the field, whereas a lighter-skinned slave was considered to belong to a "weaker and somewhat unstable mulatto group" (Parrish 1946, 16). The fact that this belief found its way into the twenty-first century language use reflects, according to Wilder, "not only the survival of the contentious word *nigger* but the continued reification of the slave mentality within black culture" (Wilder 2010, 190, italics in original).

slaves" and "field slaves," which – unlike the speech – are proven to be historically accurate.[58]

Although there was a clear racialization of slavery, which was based on the fact that the words *black* and *slave* became synonymous to each other, not all Black people in the slave states were enslaved.[59] If they were free, lighter-skinned Blacks were often seen as a buffer group between the slave-owning population and enslaved Black people (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 15). Since many of these light-skinned free Blacks were either educated or had learned a trade, they soon started to form an elite group among other free Black people, which led to a tripartite system of racial classification in the U.S. South (ibid.). This practice continued and even increased after the Civil War. Eventually, it led to the formation of what Du Bois called the group of the "Talented Tenth," a concept that he first advanced in 1903, with most of their members being of lighter hue (Du Bois and Zuckerman 2004). After the Civil War this free population of mulattoes often was afraid of being put in the same category with the newly-freed slaves, and of subsequently losing their social standing. In order to prevent this fear from becoming reality, they sometimes refused to associate with darker-skinned Black people, who they considered lower class, and often tried to marry up in order to ensure that their children were also light-skinned (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 697). Ultimately, many light-skinned Blacks at that time saw themselves as part of an aristocracy of political and educational leaders (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 31). Their light skin helped them to successfully reap the "perks" that a racist white society granted them for their proximity to whiteness.

Black people were conditioned to believe in the superior rank of whites as the "master race" by the powerful doctrine of slavery that made it impossible to re-

[58] A transcript of the document is available in its entirety on the University of Missouri-St. Louis library website, with the disclaimer that it is likely to have been written in the mid to late-twentieth century, and not – as originally believed – in 1712 (http://web.archive.org/web/20070806183356/http://www.umsl.edu/services/library/blackstudies/lynch.htm). It was later published in book form in *The Willie Lynch Letter and the Making of a Slave* (1999) and has sold widely, often being assigned as required class reading.

[59] Whether they came to the United States as free persons, or were manumitted from slavery at some point, there was a sizeable free Black population in the South from early on (Brown and Webb 2007, 80-81). Also, only a minority of whites was wealthy enough to keep slaves. Nevertheless, although white slave owners were small in numbers, they were still a powerful minority (Wander, Martin, and Nakayama 2011, 36; for more statistics see Hall 2009, 42-43).

sist this brainwashing of seeing Black as inferior. The total control of a Black person's mind, which inevitably comes with the interplay of coercive power expressed by the superior group and the eventual acceptance of this dominance by the inferior masses – in this case slaves – can be described with the concept of cultural hegemony. This is attributed to Antonio Gramsci and his elaborations in the *Prison Notebooks* (2011 [1929], 203). His comments on coercion and consent are reminiscent of a quote by African American historian Carter G. Woodson, who claimed that,

> [w]hen you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. (Woodson 1998 [1933], xiii)

While Woodson wrote this during a time of racial segregation, which was legalized throughout many parts of the United States by the now infamous Jim Crow laws, there is no doubt that what he maintained in 1933 can be seen as equally valid for times of slavery. To paraphrase his idea of the "back door," what starts out as a coerced approach to control a person's thinking, over time transforms into a consensual agreement on behalf of the "controlled." This, in turn, causes the controlled person to internalize hegemonic beliefs even if those imply her or his own inferiority. Consequently, entering the back door can be seen as analogous to accepting the possibility of fewer chances in life, being relegated to a lower-class position, and not being worthy of what the dominant group gets. At the same time, such behavior is indicative of accepting this "proper place" as natural and perhaps even God-given.

It is clear from these observations that the power of racism as an ideology lies in its ability to aim "at the minds of nonwhites as well as whites, inculcating subjugation" (Mills 1997, 89). Once the subjugated status is accepted, entering through the back door will no longer be questioned by the majority. This is not to say that there was no active protest against slavery on the part of numerous Black people; protests that took both publicly visible and less visible forms. Yet the concept of hegemony helps to understand why the system remained effective for so long.[60] The same reasoning can then be used to explain why colorism has been so widely accepted in the Black community. Decades of worshipping ideal feminine

[60] See the works by Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeht Fox-Genovese who applied Gramsci's concept of hegemony to the context of slavery in the U.S. (see, for example, Genovese 1974; Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005).

beauty in America as white, supported by the white mainstream media, made every other ethnic group believe in the ultimate beauty of these standards themselves.

1.2.2 The Jim Crow Era: Of Paper Bags, Passing, and the Black Middle Class

During the first years of Reconstruction after the Civil War, the outlook for Black people was a positive one, albeit ever so briefly. African Americans in the South enjoyed their newly-gained freedom and civil rights, and actively participated in the political life which had formerly been denied to them. However, the members of the old slavocracy, who were not willing to accept Black people as their equals, soon regained power in the disguise of states' rights (Painter 2006, 141-159). They managed to re-establish a racial hierarchy that effectively disenfranchised Black people by creating a rigid set of Jim Crow laws, named after a popular minstrel show at the time (Wallenfeldt 2010, 136). These laws, establishing strict racial segregation in the South, restored the color line that divided whites from Blacks in all areas of social life. They were not only legally enforced but also maintained with the help of extralegal white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which practiced racial terror to keep Black people "in their place."[61]

With slavery gone, the purpose served by free light-skinned Blacks which, although small in size, had operated as a form of buffer between the slave holders and the enslaved became obsolete. Suddenly, Southern whites bunched Black people – regardless of their previous status of free or enslaved – into one group; a group that they clearly saw as inferior and often did not want to associate with. Jim Crow laws did not distinguish between shades of color; if you were known to be "colored," to use the racial label of the day, you had your place in society that would not allow you to cross the color line. This *de facto* relegation to second-class citizenship caused those who before had considered themselves as part of a light-skinned elite to disassociate themselves from darker-skinned Black people even more. Light-skinned African Americans hoped to eventually get back their rights and privileges that they had enjoyed based on their light complexion. Gunnar Myrdal labels

[61] Their most violent means were lynchings, yet rallies of members disguised in hooded white sheets and cross burnings were powerful means of intimidation as well.

this an unsolvable conflict, because "[i]f the dark Negro accepts the white man's valuation of skin color, he must stamp himself as inferior. If the light Negro accepts this valuation, he places himself above the darker Negroes … and he reduces his loyalty to his caste" (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 699). This double-edged sword creates a significant identity problem for Black people in American society to this day. They constantly see themselves "through the eyes of others," as Du Bois called it when he penned the concept of "double consciousness" some forty years earlier (1994 [1903], 2). These are the eyes of whites, who define Black people as inferior. It is because of this internalized sense of inferiority that Black people often wish to disassociate themselves from those whom society sees as positioned on the lowest rung of the social ladder, these being those with very dark skin.

E. Franklin Frazier observes a clear correlation between skin color and class affiliation in the Black community. In his seminal work *The Negro in the United States* (1949), the first large-scale sociological study conducted and written by a Black sociologist, he writes: "The lower class has a larger proportion of dark or black Negroes than the middle or upper class" (Frazier 1949, 286). He then goes into a detailed explanation of how members of the Black middle class would seek friendship and marriage with those who have a fair complexion to improve their social standing even further, and how the upper class is known for "snobbishness toward dark or pure-blooded Negroes" (287). Frazier also comments on gender differences in this system of social stratification, by stating that among members of the upper class men are more likely to be of dark skin than women, which indicates that it is more difficult for dark-skinned women to achieve a higher status in Black society (287-288). This can be partly explained by men being what St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr. call "partial to color," and preferably choosing "very light-brown and fair women" as (marriage) partners (1945, 497).[62] Such demeanor effectively created a "*social* handicap for the very dark woman" (498) and made it more difficult for her to enter the middle and upper classes.

While important socially, color distinctions were also made on an economic and professional level. Sociological studies from the 1940s offer proof that many

[62] One of the most baffling quotes that reflects on the intersection of sexism and colorism is found in Drake's and Cayton, Jr.'s *Black Metropolis*, a sociological study on race in the Chicago area, when a young man is quoted as follows: "I don't look for coal mines; I look for gold mines" (1945, 498).

pink collar jobs, such as stenographers and typists, secretaries and assistants, as well as waitresses and cashiers were staffed with light-skinned women (see Drake and Cayton Jr. 1945, 498-499). At that time it was not uncommon to see advertisements that would specify the applicants' skin color (Johnson 1995, 72). Myrdal and others write of exclusive mulatto societies in Southern cities like New Orleans, Charleston, or Mobile (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 696), and Audrey Elisa Kerr chronicles blue vein societies in Washington, D.C., which considered themselves as higher up the social ladder than those of darker hues. Their superiority complex was based on the fact that their skin was so light that blue veins would show. Frazier exemplifies this with a "brown-skinned" young man who told him about being looked down on by "blue-blood" mulatto families in his neighborhood. Those families also attended "high tone" churches that did not allow anyone darker than an octoroon.[63] Overall, this social color-caste created an "insurmountable barrier," which was lifted only when the children of these families moved away from their color-struck communities (Frazier 1949, 290). Practices like these, as Frazier notes, were not only valid in the South but also in the Northern cities, although not to the same extent. According to one of Audrey Eliza Kerr's interviewees, even New York's reputable Cotton Club allegedly operated based on an intra-racial color line (2006, 32-33), something that Francis Ford Coppola's 1984 film by the same name alludes to.

It was during the years of Jim Crow that a trivial brown paper bag became a powerful symbol, or, as Kerr notes in *The Paper Bag Principle*, "an object of complex, perplexing, and obscure meaning in black communities" (2006, xiv). Simultaneously a symbol of belonging – if you could claim to be lighter than said bag – and a badge of inferiority – if you were darker – it was the defining marker of inclusion or exclusion. Allegedly used by various organizations such as churches, sororities, or social clubs, the paper bag became "both a source of pride and an objectionable taboo" (xiv). Similar tests were the "door test," which was the practice of matching Black people's skin shade with the color of the wooden door of a social gathering, or a humiliating "comb test," which would have people run a fine-toothed comb through somebody's hair. If the hair was too coarse or kinky and the comb got

[63] Among the racial labels of the day were many that referred to distinctions based on the amount of "black blood" that one had running through her or his veins. *Octoroon* and *quadroon* were terms referring to people with one eighth or one quarter Black ancestry, respectively.

stuck, this meant exclusion; if it ran through smoothly, the person was "in" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 27).

Little written evidence exists of practices like those described above, yet their existence manifested itself firmly in Black people's consciousness. It is not that relevant whether such shameful tests were really practiced, whether their mentioning was part of an unwritten set of rules and conventions, or whether they were merely a product of well-crafted myths in African American folklore. All that matters is that the concepts were so clear in the Black community that already naming those practices would suffice for people of certain shades to "know their place." This was, depending on the outcome of the various "tests," either inside the clubs, societies, and sororities, or outside the proverbial door, the shade of which might have denied them entrance based on their phenotypic appearance.

People who were light enough in skin color and endowed with European features so that they could be mistaken for a white person, often chose to engage in what became known as "passing for white," or permanently crossing the color line. What had already been common during slavery, when one's racial designation often determined whether a person was free or enslaved, continued to be practiced after the Civil War for mostly economic reasons and to escape Jim Crow segregation. Information on how many Black people engaged in the routine of passing is obviously scarce. Often it is merely rumors that exist of people who are believed to have moved over into the white world. The fact that passing has become such a popular trope in African American literature, however, is an indicator for its popularity in the "real" world (see also chapter 2.1.1). Lawrence Otis Graham goes so far as to establish 17 "Rules of Passing," which were well-kept secrets and thorough mechanisms of how to avoid being discovered as someone passing for white (1999, 380-382).[64]

With the budding movement for racial equality it became more important, however, to show race unity, at least on the outside. Gunnar Myrdal observed in the 1940s that "[a]s the Negro community is becoming increasingly 'race conscious' it is

[64] Among those rules is the advice to completely break with one's family if they are unwilling to support the decision of the passer (382).

no longer proper to display color preferences publicly" (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 698). This goes in line with the cultural developments that, for the first time in history, pointed to ways for positive Black identification, starting with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and resulting in the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent Black is Beautiful era.

1.2.3 SAY IT LOUD: BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL … OR IS IT?

In the 1950s a new era was ushered in during which African Americans fought for their constitutional rights and equal access to mainstream American society on a large scale. Almost one hundred years had passed since Abraham Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and yet Black Americans still found themselves relegated to second-class citizenship. From Martin Luther King, Jr.'s non-violent protests that advocated a colorblind equality of Blacks and whites, to more militant actions of the Nation of Islam and the Black Power movement, which were geared towards a more separatist approach, the events of the 1950s and 1960s caused great changes in the racial climate of the United States. The early years of the Civil Rights Movement were characterized by the focus on attaining those very rights that had been given to African Americans on paper since the abolition of slavery, yet – in practice – had been systematically denied by institutional barriers, especially in the Jim Crow South.

After the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had been passed, the focus shifted inwards to reflect on what Black people thought of themselves. It was clear that prior to that time, like bell hooks put it, "to be born light meant … born with an advantage, recognized by everyone. To be born dark was to start life handicapped, with a serious disadvantage" (1995, 119). Activists such as Stokely Carmichael, who is known for having coined the slogan "Black Power," outspokenly decried white ideologies and instead advocated the concept of self-love. This went in line with embracing what white society had maintained were undesirable physical characteristics:

> The only thing we own in this country is the color of our skins and we are ashamed of that because they made us ashamed. We have to stop being ashamed of being black. A broad nose, a thick lip and nappy hair is *us*, and we

> are going to call that beautiful whether they like it or not. We are not going to fry our hair anymore. (qtd. in Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick 1970, 472)

Perhaps much of what Carmichael, a prominent and outspoken Black Panther member and former leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), said in his speech "Black is Good" is conceived as too radical by today's standards.[65] Nevertheless, his call for positive self-definition (2000, 41) is one that echoes the language of the Black is Beautiful era. It is clear, however, that this creation of a healthy self-esteem is paired with a pronounced sense of Black Nationalism, bordering on separatism. Carmichael's rejection of trying to acquire "good hair" by exposing it to chemicals and hot combs, which he refers to as "frying" hair, is a clear statement not to submit to one racially limited definition of beauty. This rejection of beauty standards that were not their own obviously has to be seen as a difficult process. In his autobiography Malcolm X describes the pride he felt after having received his first "conk," in other words, having straightened his hair for the very first time (X and Haley 1992, 56). Only much later, he admits, did he notice that by doing that he had simply succumbed to the white man's standards. While he first felt "lost in admiration of … hair now looking 'white'" (56), he later realized that he, too, had bought into the idea of seeing light skin and straight hair as a form of prestige symbol (X and Haley 1992, 2-3). According to Malcolm X, Black people were brainwashed by white society to such an extent that they would "even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards" (56-57). Ironically, Eldridge Cleaver writes about Malcolm X only coming to see this after having broken with Elijah Muhammad, the controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, who had allegedly ordered the Muslim women in his organization to straighten their hair because "kinky hair was ugly and dirty" (Cleaver 1973, 5).

Whereas there had been a clear favoritism in the Black community for those with light skin and straight hair, once "Black is Beautiful" became the order of the day, colorism was often visible in its reverse form. Tensions were fueled by charges of not being "Black enough" by those who embraced the idea that racial loyalty would come with dark skin and tightly curled hair only. This is why many lighter-

[65] I am particularly referring to his prediction that Black people would meet a similar fate as the Jews in Nazi Germany if they did not act accordingly (Carmichael 2000, 42). This comparison just does not seem appropriate, because regardless of all the plights that Black people in the U.S. were exposed to – and Carmichael was not even referring to slavery here – likening the situation to one of the most heinous crimes and genocides in history rings as irreverent.

skinned African Americans felt they had to affirm their belonging by exaggerating their Afrocentric looks, and sporting even bigger Afros than those Black people with darker skin. The notion of racial authenticity being on the line because of one's light complexion is observed by Angela Davis, who testifies to that in her autobiography: "Sometimes I used to secretly resent my parents for giving me light skin instead of dark, and wavy instead of kinky hair" (1988, 96). In a classroom conversation held with her at Syracuse University in October 2010[66] she also talked about her Afro, which made her *the* cultural icon of the Black Power movement, and how she had to apply an excessive amount of hairspray to keep it in shape. Retrospectively, it seems a little ironic that "going natural" in her case was not so natural on second glance.[67] Still, showcasing an Afrocentric, perhaps even radical, hairdo seemed all the more important to convey the political message of her commitment to the Black struggle. When looking at her and Kathleen Cleaver, who is even lighter in skin color than Davis yet sported the same big Afro during that time, it appears that light skin required more effort to be culturally perceived as Black. It seems as if with this heightened sense of self-esteem and Black pride some members in the Black community felt the need to police the boundaries of Blackness. This was done to make sure that only those who actively subscribed to the newly voiced pride of Black-identified standards were seen as part of the in-group.[68]

While James Brown's funk song "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" was turned into the anthem of the Black Power Movement in 1968, the slogan "Black is Beautiful" reverberated throughout the country. It became the most important mantra for African Americans at that time, as theologian Howard Thurman maintains:

> "Black is Beautiful" became not merely a phrase – it was a stance, a total attitude, a metaphysics. In very positive and exciting terms it began undermining the idea that had developed over so many years into a central aspect of white mythology: that black is ugly, black is evil, black is demonic. In so doing it fun-

[66] As a graduate student scholar in residence at Syracuse University from August to October 2010 I was allowed to audit a course Davis taught as a visiting scholar, which was titled "Women of Color: Feminist Theories and Practices."
[67] Obviously, it is an erroneous belief to think that a natural hairstyle would be "merely hair left in an untouched state" (Craig 2002, 21), but because Davis referred to her hair as "wavy instead of kinky" it becomes clear that it had a texture that would require additional grooming to maintain her Afro.
[68] I borrowed the idea of "policing" Blackness and its boundaries from Debbie Weekes-Bernard, a research analyst for a British think-tank for race equality, who was quoted in a 2011 *Guardian* article on colorism (Adewunmi 2011).

> damentally attacked the front line of the defense of the myth of white supremacy and superiority. (Thurman qtd. in hooks 1989, 115)

In order to attack this myth of white superiority bell hooks speaks of aspirations to "decolonize" the minds of Black people. Maxine Leeds Craig calls this a "rearticulation of racial meanings" (2002, 10). This, in effect, meant replacing racist standards by "establishing a politics of representation which would both critique and integrate ideals of personal beauty and desirability … and put in place progressive standards … that would embrace a diversity of black looks" (hooks 1995, 119). It was viewing one's own looks with pride that turned self-love into "a radical political agenda" (ibid). Due to its political meaning, wearing an Afro or donning African clothes like dashikis became much more than just a personal fashion statement, which was the argument often made by white mainstream America. Before it became a "popular commodity" (Craig 2002, 19), wearing an Afro was a political statement, along the lines of "the personal is political." Although this slogan had first become prominent when used by (white) women's liberation groups, it was equally important for expressions of self-determination for African Americans.

Obviously, during the "Black is Beautiful" revolution race unity and racial loyalty took center-stage and did not allow for an open discussion of distinctions based on the intra-racial color line. The fact that it was no longer socially appropriate to talk about the color complex in public did not, however, completely eradicate those deep-rooted feelings that put a premium on light skin. This was mostly due to the fact that assimilation into mainstream society continued to be awarded with concrete benefits, and "individual black folks who were most like white folks in the way they looked, talked, dressed, etc., would find it easier to be socially mobile" (hooks 1995, 123). Unfortunately, embracing Blackness in its entirety was only a short-lived idea, and with the backlash of the more conservative years that followed the radical period of the 1960s, many of the conflicts around shades of skin color continued to simmer under the surface.

1.2.4 LASHING BACK: REVIVING LIGHT VS. DARK

If bell hooks is to be believed, by the start of the 1970s the interest in talking about racism and old-established beauty standards among Black people had given way to the belief that racial self-hatred was an issue of the past and choices of hairstyle were simply "an expression of liberal individualism" (hooks 1995, 124-125). This attitude allowed a "re-investment in color-caste hierarchies" (130), which soon revealed itself in sociological studies of children once again favoring white dolls instead of Black ones, as well as in the media's revival of celebrating a light-skinned beauty ideal, particularly in advertisements. After the Black is Beautiful era, as a study of *Ebony* magazine shows, "the fair-skinned Eurocentric model had begun to reassert itself as the somatic norm for *Ebony* advertising by the late 1980s" (Leslie 1995, 426). Contrary to the backlash in terms of skin tones, the study also revealed, however, that there was a somewhat permanent change in hairstyles which reflected an increase in "naturals," apart from showing models sporting straightened and relaxed "dos." This was interpreted as an extension of what was deemed socially acceptable by both advertisers and readers (433). Nevertheless, there was a continued focus on less African attributes, leading the study author to conclude that once again "[r]acially mixed and nonblack African somatic types were increasingly emphasized" (ibid.). bell hooks critiqued developments like this one by asking in her essay "Overcoming White Supremacy: A Comment":

> What did it mean to have this period of racial questioning of white supremacy, of black is beautiful, only to witness a few years later the successful mass production by white corporations of hair care products to straighten black hair? (hooks 1989, 116)

One answer lies in the capitalist principles of a white supremacist society, the companies of which will do anything to reap the benefits which result from the identity complexes that this very society inculcates in the people it subjugates. In her essay "Black Beauty and Black Power" hooks also holds the Black community accountable, at least in part. Among other things, she talks about the lack of an unrelenting effort to tackle the intra-racial color caste system, which was aided to some extent by lacking access to the media to "launch a sustained challenge to internalized racism" (1995, 125).

Accusing people in the Black community of complicity in the perpetuation of the color complex became a prominent trope in the post-Civil Rights era. In a highly regarded article in *The Black Scholar* (Mar-Apr 1973; reprinted in Nov-Dec 1981), Trellie Jeffers raises serious allegations against the Black middle class, which, she charges, has discriminated against what she calls the "Black Black woman" for centuries.[69] Speaking from personal experience at a prestigious Black Southern college, Jeffers tells of the hardships she faced because of her dark skin color. She goes so far as to say that while white people's racism is bad, this form of discrimination within the community is even worse:

> [...] for some of us, no white man could ever perfect so devastating a blow to the human potential than the black middle class racism the black black woman has encountered, for she is usually regarded by middle class men as too ugly for marriage and unfit for supervisory positions. (Jeffers 1973, 38)

Upon describing the "devastating" psychological consequences for dark-skinned Black women, Jeffers also likens colorism – although she does not name it as such – to a "divisive cancer that has chopped the black race in this country into polarized sections" (37).[70] Moreover, Jeffers describes how dark-skinned women feel the need to approximate themselves to white standards by donning wigs and straightening their hair as well as imitating white speech habits, practices she deplores as "maiming" (39). Yet she also sees these images confirmed in "center-folds and [on] covers of many black magazines," which continue to have a powerful, albeit destructive, impact on those who do not see themselves represented in the media (ibid.). What Jeffers addresses in terms of attacks against dark-skinned Black women is answered by similar stories of psychological pain from the other end of the "color chart." In a response piece by Adrienne M. Harrison, at that time a graduate student in psychology, it becomes clear that the wounds created by colorism, among the Black middle class and in general, are as deep for light-skinned women. In a poignant analysis that speaks to the torments she had to endure because of her being "high yellow," Harrison concludes by addressing the need to "stop the white Mephistopheles of degenerate racism from manipulating our minds" and "cast off white American morals and values so destructive to the spirit of black communal living and freedom" (Harrison 1973, 60). While Jeffers put the blame on those who

[69] The repetition of the adjective *Black* is a clear reference to skin color here, implying that the Black woman she talks about collectively in this essay is really, truly, visibly Black.
[70] It is in a belated response to Jeffers's article by Alice Walker in 1982 that the term *colorism* is coined by the novelist herself (see Walker 2004 [1982]).

were complicit in the perpetuation of the color complex within the Black community, Harrison sees the problem located outside the community and concludes that only active resistance against this manipulation of Black people's minds will help to bring colorism to an end for Black women, both light and dark.

Although in much of the public discussion the focus was – again – on women, Michael Jackson's visual and quite uncanny transformation from an Afro-wearing, brown-skinned child prodigy to the world-renowned, yet entirely white-looking King of Pop, became illustrative of the continued existence of colorism in the Black community. Since the real reason for Michael Jackson's complete change in physical appearance may never be known, his claim of suffering from the rare skin disease vitiligo, which he first mentioned in an interview with Oprah in 1993, should be acknowledged as one version of the truth.[71] His bleached skin and some of his otherwise altered looks thus could have merely been the results of attempts to even out his skin, the pigmentation of which had been destroyed by the skin disorder. At the same time, Jackson's attempt to look white could have been more deliberate in order to maximize his crossover success among white audiences worldwide. This rather material reason, in turn, may or may not be related to an internalized color complex that went in line with a wish to deny his Black ancestry and appear white.[72] In any case, Jackson's iconic status called for every action to be attributed with meaning.

Regardless of the real reason for Jackson's transformation into what Patricia J. Williams called "the Negro Caucasian" (8 July 2009), it certainly sent a contradictory and also problematic message to his Black audience, particularly to his young adolescent fans. What did it mean that the man who chanted "It Don't Matter If You're Black or White" seemed so divided against himself that in the end he probably did not recognize the "Man in the Mirror" anymore, to invoke another one of his legendary song titles (Aoun 2009, 169)? Or, as the character Queen Shenequa, played by comedian Ellen Cleghorne, once asked on a skit on *Saturday Night Live* in 1991: "Michael, if it don't matter if you Black or White, / then why you

[71] While *Ebony* or *Essence* never ran a story on Jackson's case, *Ebony* published a multi-page feature story on the skin condition as early as in 1968 ("I Wish I Were Black - Again").
[72] For a more extensive analysis of Jackson's many facets of "surgical passing," as white, female, asexual, etc., see Kathy Davis's "Surgical Passing: Or Why Michael Jackson's Nose Makes 'Us' Uneasy" (2003).

White?" (qtd. in Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 135). Although rendered humorously here, the reality of Jackson's transformation was a far more serious issue. Marita Golden writes about an exchange with cultural historian Anthony Browder, in which she maintained that, "Michael Jackson is a parody of Black folks' love affair with Whiteness, the desire, sometimes secret and unexpressed, other times obvious and acknowledged, that lots of us still have to be lighter and whiter than we are" (2004, 101). Having this secret love affair, as Golden termed it, publicly exposed and discussed, certainly made many Black people uncomfortable, as it showed the unresolved issues around skin color that were prevalent. Ultimately, as Russell, Wilson, and Hall put it, "Michael Jackson did not invent Black self-hatred. He is simply the product of an environment with a long history of race and color bias" (161)

In the 1980s, a conservative backlash against people of color ultimately contributed to a revival of the light versus dark divide, both inter- as well as intraracially. This was fuelled by the Reagan administration and its opposition to affirmative action, Reagan's racially biased war on drugs, as well as cuts to the social welfare program. The latter disproportionately affected people of color but was defended by Reagan's repeated telling of the fabricated story of a Cadillac-driving "welfare queen."[73] Instead of acknowledging the prevailing significance of race as a social construct, and racism as institutionalized and endemic to people of color, the political establishment blamed failures on pathologies of individual members or entire races.

The many African American "firsts," in other words, success stories of individual Black people – from actors and entertainers, to politicians and official representatives, to businesspeople and entrepreneurs – also contributed to the perception that the system of discrimination based on race was on the wane. The prevailing attitude in the 1980s was that as long as Black people worked hard and pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, they could be just as successful as any white person, with individuals serving as role models. A case in point was when the Miss

[73] Reagan first told this story while he unsuccessfully ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976. Despite the fact that he never referred to the woman as Black, the common assumption was that this social welfare fraud must be African American. It stuck in the (white) public consciousness, thus giving birth to the stereotype of the Black Welfare Queen, which still haunts U.S. politics to this day (see, for example, a CNN article by Blake 23 January 2012).

America Pageant for the first time crowned a Black woman as the most beautiful woman in the United States. Vanessa Williams donning the Miss America tiara in 1984 was heralded as a milestone of success, also in the dominant white society. After all, the beauty pageant had only been integrated in 1970 – ironically by Iowa, one of the whitest states in the nation, which had then sent its first Black contestant (Davis and Haddock 2010, 74). Despite its positive meaning as such, however, Williams's selection also confirmed that white society remained partial to light skin. With her light complexion and her green eyes many in the Black community felt that Williams did not symbolize the great range of Black female beauty and merely won because of her proximity to Eurocentric standards (see Daniel 2002). The extensive discussion that followed – at least in some Black media – goes to show that while (intra-)racial tensions ostensibly seemed to have diminished, an event like this was enough to bring the undercurrents to the surface of what John Fiske would call a "river of discourses" (1996, 7). It was because overt racial discrimination was replaced by colorblind racism that the meaning of skin color could once again take center stage, both in the larger society as well as in the Black community. Against this background of so-called colorblind policies, Black people quickly realized that the advantage system based on shades of skin color was still very much in place, and those who looked less Black were awarded with benefits from white society.

Throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century events like the Rodney King beating, the Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill controversy, the O.J. Simpson trial, or the racially charged events following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina characterized racial politics in the U.S. What all those events had in common was that they showed – contrary to both wishful thinking and white ignorance – that race and racism continue to be systemic issues in America. It is merely a natural outcome that in light of this, skin color also continues to be of relevance within communities of color. Most recently, this could be seen in the highly publicized case of George Zimmerman, a white Hispanic, fatally shooting Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager, in Sanford, Florida in February 2012.

One of the most powerful means to perpetuate color hierarchies has always been Hollywood, largely because of the intimate position of television in people's private homes. As Marita Golden succinctly puts it, "[t]elevision has been and still

is one of the culture's most powerful tools for spreading the gospel of the supremacy of whiteness" (2004, 84). This dominance of whiteness is seen in the fact that the most successful Black actresses are racially ambiguous and look like Halle Berry (Hill Collins 2004, 195), or that in the music industry light-skinned women like Mariah Carey and Beyoncé Knowles more often make it to the top than any darker-skinned singers and dancers. Light skin bias is even observed in the news media, as there is a clear dominance of light-skinned anchors on the major networks and cable news channels. Examples include *CNN's* Soledad O'Brien and Fredricka Whitfield as well as Don Lemon and T.J. Holmes. While long considered a taboo issue, in 2011 anchorman Don Lemon made some outspoken comments about the television networks' own brown-paper-bag test for anchors' complexions (Jefferson 29 June 2011).

1.2.5 Post-Racial What? Colorism in the Age of Obama and Beyond

At the completion of his first four years in office, President Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States has undoubtedly shaped the country.[74] How he will go down in history is yet to be determined, not in the least by the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections in November 2012. Yet it is already indisputable that his election in 2008 created the idea of America being "post-racial," with people starting to talk about the "Age of Obama," a phrase that rings of dreams of racial equality having finally become true. As such it is reminiscent of Obama's very own call for unity and equality, perhaps most eloquently expressed in his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 2004, when he was a candidate for the U.S. Senate: "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America" (2004). As important as this call for unity is, it allows some people to believe in the utopia of a color-blind society

[74] During his first presidential campaign and upon being elected President there was an extended discussion on Obama's racial heritage in the media. Some journalists were debating as to whether referring to him as biracial would perhaps be more accurate. It is certainly true that Obama's white mother from Kansas and his Black father from Kenya make him biracial, and not – unlike in times of segregation and the "one-drop rule" – *just* Black. Nevertheless, many see it as a person's own right to choose as to how she or he self-identifies. President Obama has done so repeatedly, and calls himself *Black* and *African American* interchangeably.

in which race would no longer matter. Four years after Obama's election, and despite numerous examples to prove the contrary, some uphold the belief that as a nation the U.S. has overcome its race problems. By simply looking at the ongoing issues of systemic inequality, however, such illusions can be easily refuted (see, for example, the statistical data on unemployment statistics and the wage gap in chapter 1.1.2). It is useful to repeat what Kimberlé Crenshaw once said in this context: "We are a society that has been structured from top to bottom by race. You don't get beyond that by deciding not to talk about it anymore" ("Civil Rights Today" 2006). Put another way, despite what some would like to believe, people in the U.S. are not solely judged by the content of their character, but more often by the color of their skin, regardless of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s grand dream almost fifty years ago.

This continued relevance of skin color within the larger U.S. society allows for the assumption that the value system of different shades of skin within the Black community (and other communities of color, for that matter) has not lost its importance either. One way of telling that skin color still carries heavy weight in Black America is taken straight from the Obama family: We know that skin color continues to be relevant as long as someone the hue of Michelle Obama is considered so unusual in her position that Black journalists compliment Barack Obama for not choosing a light-skinned trophy wife (Bates 6 March 2008), or claim that having a dark-skinned First Lady is "straight-up revolutionary" (Williams 13 January 2009), or notice that "waxy Michelle" became a café au lait copy of her real-life model at Madame Tussauds (Wiltz 9 April 2009). As Theresa Wiltz wrote on *theRoot.com*, the *Washington Post*'s online magazine for African Americans, which was founded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: "The wax first lady looks a good couple of shades lighter than her biracial husband. She's immortalized in a honey hue that has absolutely, positively, nothing to do with her richly mahogany reality" (Wiltz 9 April 2009). A surface reading of the texts that comment on Michelle Obama's skin tone (and the representations of it) suggests that it is the position as First Lady itself which called for those remarks. As the wife of the President of the United States she is automatically elevated to a celebrity status that entails documenting and gossiping about her every single move and every detail of her

appearance. Yet what all those articles have in common is that they place a distinct value on Michelle Obama's dark skin, and emphasize that women like her are not usually seen in positions of power,[75] or next to successful Black men who tend to marry light-skinned women.[76] It is no coincidence, then, that those articles were all written by Black women who seem to have been longing for a public figure to break with the norms, and challenge the prevailing standards of beauty, which, even in the twenty-first century, seem to follow the age-old premise of "light is right."

Both during the presidential campaign as well as after Obama's election, his wife often made headlines based on her physical appearance. In the December 1, 2008 issue of *Newsweek*, Allison Samuels wrote the cover essay titled "What Michelle Means to Us." In this article Samuels also discusses colorism in the Black community, which is why she is quoted at length below:

> Michelle is not only African-American, but brown. Real brown. In an era when beauty is often defined on television, in magazines and in movies as fair or white skin, long straight hair and keen features, Michelle looks nothing like the supermodels who rule the catwalks or the porcelain-faced actresses who hawk must-have cosmetics. … In too many cases, beauty for black women (and even black men) has meant fair skin, "good hair" and dainty facial features. Over the years, African-American icons like Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Halle Berry and Beyoncé – while beautiful and talented-haven't exactly represented the diversity of complexions and features of most black women in this country. (Samuels 1 December 2008)

While offering a concise history of skin color privilege and prejudice in Black America, which includes listing some of the most successful, yet always light-skinned, Black actresses and singers, Samuels also paints an accurate picture of contemporary American society. She claims that fashion shows and glossy adverts still reflect only one beauty norm, which is characterized by light skin and long, flowing hair.[77]

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[75] As always, exceptions prove the rule, if one thinks of politicians like Condoleezza Rice and actresses like Whoopi Goldberg, Nia Long, or Gabrielle Union. Particularly Union and Long, however, are very outspoken on the difficulties they face in Hollywood based on their dark skin tone (see, for example, Percival and Crisp 2005 [2003]).

[76] This habit was already noticed by Gunnar Myrdal in his 1944 sociological study of the Black community (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose 1944, 698), and Alice Walker described the light-skinned looks of the wives of Frederick Douglass and Marcus Garvey (2004 [1982], 302-303). The practice is seen to this day when looking at some high-profile Black male celebrities like Bill Cosby, Spike Lee, Chris Rock, or Eddie Murphy, and their respective light-skinned wives, as well as by watching reality TV shows such as *Basketball Wives* on VH1.

[77] To be fair, some high fashion labels and magazines regularly feature dark-skinned models like Naomi Campbell, Alek Wek, and Iman, yet the high fashion industry is known for playing with the "exotic" image of the Black Other. Interestingly, despite her success, Naomi Campbell herself once accused the fashion industry and its magazines of colorism in a *Telegraph* article: "Black models are being sidelined by the major modelling [sic] agencies. … It is a pity that people don't appreciate black beauty" (Davies 2007).

It is because of this omnipresence of light-skinned beauties in the media that Michelle Obama's face on magazine covers seems all the more relevant, as Samuels points out. The significance of the First Lady's hue was also noticed by others, particularly because it is rare that well-known Black men are seen with dark-skinned Black women.[78] Marita Golden, author of *Don't Play in the Sun: A Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex* (2004), is quoted to have said the following about Barack Obama in a 2009 article published the *Washington Post*:

> A lot of my African American friends said this brother is incredible but who is he married to? … We were holding our breath, literally. Then when we saw his wife, my friends of all hues felt enormously proud that he was married to a woman that looked like Michelle Obama. The fact we had to hold our breath and the fact we had to be proud spoke volumes about where colorism is today. (qtd. in Brown 2009)

So where is colorism today? And why, despite so many calls for trying to overcome it, bury it, forget it - with "it" always being the "crazy aunt in the attic of racism," as a Black journalist once called it (Brown 2009) – is it still an issue today? One reason for colorism's sustained existence is that the media, both mainstream and alternative, continue to herald rigidly defined Euro-American norms of attractiveness and desirability. Here we can again take up bell hooks's argument used in the introduction that despite all the progress that was made in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and the subsequent Black is Beautiful movement, "masses of black people continue to be socialized *via* mass media and non-progressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values" (hooks 1992, 18).

One such expression of the media's color bias is the cover of the October 2010 issue of *Elle* magazine featuring Gabourey Sidibe, the lead character of the 2009 movie *PRECIOUS*, directed by Lee Daniels and based on the 1996 novel *Push* by Sapphire. While it needs to be seen as progressive to have a full-figured woman on the cover of any women's magazine in a society that is driven by the obsession to be thin in order to be beautiful, there are some problems with this very title page. This becomes especially clear if one compares the photograph with some other pictures of Sidibe. All of those show her many shades darker than on the *Elle* cover, which leads to the inevitable conclusion that the photograph for *Elle* was digitally altered

[78] It is also believed that Barack Obama would have received less support in the Black community, particularly from Black women, had his wife been light-skinned or even white (see Crawford 2008; Adewunmi 2011).

to give Sidibe's skin a much lighter hue than her natural self. Questions as to why this was done are only subject to speculation because the magazine's editors denied the airbrushing allegations, which became a hot-button issue in the blogosphere as soon as the issue hit the newsstands (see, for example, "Gabourey Sidibe Cover Lightened by *Elle*?" 17 September 2010). The act of digitally bleaching Sidibe's skin could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to make her look less threatening to the status quo. It appears as if by featuring a woman who does not fit society's conventions of attractiveness in terms of weight *and* skin color, the editors of *Elle* possibly feared they were taking it too far. *Elle*'s readership is already presented with an image that clearly breaks with hegemonic standards of beauty, simply because it does not conform to society's obsession with thinness. Concurrently, this image can be more easily accepted than the picture of both a heavy-set *and* a dark-skinned woman, which would perhaps be too reminiscent of the Mammy figure.

As such, the incident of digitally altering a magazine cover with regards to skin color is akin to the *TIME* magazine cover of O.J. Simpson in 1994, albeit in reverse. Simpson, the former football star and then alleged murderer of his ex-wife Nicole Brown, was digitally made to look darker on the cover of *TIME*, which became evident only because *Newsweek* ran the same mug shot – yet unaltered – on its own cover in the same week. What was probably an attempt to make Simpson look more threatening on the *TIME* cover, yet was always denied by the people in charge, caused an extended debate on the media's manipulation of reality and their capitalizing on racist stereotypes (Fiske 1996, 269-274). The idea to darken Simpson's face to make him look more dangerous clearly evokes the stereotype of the Black Buck, in other words, the controlling image of the hyper-masculine Black rapist. It is implied that mainstream America can more easily identify with this image if the physical features are in line with the powerful stereotype that has permeated American culture ever since the release of the movie *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Compared with the *Elle* incident, it follows that on the one hand there was the attempt to resurrect the Black Buck and, on the other hand, the apparent effort to bury the Mammy.[79]

[79] The 2011 movie adaptation of Kathryn Stockett's best selling novel *The Help* (2009) suggests that the Mammy as a stereotype is still very much alive.

Another example that demonstrates the continued relevance of skin color in the age of Obama is exemplified by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's 2008 remarks about Barack Obama himself. As two journalists recorded in their book, Reid once referred to Obama as being "light-skinned" with "no Negro dialect" (Halperin and Heilemann 2010, 36).[80] While overtly racist in their nature, comments like these as noted by a *New York Times* journalist, reach beyond white-on-black racism into the realities of "intricate caste hierarchies" that determine "who gets hired, who gets convicted and who gets elected" (Vedantam 19 January 2010). In a *Newsweek* blog Allison Samuels went so far as to put the blame directly on mainstream America: "Reid's recent controversial and disturbing statements prove that no matter how hard we as African-Americans try to move past a racial stigma that's haunted us for far too long, mainstream America just won't let us let it go" (11 January 2010).

Overall, a consolidated view of all these examples indicates that because white society keeps on making distinctions based on skin shade, and, at the same time, grants advantages to those with light skin, Black people continue to be socialized with the idea of "light is right." Here, the skin bleaching of former baseball star Sammy Sosa is just one prominent case in point.[81] Further proof can be found in the increased number of filed complaints based on intra-racial color discrimination, recorded by the EEOC, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.[82] Ultimately, it is valid to say that the Black community is no more "post-color" than the American society at large is "post-race," and that simply remaining silent about it will not make the issues go away.

[80] These comments also bring to mind early coverage on Obama, which dealt with the question of whether the son of a white Kansan mother and a Black Kenyan father, who was brought up in a white household in Hawaii could be "Black enough" for African American voters. The 2007 *TIME* magazine article "Is Obama Black Enough?" by Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates gives a quite nuanced view on this debate. Among other things, Coates emphasizes that despite Obama's white upbringing and the lack of a family history in slavery, his daily experiences as the husband of a Black woman, attending a Black church, and living on Chicago's South Side clearly make him Black (Coates 1 Feb. 2007).
[81] In an interview Sosa admitted to applying a bleaching cream before going to bed at night, but denied that this would have anything to do with wanting to be white (Rojas 10 November 2009).
[82] The latest available data are from the year 2006, in which – according to an EEOC press release – 1,241 discrimination charge filings based on color were recorded. This figure more than tripled since 1992, when the EEOC had recorded 374 such complaints (EEOC 28 February 2007).

She should have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much. ~ Wallace Thurman, The Blacker the Berry *(1929)*

I don't wanna be dark an [sic] big – make me pretty God – make me light and pretty! ~ Dael Orlandersmith, "Yellowman" (2004)

1.3 BLACK WOMEN AND COLORISM: A SPECIAL CASE

While the epigraphs to this chapter are both statements by fictional Black female characters struggling with dark skin, the ramifications for dark-skinned Black women in real life are just as bad.[83] Black girls to this day often realize early on that their skin color might one day decide their fate, be it whom they are able to marry or for which kind of job they are considered suitable. Skin color, even more so than any other physical feature, often is the determining factor in success or failure, especially for women: "Colorism affects African Americans of both genders, but the complexion hierarchy is more central in the lives of women" (Keith 2009, 26). Because light skin and long hair are synonymous with being a beautiful female, those who do not fit these characteristics are considered less desirable and less beautiful, both "in the racist white imagination and in the colonized black mindset" (hooks 1995, 127). Whereas this chapter does not intend to deny any effects of colorism on men, it will place the focus on women; this is because the meanings of being beautiful and being female are so inextricably interwoven that it would be remiss to ignore this special case in Black America.[84]

After establishing some reasons for Black women being characterized as the veritable "Other" in U.S. society, some aspects of the beauty industry and the commodification of female beauty will be addressed. Following this, another key aspect of femininity, hair, will be dealt with in some detail. Issues around, for example, so-called "good" and "bad" hair in the Black community, in other words "processed" versus "natural" hair, will be explained at the end of this chapter.

[83] For an extended discussion of colorism in fiction see chapter 2.1.
[84] One example which shows that colorism is not solely a women's issue is the life of Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman. Although he wrote his novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) from a Black woman's point of view, he allegedly suffered from color hierarchies in his community himself; the reason being that he was particularly dark-skinned (Thurman, Singh, and Scott 2003).

1.3.1 Two Sides of a Coin: Black Femininity as the "Other"

Black women were defined as the less valuable and ultimate "Other" from the moment they were first brought to the country on slave ships. Since white people in the British colonies of the seventeenth century had come from Europe with their ideas of what later manifested itself as the "cult of true womanhood," white women were glorified. They were seen as symbols of purity and femininity, and were put on pedestals to represent the ideal (and only) definition of beauty. For this image to work, however, the white supremacist society had to identify a binary opposite, which came to be the Black woman. Psychologists William Grier and Price M. Cobbs put it this way:

> In this country, the standard is the blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned girl with regular features. Since communication media spread this ideal to every inhabitant of the land via television, newspapers, magazines, and motion pictures, there is not much room for deviation. The girl who is black … is, in fact, the antithesis of American beauty. However beautiful she might be in a different setting with different standards, in this country she is ugly. (1992 [1968], 40-41)

The Black woman thus was the antithesis to what Audre Lorde termed the "mythical norm" (Hill Collins 2000, 168) and was characterized as savage, loose, amoral, and ugly. In other words, the Black woman was positioned on opposite ends to this norm, which Lorde described as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" (1984, 116).[85] Artist Lorraine O'Grady compares this to the obverse and reverse of a coin, each side standing for a different representation of "woman":

> The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she better not be. (O'Grady 2003 [1992], 174)

What O'Grady suggests here is that Black and white female bodies cannot be viewed separately, and – as is the nature of binary systems – only acquire meaning in relation to each other. Patricia Hill Collins comes to a similar conclusion when she contends that "standards of female beauty have no meaning without the visible presence of Black women and others who fail to measure up" (2004, 194).

[85] Lorde specifically talks about the Black lesbian, who is completely opposed to this "mythical norm," but heterosexual Black women are seen in a similar position that categorizes them as the "Other."

Because of the clear hierarchy that emerges here, the issue can be likened to what Jacques Derrida described as non-neutral binary oppositions. As Derrida suggests and Stuart Hall paraphrases, one pole is usually dominant, "creating a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition" (Hall 1997, 235). This dominant pole does not only define itself but is also entitled to objectify the inferior pole, in this case the Black female body:

> As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject. (hooks 1989, 42-43)

Because Black women's identities have always been determined by others, and their status as human beings has been denied, it is even more difficult for them to acquire a positive and self-defined sense of identity. While white women are objectified and subject to a male gaze in a patriarchal society, women of color are confronted with double objectification based on their being female *and* Black, with factors such as class or sexual orientation often playing a vital role as well. What was first coined "double jeopardy" by Frances Beale (1970), later termed "multiple jeopardy" by Deborah K. King (1988), and today expressed by using the concept of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), shows the intricate complexities of Black female identities and the multiple oppressions the Black woman is exposed to in a white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal society.[86]

Within the "kaleidoscope of not-white females," as O'Grady claims, African women are located at the "outermost reaches of 'otherness'" (2003 [1992], 174-175). This comes as a result of their skin color and features, as well as their roots in the country as enslaved peoples. They thereby assume "all the roles of the not-white body" (ibid.). Thus, the "Othering" of Black female bodies not only elevates the social rank of white women but also legitimizes the oppression and subjugation of Black women, as Patricia Hill Collins asserts: "Maintaining images of U.S. Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression" (Hill Collins 2000, 70). As such, Black women were seen fit to be exploited – economically, sexually, and socially.

[86] For a more elaborate treatment of the issues with which Black feminists concern themselves, see my unpublished diploma thesis, titled *The Black Feminist Movement in the U.S.: A Commitment to Action Then and Now*, which was approved by Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt, Austria in 2008.

Also inherent in this "Othering" is the creation of a myriad of harmful controlling images or "gendered racist stereotypes" that came to define the Black woman (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, 3). From the self-sacrificing, asexual Mammy, who worked as a maid in white households and often took on the role of raising white children; to the domineering, emasculating Matriarch; to the promiscuous, hypersexual Jezebel; to the sassy, abusive Welfare Queen – no matter how Black women are portrayed in the media, they are often perceived as stock characters.[87] One more recent, yet nevertheless popular, image is that of the Angry Black Woman. Related in principle to the image of the Matriarch, this stereotype is often used as shorthand for strong women that do not seem to let themselves be controlled by their men and society in general. Rather than taken as a good character trait, their independence and strong sense of self-value are turned into something negative by portraying them as angry. A prime example is Michelle Obama, who has been repeatedly labeled as such. A recent book on the Obamas by a *New York Times* reporter even prompted her to publicly denounce these allegations that had been part of the public discourse of her since the day her husband started his presidential campaign ("Michelle Obama Tired of 'Angry Black Woman' Stereotype" 11 January 2012).

Many of the stereotypes attributed to Black women are also closely linked to shades of color in human skin. The darker the woman is, the more easily she falls into one of the predominant derogatory categories that emphasize her as "Other." The "Mammy," whom Michele Wallace describes as a "hated figure in black history" (1979, 21), has always been publicly personified by very dark-skinned women. Actress Hattie McDaniel and her representation of this stock character in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is case in point. Donald Bogle asserts that "[a] dark black actress was considered for no role but that of a mammy or an aunt jemima" (2001, 15). Also the "Matriarch" is generally supposed to be of darker complexion,[88] as is the Angry Black Woman, whereas the oversexualized "Jezebel" and the "Hip Hop Ho" in current music videos are more often light-skinned than of darker hue. On the one hand, the "Hip Hop Whore" serves as an eroticized symbol for desirability and exot-

[87] For a more detailed analysis of Black female stereotypes see, for example, Hill Collins (2000; 2004).
[88] See Golden's description of the famous television matriarch "Sapphire" (2004, 76-78) or bell hooks's comments on the issue (1995, 127).

icism. On the other hand, however, her public image still humiliates the Black woman by portraying her as promiscuous, with the emphasis being on objectification and sexual exploitation. By looking at superstars like Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Alicia Keys it becomes obvious that lighter shades of skin obviously get women ahead in the music industry and music video business. In addition to that, light skin favoritism continues to be apparent in Hollywood. Many successful Black female actresses in Tinseltown are light-skinned, with Halle Berry, Paula Patton, and Zoe Saldana being just three names on a long list. That so few images of really dark skinned Black women are seen in the movies, on television, and on magazine covers also contributes to dark-skinned women's marginalized status. At the same time, it reveals the media's enormous influence in determining a female beauty aesthetic.

The problem is that "[t]rue femininity is still defined in relation to whiteness" (Hunter 2005, 77). Or, states Cornel West, "[t]he ideal of female beauty in this country puts a premium on lightness and softness mythically associated with white women and downplays the rich stylistic manners associated with black women" (2001, 130). This is why Black women are, generally speaking, more affected by a self-internalized inferiority complex than Black men. Because "[d]ark skin is stereotypically coded in the racist, sexist, and/or colonized imagination as masculine," as bell hooks argues, Black men might benefit, while dark-skinned Black women lose feminine – and thus womanly – qualities (1995, 129). The flipside of this, however, can also bear negative consequences for Black men. When they are light-skinned, Black men are likely to suffer from charges of not being "manly enough" because they are not "Black enough." This again exemplifies that colorism cuts both ways, and – although mostly treated as an issue for women – has effects on African Americans regardless of gender. By taking this analysis one step further one could claim that light-skinned Black men are required to wage yet another battle over their masculinity in a society that has, historically speaking, both metaphorically and literally emasculated the Black male body.

As far as the Black female body is concerned, Black women suffer from colorism because we are living in a sexist society that puts a higher value on women's bodies than on their minds and actions (Hunter 2005, 69). This is because, as Rita Freedman maintains, "beauty is asymmetrically assigned to the feminine role, [and]

women are defined as much by their looks as by their deeds" (qtd. in Hunter 2004, 23). Light skin privilege often goes beyond being considered beautiful; it may also exert influence on career paths and the ability to choose a (marriage) partner. Therefore, skin color is often referred to as "social capital" (Hunter 2002) or "symbolic capital" (Glenn 2008). It functions as a viable asset that creates a correlation between skin tone and attractiveness, or skin tone and success (see also chapter 2.2). Just as whiteness serves as a form of property, a concept put forward by Cheryl Harris (1993), lightness of skin within a racial or ethnic community, too, has a distinct property value. The corollary is that the mere fact of lacking what is generally accepted as valuable makes Black women more susceptible to buy into the beauty myth and try to approximate their bodies to white Western values. By doing so, they hope to refine their bodies in ways that conform to the "norm." Corporations quickly recognized this need and now do everything to commodify beauty. White beauty is put up for sale everywhere, thus adding fuel to the flames of the eternal debate as to "who is the fairest of them all."

1.3.2 Commodifying Beauty: Who (Hue) Is The Fairest Of Them All?

The Black body, as Charles W. Mills points out, has historically been considered intellectually, morally, and aesthetically inferior, because it does not comply to the "somatic norm" of the white body (1997, 61; 120). Moreover, Blackness long served as what Hill Collins calls a "badge of inferiority" (2004, 53). The celebration of white aesthetics thus implies the necessity to try and emulate the white body for all others who want to reach full personhood (Mills 1997, 120). Additionally, as Hunter argues, women's bodies in general are "manipulable commodities objectified for male consumption" (2004, 31). Consequently, it would be naïve to see beauty as simply in the eye of the beholder. Rather, beauty needs to be conceived as ideological and is clearly based on the conception of a white supremacist as well as a patriarchal society (ibid., 30).

For reasons outlined in the previous section, the stress to chase after the beauty myth is more prominent for Black women. As only a limited set of physical variations of what is considered beautiful and desirable is accepted in society, one

may even talk of an ever-increasing pressure to meet conventional beauty standards (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). Cornel West blames the "ever-expanding market culture that puts everything and everyone up for sale" (2001, xvi). Along similar lines, Evelyn Nakano Glenn maintains that the increased use of skin lightening products to chemically reduce the amount of melanin in one's skin "cannot be seen as simply a legacy of colonialism but rather [as] a consequence of the penetration of multinational capital and Western consumer culture" (2008, 286). Instead of a decline, Glenn predicts an increase in skin bleaching on a global scale as long as these forces of capitalism continue to grow.[89] Against this background, what Glenn called "yearning for lightness" (281-302) seems to be the logical outcome. The upshot entails an ever-increasing market for skin lightening products and a booming hair care industry, which both peak in multi-billion-dollar global businesses (283). This includes illegal Black-market products that promise lighter and brighter skin but often contain mercury or lead in highly toxic dosages (283). Yet because of the existence of what Hunter calls a "beauty queue," that is, a "rank ordering of women from lightest to darkest where the lightest get the most perks and rewards, … and the darkest women get the least" (2005, 69), it already makes a difference to become only one or two shades lighter.

Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden call this the "lily complex," which is the internalized notion of Black women not seeing themselves as beautiful and constantly trying to imitate a lily white beauty ideal. Ultimately, this ideal remains unattainable and thus might create a sense of contempt for Black women's own natural appearance as well as a loss of self-esteem (2003, 177-183). By once again referring to an archetype from the realm of African American literature, Toni Morrison's character Mrs. Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is case in point. She loses herself in the fictional world of the silver screen by immersing herself in the movies that showcase white beauties, yet ultimately has to realize the crushing reality that she will never look like them, no matter how hard she tries (Morrison 1999, 95-96).

[89] Drawing on studies from such diverse regions as the Philippines, India, and East Asia to Latin America, African America, and even Europe, Glenn speaks of a "global skin-lightening trade" (283).

This rejection of their visibly Black appearance on the part of Black women who yearn for lightness can be considered a modern act of racial passing. Black women try to pass for white by wanting to change their physical appearance. Intrinsically, racial passing in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), a prototypical novel on that issue, is not very different from what is going on today. What Clare Kendry, one of Larsen's protagonists, did on an everyday basis and Irene Redfield, her childhood friend, engaged in from time to time were acts of identity denial. In a related sense, applying skin bleach, wearing blue or green contact lenses, and using hair straightening products, are similar acts of such a denial in a modern context. Of course, the reasons for passing are different. For Larsen's biracial women protagonists, racial passing in the 1920s was mainly an act to acquire certain social benefits, first and foremost a secure social status. For today's Black woman, who would like to approximate herself to the hegemonic ideal and thus be able to pass for white, this can be seen as an act of self-protection against the aforementioned derogatory (gendered) stereotypes. Additionally, it may be an attempt to reap the benefits that white society still grants those it considers their own. Of course, if we follow Valerie Smith's model of locating passing "within the discourse of intersectionality" (1998, 37), we realize that passing may be equally motivated by class, race, and gender considerations, both then and now. Passing in the twenty-first century, therefore, seems to be a strategy to avoid being viewed as merely the "Other" and to take advantage of white privilege – or in this case – privilege based on light(er) skin. Black women try to pass for O'Grady's obverse of the coin, that is, for the white side of the female body in Western society, and the cosmetics and hair care industry is more than willing to offer its "cures."

Whether directly, by featuring only light-skinned Black women or digitally altering the physical appearance of those who do not quite fit the "norm," or indirectly, by printing advertisements for bleaching creams and hair straightening products, the media plays a vital role in feeding into the idea that beauty can be commodified. One example of how those two intersect is the 2008 controversy over the L'Oreal ad for Féria hair color. This advertisement featured singer Beyoncé with reddish-blond hair, and, as many critics later claimed, digitally lightened skin. If the ad that was published in *Essence*, *Elle,* and *Allure* magazines is compared to other pictures of Beyoncé, her skin color appears much lighter and almost matches

her colored hair. In a statement subsequently issued by L'Oreal Paris, the cosmetics giant obviously denied all accusations of digital bleaching.[90] Yet, it seems difficult to buy their official response that this photograph was merely the result of extreme lighting and what in advertising is known as "creative touch-ups," rather than an intentional move to lighten her skin. But even if one accepts this version of reality, the picture nonetheless sends a specific message to which L'Oreal could hardly have been oblivious. The point is that apparently there is something about lighter skin that makes women more attractive and beautiful in advertisements, just like they are considered as more attractive when wrinkles or excess body fat are digitally removed from their bodies. This message seems even more pronounced in *Essence* magazine, which exclusively targets African American women. *Essence,* until this day, features cosmetic products for "dark spot removers" or "skin tone correctors" – two twenty-first century euphemisms for skin bleaching and skin lightening products. Beyoncé is certainly considered an icon of beauty, perhaps even a role model for the Black women reading this magazine. If the image of an African American female celebrity like her is digitally altered in a way that her skin is made lighter, this once again speaks to what is acceptable in a society and what is attributed with more value.

Following discussions in 2011 that had people speculating whether Beyoncé might be bleaching her skin herself, yet another controversy around her skin color emerged in January 2012: In a photograph intended to promote her latest album, she is seen posing on a couch with a straight blond do, bleached eyebrows and skin that looks almost white. Once again the blogosphere went haywire over the implicit messages of "lighter is better" that this ad sends out to her (female) fans, particularly because this time it seems as if the singer is herself to blame for the message herself (Cabrera 17 January 2012). Not only female celebrities seem to have fallen prey to these narrowly defined standards of beauty, however. Apart from Michael Jackson, the former baseball slugger Sammy Sosa, a Black Dominican, as well as Jamai-

[90] More recent examples that show the global dimensions of digital skin bleaching in magazines involve two Indian actresses. Bollywood star and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai Bachchan even considered legal action against *ELLE* India, following disputes over a 2010 cover on which she was featured several shades lighter that her natural self (Cable 24 December 2010). Similar accusations surfaced against L'Oreal in 2011 for allegedly airbrushing pictures of Indian actress and *Slumdog Millionaire* star Freida Pinto to make her skin look lighter (Rawi 27 September 2011).

can dancehall artist and rapper Vybz Kartel are both known to have bleached their skin (see Rojas 10 November 2009; Bakare 7 September 2011).[91]

Skin bleaching certainly is a radical way to alter one's appearance, which can hardly be seen as anything other than wanting to emulate a European ideal of beauty. In contrast, cases of hair straightening or wearing lighter-colored contact lenses can not automatically be considered as attempts to emulate whiteness:

> … the relationships between outward expressions of beauty and self-appreciation is complex. Not every woman who decides to straighten her hair or change the color of her eyes by wearing contacts believes that beauty is synonymous with whiteness. Trying on a new look, even one often associated with Europeans, does not automatically imply self-hatred. It is possible to dye your brown tresses platinum and still love your Blackness. (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, 178)

At the same time, however, the notion of light eyes and long, straight hair as synonymous to being beautiful might just be so internalized that chasing after this hegemonic ideal of beauty – although not related to a conscious hate of one's self – should be considered problematic. This is particularly so if there is a lack of appropriate Afrocentric alternatives that are considered equally attractive. The issue of hair, above all, can be a touchy subject for Black women. As such, the politics of hair texture – whether straight or curly – continue to be part of the color complex, sometimes being more of a taboo than skin color per se, but always paralleling the politics of skin color (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 82).

1.3.3 Hair-Stories: The Straight, the Curly, and the Afro

Just like skin color, hair has been a racial marker ever since the development of a white norm and a Black Other. This started when slavery became racialized and white America needed a proper justification for its system of ultimate dehumanization and exploitation. As mentioned in previous chapters, from the early days of slavery onwards, various privileges were given to those who looked "less African,"

[91] These examples complement recent statements by well-known TV and film personalities like *CNN's* Don Lemon and *ABC*'s *Private Practice* star Taye Diggs, who both openly speak about the psychological pain they experienced as a result of their skin tone, light and dark, respectively (Chiles 16 January 2012; Jefferson 29 June 2011). Put together, all these cases show that the taboo of men being affected by the color complex seems to be opened to the public. It is thus simplistic and naïve to view the color complex as an issue for women of color only, as men are also exposed to the pressures of a global white supremacist capitalist system, even though in different ways.

which was at that time synonymous with "less savage." In her book *Black Sexual Politics* Patricia Hill Collins refers to a study on slavery by Orlando Patterson in which he came to the conclusion that "it was not so much color differences as differences in hair type that become [sic] critical as a mark of servility in the Americas" (qtd. in Hill Collins 2004, 195). Hair, being a less immutable characteristic than, for example, skin color, instantly became a means to divorce oneself from one's "savage" heritage and to showcase one's refined features. By straightening their hair Black people could prove, or at least pretend, that they did not belong to the ultimate Other and could conform to standards set by Europeans. *Essence* editor-in-chief Angela Burt-Murray emphasized the importance of Black people's hair by once writing in an editorial: "Without a doubt, our hair has been a racially charged issue since we hit these shores" (2006, 14).

With time, straightened hair became accepted as a sign of good grooming and by the early twentieth century the burgeoning Black middle class considered straight hair as the predominant social norm for Black women whose hair is seen as a "badge of beauty" (Hill Collins 2004, 196). It was not until the 1960s that straightened hair briefly became a "symbol of racial shame" (ibid., 16) and an expression of a self-internalized inferiority complex. As Maxine Leeds Craig shows in her study of Black beauty politics, prior to the 1960s Black women wore their elaborately coiffed hair with race pride and a sense of dignity (2002, 15; 34). In an essay titled "Straightening Our Hair," bell hooks explains that when she was growing up she did not view the Sunday morning sessions of having her and her sisters' hair straightened in her mother's kitchen as related to wanting to be white. Quite the contrary; she describes these memories as "rites of initiation into womanhood" and intimate rituals that were essential parts of Black women's culture (hooks 2001, 111). Those hairstyling sessions at home or in the beauty parlors clearly served as spaces for Black women to affirm and empower themselves, reclaim agency, and raise consciousness, while getting a break from the racist and patriarchal world outside (112).

The attempt to approximate the look and texture of what was generally seen as "white people's hair" created a market that was long dominated by Madam C.J. Walker (1867-1919) and her hair care empire. Born as Sarah Breedlove, the woman

who later took on the name of her husband is listed as the first Black female millionaire in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. She is seen as the mother of the Black hair care boom across the nation with products such as the hot comb and her secret hair-growing formula being the most well-known. While Walker never used the word *straightener* in any of her advertisements, which perhaps was a conscious move to avoid charges of selling out to a white standard of beauty, her products were intended to help Black women straighten their tight curls and transform what was known as "bad hair" into hair that is "good" (see, for example, Rooks 1996).[92]

According to Geneva Smitherman, the terms "good hair" and "bad hair" are widely known shorthand in Black communities of the U.S. They are not neologisms but compounds that have been used in the Black community for centuries. In her book *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* Smitherman describes "good hair" as hair that is "naturally straight … akin to that of whites" (1986, 64). Likewise, Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson utilize similar definitions, describing "good hair" as "a close approximation of Caucasian hair. … generally wavy and silky soft to the touch. … long." (2001, 2). In contrast there is "bad hair," which is described as "[t]ightly coiled, 'coarse' hair that is thought to be hard to 'manage' and is generally short. Also known as nappy hair, tight hair, and mailman hair" (ibid.). Or, as singer and songwriter India.Arie muses in her song "I am Not My Hair:" "Good hair means curls and waves. Bad hair means you look like a slave."

Public images of the so-called "firsts" that transgressed the color line and broke racial barriers to become successful in the white corporate world or on television and in the movies affirmed these notions of "good" and "bad hair." African American actresses and anchorwomen prior to the 1960s were almost exclusively seen wearing straight hairdos that, given the natural texture of many Black people's hair, could only have been achieved by excessive chemical or manual straightening, or wearing wigs. Eugene Robinson, a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist at the *Washington Post*, recalls in 1999 autobiography that when he was growing up the black-oriented magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet* featured "big, glossy ads for every imagina-

[92] For a more extensive coverage of some of the most successful Black female entrepreneurs and beauticians in Black beauty culture see Susannah Walker's *Style and Status* (2007, 50-66).

ble poultice or device that plausibly or implausibly claimed to make kinky hair straight" (1999, 112). Robinson continued to explain that

> African Americans were spending eons of time and Fort Knoxes of money in an endless attempt to turn hair that God intended to be coarse and kinky into hair that would blow in the wind, like the hair of white models … hair that bounced, according to the television commercials, with an ineffable quality called 'body.' (112-113)

With few exceptions, this is also the case today, as there seems to be a limited tolerance of natural Black hair in society.[93] As such, Black women often need to go to great lengths to disguise the natural state of their hair. In an *Essence* article from 2000, it is claimed that "African-Americans buy 34 % (or $ 762 million worth) of all hair care products annually, yet … make up [only] about 13 % of the U.S. population" (Johnson August 2000, 107). In light of such statistics, what Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden claim rings even more true: "For many Black women, hair, more than anything else, is a symbol of how they must shift to be accepted" (2003, 187). The authors of the book *Shifting* further emphasize that hairstyles have distinct, often opposing, meanings in the eye of the beholder:

> Dreadlocks are a sign of self-confidence and spiritual consciousness – or is the wearer a 'radical'? A shorn head is a stroke of boldness, beauty and rebellion – or is it one of insanity? Straightened hair – short and neat or long and styled is classy and sophisticated – or is it a betrayal? (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, 187-188)

It goes without saying, then, that conscious acts to go against that collective obsession with straight hair are often seen as revolutionary. This is probably best expressed by the Afro of the 1960s, which became – as hooks maintains – a "sign of cultural resistance to racist oppression and … a celebration of blackness" (2001, 112-113). Most iconic of all probably was the image of Angela Davis and her Afro, who once – not without some mild outrage – referred to the fact she is often "remembered as a hairdo" (2001, 201). The FBI Most Wanted poster that was released prior to her arrest on charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy – all of which were later dropped – certainly helped in creating the image of the Afro. While on the one hand it was seen as a symbol of Black Power, on the other hand it served as

[93] A current testament to this is a digitally-altered but fake image of Michelle Obama sporting a natural 'do that went viral on the Internet in March 2012. It caused an extended debate over the fact that Black women "still hope for a beauty ideal that includes them" (Andrews 29 March 2012).

shorthand to describe a militant revolutionary and a dangerous, possibly armed criminal.

Today people often claim that different hairstyles are simply a sign of personal choice, thereby being at most a fashion statement, but no longer a political one. Yet when looking at the pervasiveness of straight hair as the accepted societal norm, vocally expressed by some interviewees in Chris Rock's comedy documentary *Good Hair* (2009), one cannot help but be reminded of Audre Lorde, who once asked in *Essence*, "Is Your Hair Still Political?" (September 1990, 40). What those young college girls interviewed in Rock's documentary see as socially acceptable in terms of hairstyle was so uniformly non-Black that it speaks volumes to the internalized character of standards of beauty that are not their own. That Black hair is still political is also seen in the 2007 controversy over Don Imus's ill-famed remarks about the Rutgers women's basketball team (see Puff 2011). When the radio shock jock called the young Black women nappy-headed hos" on nationally syndicated radio, the insult was both racist and misogynist, and reflected on some of the negative connotations that center on Black people's natural hair (see, for example, Awkward 2009). Why else would *Precious* (2009), the film adaptation of Sapphire's well-acclaimed 1996 novel *Push*, feature actress Paula Patton as the character of Ms. Rain with straight long hair, when the writer described her as a woman wearing dreadlocks in the book (1998, 39)? And why else would Malia Obama's hair that the then 11-year-old wore in twists while on vacation in Europe in 2009 be discussed on a conservative online forum as "unfit to represent America" (Saint Louis 27 August 2009)?

It is hardly surprising that the ideology of only loving straight hair has its price, particularly when it comes to young Black girls' identity. This led to an entire market of books for pre-schoolers and young readers that intend to affirm Black children's love for their natural hair. In 1998, Carolivia Herron published a read-aloud book titled *Nappy Hair*, which was followed by other publications such as *Happy to be Nappy* by bell hooks in 1999 and *I Love my Hair!* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley in 2001. In 2010 Sesame Street even produced an episode titled "I Love My Hair," which featured a little Black Muppet girl dancing in a clip sporting vari-

ous hairstyles – from cornrows to pigtails to Afro puffs – while the voice of a young girl sings about loving all the things her hair can do (Davis 18 October 2010).

In "A Letter to a Young Black Girl I Know," Marita Golden emphasizes that a variety of hairstyles – including straightened ones – would be fine on Black women as long as they were reflecting norms coming from within their community, yet this would be lacking in the U.S.: "… our African sister ancestors wove their hair and dyed it, and created amazing styles within the traditions of an African standard of beauty. But we have no African American standard of beauty, only a White influenced standard" (2004, 193-194). This makes for the conundrum of both empowering as well as disenfranchising implications of how Black people wear their hair. As bell hooks maintains,

> [w]ithin white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the social and political context in which the custom of black folks straightening … hair emerges, it represents an imitation of the dominant white group's appearance and often indicates internalized racism, self-hatred, and/or low self-esteem. (hooks 2001, 112)

Taking this statement at face value, there is no way to deny that Black hair continues to be political. The question as to how Black people wear their hair might have ceased to be associated with struggles for equality, as was the case with the Afro of the 1960s. Even so, it sends a message whether hair is relaxed and worn straight, or kept in its more natural, tightly curled style.

Nobody wants to talk about colorism.
And yet everybody talks about it.
~ DeNeen L. Brown (2009)

What happens to children who grow up seeing everyone else portrayed as heroes, while they are given a steady diet of images portraying themselves as less desirable? ~ Anthony Browder (1992)

2 THE (DIS)ADVANTAGES OF SKIN COLOR: RE-VIEWING RELEVANT LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

At the outset of their seminal work *The Color Complex* (1992), authors Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall refer to colorism as the "last taboo" (2). While some perceive speaking about intra-racial bias as "airing dirty laundry," colorism has long been an open secret that continues to be discussed within the Black community, not only behind closed doors. A myriad of interpretative and analytical studies attest to this. They come from multiple disciplines, yet three fields deserve a more extensive review here: literature, sociology, and the media. First, a number of salient themes and tropes related to skin color will be reviewed by looking at African American literature, which is often considered a mirror of Black life. Second, differences in skin tone and their ramifications for African Americans will be examined from a social science viewpoint. As such, that sub-chapter is divided into research centering on the five basic social institutions (family, education, economic and political institutions, and religion) as well as identity constructions. Third, selected studies from the print media and advertising sectors will be used to show that skin color bias is mediated and perpetuated through mass communication channels to this day. Despite its high aims, this literature review can only offer a general synopsis of the available research, and omissions are inevitable due to the seemingly infinite number of works on the subject. Ultimately, this shows the scholarly community's sustained interest in skin color as a research topic in various disciplines, thereby recognizing both the advantages and disadvantages that different shades of Black skin entail in a racialized American society.

The literature of the culture is reflective of the life *of the culture.*
~ Gloria T. Randle (2002)

2.1 Bi-Racial Beauties, Berries, and Blue Eyes: Literary Tropes of Color

From critically acclaimed writings by some of the leading African American writers to what could be called popular dime novels, from adult fiction to teen novels and children's books, from drama to poetry – skin color and colorism have prominently featured in all these genres, from the very first known publications of the nineteenth century until today.[93] As Gloria T. Randle remarks in her essay "Nobody Wants a Dark Child," the fact that discourses around skin color are employed so regularly in African American literature speaks to its continued relevance and its status as a "force to be reckoned with in the culture" (2002, 347). Like the opening epigraph to this chapter indicates, literature of a given culture can be seen as "reflective of the *life* of the culture" (347; original emphasis). Both this life and the literature have been treated extensively in studies elsewhere. Hence, the chapter at hand will only offer a cursory and, by necessity, limited glance at some of the most well-known texts and characters, the distinguishing feature of which was skin color. Such an overview is relevant in the context of this dissertation precisely because many of these texts and characters have come to be included in the public discourse of colorism.

While literary analyses focusing on ways to represent intra-racial color stratification in fiction, poetry, and drama exist in abundance, they mostly focus on individual texts, or mention skin color only in relation to a larger and more broadly conceived analysis of any given work. Yet, what has been extensively researched by

[93] Both William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter* (1853), which is considered the first novel by an African American, although it had to be published in London, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), the first novel by an African American published in North America, describe different shades of skin color in great detail. Even more importantly, they attribute special value to those characters of lighter hues. Another example, although set in Saint-Domingue and not in the United States, is Victor Séjour's short story "The Mulatto." The text, considered the earliest work of fiction by an African American and published in Paris in 1837, deals with the tragic implications of mixed race offspring in a slave society. William Wells Brown's "The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom" (1858), the first known work of drama by an African American, also features a light-skinned protagonist, as do many other literary "firsts" written around that time.

sociologists, psychologists, and even media scholars on a comparative scale has received scant attention among literary critics so far. Comparative studies on colorism in literature are scarce, although literary texts are often called upon to authenticate a particular analysis or interpretation in other disciplines. This confirms that literature mirrors a given society at a given time, or, as Randle suggests, "[b]ecause of its ability to reflect and inform human behavior, the literature of a culture stands as a repository of cultural norms, practices, and traditions" (2002, 346).

A recent book-length treatment of the issue is Wibke Reger's *The Black Body of Literature: Colorism in American Fiction* (2009). Once one gets past the fact that what she means by African American literature as explained in her introduction (15) is not only literature *by* Black people but also literature *about* Black people, particularly about the Black body, the book offers a significant contribution to the field. Her study of a number of exemplary novels, all of which have received canonical status, leads to new understandings of the importance of skin color on the literary Black body. The broadening of the meaning of the term *African American literature* might well be justified, as it allows the author to also include early nineteenth-century anti-slavery novels written by white abolitionists. Prime examples of these are Richard Hildreth's *Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which serve Reger as the starting points for her analysis of skin color as either a central theme or a marginal subtext (2009, 14).[94]

Margo Natalie Crawford's comprehensive analysis of what she calls "dilution anxiety" and the fetishization of different shades of Blackness further contributes to filling the void of critical analysis on the meaning and significance of skin color in the broader realm of fiction (2008). Like Reger, Crawford includes an analysis of literature about but not necessarily by African Americans. Doing so allows her to compare and contrast works like Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

[94] Owing to space limitations, this review will only be based on texts written *by* African American authors. Similar concerns require the foregrounding of fiction and only a most superficial treatment of other genres, such as poetry and drama. These necessary restrictions notwithstanding, poems and plays were equally relevant with regards to portraying color consciousness in the Black community, particularly as a plight for dark-skinned women. The strong focus on skin color in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry, for instance, even coined a theoretical label, as her work was considered to include the "Black-and-Tan Motif" (Davis 1962). Zora Neale Hurston's well-acclaimed play "Color Struck" (1925) did not shy away from frankly addressing the issue on stage; nor did Dael Orlandersmith's "Yellowman" (2002), to name only two plays focusing on skin color in Black America.

(1936), and several of Toni Morrison's works that reflect on the "mistake of reducing human identity to skin color" (Crawford 2008, 113). By including a psychoanalytic dimension as well as a focus on visual aesthetics of (post-)Blackness, Crawford's book provides an analytical nexus between obsessions with the Black phallus and body politics represented in works of art, both coming to express the "racial signifying power of skin color" (9).

Last but not least, Samira Kawash's *Dislocating the Color Line* provides another important perspective through a comparative analysis of the meanings of skin color in literature (1997). Mainly concerned with hybrid identities, Kawash explores the transgressions of the color line and uses key literary texts to address the complexities of what she sees as constructed racial differences. While more broadly conceived than the other two books, skin color dynamics are highlighted by drawing on examples from novels by Charles Chesnutt, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Although the themes in the books under review differ throughout time, Reger, Crawford, and Kawash identify several recurring literary types, the skin tones of which are attributed with special meaning.

2.1.1 "Lighten up de Race": (Un)Tragic Mulatto/as, Passing, and Being Color-Struck

On the light-skinned end of the color spectrum are what in literature have come to be known as tragic mulatto/a characters and those who pass for white. These frequently are stereotypical literary characters that originated in abolitionist literature and were generally used to evoke white readers' sympathies (Sollors 1997, 223). Due to the fact that most of the nineteenth-century readership of African American literature was white, these texts were written in part with the purpose of gaining the readers' compassion. This could be increased if there was white blood running through the Black characters' veins. A racially ambiguous look, particularly if they were female, made them more "refined" and more human in the eyes of the white readership (Walker 2004, 301). Yet, according to Sherley Anne Williams, the tragic mulatta was often "too refined and sensitive to live under the repressive conditions endured by ordinary blacks and too colored to enter the white world" (1986, 289).

While they were frequently doomed, as Werner Sollors puts it, tragic mulattas were usually portrayed as "exceptionally beautiful" (1997, 224). This, in turn, fed into the fantasies of white male readers, who were longing for the exotic "Other" and the forbidden fruit, so to speak. In an attempt to write against what was then labeled "miscegenation," which was illegal in many states, the tragic mulatta was presented as not fit to survive. Being "neither black nor white yet both," to echo Sollors and his book by the same title, these characters could not find a place in society. One well-known text is William Wells Brown's abolitionist novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853) in which all but one mixed-race woman suffer a more or less tragic and untimely death.[95]

It was not until the early twentieth century and particularly the flowering literary and artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance that fair-skinned Black female characters were given agency to decide their own fate, with a rewriting of the tragic mulatta trope becoming more frequent. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) offers a paragon of a mulatta who is anything but tragic. It seems as if Hurston's belief of never having felt "tragically colored" herself (2004, 1031) becomes evident in her writing. At the same time, the text makes overt references to intra-racial color tensions, which goes to show that Hurston was not oblivious to their existence. These are epitomized by the color-struck Mrs. Turner and her admiration for Janie Crawford's "coffee-and-cream complexion" as well as her long, straight hair that is described as "luxurious" (140). Yet instead of turning this biracial beauty into another defeated tragic mulatta, the narrative renders the light-skinned protagonist as a heroine on her quest for self-fulfillment. While not as positive in her character portrayals as Hurston, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) adds dimensions of class and sexuality to the biracial Black women in the novel. Ultimately, only one of the "passing" women dies. Even then it is more of a protagonist/antagonist conflict that calls for this kind of dénouement than the punishment of those women who are transgressing the color line.

[95] Despite the existence of such well-known stock characters, there have always been exceptions to the rule. Pauline Hopkins's short story "Talma Gordon" (1900), for instance, offers an early revision of the tragic mulatta, in the sense that she does not die in the end. While certainly an evolution in character development, the protagonist still needs to be saved from her otherwise tragic fate by a man, and is not allowed to save herself.

While there is not always a tragic ending, there is often a sense of not fully fitting into either of the two societies from which the "passing" characters come. A prominent example of this dilemma is the eponymous hero of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). The unnamed narrator claims that while sometimes feeling like a cowardly sell-out who chose a comfortable lifestyle over a commitment to his own race, he was "possessed by a strange longing for … [his] mother's people" (Johnson 1995, 99). It is this unfulfilled yearning for "his" people which makes him conclude that he had sold his birthright "for a mess of pottage" (100). Although it does not end in death, his story is still a tragic one: The anonymous protagonist does not only lose his wife, who dies in childbirth, but also has to deny his roots and live with the secret of passing for the rest of his life.[96]

This sense of disidentification with one's Black heritage is also of concern to Langston Hughes, who interspersed stories of passing with questions of identity and belonging in his fiction and poetry.[97] While Hughes, for instance, deals with these issues in both a short story and a play that carry the title "Mulatto," the sense of not knowing one's place in society is most poignantly expressed in his poem "Cross" (1926). An unknown, gender-neutral poem persona tells the story of her or his wealthy white father and a poor Black mother, possibly the white father's slave or servant. While the father died in the "big house," the mother passed away in her "shack," which leads the poem persona to ask the all-important question at the end: "I wonder were I'm going to die / Being neither white nor black?" (Hughes 1990, 158).[98]

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[96] This crossing over into white society can be seen as an act of disappearing, a trope that is also employed by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952), or, more recently, by Danzy Senna in *Caucasia* (1998). In the opening of the novel the narrator and protagonist Birdie Lee remembers what happened to her when her white mother decided that her light-skinned biracial daughter was going to pass for white: "I disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost" (1).

[97] Just like Larsen and Chesnutt, Hughes was light enough to be able to pass for white if he had wanted to, which invites the interpretation that at least some of those authors' writings may have been based on their own life stories. Alice Walker, too, relates the frequency of light-skinned protagonists to the great number of light-skinned writers. The only counter-example she mentions is Wallace Thurman, whose dark complexion allows her to justify his writing of a dark-skinned Black woman. Thurman's protagonist Emma Lou struggles in her fictional world just as the author may have struggled in his life "because he was so black himself, and blackness was a problem for him among other blacks lighter than he" (Walker 2004, 308).

[98] Apart from concerns about their own identity, those passing characters were often equally terrified of their offspring's status in society. The fear of what was known as a "throwback child" (Graham 1999, 382) – a child that would turn out darker than the parents and thus would reveal the passing parent's secret – is discussed in Larsen's *Passing;* George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1989); or Hughes' short story "Passing," published in *The Ways of White Folks* (Hughes 1990).

Another case in point for struggling with one's identity is Clare Kendry in Larsen's *Passing*, whose very name hints at her *clear* and therefore light skin that allows her to pass. She expresses a "wild desire" (174) to be with Black people, which is what some literary critics claim leads to her fatal destruction in the end. Similarly, in Larsen's debut novel *Quicksand* (2006 [1928]) the fair-skinned protagonist Helga Crane expresses a feeling of kinship and longing for "these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes" (89). She desires Black people's company when she returns to Harlem from her extended visit to Copenhagen, although she had wanted to avoid "those Negroes" (90) before.

The wish to distance oneself from one's own people can also be seen in characters who believe that because of variations in human physiognomy, such as thinner lips, straight hair, and – most notably – a lighter skin tone, they should be considered a separate group on the social ladder. Embittered after having realized that the right shade of color gets some people ahead and leaves others behind, these characters have come to believe that their affiliation with the Black race would hold them back. They often express a keen wish to set themselves "aside from the Negroes" and "class off," as Mrs. Turner maintains in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (140-141). As such, Mrs. Turner expresses clear signs of having internalized white racist logic. She can be described as "color struck" – an adjective made popular by Hurston in her play by that title (Hurston 1989 [1925]).[99] While Mrs. Turner is acutely aware that skin color serves as social capital even within Black communities, she also believes that light-complexioned African Americans have the responsibility to contribute to a collective racial uplift. In her view, this would be best achieved by breeding out Blackness, as a memorable passage indicates: "It's too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up de race" (140). Essentially, Mrs. Turner's feelings of superiority over other Black people, particularly those of dark skin, are similar to those of Matthew Antoine, a light-skinned color-conscious teacher in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying* (1993): "I *am* superior to you. I am superior to any man blacker than me," is Antoine's final verdict when he talks to the protagonist Grant Wiggins (1994, 65).

[99] Today "Color Struck" (1925) is often read side by side with Dael Orlandersmith's "Yellowman" (2002), although they were published almost 80 years apart. Both plays grasp the destructive forces of colorism that turn the characters into self-hating individuals who meet a tragic fate (see Classon 1997; Carpenter 2009; Fleetwood 2011).

2.1.2 "No Place in the World": The Plight of the Dark-Skinned Black Girl

The other end of the color spectrum in the African American literary imagination is comprised of very dark-skinned Black girls and young women, who often live miserable, sometimes even tragic, lives because they desperately long for light skin.[100] In the introduction to the short story collection *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975), editor Mary Helen Washington goes so far as to maintain that "[i]n almost every novel or autobiography written by a black woman, there is at least one incident in which the dark-skinned girl wishes to be either white or light-skinned with 'good hair'" (xv). If color issues are exposed, they are frequently presented from the point of view of a child or adolescent: Emma Lou Morgan's belief that if she had only been a boy, her dark color would not have mattered that much (Thurman 2008); Pecola Breedlove's naïve, yet fervent praying for blue eyes that would make up for her "ugly" dark skin (Morrison 2007 [1970]); Naomi Jefferson's longing for a "fine boy" with light skin and wavy or curly hair (Briscoe 1996); Claireece "Precious" Jones' fantasies of being "treated right and loved by boyz [sic]" if she were only light-skinned (Sapphire 1998, 113); Or, Maleeka Madison's admiration for kids with skin "the color of a butterscotch milkshake"(Flake 2007, 17).

What all these adolescent protagonists have in common is that they are trying to escape what Thurman termed the "haunting chimera of intra-racial color prejudice" (2008, 38). The young girls are all tragic characters, some more so than others. Their tragedy, however, is not based on miscegenation and the fact that society does not accept them as neither white nor black, as is the case for the trope of the tragic mulatta. Rather, tragedy lies in their being too black, and female at that. There is an attempt to counter that notion with the affirmative folk saying "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," which attributes dark skin with positive characteristics such as sweet and sugary juice from a luscious ripe fruit. Unfortunately for those characters, the extended version of this proverb seems to be even more true: "… but if you're too damn black it ain't no use" (McKenzie 1996, 96). The society the literary characters grow up in, a society that is – as in Pecola's case – full

[100] In addition to those female characters of darker hues yearning for light skin, dark-skinned women may also represent the asexual Mammy or Aunt Jemima figures, although those are more frequent in film than in literature.

of Shirley Temples, Greta Garbos, and Mary Jane candy, has inculcated the worshipping of everything white in people's minds. If whiteness is worshipped, of course, its binary opposite Blackness is denigrated. In the case of Emma Lou and Pecola, these destructive notions have even been internalized by their families. Instead of showing their children love and affection regardless of their hue of skin, their mothers instill massive inferiority complexes in their daughters. The young girls are told, both implicitly and explicitly that "[t]here was no place in the world for a dark girl" (Thurman 2008, 31). The hegemony of white beauty, therefore, does not only pervade the external society at large but also seeps into private homes, which makes the messages even more insidious and damaging.

Seeing hegemony as a tool to control Black people's collective consciousness allows us to draw a comparison to what is happening in American society. This is well-illustrated by Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Claudia, the narrator, remembers her initial childhood aversion to white dolls that everyone around her seemed to have loved and cherished: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured" (2007 [1970], 14). Yet, as Claudia tells us, she "could not love it" (ibid.). She then goes into great detail explaining her desire to dismember and destroy the doll, to find out what was there to love that she did not see (13-16). Only when growing older does Claudia finally surrender to what society has been telling her from childhood on: "I learned much later to worship her … knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (16). This self-reflective statement directly speaks to learning how to conform to society, a society that plants certain seeds, which – with time – start to grow and shape people's thinking. It began with the seeds of cherishing white beauty and despising the Black Other that were planted during slavery. As those notions grew well into the post-slavery era, they became part and parcel of Black people's identity, and – consequently – part of Black literature as well.

2.1.3 "From Jet Black to Pure White": Being Manly or Being Fine

Just like Black women in African American literature, Black men are often characterized by their phenotypes. Character descriptions range "from jet black to pure white" (Johnson 1995, 28), with all possible shades in between.[101] When Black men are depicted in terms of dark skin color, they most often correspond to one of two stereotypical character tropes: On the one hand, they personify the virile and strong Black brute, immortalized by Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940). Donald Bogle describes this trope as "a barbaric black out to raise havoc [whose] physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed."[102] The dark hue emphasizes this perception, for dark skin on male bodies is widely regarded as a sign of Black masculinity.[103] At the same time, dark-skinned characters are often considered as "not good enough" – particularly not good enough for any light-skinned woman. A case in point is Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He is perceived to be beneath Janie's standards and only after her money (Hurston 2000, 110-115). On the other hand, dark-hued Black men in literature may also make for asexual, loyal, and obedient Uncle Toms, so called after a character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). With Uncle Toms, dark skin color is foregrounded to suggest a lack of intelligence usually attributed to "pure-blooded" Africans. This alleged simple-

[101] As a matter of fact, labeling different shades of skin color has become a creative endeavor in African American literature, with descriptions of color gradations ranging from "coffee-colored face[s]," with exotic "teakwood tan hand[s]" (Thurman 58; 78), to skin "the color of cinnamon" or "powdered ginger" (Briscoe 1996, 7). The extended effort in describing various skin tones speaks to the importance of the slightest nuances that people notice and consequently attribute value to.

[102] Bogle's definition is linked to what he lists as a separate stereotype, the trope of the Black buck. This stereotypical portrayal is best known from D.W. Griffith's 1915 silent film *Birth of a Nation*. According to Bogle, Black bucks are "oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (2001, 13-14). It is this image of a dark-skinned, virile Black male that is resurrected whenever an African American man is suspected to have committed a crime, particularly against a white woman. Two prominent examples are Willie Horton and O.J. Simpson. While the former was instrumentalized to evoke fear in the 1988 presidential campaign by George H.W. Bush, the latter was featured on a controversial *TIME* magazine cover in 1994. As is now known, Simpson's mug shot on the front page was digitally darkened. Whether done intentionally or not, this made him look more aggressive and dangerous ("Same Mug Gets New Look in Time" 1994; see also Fiske 1996, 269-270). A follow-up study on viewers' memory of criminal photographs found the "prototypical" criminal in the eyes of the study participants not only to be Black, but also more likely to have Afrocentric features (Oliver et al. 2004).

[103] While often considered negative, particularly in anti-Black literature and what is known as protest fiction of the 1960s, Black male virility is not always seen as bad. This creates a peculiar paradox in the gendered meanings of shades of skin color. Dark skin is a sign of potency, (sexual) power, and masculinity in Black men, yet it equals asexuality and maternity in women. The latter is epitomized in literature by self-sacrificing, matronly Mammies who work as domestic servants in white homes and put white people's concerns before their own.

mindedness is often paired – specifically in white "plantation fiction" – with what James Weldon Johnson's unnamed protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* describes as "a happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being" (1995, 79) who is not taken seriously by the reading public.

Conversely, light-skinned Black men – if they are not part of the tragic mulatto genre – are frequently portrayed as outsmarting whites. This is particularly true if they are successfully "passing". At the same time, they often also harbor identity conflicts that come with denying one's roots (see Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and George Schuyler's *Black No More*). On a more superficial level of characterization that lacks any deeper psychological aspects, fair-skinned men may serve as simple (and often shallow) love interests for very dark-skinned women (see Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, Connie Briscoe's *Big Girls Don't Cry*, or Dael Orlandersmith's "Yellowman").[104] Those characters are regularly described as "fine," and the positive traits of their physical appearance are *a priori* aligned with expectations of their good character (see Reger 2009). It goes without saying that in the course of the story these characters rarely live up to the skin-deep assumptions others have of them.

The same goes for the other extreme, which is the presumption that Black men with a light complexion must be "stuck-up" and "conceited," and perhaps even look down upon dark-skinned Black women. Literary narratives usually refute this stereotype on second glance. TaResse Stovall's novella "My People, My People" (2008) serves as a recent example. The protagonist Carmella Daley, a successful brown-skinned advertising manager, is confronted with her own color prejudice when she turns down advances by Shane, a light-skinned photographer she works with, based on the fact he is "too light." Being light-complexioned is often seen as

[104] Obviously, this is a generalization and oversimplification of Black literary characters, whose actions and character traits were defined – for the most part – by their phenotypical appearance. In many cases, these literary tropes were revised and re-imagined, often in an attempt to critique the color complex prevalent in the Black community at large. At times, the texts themselves offer a scathing critique of colorism. Wallace Thurman, for instance, includes a somewhat parodist meta-discussion of colorism and intra-racial elitism, which is held by fictional Harlem literati whose names only vaguely disguise their real life models (Tony Crews for Langston Hughes, Cora Thurston for Zora Neale Hurston, and Walter Truman for Thurman himself). In this section of the novel Thurman channels his opinion on the issue through Walter Truman, a character who goes on to explain light-skinned people's prejudice: "[Y]ou can't blame light Negroes for being prejudiced against dark ones. … We are all living in a totally white world, where all standards are the standards of the white man" (2008, 90).

missing racial authenticity, and consequently results in having to prove that one is "Black enough," a trope that is regularly found in literature published during the "Black is Beautiful" and "Black Power" periods.

Dozens of research studies have shown that skin tone and other racial features … regularly determine who gets hired, who gets convicted and who gets elected. ~ Shankar Vedantam (2010)

2.2 INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTITIES: STUDYING SKIN COLOR IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Social scientists, especially sociologists and psychologists, started publishing empirical research about Black people in the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century. Already they were able to demonstrate a clear correlation between social standing and gradations in skin tone (see Myrdal 1962; Drake and Cayton Jr. 1945; Frazier 1949). The relevance of skin color was also documented by Charles Parrish, who devoted early attention to color names and their respective meanings in Black communities. Among other things, he identified more than one hundred different names used to describe "Black" skin (1946).[105] Over the last two decades, studies that focus exclusively on skin color stratification within racial or ethnic groups have gained popularity.[106] The ensuing chapter will group studies on the significance of skin color and the implications of colorism on African Americans around the five basic social institutions of family, education, economics, politics, and religion.[107] In addition, one sub-chapter will specifically focus on issues of identity, and a final section will briefly address problems with available research.[108]

[105] Sixty years later JeffriAnne Wilder revisits this study and gets similar results, which indicates little change in the relevance of skin color to African Americans overall. Both studies convey a high number of negative terms on both ends of the color spectrum. Interestingly, relatively neutral terms are used for medium brown skin, in other words, the shades in between. This suggests a more complex three-tiered system, rather than one of merely binary opposites of light and dark skin, which is usually emphasized in colorism research (Wilder 2010).

[106] Yet there are still only a handful of scholars who edited anthologies and collections on colorism. Among these are Ronald Hall, Margaret L. Hunter, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Cedric Herring, and Verna M. Keith. Due to page limitations, studies with a geographical focus outside the United States, as well as those that include other ethnic groups such as Latino/a Americans or Asian Americans cannot be included here (see Telles 2004; Rondilla and Spickard 2007; Hall 2009).

[107] These are defined as "established and organized systems of social behavior with a recognized purpose" (Andersen and Taylor 2008, 4) and are common in every human society.

[108] Just like with the previous chapter on African American literature, it is impossible to take full account of the extensive body of analyses available. Consequently, attention will only be given to a selected number of studies that appear to be most influential in the scholarly community of skin color research.

Essentially, studies either center on shades of skin color and their material or psychological consequences, or on behavioral patterns. This includes research on positive relationships between skin tone and, for instance, chances on the dating and marriage markets, jobs and income, and even prison sentences. Furthermore, studies draw on data gathered with regards to perceived attractiveness, self-worth and – more broadly speaking – identity. In general, research can be distinguished by following either a quantitative or qualitative approach; rarely are both found in a single study. While quantitative methods offer statistically valid results on measurable consequences that different shades of skin tone have on African Americans, qualitative studies – such as interviews with individuals or focus groups – present equally important results, particularly on how skin tone affects human behavior and identity politics.

2.2.1 The Family

The family is, broadly speaking, the most immediate social support system for children, particularly in the Black community. There, it works "to buffer Black children from the external forces of racism" (Wilder and Cain 2011, 578) and teaches them coping strategies to live in a white hegemonic society. Nonetheless, it is often within the intimate surroundings of a family that intra-racial skin color biases are planted and perpetuated, thus representing what could be called internal forces of racism (see also Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 94-106). This color socialization may find expressions in everything from disparaging remarks about a child's "stigmatized" features of dark skin and "nappy" hair; to advice of how to avoid getting a tan – akin to Marita Golden's autobiographic book title *Don't Play in the Sun* –; to pressure for marrying "light." In line with their strong role in many families, maternal figures such as mothers and grandmothers often bear the responsibility of transmitting values attached to skin color. They may instill a "normative framework" of colorism in their children, especially in their daughters and granddaughters (Wilder and Cain 2011, 598). At the same time, as Wilder's and Cain's study indicates, female family members may also be the most vital source of resistance for such color

values, in which case children experience the family as a locus for identity affirmation and resistance to intra-racial bias (ibid).[109]

Wherever skin color bias is not contested, however, it may also be a vital factor for other decisions. A recent news article suggests that skin tone may also be a criterion for Black parents who wish to adopt a child (Stodghill 8 March 2012). This idea is also supported by Christine Ward Gailey, who cites several social workers talking about their experiences with Black adoptive parents who had a particular color preference for their child (2010, 38-40). Another such example is a study conducted by Charis Thompson that reveals skin color to be a salient factor in infertility treatments and reproductive assistance with egg donors. The study proclaims that databases often list an egg donor's skin tone, a piece of information that seems to be in high demand (Thompson 2009). This desire to "match" children with one's own skin hue might be merely based on the wish for the children to look like their future parents. It could, however, also speak to underlying issues of racialization, perhaps even to internalized biases with regards to skin color.

Further related to the institution of family are choices made on the dating and marriage "markets."[110] Research indicates that even though light-skinned African American women are not married in higher numbers than their dark-skinned counterparts, if they are married, their chances of having a "higher status spouse" are greater (Keith and Herring 1991; Hunter 2002).[111] Light skin thus serves as a form of social capital that can be exchanged for access to partners with a better social standing and upward social mobility.[112] This is possible because of the intersections of gender and race when it comes to female bodies. On the one hand, women's bodies are seen as "commodities objectified for male consumption" (Hunter 2004, 31). On the other hand, female beauty is never an objective or neutral category, but

[109] For a more detailed account of family research on colorism see Burton et al. (2010).
[110] For a broader overview on skin color preferences when it comes to "dating and mating" see chapter seven of *The Color Complex* (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 107-123).
[111] A "higher status spouse" is defined as a partner with higher levels of education and higher income.
[112] Much of the research addresses women's use of their light skin as social capital with men. One of the few studies focusing on male subjects could not find a strong correlation between light skin color of Black men and their chances on the dating and marriage market (Udry, Baumann, and Chase 1971). This may be related to the fact that light skin is not in line with the "ethnic concept of masculinity" (Hall 1995, 177). Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on such correlations in gay and lesbian relationships, whether legally married or not. Future studies should therefore take same-sex relations into account to find out if and how differences in skin tone are of relevance there.

always informed by racialized ideologies and beauty ideals. Against this backdrop, light skin is seen as a reference point for beauty, which makes it possible to be transformed into a form of property (30-31).[113]

2.2.2 EDUCATION

The lighter their skin, the more years of education African Americans are likely to complete, a claim supported by several studies (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Hill 2000; Hunter 2002). Margaret Hunter's gendered analysis, for instance, suggests that the lightest women had more than one additional year of education compared to the darkest-skinned women in her study. This is – at least in part – due to the fact that teachers are no more immune to color prejudices than anybody else. Consequently, if educators are biased towards lighter-skinned students, they may expect them to perform better and score higher test results. By doing so, they may create – inadvertently or otherwise – a self-fulfilling prophesy that could manifest itself in students' academic performances (Hunter 2008, 68-69). On the flipside, teachers – both Black and white – may have different stereotypes and perhaps lower expectations for students with darker skin. Additionally, being confronted with racial slurs or bullying based on phenotypic appearance by their peers and classmates may take its toll on students' performances.

Even at the college level, color gradations may play a role. In the past, as Audrey Elisa Kerr uncovers in *The Paper Bag Principle* (2006), such hierarchies were not only expressed in social cliques on campus. Her collection of interviews and yearbook records of prestigious historically Black educational institutions like Howard University in Washington, D.C. attests to the fact that the admission selection process of students was often based on skin color. As one of her interviewees remembers, "[i]t was the story during our time that – for young ladies, anyway, – you had to send a picture to Howard. … I heard that colorism was a factor in sending the picture, and it had a big impact on your admission" (qtd. in Kerr 2006, 93).

[113] It should be noted that not all studies furnish such strong evidence for this correlation between skin tone and spousal status. In a book chapter published in 2004, a group of scholars are more tentative in their conclusion and stress that "although historically important in determining the life chances of people of color, … [t]here is at best a modest relationship between spousal earnings and skin tone" (Edwards, Carter-Tellison, and Herring 2004, 78).

Color prejudice on those campuses, according to Kerr, remained in effect until the final third of the twentieth century. It found expression in the continued election of light-skinned homecoming and prom queens (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 104), as well as in campus organizations being divided by skin hues (Kerr 2006, 88-92). The latter is caricatured in Spike Lee's now classic musical drama *School Daze* (1988). As such, it is an apt illustration of color complexes on campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Fraternities and sororities in the film are portrayed as operating based on color codes, with some Greek-letter organizations allegedly using a symbolic paper bag test that would prevent darker-skinned students from joining.[114] After the movie was released, representatives of student groups all over the country were quick to deny Lee's charges and dismiss them as issues of the past ("Light Vs. Dark"). Still, certain color hierarchies in schools and on college campuses seem to exist to this day, although perhaps in a less institutionalized manner, as several personal stories on weblogs indicate (Ellis and Hinton 2011; Jackson 20 January 2012).

2.2.3 Economic Institutions

Looking at the economy as a social institution and establishing a possible relationship between occupational attainment and skin tone requires taking into account two major factors. First, differences in socio-economic ranks might be "inherited" from one's family. This family may have once belonged to a "mulatto elite" that was historically advantaged in white society (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 24-26). Obviously, the said family will try to perpetuate privilege resulting from membership in a specific social class that disproportionately features members with fair skin. Second, the correlation between educational attainment and skin tone may be of additional relevance for one's position on the job market. Put differently, some-

[114] Russell, Wilson, and Hall even write of "color tax parties" that existed from the 1920s until about the 1960s. These parties required male students to pay a tax, the rate of which would depend on their date's skin tone (1992, 30). Unfortunately, old notions sometimes die hard, and as recent as 2007 a Detroit party organizer deemed it a good idea to promote a "Light Skin Libra Birthday Bash" that would grant light-skinned women free entry to the club. Needless to say, the party was cancelled after a firestorm of criticism (Cannick 16 October 2007). Similar parties, however, which often revolve around light skin/dark skin beauty contests, continue to attract negative publicity every now and then (see chapter 4.2.2 and appendix for pictures).

one with more years of formal education is more likely to get a higher status job, and one that is better paid at that.

Yet, even when factors like differences in family background and years of education are taken into account so as to not potentially distort research data (Hunter 2008, 66), studies show that occupational differences by skin tone are statistically significant. For instance, light skin translates into an increased likelihood of getting a job as a professional or technical worker, whereas respondents with very dark skin more often are laborers (Keith and Herring 1991, 768). Similarly, income also reflects correlations between shades of skin and the amount of money earned. To give one concrete example, Margaret Hunter's research on the relationship between skin tone and income for African American women suggests that "[f]or every increment of lightness on the color scale, income increases by $673 annually" (2002, 183). This figure becomes even more pronounced when one looks at the pay gap between the lightest women in the study and those with the darkest skin tones. By comparison, the difference amounts to more than $2,600 per year, even when the women come from similar backgrounds (ibid.). These findings once again suggest that skin color works as social capital, yet here it may even come with a tangible – and considerable – money value. By Hunter's account, this is more salient for women than men, because women might benefit from what Hunter terms a "halo effect of physical attractiveness," one aspect of which is light skin color (2008, 67).

Distinct from occupational status and income, yet related to the realm of the workplace, is job discrimination. There, not only race but also differences in skin tone may play a vital role. In 1989 *Morrow v. IRS* became the first court case filed based on (intra-racial) color discrimination.[115] Already the Civil Rights Act of 1964 listed color as a separate category from race, religion, sex, and national origin (Title VII). Yet, before this precedent-setting case of 1989, color-related or color-based discrimination was not acknowledged by the courts when it was between members

[115] Legal scholars Trina Jones and Taunya Lovell Banks, both leading experts in this area, maintain that contrary to general perception colorism can be perpetuated both intra-racially and inter-racially (Jones 2000; Banks 2000).

of the same race (Banks 2009).[116] In the case of *Morrow v. IRS*, the plaintiff Tracy Morrow,[117] a former clerk at an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) office in Atlanta, filed a complaint of color discrimination against her dark-skinned supervisor Ruby Lewis. Morrow claimed that the defendant had targeted her with reprimands and had singled her out because of her light skin color (Hall 2008, 31).[118] Although Morrow ultimately lost the case, it marked a milestone in legal history, being the first lawsuit that allowed discrimination based on skin color between two people of the same race as the reason for legal action.[119] To this day, there are only a few such cases that are actually litigated, and even fewer that are won. Nevertheless, statistics from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) show that the number of discrimination charge filings based on color tripled between 1992 and 2006 (see chapter 1.2.5). In 2007, an EEOC press release even documented the launch of a new campaign to eradicate racism and colorism from the employment sector. This is yet another factor that attests to the increasing awareness of the issue (EEOC 28 February 2007).[120]

2.2.4 Political Institutions

Since Reconstruction (1865-1877) studies have shown an overrepresentation of light-skinned elected politicians. By drawing on previous research as well as their own, Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver assert that light skin color "remains consistently associated with elite electoral office-holding" (2007, 651). A quick glance at some of the photographs of the most prominent Black politicians and

[116] One problem, as Banks notes, is the fact that historically the words *race* and *color* were used interchangeably. While Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 lists them separately, they are not defined in the text. To this day skin color litigation remains a complex issue, because courts often view such color claims as race claims, without considering them as separate forms of discrimination.
[117] The case was first known as *Walker v. IRS*, but during the trial the plaintiff got a divorce and reclaimed her maiden name (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 125).
[118] It bears mentioning that Ronald Hall and Midge Wilson were called as expert witnesses in the case. Chapter 8 of their book *The Color Complex* (with Kathy Russell) elaborates more extensively on this lawsuit as well as other examples of color harassment in the workplace (1992, 124-134).
[119] One of the few successful cases centered on a former employee of the restaurant chain Applebee's. In this case a light-skinned manager had consistently used derogatory racial slurs pertaining to an employee's dark skin tone. After complaining to general management, the employee was fired and subsequently filed a lawsuit. The case was eventually settled by the EEOC, with the plaintiff receiving $40,000 (EEOC 7 August 2003).
[120] In addition to the employment sector, forms of housing and credit discrimination may also be based on shades of skin color.

elected government officials before and after the Civil Rights Movement supports this idea: from Edward W. Brooke, the first Black Senator since Reconstruction; to Thurgood Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court Justice; to Maynard Jackson, Ernest Morial, and David Dinkins as the first Black mayors of Atlanta, New Orleans, and New York, respectively; to Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice as the first African American Secretaries of State; up to Barack Obama, as the first African American President.[121] The overrepresentation of light-skinned African Americans in what used to be known as the "Black elite" may be part of the reason for the high numbers of fair-complexioned individuals holding political office. Thus, it is valid to state that light skin color creates additional advantages that even permeate into politics.

In a study on possible impacts of skin tone on candidate evaluation by potential white voters, Weaver found out that dark skin "magnified the effect of race, exacerbated stereotypical beliefs about candidates, and made certain categories of voters more or less likely to support the candidate" (2010, n.p.). Her research clearly documents that colorism also works inter-racially, a fact that has been repeatedly emphasized in discussions about Barack Obama's political career. In fact, his light skin color and mixed racial ancestry are believed to have played a role in his winning large numbers of the white vote in 2008. As one op-ed writer in the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* astutely observes, "if he were dark-skinned, and looked like say, the rapper 50 Cent, yet had all the same attributes, mannerisms, and credentials, he would not likely be embraced by white America in the same way" (Zarembka 2 April 2008). In line with this argument, a widely discussed experiment from 2009 revealed that perceptions of Obama's skin tone match the political orientation of study respondents. As the study showed, Obama's skin color was perceived to be lighter when people agreed with his political agenda, and darker when they disagreed (Willyard 23 November 2009). This lends support to the notion that not only beauty but also skin tone is in the eye of the beholder, as one report appropriately put it (ibid.).

[121] It is worth noting that in the past this elite of "mulatto" leaders would correspond to what was known as the "Talented Tenth," a concept made popular (although not coined) by W.E.B. Du Bois in an essay by that title in 1903. While Du Bois later rejected allegations that membership was contingent on skin tone, the "Talented Tenth" still remained an elitist idea, and its members very much reflected the existing color bias of the day (Daniel 2002, 64).

Lastly, skin tone is also proven to have ramifications in the legal arena. It is a well-established fact that people of color are subjected to what is called racial profiling; in other words, they have a higher chance of being stopped by law enforcement officials than white people. Because darker skin color is associated – among other things – with being suspicious and more prone to violence (see Weaver 2010), having dark skin additionally increases the likelihood of being subjected to selective enforcement based on race and color.[122] Less known is the correlation between jail sentences and skin tone among people of color. A recent research project on the effects of skin tone on prison time for Black female offenders attests to that. The authors allege that sentences were on average 12 percent shorter for light-skinned offenders than for those with dark skin, a figure that was similar for actual time served (Viglione, Hannon, and DeFina 2011, 255). This echoes a popular folk saying in the Black community: "The Lighter the Skin, the Lighter the Sentence" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 38).

2.2.5 Religion

In 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois insightfully termed the church the "social center" of Black life (Du Bois 1994, 117).[123] What has become a memorable statement is echoed by scholars to this day. After a ten-year-long study of Black churches in both rural and urban areas, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya support this claim: "While there has been some chipping away at the edges … black churches remain the central institutional sector in most black communities" (1990, 382). It is therefore not surprising that just like other social organizations and institutions, the Black church, too, often was divided across an intra-racial color line and "churchgoers … tended to congregate by color and class" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 27). "High-tone" churches that would only allow light-skinned members were said to have performed paper bag, blue vein, or comb tests to enforce their selective practices (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 27). Particularly the comb test, which deter-

[122] Racial profiling is such a well-known problem that it even resulted in a somewhat ironic acronym in the community: DWB – driving while Black, which is an allusion to the common abbreviations for drunk driving: DUI (driving under influence) and DWI (driving while intoxicated).
[123] This is historically based, as churches were traditionally the only public places where Black people could be among themselves and escape the daily terrors of slavery, segregation, and racism in general.

mined whether a person's hair was "good" or "bad," has become associated with elite Black churches, "from Catholic churches in New Orleans … to Christian Methodist Episcopal churches in Ohio" (Kerr 2006, 106). Audrey Elisa Kerr, who studied the relationship between what she called "complexion and worship," quotes one of her interviewees as follows: "A deacon would stand at the door, and if your hair was too nappy … [they] … would actually ask you to worship elsewhere!" (ibid.). Of course, whether this was really practiced or is merely part of Black complexion lore is ultimately irrelevant. Whether for fear of being publicly humiliated, or because they did not want to stand out, people certainly knew which congregations they could attend and in which they were not welcome.

Today, things obviously look different, and if they ever existed, questionable practices such as the comb test would no longer be tolerated. It would be interesting to find out if subtle color distinctions remain. So far, no extensive research seems to have been performed on whether shades of skin color still play a role among worshippers in their respective churches. However, if congregations remain divided by class – as Lincoln and Mamiya claim they most often are – similar color stratifications might exist to this day, the reason being that class affiliation continues to correlate with skin tone.

2.2.6 Identity

Countless studies, both qualitative and quantitative, document the relationship between skin tone and Black people's sense of identity. It may be argued that all started with a series of doll preference tests in the 1940s. Kenneth and Mamie Clark's study on "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," colloquially known as "doll tests," was even used as evidence in the 1954 landmark school desegregation Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (Clark and Clark 1947). The two psychologists assessed Black children between the ages of three and seven, the majority of whom seemed to demonstrate a clear preference for white dolls and referred to Black dolls as ugly. When asked in the final question which doll they would identify with in terms of physical appearance, many children – realizing that their answer meant they had to identify with what they had previously

determined as the "ugly" Black doll – reacted by bursting into tears or becoming otherwise emotionally upset. The Clarks inferred from this that Black children had internalized racism. This, as the researchers concluded, led to a psychologically damaging sense of inferiority and a distorted sense of self (ibid.). The doll tests subsequently attained iconic status – or, as Gwen Bergner insists, "a hallowed place in social psychology" (2009, 300). Similar doll tests have since been numerously repeated.[124] At the same time, many vocal critics of both the study approach itself and its results have come forward, with some even calling the tests' results predictable and manipulated because of the way the questions were structured (see, for example, Bernstein 2011; Bergner 2009). Regardless of how flawed the outcome really was, however, the doll tests have been shaping the discourse on racial identity formation like few other studies have.

In the wake of the doll tests, studies on correlations between different shades of skin tone and a sense of self became a common field of research in and of itself, not only in children. Several studies document an increased sense of self-esteem and attractiveness in light-skinned Black adolescents (Robinson and Ward 1995) as well as adults (Harvey et al. 2005). Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith approached the matter by analyzing self-evaluation in adults (2001). In their representative sample[125] they found that self-efficacy, that is, people's belief in their own capabilities and competences, was influenced by skin tone. In fact, lighter-skinned men had a considerably higher sense of self-efficacy than darker-skinned men. When looking at self-esteem, the impact was reversed in terms of gender, but significant nonetheless. The researchers report on a clear relationship between skin color and a sense of self-esteem for women. Correlations between skin tone and self-confidence were particularly pronounced in dark-skinned women with a lower socio-economic status (Thompson and Keith 2001, 353). The study authors infer from this a "quadruple oppression" for Black women, which stems from the "convergence of social inequalities based on gender, class, race, and color" (ibid.).

[124] In the 1980s, the *Journal of Black Psychology* dedicated an entire issue to contemporary doll tests which revealed similar results, but also reported on some criticisms (see *Journal of Black Psychology* 14.2, 1988). The two experiments which received the most attention in this decade were the 2006 award-winning short documentary "A Girl Like Me" by then high-school student Kiri Davis, and a *CNN* study that was presented in a four-part series by anchor Anderson Cooper on his show *AC360°* in 2010 (Kiri Davis 2006; "Updated: AC 360 Series: Doll Study Research" 17 May 2010).
[125] The data used came from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) and subsequent face-to-face interviews.

Several researchers followed up on these studies with qualitative approaches to account for the special psychological impact of colorism on Black women. They often found striking examples of how Black women's sense of identity was influenced by the hues of their skin (see Hunter 2005; Wilder 2008).[126] However, while light skin comes with a set of advantages according to these studies, one "cost" is that of losing what Margaret Hunter calls "ethnic authenticity." Reporting on the outcome of her study, Hunter maintains that "[f]or African American women authenticity was the vehicle through which darker-skinned women took back their power from lighter-skinned women" (2005, 95). Charges of not being "Black enough" are common, as is insulting name-calling that labels light-skinned women as "sell-outs," "wanting to be white," or being "conceited" and "stuck-up" (see, for example, Golden 2004, 19). This perceived lack of ethnic legitimacy is perhaps even more relevant for Black men, who live in a society that has continuously been denying them their manhood. Light skin, which is generally considered a feminine quality, thus puts an additional burden on Black men's masculinity.

2.2.7 Problems with Existing Research

The bulk of colorism research suggests that skin color will continue to be relevant for African Americans in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, some scholars predict long-term changes that will reflect on demographic developments (see Bonilla-Silva 2009). At least for now, however, apart from effects on one's sense of identity, skin tone still comes with various measurable effects in social institutions, despite some isolated claims to the contrary. One such dissenting voice is Aaron Gullickson. He suggests that correlations between African Americans' skin tone and areas like educational and occupational attainment are already in decline for people who grew up during and after the Civil Rights Movement. As such, his findings are diametrically opposed to three sociological studies he re-evaluated in 2005. Gullickson alleges that scholars involved in the original studies neglected to take into account differences between cohorts. He then refutes the claim that skin tone is pertinent to education and occupation, yet confirms its continued relevance for dating and mar-

[126] Apart from obvious psychological effects, skin color stratification appears to even have physical consequences. Ronald Hall, for example, references a set of studies that seem to indicate a connection between dark skin color and hypertension (1995, 180-181).

riage. In the latter two categories light skin continues to enable access to what he, somewhat disparagingly, calls "high quality spouses" (2005, 173).[127]

Without belittling Gullickson's findings, his conclusions need to be put in an appropriate context. It is possible that data from the early 1980s reflects a momentary decline in the relevance of skin tone as an outcome of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. Yet, a conservative backlash following this period of racial awareness is likely to have reversed those trends once again. To make matters even more complex, gender needs to be considered as a separate identity category to determine if skin color comes with different effects for men and women in these studies. This has been historically proven and cannot be suddenly dismissed or ignored. As Verna M. Keith notes, Gullickson did not specifically look for gender differences in the data. In Keith's account, if gender is taken into consideration in those very same studies, skin color remains a critical issue for Black women in all categories (2009, 32-33).

More broadly, there is a problem with the large representative survey data that is available. Most studies draw on data sets generated in the 1980s, or earlier. This makes for a scarcity of research based on statistically representative sampling sizes that can reflect on the quantitative effects of skin color within the last thirty years. Absent more recent data, I can only concur with Keith who charges that "[d]espite years of research, we know very little about how complexion differences come to matter" (38). To counter this, she emphasizes the necessity of generating more survey and ethnographic data. One such qualitative study that is much anticipated is the revised and updated edition of Kathy Russell's, Midge Wilson's, and Ronald Hall's *The Color Complex*, due out in January 2013. The first edition, in 1992, garnered much attention and remains a key text in the field (see also the references to the book throughout this chapter). The broad scope of the book gives the reader glimpses into the relationships between skin color politics and a number of diverse areas of life, from the family and dating, to the workplace, and the media.[128]

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[127] Yet as Gullickson accurately observes, this decline of skin tone differentials in all but one category is not necessarily akin to a decline in prejudice based on skin color. Prejudice, he suggests, is still in place, despite structural changes in race relations that reduced the material advantage of light skin for individuals (2005, 173).

[128] It was this broad scope that has also been criticized at times, as it comes at the cost of individual chapters not elaborating on the issues in their full complexity (see Williams 1992). Apart from this,

A noteworthy criticism of the first edition comes from Nicole R. Fleetwood. Although *The Color Complex* succeeds in giving a broad overview of a great number of subject areas, it shows only one side of the story: that of Black pathology. Fleetwood complains – justifiably so – that intra-racial colorism is only seen as "a psychological disorder that affects individuated black Americans" (2011, 74). This, however, places the blame on individuals without looking at the socio-historical context of "blackness as a racial formation" in the U.S., which allowed for the very creation of colorism in the first place (ibid.). A critique of individual members of the community who actively contribute to the perpetuation of colorism may be legitimate, particularly when those members are role models in the public sphere (Michael Jackson is listed as one case in point). Those individuals need to set an example of how Black Americans can get past color stratifications, instead of engaging in skin bleaching and celebrating white beauty standards themselves. Yet, as Fleetwood argues, this criticism is incomplete at best and ineffective at worst if it is not accompanied by a critical analysis of racial formation in the United States and its continued influence on people's individual behavior (74). It remains to be seen if and how the revised edition of *The Color Complex*, published twenty years after the first edition, will address those issues.

critics were divided on the book's journalistic writing style, which made it more accessible to the general public but at the same time fueled criticism of lacking a more serious academic tone. Despite its flaws and the ensuing criticism, however, the book seems an indispensable resource, particularly for newcomers to the field of colorism in the United States.

How you see yourself is through representation – how the world represents you. You want what you are shown, what is presented and promoted as privileged. ~ Heidi Safia Mirza (2012)[129]

2.3 Visualizing the Image, Contextualizing the Words: Analyzing Skin Color in the Media

Beyoncé Knowles, Mariah Carey, and Halle Berry: What these three women have in common is not only their A-list celebrity status as singers, entertainers, and actresses, but also that all of them are light-skinned African American women. Coincidence or not, none of the three look anything like Kelly Rowland, India.Arie, or Gabrielle Union, who are all dark-skinned and display Afrocentric physical features. Coincidence or not, none of the latter three are as successful in the entertainment industry as their lighter-skinned counterparts. Exceptions prove the rule, as the saying goes, but when examining America's film and music industry, many of the Black female celebrities of the twenty-first century closely resemble the twentieth-century trailblazers Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, and Dorothy Dandridge.

Looking at these examples, there is no denying the fact that light skin has been – and in many instances continues to be – the "gold standard for beauty and desirability" (Harris 2008, 56), particularly for Black women.[130] This is true for real life as much as for the media and is reflected in various media outlets on screen and "on the page." While in the past the media was seen as a mirror held up to society, mass communication scholars today grant the media some agency in producing meaning, too. In other words, media outlets constitute and are themselves constitutive of social reality. In general, studies in mass media communication demonstrate a clear preference for fair-skinned entertainers, actresses and actors, anchormen and women, as well as models in advertising. This has been widely reported, with, for instance, Russell, Wilson, and Hall dedicating an entire chapter of *The Color Complex* to the television and film industry and its historic preoccupation with in-

[129] Qtd. in Bim Adewunmi (2011).
[130] With Black male actors, the color issue is often reversed, as dark skin comes to stand for "virility, menace, or sexiness" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 135), which are attributes often desired for Black men in the movies.

tra-racial differences in skin tone (1992, 135-162). Recently, music videos of hip hop and rap songs have created a firestorm of criticism due to the fact that video vixens are almost exclusively light-skinned, and (misogynist) rap lyrics often deride dark skin as undesirable while favoring light hues (see, for example, Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang 2009; Ford 2011).

The media is not only a site of colorism, however. Quite the contrary, it may also work as a veritable tool to deconstruct it. While Spike Lee's drama films *School Daze* (1988) and *Jungle Fever* (1991) address the issue in a fictional context, Kathe Sandler's 1982 documentary *A Question of Color* set the stage for a number of critical filmic texts which explicitly tackle skin color bias on a meta-level. This includes Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS documentary *America Beyond the Color Line* (2004), which among other issues, also addresses light-skin privilege in Hollywood; an episode of *ABC*'s news program *20/20*, narrated by John Stossel in 2005; Anderson Cooper's replication of the "doll tests" on his show *Anderson Cooper 360°* on *CNN* in 2010; and the most recent take on the issue by filmmakers D. Channsin Berry and Bill Duke in their independent documentary *Dark Girls* (2012).[131]

Because the focus of this dissertation is narrowed to Black magazines, the following two sections provide a quick outline of some salient studies in the print media and advertising, the latter of which is seen here as a separate genre in the print sector, distinguished from editorial content. A few studies of *Ebony* and *Essence* as the two leading Black magazines in the U.S. exist, but rarely is skin tone stratification the center of attention. If there is such a focus, it is either on advertisements, cover pages, or other visual elements, such as editorial photographs, that generate the most interest.

[131] While *Dark Girls* was previewed with the filmmakers touring around the country, they had already announced plans of a sequel, which would focus on the plight of lighter-skinned women, provocatively titled *The Yellow Brick Road* (Christian 16 July 2011).

2.3.1 PRINT MEDIA

Perhaps because of the difficult and time-consuming process of detecting and systematically analyzing skin color bias in written texts, most of the research on colorism in print media focuses on images. Lillie M. Fears is one exception: She does not only examine news editorial photos of Black women in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Jet* between 1965 and 1995 but also looks at the language used in captions and texts accompanying these photos. While her study does not show a disproportionate number of light-skinned women in the photographs, the written text complementing those photos reveals a more frequent usage of favorable descriptors when the woman on the picture is of a lighter skin tone. Adjectives to describe physical attractiveness – such as *beautiful*, *gorgeous*, and *lovely* – clearly demonstrate a preference, conscious or not, for light skin in the corpus under review (Fears 1998, 33). Such results suggest that "journalists, like advertisers, can be influenced by the colorism phenomenon" (ibid.). At the same time, however, Fears's study does not expose an overuse of news and feature photos showing light-skinned women, something that has been repeatedly documented in advertising. This, in turn, corroborates the notion that news media paint a more accurate picture of the realities of Black America than does advertising (34).

An important variable for any research is, of course, time. In a study that reflects on representations of Lena Horne in *Ebony* magazine in the post-war years, Megan E. Williams elaborates on reader responses that are openly critical of the magazine's over-featuring of fair-skinned women such as Horne. This was because prior to the Civil Rights Movement the majority of beauties celebrated in *Ebony* and other Black publications were light-complexioned.[132] Equally common was the magazine's practice to openly advertise skin bleaching products, the blurbs of which would go so far as to consider a "dark unlovely complexion" as "hurt[ing] your popularity" (Williams 2009, 127). The reported criticism of these ads based on their tendency to exclude dark-skinned Black women sheds light on readers' awareness for skin tone bias. While many magazine readers would certainly fall prey to such biased messages, there were others who openly challenged the hegemonic stand-

[132] In his dissertation on *Ebony*, Korey Bowers Brown lists several covers of dark-skinned women of color, but the overall trend was to cherish light skin (2010, 62).

ards of white and light beauty and expressed disapproval of "their" magazine perpetuating them. Williams even reports that after much pressure from readers, a 1948 editorial column promised to discontinue the promotion of those products (128). Of course – as ample studies by others as well as my own research show – advertisements for skin lighteners continue to be printed in Black magazines to this day (see chapter 4).

2.3.2 ADVERTISING

Whereas the aforementioned research looked at readers' reactions to advertisements that were published in *Ebony*, numerous studies focus exclusively on the advertising genre. These either examine the formal level of the ads, which includes the models' looks and portrayals, or the content level with regards to product categories. Historically, as Kevin L. Keenan maintains, "[a]dvertising has been criticized as inherently racist" (1996, 907) – as well as sexist, as I would add here. This is reflected not only in the models chosen, but also in the products that are advertised. Over-featuring light-skinned (and white) models and excessively advertising beauty products that promote light skin and straight hair are common. Such practices send one clear message to Black consumers, above all, Black women: being light and bright is acceptable and desired, while being black and brown is not. Blinded by the white, so to speak, readers are encouraged to buy into America's white-controlled beauty myth that even Black-oriented magazines can not fully escape.

Taking this notion as a premise, Keenan goes on to show that on average African Americans are "less Black" in advertisements than in non-advertising photographs. Comparing the appearance of Black people in magazine ads between 1989 and 1994 in *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise* with those in *Glamour* and *Fortune*, Keenan's findings reveal that particularly in Black magazines African American models had lighter complexions.[133] In general, his results are in line with findings from a 1995 study in which Michael Leslie compared *Ebony* ads from the 1950s, 1970s,

[133] One exception in Keenan's study were ads for toiletries such as fade creams and hair relaxers that are specifically targeted to African Americans. Interestingly, those tended to feature models with darker skin color, possibly as part of an "aspirational strategy" to appeal to dark-skinned audiences (1996, 911).

and 1980s (1995). Leslie indicates a process of "diversification of the black image" in the sense that there were more dark-skinned models in the 1970s and 1980s compared to the time before the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (433). At the same time, the normative standards of white and light beauty prevailed. This was particularly true for Black women. Both authors concur that there was a brief period immediately after the pro-Black oriented movements of the 1960s when the aesthetic qualities of models in advertisements were changing to embrace "Black is Beautiful." Nevertheless, corporate advertisers returned to more Caucasian-looking models by the 1980s. This is further reflected in the fact that the publication of ads that promote skin lighteners and hair straightening products, such as chemical relaxers, were never completely abandoned.

When it comes to advertisements in *Essence*, the image appears to be similar. In her master's thesis, Melyssa D. Prince conducted a content analysis of advertisements in *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* between 2000 and 2004. Dark-skinned women, according to Prince's findings, were still underrepresented in advertising in both magazines, although *Essence* was more likely than *Cosmopolitan* to have printed ads with women of medium brown hues (Prince 2006). In a similar study that compared ads in *Essence* and *Jet* magazines in 2003 and 2004, Vanessa Hazell and Juanne Clarke come to related conclusions, at least for one of the two years reviewed. While far from representative because of its limited time range and corpus, their study seems to indicate no permanent shift from the light-skinned beauty ideal to one that embraces the full range of African American looks and phenotypes (Hazell and Clarke 2008).[134] Additionally, white ideals are still imposed on readers. This is done both implicitly – by featuring a higher number of light-skinned models in advertisements, and explicitly – by advertising skin creams and hair products that have little to do with Black aesthetics.[135]

Studying American beauty culture, in particular with a focus on Black female body images in advertisements, has become a popular research area in recent years. In *Hair Raising*, Noliwe M. Rooks explores Black beauty culture in relation to hair

[134] Unfortunately, there is neither much systematic research on *Essence* nor more recent studies available.
[135] The fact that both *Ebony* and *Essence* operate as private enterprises obviously makes them dependent on advertising revenues, even more so in the digital age when circulation of print media has faced a global decline.

politics from Madam C.J. Walker's "Wonderful Hair Grower" in the nineteenth century to the significance of Black women's hair in the 1990s (Rooks 1996). *In Ain't I a Beauty Queen*, Maxine Leeds Craig, in turn, studies the history of Black women in beauty pageants and how the racialized body of the Black woman was portrayed and mediated throughout the years (Craig 2002). Susannah Walker, finally, looks at the side of the producers and examines in *Style and Status* how images of beauty are sold to Black female consumers (2007).

As Walker asserts, advertisements of beauty products targeted at Black women use emotional messages to pretend "that intangibles like love, popularity, and beauty themselves could be bought" (2007, 6). Because African American beauty culture has always been influenced by a white commercialized beauty standard, ads for skin bleaching products, for example, relate "light skin with femininity, beauty, and romantic success" (109). Studies of such cosmetics ads trace the development from overtly devaluing "the dark, ugly tones of the skin" like a Nadinola skin bleaching ad from the 1920s suggested (qtd. in Walker 2007, 38), to more covert language that portrayed light skin as the desired ideal. This is expressed by, for example, referring to Black men's preferences in women, who – according to ads from the 1950s and 60s – would "notice and admire girls with clear, bright, Nadinola-light complexions" (ibid., 109). Ever since the "Black is Beautiful" era the sales strategy for what is essentially the same product has been cleverly adapted by using subliminal messages, such as the promise that Nadinola "fades away dark spots" (*Ebony*, August 1986: 132). In addition to those more subtle cues, products are in most cases no longer advertised as bleaching or skin lightening creams. Rather, euphemisms such as "fade creams" have become part of the discourse in order to not offend a new group of customers who need to be convinced that they are not selling out to a white beauty standard but are merely enhancing their natural skin tones. As is implied by the word *fade*, two synonyms of which are "to grow pale," and "to cause to lose colour [sic]," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the side effect may be a lighter hue of skin. This is, in and of itself, a pleasant side effect for many in a society that continues to adhere to a "light is right" mentality.

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.
~ Zora Neale Hurston (1942)

There is nothing so practical as a good theory. ~ Kurt Lewin (1951)[136]

3 Critical Discourse Analysis as Methodology and Method

Coming to terms with a culturally sensitive and complex issue like the discourse of skin color is not an easy endeavor, but critical discourse analysis (CDA) seems to offer an adequate means to do so. Scholars often conceive of discourse analysis as both method and methodology. As methodology or research perspective the term draws on its status as a scholarly orientation or epistemology, thereby providing a standpoint that helps to interpret the social world and "unpack the production of social reality" (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 82). In other words, apart from trying to understand this social reality, discourse analysis also specifically looks at the production site and thereby attempts to explore how reality is constituted and constitutive of certain discourses in the first place (6). As method, or, rather, a set of methods and techniques, discourse analysis is seen here as "the structured and systematic study of texts" (4). There is no one way to perform critical discourse analysis, which means it is considered "a bulk of approaches with theoretical similarities" (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 27). This is also why CDA needs to be conceived more as a discipline or paradigm rather than one single or specific theory.

Several distinct schools of thought exist when it comes to CDA research, including, for example, approaches that are dialectic-relational, sociocognitive, or discourse-historical (see the works of Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and

[136] Qtd. in Marrow (1969).

Ruth Wodak, respectively).[137] These often ideologically differing approaches have their roots in a variety of disciplines, from the broad realm of linguistics to the fields of anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and literary studies (see Wodak and Meyer 2009). As a result of this multiplicity of methodologies, as well as the ensuing heterogeneity of methods, Wodak and Meyer stress the importance of specifying the particular school of thought any researcher follows. In my study I mainly draw on an approach proposed by the German linguist Siegfried Jäger and his team from the Duisburg Institute of Linguistic and Social Research in Germany. In a broader sense, it builds on Foucauldian discourse theory and on deliberations on discourse by Jürgen Link, another German linguist who metaphorically likens discourses with a "flow of knowledge throughout time" (Jäger and Maier 2009, 35). This notion is reminiscent of John Fiske's oft cited river metaphor of discourses that constitute any culture:

> At times the flow is comparatively calm; at others, the undercurrents, which always disturb the depths under even the calmest surface, erupt into turbulence. Rocks and promontories can turn its currents into eddies and countercurrents, can change its direction or even reverse its flow. Currents that had been flowing together can be separated, and one turned on the other, producing conflict out of calmness. (Fiske 1996, 7)

It is this flow of knowledge in the metaphorical river of skin color discourse that my study seeks to analyze. Which discursive events are muddying the waters, so to speak? Where in this river are the quiet creeks and raging streams synonymous for different discourse strands in the flow of knowledge throughout time? And how do discursive contexts frame the discourse of skin color, similarly to banks of a river framing the river bed?

In line with one of the core principles of CDA research I am not only interested in the (re)production of social domination by discourse but also how subordinate and marginalized groups resist and challenge such domination (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 9). When it comes to specific methods, CDA often borrows from traditional qualitative approaches. My study is based on a modified form of interpretative content analysis, highlighting common themes, metaphors, and collective symbols, identifying discursive events, and outlining the discursive limits that border the realm of the "not sayable." Particularly these limits will be of interest as they

[137] For an overview of the different theoretical positions and their objectives see chapter one in Ruth Wodak's and Michael Meyer's edited volume, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (2009, 1-33).

demonstrate the paradoxes of the values attributed to skin color in the magazines under review. As such, discourse analysis, as Fiske posits, "differs from linguistic analysis in focusing on *what* statements are made rather than *how* they are. … what statements were made and therefore what were not, who made them and who did not" (1996, 3; original emphasis).

This chapter is divided into two parts, one being more theory-based and the other one dealing with my specific case study: At first, I will explore critical discourse analysis through a theoretical lens. This section is devoted to defining the terminology I utilize in my approach to CDA. Terms like text, discourse, and context need precise working definitions and concise explanations as to how they relate to each other. Similar connections will be established between the terms power, knowledge, and ideology. These two sub-sections are followed by definitions and examples of several analytical terms and categories in CDA research, such as discursive events and limits, or the concept of collective symbolism. In the other main section I will proceed to explain the analytical approach to the research design of this particular case study. The defining elements of any research are its research questions, which – in this study – can be grouped according to the five elements of du Gay et al.'s cultural studies model of the "circuit of culture." Because transparency with regards to the research process is crucial in CDA, the processes of identifying and collecting relevant data as well as the stages of structured, detailed, and synoptic data analysis will be also related in greater detail.

3.1 THE THEORETICAL LENS: CDA THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHERS

While the word *critical* is often seen as "a ubiquitous epithet attached to a variety of nouns" (Locke 2004, 25), discourse analysis becomes critical only when certain aspects are taken into account: First, the word denotes an approach that is based on the critical investigation of social phenomena, while taking nothing for granted (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 2). This presupposes a certain distance to the data and an understanding of the analysis to be multi- and interdisciplinary. Second, social phenomena need to be seen as always mediated by power relations. As Wodak and

Meyer maintain, CDA is interested in relations of power and hierarchy between different groups in society as well as relations of exclusion and subordination among these groups. Specifically, "CDA aims to shed light on the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities" (2009, 32). This, in turn, includes an understanding of different forms of oppression as being inherently intersectional and not privileging one form of oppression over the other (Locke 2004, 26).[138] Third, social phenomena are always embedded in a specific historic and cultural context (25). Last but not least, facts are ideological and thus colored by certain values too, with language being at the heart of subject formation, both on a conscious and a subconscious level (ibid.).

Against the background of what makes discourse analysis critical, it becomes obvious that a discourse analyst digs deeper than someone employing other qualitative approaches. Or, as Phillips and Hardy put it, "[d]iscourse analysis … tries to explore how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time" (2002, 6). In this sense, CDA always needs to be seen as "three-dimensional" (Fairclough, 1992). Hence the approach is interested in the reciprocal relationship between text, discourse, and context, with none of these three elements operating in isolation from the other (4-5). In order to better understand these terms and how they intersect, all three will be briefly explained. When talking about discourses, particularly in the tradition of Michel Foucault, core concepts such as power, knowledge, and ideology also need to be defined. Following Siegfried Jäger's model of CDA then requires a closer look at what he understands by discursive events and different discourse strands. Additionally, differences between the realm of the "sayable" and the "not sayable," the latter realm being called discursive limits, will be elucidated. Last but not least, I will provide definitions for the three most important analytical categories of this study, these being collective symbols, metaphors, and manifest intertextuality.

[138] Such ranking would be akin to the notion of "oppression Olympics" (see chapter 2).

3.1.1 TEXT, DISCOURSE, AND CONTEXT

A text, according to Mary Talbot, is an "observable product of interaction," in other words, a cultural object of some kind (2007, 9). When studying texts it is imperative to always view them from a macro-level perspective, as they do not retain their meaning in a vacuum: "Texts are not meaningful individually; it is only through their interconnection with other texts, the different discourses on which they draw, and the nature of their production, dissemination, and consumption that they are made meaningful" (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 4). Put another way, single texts have minimal effects and little power by themselves. It is only when knowledge is solidified through discourse "with its recurring contents, symbols and strategies" that power effects become visible and more sustained (Jäger and Maier 2009, 38).

Defining texts as cultural objects or products enables an analytical distinction between texts and discourses, the latter being processes and cultural activities that continuously constitute texts while being constituted by texts themselves (Talbot 2007, 9-10). Fairclough and Wodak call these processes simply forms of "social practice" (1997, 258). As the numerous definitions both inside and outside the academic world suggest, the meanings of and approaches to discourse range between manifold and infinite. Wodak and Meyer, for example, maintain that discourses can mean "anything from a historical monument, a *lieu de mémoire*, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language per se" (2009, 2-3; original emphasis). The term *discourse* itself derives from the Latin verb *discurro*, which signifies "a running around in all directions" (Hawthorn 2000, 86). Referring to the multiplicity of meanings, John Fiske goes so far as to characterize the term *discourse* as intangible:

> *Discourse* is an elusive term, for it refers both to a general theoretical notion and to specific practices within it. ... Discourse, then, is language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its users: it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community. (Fiske 1996, 3; original emphasis)

The notion of language in social use is in line with what Terry Locke says about discourses being "sense-making stories" circulating in society (5). Looking at the discourse of color(s), by way of example, one could say that it is widely accepted to

regard *black* and *white* as binary opposites to each other. This also manifests itself in the fact that languages around the world have more positive terms that connote whiteness (or lightness) and more negative terms that connote blackness (or darkness). Based on this social reality it may be argued that how we view color as one "sense-making" discourse is "colored" – no pun intended – by the way we view the world and the colors around us. This, in turn, takes us back to the afore-mentioned approach by Jürgen Link and the notion that discourses are "flow[s] of knowledge throughout time [that] … exercise power in a society because they institutionalize and regulate ways of talking, thinking and acting" (Jäger and Maier 2009, 35).

These flows of knowledge, obviously, are not fixed throughout different time periods, which points to the final aspect of Fairclough's three-dimensionality of critical discourse analysis: context. As mentioned, discourses are always historical, meaning they can only be understood in relation to the context in which they appear (Jäger and Maier 2009, 20). From a sociological vantage point, David Altheide provides a useful definition that relates to context and its relevance: "*Context*, or the social situations surrounding the document in question, must be understood to grasp the significance of the document itself, even independently of the content in the document" (1996, 9; original emphasis). It is the importance of different contexts – historical, cultural, political, psychological, and otherwise – that makes CDA an inherently multi- and interdisciplinary affair.

3.1.2 Power, Knowledge, and Ideology

Just as text, discourse, and context are overlapping and intersecting concepts in critical discourse analysis, so, too, are power, knowledge, and ideology. Particularly the first two are often considered inseparable, as is perhaps best seen in the work of Michel Foucault. The French philosopher and one of the "theoretical 'godfathers' of CDA" (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 10) often used the term "power-knowledge"[139] to infer that the two are mutually constitutive. As Foucault suggests, "power and knowledge directly imply one another; … there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not pre-

[139] Sometimes this is spelled as "power/knowledge."

suppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1995, 27). Stuart Hall, while also drawing on Foucault, points out that "[k]nowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to *make itself true*" (2001, 76; original emphasis). While thinking about these power/knowledge linkages, it is important to remember that knowledge is always conditional, which means that its sense of being true is based, among other variables, on the historical, geographical and cultural locations of people (Jäger and Maier 2009, 34). It is the sometimes hidden and opaque relations of power and knowledge that CDA scholars try to uncover. Or, as Teun A. van Dijk maintains, scholars of Critical Discourse Studies "are typically interested in the way discourse (re)produces social *domination*, that is, the *power abuse* of one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively *resist* such abuse" (2009, 63; original emphasis). Power, as noted in the anthology *Blackberries and Redbones*, is a "critical resource," particularly "[i]n a society that imposes standards that counter self-defined Black corporeal representations" (Spellers and Moffitt 2010).

Distinctly related to such power abuses are ideologies that inform discourses and thus the subjects embedded in them. Although the word *ideology* has acquired negative connotations related to fascism, communism, and – most infamously – National Socialism in Germany, the term can generally be defined as simply a "*coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs or values*" (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 8; original emphasis). The emphasis in this definition is placed on the permanency and continuity of these beliefs, which do not necessarily have to be negative. Another important aspect is to view ideology as necessarily a distortion of reality, or a "'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," to use Louis Althusser's well-known definition of the term (1971, 152). CDA scholars understand discourses as producing subjects and shaping reality, and – consequently – informing everyday beliefs and worldviews that may turn into ideologies (Jäger and Maier 2009, 37). These ideologies are manifested in relations of power, with power being seen – in line with the tradition of Foucault – as a systemic and constitutive element of society (Jäger and Maier 2009, 9). In his textbook on social research methods, Alan Bryman sees CDA as emphasizing "the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change" (2008, 508). In the same vein, Norman Fairclough, another "founding father" of

CDA, describes its goal as studying how discursive "practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" in the larger society (1995, 132).

3.1.3 Discursive Events, Limits, And Discourse Strands

While, as Jäger and Maier corroborate, "[a]ll events are rooted in discourse," an event only becomes *discursive* among CDA scholars "if it appears on the discourse planes of politics and the media intensively, extensively and for a prolonged period of time" (Jäger and Maier 2009, 48).[140] This definition is again reminiscent of a concept introduced by John Fiske, what he calls media events, which he defines as "sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence" (1996, 7). In other words, if an event is not mediated and thus is not part of an extended (media) discussion, it does not become discursive. To use the coverage on the meaning of skin color in the Black community as a concrete example, if specific events and incidents related to the discourse of skin color are taken up extensively by the Black press, they can be regarded as discursive events shaping the overall discourse. By way of example, the election of light-skinned Vanessa Williams as the first Black Miss America in 1983 became the discursive event for several follow-up articles on the relevance of skin color in the Black community (see chapter 4.3).

Often, discursive events are used to implicitly or explicitly legitimize feature articles or interviews on a specific complexion-related issue. At other times, however, the events that lead to articles on skin color remain completely hidden. In this case, only a look at the larger socio-historical context in which the article is embedded may hint at the discursive events at play. One example is *Ebony*'s May 1988 feature story "Why Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference." It was published only three months after the release of Spike Lee's musical drama *School Daze*, which centers on the phenotypical differences in skin color and hair texture of two Black sorority groups. Although many sources of the article are spokespeople from Black fraternities and sororities, a focus that suggests the film's controversial mes-

[140] Discourse planes, according to Jäger and Maier, are specific "social locations from which speaking takes place" (2009, 48). This study deals with the discourse plane of the media; more precisely, with the magazine sector of the discourse plane of Black media in the United States.

sage was part of the reason for the article, *School Daze* is not mentioned at all. Concurrently, the mediation of an event over a prolonged period of time can also happen in the letters to the editor sections. Reader responses speak to the discursive quality of an event in a particularly interesting fashion because they confirm that the event or incident has, in fact, entered the public discourse and is discussed also outside the discourse plane of the media.

Discourses are not monolithic entities but are usually formed of several subdiscourses, commonly referred to as discourse strands. As it were, these discourse strands may be formed of other different, yet thematically consistent, areas, or discourse fragments. The discourse of skin color, for example, may be informed by discourse strands of beauty, race, and identity on the meso-level, as well as by economic and political discourse strands on the macro-level of the larger U.S. society. Discourse strands may intersect on one or more levels, sometimes forming what Jäger and Maier refer to as discursive knots that need to be disentangled by the researcher (Jäger and Maier 2009, 47). Together these discourse strands form what Foucault called the "atoms" of any discourse (Jäger and Zimmermann 2010, 31). Extending that metaphor, one could say that like colliding atoms, different discourse strands may either attract or repel one another. Put differently, discourse strands may reflect different ideological positions that can either represent dominant discourses or parts of counter-discourses, thus forming dissenting voices to the dominant discourse position (Jäger and Maier 2009, 50). One example of such a dissenting discourse is the emergence of the rallying call "Black is Beautiful" in the late 1960s, which was a clear counter-argument to the hegemonic narratives of a white standard of beauty. In general, if such discourse strands are analyzed closely, individual "statements" that are often seen as "common sense" positions come to the surface. It is the meaning behind what appears as "common sense" or obvious at first glance that CDA scholars attempt to deconstruct:

> Discourses are *naturalized* for individual subjects, who, viewing the world through their own discursive lenses, regard their own position as "common sense" rather than a particular construction of reality. Revelation occurs when these "common sense" positions are *demystified* or *denaturalized*, and exposed as discursive constructions. (Locke 2004, 32; original emphasis)

The exposure of discursive constructions – those that are "sayable" – is but one aspect that can be studied. Equally revealing is a close look at what is "not sayable." This analysis of the concept of the "limits and forms of the sayable" (Foucault 1991, 59) is important, because it shows the discursive limits or blind spots of certain discourses (Jäger and Maier 2009, 47). Discourse fragments that are conspicuous by their absence reveal the asymmetrical power structures at play, which – in the case of the media outlets analyzed – may also unfold the (economic) pressures to which the magazine is subjected. Moreover, discursive limits shed light on the gate keeping function the editorial boards may have exercised in order not to breach protocol. While the borders between the "sayable" and the "not sayable" are in a constant state of flux and always depend on the socio-historical and political context to begin with, there are also specific strategies that can be used to either extend or narrow down said discursive limits. These "tricks," as Jäger and Maier call them, are often found in the use of discursive moves such as relativizations, defamations, allusions, or implicatures (2009, 47). They may serve as analytic clues to define any discursive limits in a particular place and time. Such clues may also be found in a variety of rhetorical means. The three most important ones for this study will now be defined.

3.1.4 Collective Symbols, Metaphors, and Intertextuality

A collective symbol, sometimes also referred to as cultural stereotype or topos, is a specific form of figurative language that is known to all members of a society. People use it collectively and pass it on to future generations so that it helps them to better understand and interpret reality (Jäger and Maier 2009, 47-48). While describing the concept of figurative language is not new *per se*, the German linguist and literary scholar Jürgen Link developed a theory of collective symbols in the 1980s that he related to Foucault's discourse theory. Link describes the set of collective symbols in a society as the totality of the imagery of a culture, which includes the most common allegories, emblems, metaphors, and analogies that form a system of synchronous collective symbols. This system metaphorically glues a society together, thus serving as a social adhesive (see, for example, Link 2006, 42-43). Building on Link's explanations, Siegfried Jäger and his team from the Duisburg

Institute of Linguistic and Social Research in Germany picked up this theory to use it as one key analytical tool in their approach to CDA.

Collective symbols, as Jäger observes, help to connect different discourse strands, as well as different collective images, particularly with the help of catachreses or mixed metaphors (Jäger and Maier 2009, 48). Common examples are different means of transportation, with trains and cars symbolizing progress and movement towards the future, particularly in industrialized societies. Other symbols may be related to forces of nature, such as floods, which often connote threats from the outside or chaos (ibid.). What bears mentioning is that Link's system of collective symbols is not static but may change throughout history and – more importantly – may look different in different cultures (see Jäger 2009 [1999], 134). According to Jäger, there are several criteria that help to recognize collective symbols. Among these is that they have a connotative meaning, which is different from their denotative one and often ambiguous. Additionally, this meaning can be represented visually and is analogous to the symbol it accompanies. In the course of this project, the idea of what constitutes collective symbols in a society – in this context the Black community – will be broadened. Ultimately, I will argue that culturally-specific slogans, sayings, and idioms can also achieve the status of a collective symbol. As a non-member of the Black community, unless you have studied Black culture you would probably not know their meanings. These slogans, sayings, and idioms therefore serve as an "in-culture" symbolic short-hand for complex ideas that do not require additional explanation once the collective symbol is evoked.

While many collective symbols are based on metaphors, not every metaphor necessarily makes for a collective symbol. This is particularly true for the everyday metaphors that are so constituted by culture that if they "become naturalized within a particular culture or institutional setting, they tend to become invisible" (Locke 2004, 51). As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson remind readers of their pioneering work, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), "[i]n all aspects of life, not just in politics or in love, we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors" (2003, 158). Accordingly, metaphors are not devices merely used in the realm of "the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish" (3) but are part and parcel of everyday life and our conceptual system of perceiving and struc-

turing reality (ibid.). In that sense, Lakoff and Johnson conceive of metaphors as metaphorical concepts and call attention to the fact that "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (6). Often these processes are so conventional as to go unnoticed, such as the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR,[141] which is reflected in a variety of expressions, from *indefensible* claims to *attacking* weak points, and from *winning* an argument to being *right on target* (4). In general, metaphors constitute one form of non-literal figurative language, thus belonging in the same category as figures of speech such as simile, personification, and metonymy. Their essence, as Lakoff and Johnson maintain, is to allow for an "*understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*" (2003, 5; original emphasis) One example from the discourse of skin color is the conceptional metaphors of RACISM IS WAR / COLORISM IS WAR, with, for instance, the necessity to *fight* and *battle* against the racist system and the media *bombarding* Black America with images of "light is right" (Poussaint and Jackson, 1972, 125; "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?", 1984, 66).

The last analytical category to be explained here in more detail is intertextuality. It basically occurs whenever "another text is overtly drawn upon in the construction of a particular text" (Locke 2004, 70) and this relation affects "the way in which the *intertext* … is READ" (Hawthorn 2000, 182; original emphasis). This is an age-old device that received renewed attention and a new name when the Bulgarian-French feminist and philosopher Julia Kristeva coined it in the 1960s. In doing so, she based her definition on ideas by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the Russian philosopher, linguist, and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (see Kristeva 1991 [1986]). Ever since then, the term *intertextuality* has been subject to a multitude of scholarly interest, with varying definitions that either broaden or limit the concept (for a comprehensive overview see, for example, Allen 2000). Graham Allen even calls it "one of the most commonly used and misused terms in contemporary critical vocabulary" (2000, 2). In the course of this project, I will mostly analyze what Norman Fairclough calls "manifest intertextuality" (1992). This occurs when references are overtly given attribution to their origin, either with or without quotation marks (Fairclough 1992, 85).

[141] Lakoff and Johnson always write their conceptual metaphors in all capital letters, a strategy that is adopted here. For other examples, such as TIME IS MONEY, see Lakoff and Johnson (2003).

News reports and feature articles are, by definition, inherently intertextual. Often large parts of news stories are made up by making references to different sources. One reason for using manifest intertextuality in the news media is to acquire authority by referring to external studies or reports. These do not only add a sense of credibility but also serve as references to other texts that are produced about the discourse at play. An additional motive is the ability to simply present multiple perspectives, which suggest objectivity and a balanced viewpoint. Yet another reason is to establish distance between the views of the journalist (and/or news outlet) and other people's thoughts, particularly by using direct quotations. In critical discourse analysis, as Locke insists, the main question pertains to "*how* a text is used and the effect of this usage" (2004, 70; original emphasis). This is why looking at intertextual references is important, as these references might have particular effects on different discourse strands and the overall discourse of skin color.

3.2 THE ANALYTICAL APPROACH: RESEARCH DESIGN

In Nelson Philips's and Cynthia Hardy's work on discourse analysis, the authors stress that "[d]esigning a research study is as much an art as it is a science … As with any creative process, there is no single best way to approach [it]" (2002, 60). From the inexhaustible amount of literature on discourse analysis it is their hands-on guide, paired with Jäger's practical approach to Foucauldian discourse theory that I found most useful to adapt for my own study.[142] As a third resource I mainly draw on Terry Locke's deliberations on CDA, whose lucid remarks on some key scholars other than Foucault provide a comprehensive addition to Jäger's model where necessary. In an attempt to avoid what Philips and Hardy call "academic and moral imperialism" (65) and in line with the advice of one of my mentors that research takes you where it wants to go, I follow a data-driven approach to my study,

[142] It should be noted that Jäger's approach to CDA is not without criticism. The German discourse linguists Ingo Warnke and Jürgen Spitzmüller, for example, point to the problem of researchers having certain presuppositions that they then look for in the course of analysis (2011, 128). This critique seems to be targeted at Jäger's studies of racism and racist ideologies in German media. While the criticism is valid, it does not necessarily apply to this particular project. I am not interested in discovering bias in the media per se – like Jäger usually does – but rather in how bias gets "talked about" or represented in the media. This is done while acknowledging that a value system based on different shades of skin color has been so ingrained in U.S. society that it is obviously also found within the Black community, which includes the Black media.

rather than one that is influenced by pre-defined hypotheses or a bulky theoretical framework.

As briefly explained in the introduction, this study is a historic or diachronic analysis of the discourse of skin color as represented by a notable national magazine of the Black press. With the period of analysis ranging from 1970 to today, this is a longitudinal study of the magazine sector of the discourse plane of the Black media. The analysis starts with the first decade after the passing of historic civil rights legislation and stretches to the end of 2011, thus spanning a period of just over four decades. As Jäger and Maier maintain, "the whole qualitative variety of the discourse strand becomes apparent only in those materials that cover a longer period of time" (2009, 53). Only a diachronic analysis enables the identification of "the changes, ruptures, ebbings and recurrences of a discourse strand" (51), or the "genealogy" of a discourse, to speak with Foucault. My analysis is performed against the background of seeing the media as not occupying a passive but rather an "active role in the formation of consensus in modern democracies" (Talbot 2007, 13). Magazine articles thus contribute to a discursive construction of identity with dominant and dissenting discourse strands existing in a collective Black consciousness. These discourse strands, represented through one of the Black community's very own magazines, will be described, interpreted, and evaluated. While employing a multifaceted research design to study the discourses at play, at its core this project is based on qualitative research, which Michael Jäger and Florentine Maier call "the bedrock of discourse analysis" (2009, 51).[143]

3.2.1 Guiding Questions: Along the Circuit of Culture

Based on an inductive approach that does not rely on any pre-defined hypotheses, this project revolves around a number of different research questions, all related to the meaning of skin color in Black America. Several of these questions came up while the data was already being analyzed, which supports the idea of the research

[143] I am aware of the fact that quantitative analyses are often seen as a valuable addition to a qualitative study like this one. However, the fact that the availability of *Ebony* through Google Books is not completely extensive, as a random number of issues cannot be accessed in full text, would make any quantitative claims incomplete at best and inaccurate at worst.

being data-driven rather than attempting to test pre-defined hypotheses. After a retrospective look at all the questions that surfaced throughout the study, it appears that they can be tentatively grouped along the cultural processes of the "circuit of culture," a cultural studies model devised in 1997. As Paul du Gay and his team from the Open University in the United Kingdom suggest, their "circuit of culture [provides a model] through which any analysis of a *cultural text* or artifact must pass if it is to be adequately studied" (1997, 3; my emphasis). The five different positions of *representation*, *identity*, *production*, *consumption*, and *regulation* that du Gay et al. highlight are inseparable from each other, as they are all connected through an intricate web of rules of articulation. Yet, it is still useful to start by looking at each position before seeing the circuit as a collective system for the "production and circulation of meaning" (1997, 13).

The overarching research question of this project addresses the nature of the discourse of skin color in the Black community of the United States and how this is represented in *Ebony*, the Black periodical under review. For this reason it is easy to perceive the cultural process of representation in the circuit of culture as the primary element of interest, by mainly looking at different textual and visual clues for how the discourse of skin color is represented. Such an analysis includes, for example, a look at the collective symbols, metaphors, and slogans, as well as intertextual references that surface in these texts. From this analysis can be inferred what is said and what it implies for the meaning of skin color in the Black community: (1) Is a discussion of colorism, for example, presented as airing dirty laundry, as breaking taboos, or something entirely different? (2) Is the representation of the meaning of skin color one-sided or objective, both in the editorial and in the advertising sections? (3) Are Black men and women represented differently through the discourses of skin color? And is the representation inclusive of other ethnicities, or is it monopolized as relevant only to the Black community? (4) Moreover, what differences exist between the verbal and the visual discourses presented in these articles? (5) And lastly, how, if at all, has the representation of the meaning of skin color in the Black community changed and/or developed over the past forty years? These are all crucial questions, yet it needs to be emphasized that an exclusive focus on this one category of representation precludes a complete understanding of all the elements that constitute this very category. At the same time, it is representa-

tion that can help constitute, in turn, all other elements of the circuit of culture. This is why the positions of identity (formation), production (of discourses), regulation (by magazines and the society), and consumption (by readers) need to be closely studied as well. Before doing so in the analysis, each of these moments will be briefly explained.[144]

Looking at the moment of identity requires asking questions that pertain to self-definition versus definition by others. The process of identity formation when it comes to the discourse of skin color also establishes – among other things – the boundaries for who is either "too Black" or not "Black enough," and whether concepts of identity change throughout time. Related to this is the issue of beauty, and what is considered the ideal in a society at any given point in time. This accounts for the following questions: (1) What problems arise when people's identity is defined by others and the media perpetuates a one-sided ideal of beauty? (2) How, if at all, has that ideal changed over the years? (3) How – in light of racial divisions created by the pressures of the larger society – do the texts manage to maintain (or recreate) unity among the Black readership of the magazines in which the texts appear? (4) How do the magazines attempt to develop the sense of self-love and Black consciousness that the "Black is Beautiful" era created? (5) How do Black magazines challenge the hierarchy of skin color that became visible in its reverse form once light-skinned Black Americans had to prove their racial loyalty and ethnic authenticity in light of the "Black is Beautiful" era?

Studying the realm of production, then, means looking at the (re)production of certain dominant discourses and whether any of these hegemonic beliefs are challenged to create new meanings of skin color. Often, change occurs through discursive events that shape the production of specific texts in the magazines under review. Questions pertaining to the production site also need to address the sources that produce these texts and whether any voices are presented in a hierarchical way to establish authority over the production of certain discourse fragments: (1) What are, for example, the means to establish authority in a text? (2) Is the discourse per-

[144] Any order in which these positions are presented falsely suggests a sequence of some kind, which in reality does not exist and is rejected by du Gay et al. By necessity, however, even they usually follow a clock-wise order when explaining the five different moments of their "circuit" model.

ceived to be subjective or objective? (3) Are there any dominant voices that seem to have the ultimate authority over the discourse?

Regulation in this case is mostly concerned with the realms of the "sayable" and the "not sayable," which includes the magazine's gate keeping function and rhetorical strategies that are used to broach, for example, taboo issues and make them publicly addressable. Regulation is heavily dependent on the discursive context and changes in society's values and ideologies, as well as on the actors who are pushing a discourse in a specific direction, thereby regulating it with their power to (re)produce discourses: (1) Does the discourse on skin color in the periodicals under review reflect any macro-cultural changes? (2) What does the discourse of skin color reveal about the social and discursive contexts at any particular time? (3) Do any economic pressures influence the magazine and thereby shape the discursive boundaries? (4) What strategies are used to shift these boundaries or blind spots, to put more aspects of a discourse in the realm of the "sayable"?

Last but not least, questions in the realm of consumption need to look at readers and their responses to the cultural texts to which they are exposed. Their reactions to the elements of representation, identity, production, and regulation are revealing insofar as they again contribute to (1) the production of new texts, changing or transforming identity positions, new sets of regulations, and – ultimately – new ways of representation of the discourse of skin color. Furthermore, readers' responses reveal (2) what is valid knowledge at a certain point in time, and (3) which events become discursive as a result from an extended discussion in the community, something that is reflected, for example, in the letters to the editor section.

3.2.2 Data Identification: Relevance and Accessibility

A first step to identify relevant data is becoming familiar with the magazine under review. This includes a comparison of different sections or departments in the magazine and how these change over time. Additionally, a surface reading of print issues of *Ebony* between 1965 and 1970 helped to establish the necessary context and

to determine how issues – particularly pertaining to race and color – were represented in the Black press.[145] What became noticeable in *Ebony* was a sometimes openly sexist view of Black men about Black women – one prominent example being the widely criticized cover story of the February 1966 issue, "Are Negro Girls Getting Prettier?," which provided a decidedly objectifying perspective on Black women. This "male gaze" became less explicit over time, however, particularly with the rise of the "second wave" feminist movement[146] in the larger society. With the advent of the Black women's magazine *Essence* in 1970 the editorial staff from *Ebony* seemed to have realized that times were – in fact – changing and that Black women could no longer be objectified to the extent they had been in the past. After all, *Essence* became the most important competitor for the Johnson Publications monthly *Ebony* with regards to wooing a Black female readership. This strategy was made quite explicit by *Essence* openly courting "the young, urban, inquisitive and acquisitive black woman" (Winfrey 1970, 58).

A surface reading of early *Ebony* issues helped me to identify six genres potentially relevant for further analysis: Feature stories, interviews, editorials, special commentary sections and opinion pieces, advice columns, and letters to the editor.[147] Within each of these six genres or sections in the magazine, a structural analysis revealed that possible relevant articles deal with essentially three subject areas: skin color, (Black) beauty, and identity (including being of mixed-race descent). The latter two subject areas can be seen as strands in the overall discourse of skin color. Rather than appearing separate from each other, they often are interwoven and entangled within a single article, although one dominant discourse strand – usually reflected in the headline – is likely to stand out. To allow for more in-depth treatment of the corpus, the subsequent detailed analysis focused exclusively on feature articles and, in an exemplary fashion, on letters to the editor (see chapter 4).

[145] Older print issues of *Ebony* magazine were available at Bird Library of Syracuse University, the major research site for this project.
[146] The wave analogy is contested, particularly among Black feminist scholars, because it mostly refers to what used to be white mainstream feminist movements that oftentimes excluded women of color and their issues. In marking the white women's suffrage movement as the "first wave" of feminism in the United States, the analogy also fails to give credit to, for example, African American women who developed a feminist consciousness already during slavery (see Taylor 2005).
[147] Although a relevant part of any consumer magazine, the fashion and style sections that have been prominent in *Ebony* throughout the years were entirely excluded from further review.

As the study at hand is about the meta-discussion of colorism and the meaning of skin color in the Black community, I sought to find out how the discourse of skin color is represented in one of the most popular African American monthlies. Such an endeavor is best accomplished by studying the very texts that deal with skin color as an issue in the Black community. This is one reason as to why advertising content was not the major focus in the data collection process.

3.2.3 Data Collection: Key Words and Systematic Approaches

Articles relevant for this study were identified by performing a full-text search on Google Books, as well as through the electronic publisher ProQuest that provides access to *Ebony* articles since 1988, in order to ensure a most complete list of relevant articles. To maximize the output and to ensure a systematic approach to the collection of data, a set of key words was formulated. This list includes terms directly related to skin color, such as *light skin* and *dark skin* as well as all its variations (*light-skinned* and *lighter-skinned* vs. *dark-skinned* and *darker-skinned*), but also color adjectives like *fair*, *yellow* (and its colloquial variations *yaller* and *yelluh*), *caramel*, *tan*, *golden*, and *bronze*. Additionally, compounds like *skin bleaching*, *color consciousness* (and *color-conscious*), *color-struck*, *color caste*, *color complex*, *identity complex*, *light vs. dark*, *too black*, *not black enough*, *self-hatred*, *self-esteem*, and *black beauty* were included. The word *colorism* was a search term in its own right, although it soon became clear that it has been scarcely used in articles about the meaning of skin color in Black America. Although the term has gained favor in recent years, the absence of the word in most of the conversation about skin color once again confirms the notion that colorism is more of an academic term and not necessarily one used in the community (see Introduction).

While gathering articles, I generated a table with the most basic information of each text pertaining to date of publication, magazine section, title, author, and page numbers. This was done in preparation for the process of data analysis. If specific discourse strands could be immediately identified, they were listed in a separate column; if not, this task was left for the structural analysis. Obviously, the possibility to access magazine content through databases or Google Books helped to

gather all this information much faster. On the flipside, however, the full-text search often included irrelevant search results which had to be sorted out in a manual selection process. Once this rough assortment was complete, the articles were read again and again while being subjected to different stages of analyses, from structural, to detailed, to synoptic. This was done in order to find information about the meaning of skin color in the Black community and the magazine's discourse positions with regards to that meaning.

3.2.4 Data Analysis: From Structural to Detailed to Synoptic

A structural analysis expands the information gathered about, for example, relevant sub-discourses or topics, collective symbols and slogans, as well as comments on illustrations and layout, if relevant (see Jäger and Maier 2009, 53-54). The data collection process in this project was already accompanied by a structural grouping of articles according to different discourse strands. In other words, similar to a grounded theory approach, certain stages of the analysis were conducted while data was still being collected. This once again supported an inductive approach that was data-oriented rather than theory-driven. One example of this having had an effect on the research design was the addition of the search term *self-hatred*, which happened half-way through the data analysis phase. As became clear by a structural analysis of articles from *Ebony* magazine, this turned out to be a common theme within the discourse of skin color and the discourse strand of identity. Had it not been for the flexible approach to the research design, important articles on the contiguous relationships between self-hatred and skin color might have perhaps been excluded from the corpus of texts subject to further analysis.

As is known, CDA is not about individual texts but about reaching completeness in identifying possible discourse strands and discursive fragments, or what is called "theoretical saturation" (Jäger and Maier 2009, 51). Hence, after completing tables with information pertaining to the structural analysis selected articles for detailed analysis in a process of sampling. By doing so, I hoped to create a "meaningful and manageable corpus of texts" (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 73), which would be able to capture "the qualitative range of what can be said and how it is said in

one or more discourse strands" (Jäger and Maier 2009, 51). These "typical texts" (23) were chosen based on a variety of criteria, covering six major areas: context, surface of the text (layout), rhetorical means, content and ideological statements, "peculiarities" of the article, and the discourse position as part of the article's overall message (see Jäger and Maier 2009, 55). The majority of the texts selected for detailed analysis were feature articles, as they tended to be most topical with regards to the discourse of skin color. This goes in line with Locke's labeling of feature articles as the "'staple' genre" in magazines, dealing with "issues, people and events of interest to a magazine's readers" (2004, 21). As such, they serve a variety of purposes, including information, investigation, description, or arguing for or against a certain position (22). The results of the detailed analysis are reflected in the chapter on the discourse(s) of color in *Ebony* that follows. A final evaluation and assessment of the discourse of skin color, which constitutes what Jäger and Maier call "synoptic analysis" (2009, 56), is then found in the conclusion of this dissertation.

It was the first magazine ever to embrace us. … It was the first to celebrate the rainbow of our beauty – a beauty that, before Ebony*, American popular culture had, at best, ignored, and at worst, denied. ~ Laura B. Randolph (1995)*

I knew how deeply embedded was the culture's obsession with White-defined beauty, whether it was manifested in the icon status of Marilyn Monroe or the light-skinned, "good-haired" Black women smiling from the cover of Jet *or* Ebony*. ~ Marita Golden (2004)*

4 DIFFERENCE, DIVERSITY, AND THE DISCOURSE(S) OF COLOR: LIGHT VS. DARK IN *EBONY* MAGAZINE

The two epigraphs to this chapter could not be more at odds, yet it is this inherent contradiction which speaks to the complex discourses of skin color that have manifested themselves in *Ebony*, from its inception to today. Before *Ebony* there were no mass media outlets that portrayed Black people in a positive light. But despite its founder John H. Johnson's aim to celebrate Black people with all their shades (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 169), since its beginning the magazine has been subject to external factors that made it difficult to resist what Golden calls "the culture's obsession with White-defined beauty" (2004, 7). Such factors are, for example, the continued racialization of people of color in the United States, the commodification of (Black) beauty, and the magazine's very own economic dependencies on the advertising industry that helped it to stay in print. Consequently, *Ebony*, just like any other (Black) consumer magazine, operates in what Cornel West sees as the "ever-expanding market culture that puts everything and everyone up for sale" (2001, xvi).

Taking all this as a prerequisite, Stuart Hall's quote on popular culture – which the mass market magazine *Ebony* has certainly become a part of – offers useful insights as a backdrop to the analysis that is to follow in this chapter:

> [P]opular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of

> our experience. It is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (Hall 1996 [1993], 477; original emphasis)

It is the idea of being imagined and represented based on popular desires and fantasies that should be stressed here. Evidently, what is desired is often colored – no pun intended – by what mainstream society dictates. A magazine like *Ebony* that Michael Leslie once called an "advertising vehicle" (1995, 431) will, therefore, find itself in a difficult position to juggle the dichotomies that arise from an external societal desire for a white beauty ideal and a more internal desire to appraise and celebrate Black beauty. Related to the sense of beauty is the concept of identity,[148] which is also difficult to liberate from hegemonic definitions of what it means to be Black. This is particularly challenging in light of the fact that white mainstream society has a habit of defining the identities of everyone it considers as "Other," which makes self-definition all the more difficult. Embedded in all of this is the discourse of skin color, which constitutes and is constitutive of the notions of beauty and identity. It is this discourse of color – or rather its discourses in the plural – that will be looked at closely in this chapter.

Approaching a series of articles from a critical discourse analysis viewpoint, I argue that *Ebony*'s take on different shades of skin color in general and on colorism in particular can be basically grouped into two different categories. On the one hand there are articles that directly focus on the relevance or irrelevance of skin color in the Black community, subsequently addressing a variety of different issues. Such articles typically are multi-page feature stories that already carry a reference to skin color (in Black America) in their headline. Moreover, these features often result from specific discursive events, which, in most cases, are explicitly mentioned. They may also consist of several (intersecting) discourse strands, usually those of beauty, identity, and status. On the other hand, there are articles, both feature stories and opinion columns, which concentrate specifically on one of these

[148] The discourse of identity is to be understood as what scholars labeled the politics of identity, which is not to suggest that there is one singular, essential identity that can be defined and that is the same for everyone. Also, everyone's identity is both metaphorically and literally colored by racial, ethnic, sexual, national and many other identities. In line with the focus of this dissertation, the identity aspects explored here are predominantly racial, both from an inter-racial and an intra-racial point of view. This does not mean that the multiple intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc., are neglected, as they will be addressed whenever they become relevant to the analysis.

discourse strands, while making only isolated remarks about the overall discourse of skin color. To acquire a sense for the larger discursive context, in my analysis I first look at two such discourse strands individually, which forms the chapter "Disentangling Beauty and Identity: From a Definition by Others to A Definition of Self."[149]

After independently analyzing beauty and identity,[150] the chapter "From Problem to Issue?: 'Featuring' Skin Color in 'Black America'" goes into detail with four specific feature articles that explicitly discuss the discourse of skin color in what *Ebony* likes to call "Black America." These feature articles are particularly interesting as they reveal a cyclical pattern in the significance of skin color in the Black community, at least according to *Ebony*. Lastly, the excursus "When the Reader Writes Back" looks at some letters to the editor, which provide a unique look into a part of the Black community that interacts with its magazine. This offers insights on what can be considered valid knowledge at a specific point in time. As discussed in chapter 4.4, readers' responses often actively contribute to the shaping of the discourse, thereby aiding in the production of new texts and perhaps even transforming the discourse of skin color from the bottom up.

Before delving into the actual analysis, however, *Ebony*'s role in the media landscape of the U.S. will be discussed. Elaborating on the origins and developments of the longest-standing African American consumer monthly is important for an understanding of the magazine's standing in Black America. The chapter headline "Writing against the Odds? Johnson Publications and the Black Press" is an appropriation of John H. Johnson's autobiography "Succeeding against the Odds" (1989). It seems a fitting chapter headline because "writing against the odds" is what *Ebony* started out to do. The question mark, then, should signify the ambivalence towards, for example, the discourse of skin color that has been expressed in the magazine throughout the years.

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[149] Black beauty as a concept is often defined by certain shades of skin color. Other times, Black beauty is related to the sensitive issue of Black hair. The latter group of articles traces, for example, the rise and fall of the "Natural," also known as the Afro, and the concepts of "good hair" vs. "bad hair." To narrow the focus of my research, the complexities of Black hair are not part of the analysis of this dissertation. By itself, Black hair has been subject of numerous studies, but the significance of the discourse of hair in Black magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence* awaits further study.

[150] Although the discourse strand of status was also identified, it seems less prominent on its own, which is why it will only be addressed when appropriate in the context of the other discourse strands at play.

In a world of despair, we wanted to give hope. In a world of negative Black images, we wanted to provide positive Black images. In a world that said Blacks could do few things, we wanted to say they could do everything. ~ John H. Johnson (1989)

4.1 WRITING AGAINST THE ODDS?: JOHNSON PUBLICATIONS AND THE BLACK PRESS

Since its first issue, the monthly general interest magazine *Ebony*, which targets mainly the African American middle class, has been of great influence in the Black community. With its inception in November 1945, *Ebony* ushered in a new era in the Black press.[151] John H. Johnson (1918 – 2005), a former Black insurance agent, launched the magazine after having gained popularity with *Negro Digest* (renamed *Black World* in 1970). Credit for the name *Ebony* is given to Johnson's wife Eunice, who liked the term for its meaning of "fine black African wood" (159). [152] The glossy monthly, which the entrepreneur labeled as a "Black picture magazine" (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 153) soon advanced to become the flagship of the Johnson Publications empire in Chicago and became a frontrunner on the national Black consumer magazine market.[153] Modeled in style and appearance after the successful mainstream (read: white) weekly *Life* magazine, it put an obvious focus on issues that were of concern to a middle class Black audience. Its major goal – according to Johnson himself – was to provide readers with stories of accomplishments by Afri-

[151] The tradition of Black magazines dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. While the first Black magazine, *Mirror of Liberty* (first published in 1838), is little known today, others, such as the NAACP's outlet, *The Crisis* (first published in 1910), are still in circulation. By the end of the nineteenth century more than fifty Black magazines were in print, with the first Black consumer magazine, *Colored American*, having had its inaugural issue published in 1900 (see Wolseley 1971). For a more recent account of Black periodicals in the magazine sector, see Squires (2009).

[152] This was, however, at a time when the word *black* was still often viewed as an insult, and when *Negro* and *colored* were the favored racial labels for African Americans.

[153] Of the many publications that came and went throughout the years only few are still in print today. One well-known example is *Ebony*'s sister magazine *Jet*. The weekly pocket-size news and entertainment outlet was founded in 1951 and is currently undergoing major changes to revitalize what has become an iconic brand ("From the White House to the Publishing House: Desirée Rogers, in Her Own Words" 10 May 2012). Apart from spotlighting countless African American entertainers and celebrities, *Jet* is also known for having first published pictures of Emmett Till's mutilated and disfigured corpse in 1955. As is now believed, the images of the fourteen-year-old from Chicago who had visited relatives in Mississippi and was subsequently kidnapped and murdered there helped draw attention to the violent conditions of racism in the South and ultimately contributed to the rise of the Civil Rights Movement (see, for example, Dierenfield 2008).

can Americans that did not get reported elsewhere and that "would let them get away from 'the problem' for a few moments" (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 157).[154] What Johnson meant by "the problem" was the color line between the races, which is how race issues were regarded. In white mainstream thought, this meant a problem that was "caused" by Black people.[155] While the magazine became more political in later years, often at the forefront of reporting on race issues, its early intentions – as reflected in the inaugural editorial – were primarily to "try to mirror the happier side of Negro life" (qtd. in Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 160).

Overall, *Ebony* is regarded as having shaped the public discourse on African Americans in a positive way; yet, its focus on the Black middle class has often met with criticism, particularly prior to the 1960s. As James C. Hall notes, "[a]t some point … in the process of becoming a national corporation or 'family fortune,' Johnson loses an obvious relationship between community well-being and the growth of that capitalist entity" (2001, 195). Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier takes this criticism a step further and writes about an overall contradiction between increasing race pride, expressed in many articles of the Black press, and the continued heralding of white beauty standards. In *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier implies that *Ebony* also helped to create a "make-believe world of the black bourgeoisie" (1997 [1957], 200). This, as the sociologist asserts, serves the escapist function of disguising Black people's *de facto* inferior status in the United States but is in no way representative of reality.

Today, *Ebony* is still held by the Black-owned Johnson Publishing Company. Chairwoman Linda Johnson Rice, the daughter of the late founder, and the management steadfastly maintain that the magazine is minority-owned although the bank JP Morgan Chase now holds a minority stake in the *Ebony*/*Jet* conglomerate (Watkins 2011). The magazine has come a long way, from the first issue having sold all 25,000 copies printed, to slightly more than two million in the mid-1990s

[154] Rarely did the mainstream (white) press report on African Americans in any other instance than crime or when it came to race issues. As Johnson aptly recalls, the white press did not, for example, write about Black births, marriages, and funerals, let alone about any of their achievements in American society (1989, 157-158).
[155] *Ebony* created an immense uproar when they titled their August 1965 cover, "The WHITE Problem in America."

(Shahid 2010), to a circulation currently of about 1.2 million.[156] Readership, by comparison, is now at about 11 million, compared to some 125,000 per issue in its first few months of publication (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 162). Just like other print publications, *Ebony* has also experienced tumbling circulation numbers and decreasing revenue in recent years. An article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* saw the icon fading because it "misread its digital moment" (Terry 2010, 22). However, a new branding strategy replete with a new CEO (Desirée Rogers, a former White House social secretary) and a new editor in chief (Amy DuBois Barnett) helped to increase circulation once again (Corley 22 September 2011). Additionally, the magazine often tried to dispel the common belief that its readership only consisted of the Black middle class. One example is the "Backstage" section of the issue in June 1980, which presents statistics that attest to *Ebony*'s readers being a "cross section of Black America" (Williams 13 January 2009, 30). This claim is hard to believe, however, particularly in light of Barnett's recent comments on the importance of household income and a financially strong readership: "When I came to Johnson Publishing Co., I was tasked with bringing the average age of the readership down and bringing the average household income of the readership up" (qtd. in Corley 22 September 2011).

Ebony's readers and their purchasing power were of crucial importance to the financial success of the magazine throughout the years. True to his nature as a savvy businessman, founder Johnson was first and foremost interested in a successful new business, as he candidly reveals in his autobiography: "I wasn't trying to make history – I was trying to make money" (156). Much of that money was generated through advertising, the primary revenue source for any magazine even today.[157] *Ebony* started accepting advertisements in May 1946, having waited for six months because Johnson was set on convincing white-owned national companies to buy advertising space in his new Black periodical. Several scholars have commented on Johnson's successful efforts to tap into the advertising market, convincing white

[156] The rate base (guaranteed circulation for advertisers) given in the 2012 media kit is 1,250,000 and the actual readership is listed as 11,400,000 ("*Ebony* 2012 Media Kit" 2012).
[157] Subscription sales and single-copy newsstand sales are the other two sources, but advertising sales have long formed the largest category of creating revenue for all Black (consumer) magazines. This has not always been the case. Francis B. Ward explains that in the "heyday" of the Black press, which he describes as the beginning of the nineteenth century until shortly after the Great Depression, circulation was the majority source of revenue. This, of course, made the Black press largely independent from white advertisers at that time (1973, 35).

companies it was worth advertising products to a Black audience. James C. Hall, for example, claims that Johnson was aware that "the long-term success of his magazine publishing ventures would depend upon the courting of national advertisers" (2001, 191). Maren Stange, in turn, even suggests that "pleasing white advertisers was a primary motivation" for the self-made media mogul (2001, 218). In a related vein, Hall credits Johnson with a "significant insight into the psychology of American capitalism" (2001, 191) because he managed to balance the political interests of his readership with the sensibilities of advertisers in a budding modern consumerist society. This presupposed what Hall called "pragmatic ideological shifting," a strategy that worked in Johnson's favor: "His magazines would simultaneously offer … the articulation of black consumer desire frustrated by Jim Crow *and* the aura of black success" (191; original emphasis). For, when the magazine was first published in 1945 there were no other alternatives to represent African Americans in a positive light. As Oprah Winfrey once said,

> When I was growing up, *Ebony* was the only vehicle in which you could see Black people in a light that reflected who you believed yourself to be. Not who society told you you were or were not. … I remember just eating the pages, really just trying to spoon-feed every one. (Winfrey qtd. in Randolph, 1995, 18L)

Because *Ebony* took over this role and even became political with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, it is easily forgotten that it was founded as, and always remained, a Black consumer magazine. Unlike the NAACP's *The Crisis* or other more politically motivated publications, *Ebony*'s goal was – as Johnson himself said – to attract white companies to the Black consumer market and ultimately to make money both by tapping into the advertising market and increasing circulation.

How carefully orchestrated this path to success was can be seen in Johnson's attempt to portray the magazine in a positive light. Often public figures in Black America were asked to (favorably) comment on the magazine. One example is Langston Hughes's 1965 song of praise "An Evaluation from Birth," in which he lauded the publication, its covers, and its ads (reprinted in the thirty-fifth anniversary issue of November 1980). Another prominent case in point is Maya Angelou, who extolled the magazine in its fiftieth anniversary issue. In her article "Then Ebony Arrived" (November 1995), Angelou remembered life as it had been for Black people, always juxtaposing this with what had changed "because EBONY

arrived in 1945" (43). While celebrating *Ebony*, Angelou also made a critical comment about bleaching creams, something that is rarely found in the magazine:

> Companies created and sold Nadinola face cream so that Black women could lighten their complexion and reflect what was thought of as the beauty of White women. **Then EBONY arrived in 1945…** to tell us that every inch of our skin was black, brown, beige, red, yellow, pink, and beautiful. (Angelou 1995, 43; original emphasis)

Angelou's remark on Nadinola is particularly interesting if one considers that ads for this very product were regularly published in the magazine until the late 1980s.[158] Even more striking, slogans that overtly derided dark skin and celebrated a "clear, bright, Nadinola-light" complexion abounded in the magazine long past 1945. A campaign series in the late 1950s and early 1960s, for example, played with the pervasive belief that Black men would find light(er) skin more attractive in Black women (see appendix for pictures of the ads described below, page 244-246). In one black-and-white ad of the series, a woman receives flowers from her love interest, replete with his note saying "I want these roses to see how lovely you are." The ad then assures the reader that "Wonderful things happen when your complexion is clear, bright, Nadinola-light," while the text of the ad's body encourages its female readers like this: "Don't let a dull, dark complexion deprive you of popularity. … Chase away those bad-complexion blues with Nadinola Bleaching Cream" (November 1959, 24). In another full-page (and full-color) ad, a light-skinned woman looks playfully up in the air while the Black man next to her seems to whisper something in her ear. This image is paired with the slogan "Life is more fun when your complexion is clear, bright, Nadinola-light" (January 1962, 13). And yet a final example suggests more popularity and sexual attractiveness for the Black woman using the bleaching cream: "Look how men flock around the girl with the clear, bright, Nadinola-light complexion" (October 1961, 8).

What merits attention when looking at all these ads is the decidedly white middle-class touch of the 1950s and 1960s, by showing women wearing pearl ear-

[158] Based on the databases and archives to which I had access, it appears as if the last time an advertisement for Nadinola skin bleaching cream was published was in August 1986 when the product was advertised as a "skin fade cream" ("Beauty Begins With Your Skin," Ebony, 1986, 132). While "Nadinola Skin Discoloration Fade Cream" products are still sold in drugstores across the country (see appendix for a picture taken by this writer), in 2012 Nadinola started what looks like a rebranding campaign in *Essence*. It is currently advertising the skin care line "Generations," a product line of moisturizers and facial cleansers. None of these products mention the fading or lightening of one's skin (see the "Nadinola Generations" ad from the August 2012 issue of Essence, 87).

rings and sporting well-maintained, "classic" (white) feminine hairdos. Conspicuous is that all models appear as very light-skinned, both in the black-and-white and in the full color ads, with almost no traces of "African" facial features. Their physical appearance makes them look racially ambiguous and – in a different context – suggests they could have just as well "passed" for white women. This calls to mind what Paul du Gay et al. wrote about representation in advertising in *Doing Cultural Studies*: "[T]he language of advertising, and the ways it works by attaching meanings to identities, suggests that representation is not so much about reflecting the identities we already have as telling us what sorts of identities we can *become* – and how" (1997, 39; original emphasis). In the case of these Nadinola ads, the representation of Black women "constructs" them as having more success and status when they bleach their skin. It is therefore highly questionable why Angelou's comments do not reflect any of this bias that continued to perpetuate the "light is right"-ideology with the very product she criticized. Even if Nadinola later was forced to change its strategy and started to advertise its skin bleaching products by commodifying the slogan "Black is Beautiful" as well as suggesting that women using the product could still love their "natural" complexion (Ultra Nadinola, Ebony April 1971, 182), the cream's household name is attached to skin lightening until this very day (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 51).

Such inconsistencies as the ones surfacing in Maya Angelou's story were not uncommon. In the fiftieth anniversary issue, Laura B. Randolph in her column "Sisterspeak" celebrates *Ebony* for being

> a big part of how we [Black women] received a sense of limitless possibility. … Every little Black girl who opened EBONY's pages saw it's [sic] incontestable, indisputable, incontrovertible message: Black is beautiful – in all its shapes and shades. From Lena Horne to Halle Berry. From Naomi Sims to Naomi Campbell. (Randolph, 1995, 18L)

While the four examples of Black actresses and models range in skin tone from very light to very dark, the claim that the magazine has always been that inclusive of Black women needs to be seen as sugar-coating reality. It was not until the 1960s and the calls for "Black is Beautiful" that darker-skinned women were also celebrated, thereby reflecting the cultural changes of the time. Marita Golden openly criticizes *Ebony*'s practice to feature light-skinned and straight-haired people on its covers. This can be seen in her autobiography when she talks about the "light-

skinned, 'good-haired' Black women smiling from the cover of *Jet* or *Ebony*" (2004, 8). In almost the same breath she admits, however, that it was just a fact of life that many of the African American "Firsts" looked like that. In his autobiography *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson attests to the same observation: "… from reading *Ebony* and *Jet* I was aware that there was a society-conscious Negro upper crust, and I had the vague impression that these people, who mostly lived in places like Washington and Atlanta, were light-skinned" (1999, 118). Because it was one of the magazine's goals to present successful Black people, this over-featuring of light-complexioned African Americans gracing the covers was the almost inevitable outcome. Still, it is one thing to expose the over-featuring of notable African Americans from politics and entertainment, but quite another to actively perpetuate color hierarchies that existed in society.

This was done, on the one hand, by commenting favorably on the beauty of light-skinned people, which was common until the mid-1960s. Two examples from articles in the "hard news" political section demonstrate this quite well: Then Solicitor General Thurgood Marshall, the light-complexioned civil rights lawyer who later became the first African American Supreme Court Justice, was described in a 1965 political feature as a "chubby little boy with pretty eyes and curly hair," which made him "too good looking to be a boy" as a child (Pierce, November 1965, 67). Another example is from the January 1966 issue of *Ebony*, in which the first Black female Ambassador to Luxembourg, Patricia Roberts Harris is described as "pretty," with all the pictures accompanying the feature article showing her as decidedly light-skinned, so much so that she could be seen as able to pass for white (Sanders, January 1966, 23).

On the other hand, perpetuating a "light is right"-mentality happened in *Ebony* by featuring cosmetic products that provided a narrowly-framed definition for how (female) beauty was supposed to look. Such an attempt to gain advertising money, however, is often labeled as "selling out" to (largely white-owned) cosmetic companies. In a scathing critique of the magazine's question "Are Negro Girls Getting Prettier?" (*Ebony*, February 1966), Evelyn Rodgers assailed the magazine for this statement in an opinion piece published in the *Liberator* (March 1966). She charged the magazine with being "a tool of the [white] 'power structure'" (13). In

another line of argument, Rodgers went so far as to speak of psychological enslavement at the hands of the white culture that is perpetuated in *Ebony* by a "white is right" ideology (12). Much of this criticism is based on *Ebony*'s continued practice to perpetuate white standards of beauty, added to by its promotion of skin bleaching creams and hair straightening products. Such criticism is also expressed by poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who maintained in her autobiography that in the 1960s *Ebony* was "considered … a traitor for allowing skin-bleach advertisements in its pages, and for over-featuring light-skinned women" (1972, 84).

Certainly not oblivious to the lily-white beauty standards of the industry, Johnson once made a remark on the physical appearance of models in his autobiography: "There was a tendency at first to use light-skinned models who looked like White Americans. But the sixties brought the full spectrum of Blackness. Unfortunately and sadly, we're moving back to the old days, and the models are getting lighter and lighter" (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 231).[159] While acknowledging some ambivalence on behalf of his own magazine, Johnson sang his own praise with regards to celebrating diversity: "We were among the earliest and most passionate defenders of Black beauty. We were fascinated by the different hues (smoke, cinnamon, chocolate, cream, golden, pecan, coffee) in the Black rainbow" (169).[160] That this was yet another attempt to embellish reality, which was far less diverse, will become particularly clear in the excursion on reader responses (see chapter 4.4). It is more than just a little ironic that both *Ebony* and *Jet*, the names of which stand for very black color, mostly featured light-skinned Black people on their early covers, and that many of their advertisements herald light skin color as the ideal. To this day, skin lightening and hair straightening products are featured in *Ebony*, although to a lesser extent than previously.[161] The dichotomy between economic inter-

[159] Scholars across disciplines have evinced much interest in *Ebony*'s advertisements (see, for example, Keenan, 1996; Rooks, 1996; Walker, 2007), but the actual print coverage has not yet garnered that much attention, particularly not in regards to the meaning of skin color in the Black community.

[160] This statement was later re-printed by Lynn Norment in a 1995 feature titled "50 Years of Fashion and Beauty" published in August 1995 (116).

[161] The language is also considerably different from that in the past. Prior to the 1960s, cosmetic companies overtly referred to dark skin as ugly and undesirable, and products were unambiguously labeled for what they were: bleaching creams and skin lighteners. With the advent of the "Black is Beautiful" era, the language became more subtle and products were advertised as "fade" or "vanishing" creams. Today, the references are even more subtle and advertisements point, for example, to fading out dark spots in order to obtain a "brighter, more radiant and even complexion" ("Palmer's Eventone Fade Cream", Ebony March 2012, 84). Because the word "bright" is used synonymously for

ests on the one hand that label "Black" as undesirable and the magazine's attempt to instill in its readers a positive sense of Blackness on the other hand makes for a complex set of (color) narratives that tries to counter (negative) definitions by white and Black others with (positive) definitions of Black selves, as the next chapters will demonstrate.

the word "light," it becomes apparent that while taking out the dark spots, this ad promises that Black skin will also become lighter by using the product.

It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. … To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn't look like anybody else's idea of beauty" ~ teacher Miss Saunders to dark-skinned Maleeka Madison, in Sharon G. Flake's The Skin I'm In *(1998)*

4.2 Disentangling Beauty and Identity: From A Definition by Others to A Definition of Self

Carol Moseley-Braun, the first and to date only African American female Senator (in office from 1993 to 1999) is attributed with once having said, "[d]efining myself, as opposed to being defined by others, is one of the most difficult challenges I face" (D'Orio 2004, 63). This chapter is concerned with Black people's struggle for self-definition as represented in articles from *Ebony* magazine. At least once every few years (more often at the occurrence of specific discursive events), the issues of Black beauty and identity are broached in multi-page feature stories. Moreover, anniversary issues to celebrate the magazine's history and success often serve as an additional reason to retrospectively examine the development of beauty standards in Black and mainstream America, as well as take an intimate look into the "Black psyche" to find out more about Black people's sense of identity.

Parallel to the analysis of feature articles and opinion columns, selected examples from advertising content will be juxtaposed to what appears to be the ideological orientation of the magazine with regards to skin color. Questions to consider revolve around issues of power, knowledge, and ideology by trying to establish a sense for any hegemonic structures that are reproduced or challenged. If they are reproduced, does this encourage a dominant reading of the text? If the hegemonic structures are questioned and critiqued, is there a call to action, or suggestion for "transformative impulses," as Terry Locke calls it (2004, 43)?

For the most part, the articles in both sections on beauty and identity will be discussed in chronological order. This seems to be conducive to recognizing any recurring patterns in the discourse of skin color as well as to enabling tentative

evaluations on how this complexion discourse that is informed by several discourse strands has developed and/or evolved over time.

4.2.1 Towards a Sense of Black Beauty? From "Skin Deep" to "More than What Meets the Eye"

In her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1999 [1970]) Toni Morrison wrote that romantic love and physical beauty are "[p]robably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (1999, 95). While the former is better discussed in a different context, the destructiveness of beauty can be taken up in this work. As such, it has always played itself out harshly for African Americans who were "captive of the white man's beauty standards," as an article in the December 1967 issue of *Ebony* put it ("New Trend toward Black Beauties", 164). Or, as Lerone Bennett, Jr. maintained in *Ebony* in November 1980: "Black beauty is often forced to *doubt itself* and to disguise itself by the cruel and artificial standards of a society which says always and everywhere that Black is bad and White is good" (159-160; original emphasis). This issue of self-doubt becomes apparent in Black people questioning their identity based on skin color and other physical features, which is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.2.2. For now, the focus will be on standards of beauty, how they are represented in *Ebony*, and if and how the beauty discourse has evolved over time.

For a Black consumer magazine that also sells beauty to its (female) readers, beauty is, naturally, an important concept. Beauty in general and Black beauty in particular are gendered terms and mostly used to relate to women. According to Susannah Walker, beauty is even seen as "the natural prerogative for women" (Walker 2007).[162] This beauty myth is "the mass-marketed idea of female attractiveness as young, thin, fair-skinned with Anglo-features," as *Ebony* editor Laura B. Randolph reminds us (March 1999, 26). This "myth" needs to be achieved, or at least approximated, in a way society commands. Bearing this prerequisite in mind,

[162] One exception to this is the September 1974 issue of *Ebony*, which features a multi-page cover story titled "The Pleasures and Problems of the 'Pretty' Black Man" (132 – 142). *Pretty*, as the author explains, no longer means just according to white standards: "Once the 'pretty' black men were the Adam Clayton Powell types 'blessed' with Caucasian features, light skin, 'good' hair and gray or blue eyes. But 'Black Is Beautiful' changed all that. At the top of any list of gorgeous males today may be those as dark-complexioned as singer Wilson Pickett and as nappy-headed as Sidney Poitier" ("Pretty Black Man", 138).

it seems useful for this analysis to distinguish between outer and inner beauty, in other words, between being perceived as physically beautiful by others, and a sense of feeling beautiful oneself. While the former is something that can be measured by criteria on the basis of "external" beauty, the latter could be seen as coming from within, thus being "internal" and more than what meets the eye. This, in turn, implies two sub-discourses. The first seems to be at least partially framed by a male gaze, with Black women being presented as the "Campus Queens" or the "Ten Most Beautiful Black Women in America" of any given year (see, for example, *Ebony* November 1980; April 1981). While these models, celebrities, and beauty queens mirror an idolized version of reality, articles of the second sub-discourse of "internal" beauty address the deeper meanings of being beautiful. They usually celebrate the "rainbow" of Black beauty as well as the cultural value of Blackness, in other words, anything that is not merely "skin deep."[163]

Within the sub-discourse of physical or "external" beauty, *Ebony* has always featured Black fashion models, winners of (Black) beauty pageants on and off campus, and – as of 1983 – Black women as Miss Americas. What all these women had and still have in common is that they were defined by some external standards as physically beautiful. When the standards were set by mainstream America, the defining criteria seemed to have been light skin and other European features. This became most evident in late 1983 when light-skinned Vanessa Williams captured the title of "Miss America 1984." This made her the first African American woman in the sixty-three-year-history of the pageant to win the contest. If Black beauty was addressed in the realm of the journalistic content of *Ebony*, the focus was mostly on the physical sense of beauty, as well as on material gains one could earn by cashing in on one's beauty as social capital. This is true for Black models, for example, whose salaries were discussed in May 1970 (Rowan, "Have Black Models Really Made It?"), or when the first Black Miss Americas (Vanessa Williams in 1984 and Debbye Turner in 1990) and their financial benefits of winning this title were presented (see *Ebony* December 1983 and December 1989).[164] In this sense, beauty is

[163] For this second concept see, for example, Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s feature "What is Black Beauty?," printed in 1980 and 1984 and discussed later in this sub-section.
[164] It should be noted that the first Black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, had to relinquish her title after nude pictures of her were published in the men's magazine *Penthouse* in 1984. Her first runner-up Suzette Charles, who was also Black, succeeded Williams for the last few weeks of her reign that

often inextricably tied to a capitalist discourse. In addition to articles on beauty queens and the monetary value of their beauty, articles in *Ebony* also relate to capitalist gains of cosmetic companies that tapped into the Black consumer market (see "Fashion Fair Cosmetics", November 1992; Welteroth, "The Business of Black Beauty" September 2009).

In its early years *Ebony* was known for having openly adhered to traditional (white) notions of American beauty by favoring light-skinned models on its covers and elsewhere. Additionally, it printed decidedly anti-Black advertisements for skin bleaching products that promised a better life to consumers who could get rid of, for example, "dull, dark, drab skin" ("Black and White Bleaching Cream", August 1961, 94). Confirming this practice, *Washington Post* correspondent Eugene Robinson remembers that "[t]he black-oriented magazines that came to our house, *Ebony* and *Jet*, were full of ads for 'miracle' creams that would lighten your skin" (1999, 112). He further asserts that the overall concept of Black beauty in these magazines related being beautiful to looking white (114). The cultural shift in both journalistic and advertising content only came in the 1960s. Since then, however, *Ebony* has been firm in denying that it ever practiced a skin color hierarchy. Laura B. Randolph, one of the magazine's columnists, even claimed that the magazine "was the first to celebrate the rainbow of our beauty" ("The Write Stuff" November 1995, 18L). This, however, was not expressed in the magazine until the late 1960s. It was, at best, a one-sided and "lightened" view of beauty that was accepted in the first twenty years of the magazine's lifetime (see Brown 2010).[165]

Only gradually did the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements change the public discourse on what was considered beautiful. Consequently, the messages *Ebony* delivered over the time period studied (1970 – 2011) routinely emphasized the necessity for a positive self-defined somatic image and the idea of Black beauty being like a rainbow. This "rainbow-beauty of Blackness" ("50 Years of Black Beauty Queens", November 1995, 208) can, on the one hand, be seen as a way to affirm people's positive concept of self, which has – for too long – been defined by

year. In 1989 Debbye Turner "officially" became the second African American to win the nation-wide beauty pageant and carried the title in 1990 ("Miss America").

[165] Since that time, the magazine has kept an ambiguous relationship to Black beauty, as is expressed in the continued practice to print advertisements for skin lightening creams, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

white mainstream America. On the other hand, it is a strategy to proclaim race unity, which seems to be a central discourse in the magazine.[166] This unity is important in light of the fact that Black people literally run the gamut from very dark to very light, with some even able to "pass for white." In Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s appraisal of Black beauty, "What is Black Beauty?," first published in *Ebony* in November 1980, he draws attention to the "metaphor that covers a rainbow of colors": "Sometimes it's black, sometimes it's cream, sometimes it's brown – and yet, somehow it is always and everywhere definably Black" (161). The concept of Black beauty being like a rainbow is reiterated in *Ebony* many times throughout the years. This often went to the extent of claiming "that beauty comes in all colors," which appears to be an attempt to persuade readers to truly believe this ("Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?" December 1984, 70). One could say that just like the universal slogan "Black is Beautiful," the rainbow metaphor has also achieved iconic status and become an intra-racial collective symbol of race pride and unity.

Looking at specific articles in each decade allows important insights into the discursive context and the discursive events that shaped the representation of Black beauty in relation to skin color. The 1970s, for example, were a decade in which "Black is Beautiful" aesthetics were still unapologetically celebrated. The outlook into the future, as expressed in the journalistic content of *Ebony*'s magazine articles on Black beauty, was positive, although progress was noted as happening only at a snail's pace. The feature article, "Have Black Models Really Made It?" (Rowan May 1970), is a fitting example for the slow path to equality when it comes to beauty standards. In one paragraph the anonymous author mentions the fact that "blackness became a commodity" on Madison Avenue, but only at the threat of the advertising industry losing money if it failed to recognize Black purchasing power (160). The article also demonstrates that even though *Black* became a "fad" in America in the late 1960s, Black models in the 1970s were still faring worse financially than their white counterparts (153). The six-page feature article focuses mainly on the inroads Black models were making into what used to be a business celebrating ivory-white beauty. Along these lines, the relevance of different shades of Black skin is also briefly addressed. One model is described as having had difficulties in getting a

[166] Obviously, generalizations should be avoided, and all comments made here only refer to the articles that were selected for analysis in this study.

job in the past because she was once considered "too dark." Now, however, she is in high demand because those who are "very black and very kinky-headed" became *en-vogue* with the advent of "Black is Beautiful." By the same token, another model is quoted to have experienced problems (in the 1980s) due to her light skin color because she was no longer considered "Negro enough" (158). This, of course, was a by-product of changing social norms in the Black community. With that, mainstream America as well as some Black people started putting down African Americans of lighter hues. Essentially, some were no longer considered "Black enough" to represent the "Black race." As the anonymous author concludes, "[s]uch ironies are a rather bitter truth for black models who range in skin color from *café au lait* to very black" (158).[167]

In light of the analytical conclusion on the part of this anonymous *Ebony* writer it is quite incongruous that on the page before the article as well as on its last page readers find ads for bleaching creams. The full-page color ad for "Ultra Bleach and Glow Skin Tone Cream" (May 1970, 151) shows the face of a racially ambiguous woman with an immaculate clear and light complexion. A few pages later, a quarter-page ad for Dr. Fred Palmer's "Ultra Bleach & Tone Cream" also features a light-skinned woman with the ad's slogan promising the user "brighter, clearer skin" (160). Such dichotomies are common and demonstrate that advertising content continues to reproduce some of the dominant structures that seem to have already been overcome in the editorial content sections of the magazine.

While the feature story on Black models in the 1970s specifically dealt with the perception of models, some articles in *Ebony* at that time also focused on the "everyday" concept of "Black beauty." One example is Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s "What is Black Beauty?," first published in November 1980, and reprinted in June 1984 in the wake of the controversy over Vanessa Williams becoming the first Black Miss America. Bennett starts out with an epigraph by W.E.B. Du Bois in which the scholar praises the beauty of Black women (159). This intertextual reference to one of the most prominent African American intellectuals of the twentieth century is extended

[167] Over the years, *Ebony* has repeatedly returned to the topic of Black models. As Constance C. R. White aptly professes in her feature on Black models in September 2008, "[m]odels are an ideal. They are standard-bearers of what a society considers beautiful, attractive or acceptable" (100). Taking this argument a step further, models and beauty queens can be seen as the litmus test for Black beauty and racial progress in America.

later in the text when Bennett cites a lengthy fictional dialogue about Black beauty from Du Bois's essay "Dusk of Dawn" (160-161). Together with the closing quote of the article by the ancient Queen of Sheba – "I am black **and** comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem …" (161, original emphasis) – it seems as if Bennett wanted to "evoke" Black ancestors from the past, to show *Ebony*'s readers that Black female beauty has always been celebrated all over the world. This impression is intensified, on the one hand, by the image on the first page of the article, which is a reprint of the artist Charles White's charcoal drawing, "Negro Woman." This black-and-white drawing of almost a dozen Black women, many with decidedly African facial features and textured hair, was originally used to illustrate the cover of an *Ebony* special issue on "The Negro Woman" in August 1966. On the other hand, Bennett starts his feature story with a personal account of meeting a Nigerian soldier at an arts festival in Lagos, Nigeria. As Bennett writes, the soldier was exhilarated at the sight of African American women whom he considered to be "the most beautiful women in the world" (159). The Nigerian's account is used in contrast to the view of "many White Americans, and unfortunately, some Black Americans who find it difficult to give Black beauty its due" (159). This, effectively, gets Bennett into the topic of his article, which demonstrates progress but also some remaining ambivalence towards the meanings of *Black* beauty.

Bennett continues by juxtaposing results from a nation-wide survey by Kenneth and Mamie Clark ("What Do Blacks Think of Themselves?")[168] with a readers' poll that invited *Ebony* readers to nominate everyday Black women for the title "Most Beautiful" ("Ten Most Beautiful Black Women"). The women selected in the poll "represent all shades," according to the lead text (163). Taking this as his main argument for progress, Bennett, in his own article, comes to six conclusions that read like a paean to Black beauty. One of his core messages is that "Black beauty cannot, should not, and must not be appraised by alien standards" (160). Furthermore, he promotes a strong sense of inclusiveness, employs the rainbow-metaphor, and evidently embraces the necessity to celebrate all shades of skin color: "There are many mansions in the house of Black beauty, and they are all lovely, and Black"

[168] Kenneth and Mamie Clark were two well-known psychologists whose doll tests had become iconic in the context of the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. The 1980 survey was commissioned for *Ebony* by John H. Johnson.

(161).[169] By heralding all these "mansions," race unity is clearly emphasized. This seems to be an overt attempt to counter post-1960s views that some shades of "Black" were better than others. Concurrently, pre-1960s standards of "light is right" are suggested to be equally *passé*. Bennett's prime example is Lena Horne, who was long regarded as the epitome of Black female beauty. She is now seen – according to the writer – as "one segment of the Black continuum" (161), not more and not less. Bennett also stresses that Black beauty needs to be defined by both external as well as internal factors and heralds the magazine's readers for whom Black beauty is "not a purely ornamental concept" (161). He concludes with the remark that this inclusiveness, which is in the "soul of the Black beholder," would also be the "standpoint of *Ebony*," praising the magazine for seeing that "every Black woman is beautiful in her own way" (161).

When read in relation to other articles in this *Ebony* anniversary issue of November 1980, it becomes clear that Bennett's piece tries to downplay the findings from the national survey conducted by the Clarks, which is quoted by means of an intertextual reference. Bennett stresses that *Ebony* readers apparently do not feel as ambivalent about traditional Black features as the Clark study itself indicates.[170] As the *Ebony* editor claims, "most of the photographs submitted were … of women with traditional Black features" (160). What appears to be a progressive development is, however, somewhat contradicted by the statement that follows a few paragraphs later. There, Bennett writes that although light-skinned women made up a minority in the photographs submitted, dark-skinned women were equally in the minority and "most of the nominees were brown-skinned" (160). What this suggests is that despite an obvious rejection of a light-skinned ideal of beauty, *Ebony* readers still are not quite as ready to accept dark-skinned women as "most beautiful," and rather choose medium shades between light and dark.[171]

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[169] This alludes to the Biblical passage "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2 King James Version). Bennett seems to suggest that not only are the different shades "lovely," but they are also God-made and therefore good.

[170] The study's results are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.2.2.

[171] This particular issue only has one full-page ad for what at that time is labeled a "skin tone cream." Artra Skin Tone Cream promises "a special glow" and helps to "fade away" dark spots and "even out skin tone … So you're one beautiful color. All over" (124). While more subtle in language than previous ads, the message is still the same: Black women need a "skin tone cream" to fade away darkness. The fact that the words "All over" are emphasized also implies that the product can be used all over one's body, which – obviously – would have a lightening effect on somebody's entire skin.

Despite the fact that *Ebony* readers of the early 1980s might have been accepting of a greater range of skin color in what they considered beautiful than before the call for "Black is Beautiful," white America did not necessarily agree. This becomes transparent in the controversy around the election of Vanessa Williams as the first Black Miss America. In the cover story of December 1983 that celebrated this milestone in Black history, Lynn Norment cites the psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint who maintains that, "[u]ntil you get a Miss America with Negro features, I don't think you can say color was irrelevant to her selection" (133). Vanessa Williams's crowning as Miss America became an important discursive event in the discourse of skin color in *Ebony* that year. An extended discussion among *Ebony* readers (see examples in chapter 4.4) and the general public provoked extensive further coverage. This started with a reprint of Bennett, Jr.'s 1980 feature story "What is Black Beauty?" in *Ebony*'s June 1984 issue. In this case, the "raging dispute" (48) over Black beauty standards, as it was called in the reprinted version of the article, had a lasting effect on the discourse of skin color, as the many follow-up articles on Black beauty and the significance of different shades of skin color show. As the June 1984 reprint of Bennett's article explained, the fact that it seemed Williams's election was based on externally defined white beauty standards led to an intra-racial dispute with some African Americans saying that the only reason Williams won was because of her near-Caucasian looks. Ironically, it was in the very same issue of *Ebony*, that this view is – although perhaps inadvertently – confirmed. An ad for a "fade cream," which features a light-skinned woman and promises that "[n]othing else … does the job of *fading* the way Palmer's Skin Success Cream does," supports the notion that beauty is, indeed, still defined by external non-Black standards (22; my emphasis).

In the 1990s, based on the articles in *Ebony*, standards of Black beauty were expanding to also include women of color in mainstream America. Lynn Norment's article "Black Beauty is In" (September 1990) emphasizes that it is not just one type, but "various shades of brown-black skin" complete with full lips and sometimes short-cropped hair that could make it in the model and fashion industry (25). Even so, the same magazine issue once again contains advertisements for bleaching creams. Among these is an ad for Vantex Skin Bleaching cream (94) distributed by Fashion Fair Cosmetics. This is a division of Johnson Publications that was founded

in 1973 by John H. Johnson's wife Eunice W. Johnson ("Fashion Fair Cosmetics," November 1992, 71). The fact that the Johnson Publishing Company is a stakeholder in a company which sells beauty products to Black women – including skin lightening products – makes for an interesting conflict of interest. Until today, Fashion Fair Cosmetics promotes and sells this specific skin bleaching cream, which was once described as one of Fashion Fair's "most popular products" ("Fashion Fair Cosmetics" 74). It was advertised in full-page color ads in *Ebony* until the mid-2000s.[172] Even more striking is that after that time, it remained a part of the editorial content in *Ebony*'s beauty sections. In October 2008, among other products, it was listed in the magazine's beauty section to help improve one's complexion ("On the Spot", 65), and in September 2009 it was ranked as the number one product in a list of "Black Beauty Bests" (Welteroth 112). It remains an inherent contradiction that throughout the years of promoting Black beauty in all its shades *Ebony* continued the advertising of a bleaching cream that would promote the exact opposite, something that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Black beauty continued to be covered in *Ebony* in the 2000s, both on an "external" or physical level as well as on an "internal" or spiritual and cultural level. The former category mainly includes covering Black models and the beauty industry. The article "The Business of Black Beauty" (September 2009), for instance, discusses the variety of products that are now available: "Black women are overwhelmed by marketers competing for our dollars. Whether dark-chocolate or tawny-hued, relaxed, natural or weaved, today, Sisters have options in the beauty aisle" (Welteroth 2009, 110). It is this availability of options that is presented as a sign of racial progress, yet the aforementioned contradictions with regard to skin bleaching creams remain.

A good example for beauty from "within" is the September 2007 column "Two Sides", in which two young Black women relate their personal understandings of Black beauty (Davis and Van Heidrich, "Is Black Still Beautiful?"). One of them is Kiri Davis, who directed the award-winning short documentary *A Girl Like Me* (2007). Her key argument in the opinion piece is that beauty is cultural and defined by Black people's "distinctive and unique roots" (233). Thus, Black beauty mainly

[172] It seems as if the last time a full-page ad for Vantex ran in *Ebony* was in December 2006 (131)

comes from accepting oneself from within and from refusing to take someone else's standards for one's own.

This is not always that easy, however, as mainstream American society still continues to define the standards of beauty. While there is clearly more diversity than in the past, some standards have not changed in four decades. An example of this is the story of a Black model from the popular television show *America's Next Top Model* in the feature article "Black Out: What Has Happened to the Black Models?" (September 2008). As *Ebony* editor Constance C. R. White records, a hairstylist favorably commented on a hair-straightening job of a Black model on the show by saying to her, "[n]ow you look beautiful because you really had nappy hair" (100). Such comments, even in light of the recent "Afro-Renaissance", which involves more Black women in the public sphere going "natural," speak to the fact that Black women's looks are still often measured against a white-defined gold standard. It is thus not surprising that until this day, ads for chemical hair relaxers and skin bleaching creams – although less frequent than in the past – are still promoted through the advertising pages of *Ebony*.

In spite of the magazine's attempt in the editorial sections to endorse a unique standard of Black beauty that is based on self-definition, throughout the time period studied there is almost no critical discussion of skin lightening creams. This is conspicuous in light of the fact that excessive skin bleaching has harmful side effects, and products sold in neighborhood stores and on the Internet often contain toxic ingredients such as mercury, steroids, and the lightening agent hydroquinone (Downie, Cook-Bolden, and Nevins Taylor 2004; Hunter 2005).[173] Only twice in the articles studied over the forty-year-period was there a vague criticism of

[173] Until the mid-1960s, skin bleaching creams were advertised as containing ammoniated mercury, which was – at that time – seen as the most "dependable bleaching ingredient," as an ad for "Palmer's Skin Success Bleach Cream" promised in *Ebony* (May 1963, 100). Hydroquinone is still advertised as an ingredient in "fade creams" like Ambi and Vantex, and this despite the fact that Ronald Hall describes the chemical as possibly carcinogenic according to some scientists. It is so strong that it is regularly used as a developing agent in photography (Hall 2009, 160). Hydroquinone is banned in the European Union, Japan, and Australia but approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States. Discussions to ban it have been ongoing (Conrad Stoppler and Marks 15 September 2006). Every few months, or so it seems, the FDA issues a warning against mercury and other toxic ingredients found in cosmetics. In March 2012, another such statement warned that women in at least seven states were found to have poisoned themselves by using toxic lightening creams, soaps, and lotions (Alexander 6 March 2012).

bleaching creams.[174] In one part of what appears as a five-page dialogue between Alvin F. Poussaint, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Harvard University Medical School, and civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson, the psychiatrist states: "When the new surge of blackness emerged many felt a black magazine should not be encouraging, even through advertising, other blacks to become 'white' by using bleaching creams" ("A Rap on Self-Hatred" December 1972, 122). While being vague in not naming any specific magazines, the criticism is evidently targeted at practices of the Black press that do just that: promote light standards of beauty and encourage their readers – both through editorial and advertising content – to buy into the "white is right" mentality that is propagandized by white America.

Upon close reading of the text, one discovers that the dialogue between the two prominent Black men was not created for *Ebony* but is actually a reprint from Poussaint's book, *Why Blacks Kill Blacks* (1972). Knowing the discursive event for this article is the book publication of one of *Ebony*'s major voices of authority when it comes to the Black psyche, it becomes more comprehensible why the editors would allow what appears to be only a thinly veiled criticism of the magazine. By itself, this seems daring as it could have aggravated advertising companies promoting precisely these products. The second case of indirectly criticizing the practice of skin bleaching occurred in a September 2000 column about women, age, and beauty: Laura Randolph Lancaster briefly mentions bleaching creams being banned in South Africa for health reasons ("The Beauty Myth" 26), but never is there any mention of this issue in the U.S. context.

There are likely several reasons for largely neglecting the discourse strand of health as a physiological aspect of the complexion discourse. For one, it can be assumed that *Ebony*'s parent publishing house Johnson Publications's interest in increasing the profits of one of its own businesses is a contributing factor. It follows, then, that the magazine's dependency on advertising revenue from other cosmetic companies might prevent an honest discussion of, for example, health risks associated with bleaching. Said advertising companies might see such criticism as a direct

[174] This is not counting Maya Angelou's remark in November 1995 because she insisted on the fact that the arrival of *Ebony* changed everything and the bleaching cream Nadinola was no longer relevant (see chapter 4.1).

attack on their client's products, and consider suspending their advertising in the magazine. Another, yet unrelated, reason could be that skin bleaching became even more of a taboo issue with the call for "Black is Beautiful", for it entirely contradicts what was suddenly seen as a progressive Black aesthetic based on loving one's natural Black self. It seems plausible that *Ebony* wanted to be careful not to offend its readers by criticizing what for some was an entirely personal and for others a deeply politically-charged issue. For these reasons, criticism of skin bleaching is simply in the realm of the "not sayable" in the discourse of skin color. The concepts of the "sayable" and the "not sayable" are important here because they show the "blind spots" of certain discourses, in other words the things that are not addressed. Moreover, they reveal the power structures at play. In this case, they show the gate-keeping function[175] *Ebony*'s editorial board might have exercised in order to not aggravate white corporate advertisers and consequently harm its own business, or broach issues that are considered too sensitive and socially undesirable among its readership.

If there is any criticism of beauty standards at all, the "media" are blamed for their subtle but insidious messages that "creep into our consciousness" (Lancaster, 26) and that "praise Anglo-Saxon features and insinuated that 'blondes have more fun'" (Clark and Clark, "What Do Blacks Think of Themselves" November 1980). In the December 1984 article "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?" *Ebony*'s "household" psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint calls for questioning "*who* is controlling the beauty standards" (70, original emphasis). He is also quoted drawing attention to the fact that fighting external standards in a racist society is crucial for not continuing to make distinctions between light and dark. Without defining the term *media*, it is implied that the major culprits are mainstream (read: white) media outlets. For the most part, there is neither mentioning of the accountability of Black-owned media nor of the advertising industry's very own culpability. Whereas the latter cashes in on Black people's desires to reap the benefits that

[175] The word gate-keeping was coined by German-American psychologist and early scholar of group dynamics Kurt Lewin to describe the different channels for how food reaches a family dinner table and relating this concept to the flow of news (Stacks and Salwen 2009, 75-77; Watson 2008, 108). The term is now a buzzword in media studies and has been theorized by communication scholars (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Basically gate-keeping refers to "the process through which certain information passes a series of checkpoints ('gates') before being finally accepted as news material" (Fourie 2001, 76).

come with light skin and straight hair in the United States to this day, the former is only too willing to print these advertisements to secure advertising revenue.

Even some media outlets from the parallel press (Black-oriented and/or Black-owned media) continue to openly perpetuate a color hierarchy in favor of light(ened) skin and straight(ened) hair, which often comes with a sexist view of Black women. This, however, is hardly ever critically addressed, not even when the media sectors are unrelated to each other. Rarely, for example, is colorism in hip hop videos and rap lyrics scrutinized in the Black press, although this music's influence on Black people's perception of themselves is considerable (see Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang 2009; Ford 2011). From the articles studied in *Ebony*, it appears that colorism in hip hop and rap was only taken up three times, and then ever so briefly: In September 1985, Patrice Gaines-Carter's open letter to her daughter, "Is My 'Post-Integration' Daughter Black Enough?," was reprinted from the *Washington Post*. Part of the journalist's criticism involved "women who look like they're White" in music videos that her daughter was watching: "[W]e fought harder to get all shades of Black people shown: dark chocolate, saffron, cinnamon, blue-black and ginger. I don't see these colors in your videos – certainly not the ones meant to be physically attractive" (56).

A few years later, the 1992 feature article "Why Skin Color Suddenly Is a Big Issue Again" criticizes Black music videos for favoring "fair-skinned and/or ethnically nebulous actresses/dancers with long, flowing hair or hair weaves," while African Americans of darker hues (mostly female, but some male) "are often relegated to lesser roles in the background if they appear at all" (121). A similar comment is made in the April 2000 issue in which Alvin F. Poussaint claims that "[t]he women on the videos and the foxy ladies on the sitcoms tend to be lighter-skinned" (Bennett Kinnon, 56). This observation also implies a critique of the sexualization of light-skinned Black women who are usually depicted as the Black men's love interests and are merely conceived of as objects of desire dancing in scantily clad outfits to please both the artists and a presumably voyeuristic male audience. All this, of course, has an influence on how Black people see themselves and how they conceive of their identity, a subject that will be treated in the next chapter.

4.2.2 Policing Identity: Will the "Real" Black People Please Stand Up?

In the United States, the established social order has long provided African Americans with a set of pre-defined identities. Most of these were rather negative as they were based on concepts of the white "civilized" subject and the Black "Other." The social movements of the 1960s, for the first time in U.S. history, allowed for the celebration of a pro-Black-oriented identity and "a rearticulation of a black collective subjectivity" (Omi and Winant 1994, 98). When looking at articles from the discourse strand of identity within the larger discourse of skin color, *Ebony* broaches the subject in two different ways: One, essays and articles are written from the perspective of individual Black people who relate their life story and talk in detail about their personal problems of being either (too) light- or (too) dark-skinned. Two, articles embrace a more collective voice on either end of the color spectrum and, for example, address Black people's trials and tribulations with their variant shades of skin color in general. Whereas the former category mostly relies on first-person accounts (often written by external contributors), the latter is typically written from the more distant third-person point of view of an *Ebony* editor (either named in a byline or remaining anonymous). This editor brings together opinions and experiences of different people and often includes voices of authority, such as experts from the realms of psychology or sociology. Study results and book publications are also frequently included as intertextual references and to establish authority.

This second set of articles claims to speak to and for what *Ebony* likes to call "Black America." The magazine's editors use this compound noun to allegedly include the entire Black community, when, in fact, it is mostly their target readership of the Black middle class that is meant here. Hardly ever is there a discussion on classism, which does influence people's outlook on life, including on issues of skin color.[176] In any case, both sets of articles (collective and individual) focus on somewhat related sub-discourses. These range from concepts of self-hatred versus self-love, to "policing" strategies of who is considered "not Black enough" or "too Black,"

[176] As Trina Jones writes, "classism [is] intensifying the effects of colorism" (2000, 271). The influence also works in reverse, as "a person's relative lightness or darkness determines whether she can access the benefits associated with a particular class" (ibid.). This claim is supported by a study conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in 1980, which was published in *Ebony* that year. Their findings indicated that African Americans with a college degree and/or higher income seemed less affected by "racial self-rejection" than African Americans of a lower socio-economic status characterized by less education and lower income (Clark and Clark November 1980, 178).

to a feeling of "in-betweenness," and finally to a sub-discourse of denying one's white heritage, all of which will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

The concept of self-hatred, which comes with a pronounced inferiority complex, is regularly employed when talking about intra-racial divisions based on different shades of skin color (see examples throughout this chapter). As such, it is seen as an outcome of internalized racism. This is, however, a problematic term used in this context. It suggests a form of pathological behavior on behalf of Black people and, if not carefully explained, implies that something is (psychologically) "wrong" with the people who internalize racist views of themselves. It is a fact that in a racist society the dominant "race" frequently has the power to make "Others" consciously or subconsciously agree to their own oppressed role in society. Nevertheless, speaking of self-hatred takes away the responsibility of the oppressor and downplays the significance of institutional and systemic racism that colors everyone's socialization in the United States.[177]

Trying to put into perspective the dominant but pathologizing view of Black people hating themselves, in the December 1972 article "A Rap on Self-Hatred" Alvin F. Poussaint and Jesse Jackson talk about the concept of self-love in the Black community that should be emphasized instead of downplayed.[178] As a counter-narrative to the hegemonic symbolism of Black being evil and bad, Jackson even uses the slogan "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice."[179] Stressing that the major source of self-hatred and a low sense of self-esteem among Black people is based on the powers of racism, Poussaint argues that self-hatred is partly socially conditioned as Black people are taught to believe "that all things black are inferior" (120). Jackson overall concludes that instead of focusing on self-hatred, which comes with negative connotations already, the goal needs to be to fight racism:

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[177] In his article "Culture Critique and Colorstruction", linguist and anthropologist Arthur K. Spears suggests to use the term "cultural domination" as a substitute for "internalized oppression." Cultural domination, as Spears argues, "is a systematically structured group phenomenon" (1992, 25). This seems to be a good way to express the dominance exercised by the oppressor and takes away the sense of colorism to be a pathology coming from within. In the public (non-academic) discourse, however, internalized racism appears to be the preferred term, despite the afore-mentioned problems.

[178] As explained in the previous section on beauty, this article is actually an excerpt from Poussaint's book *Why Blacks Kill Themselves* (1972).

[179] The idea of Black being evil is – according to Poussaint's response – often perpetuated by the Church, which "had a way of making black people feel like Satan when they looked into the mirror" (120).

"Much of our self-esteem will be restored by fighting racism and being on the winning team" (125). The emphasis on *fighting* or *battling* a particular enemy alludes to the conceptual metaphor of RACISM IS WAR. While Jackson's metaphorical call to arms is essentially a non-violent one and implies using a different set of weapons than in a "real" battle, it is still essential for Black people's "survival" to win this fight.

From this *inter*-racial battle with the larger racist society, the discourse often moves to a more internal, or *intra*-racial battle in "Black America." An example from the early years of this study (written from a "collective" point of view) is the multi-page feature "The Problems of Light-Skinned Blacks" (February 1975). This time, Poussaint, who can be regarded as *the* authority voice on the Black psyche and Black identity in *Ebony*, does not just serve as an expert to be interviewed but is the author of the article.[180] The feature opens with an excerpt from Audre Lorde's poem "Between Ourselves" as an epigraphic intertextual reference. In a simplified way the poem alludes to the fact that one should never judge a book by its cover – and Black people should not consider someone as the "enemy" based on the fact that this person looks white: "Do not mistake my flesh for the enemy … we each wear many changes inside our skin" (qtd. in Poussaint 1975, 85). This, of course, needs to be read as a plea for racial unity and self-love, two concepts that are often stressed in the magazine, particularly in Poussaint's articles.

Without any guidance for the reader on how to interpret the poetic introduction Poussaint proceeds by giving examples for the "blessings" of light-skin privilege. At the same time, the author is quick in relativizing these by saying "all has not been emotional bliss for 'like-white' blacks – not even for those of several decades ago before 'Black is Beautiful' was realized" (85). He then downplays the increased social status that comes with lighter skin color and argues that fair-complexioned African Americans suffer "special forms of social and psychological conflict" (85). While the very real relationship between social status and light skin has been extensively studied (see chapter 2.2), thus calling Poussaint's argument into question, he is certainly right in claiming that colorism affects people on both sides of the color

[180] Apart from his own authoritative voice on the subject of the Black psyche, Poussaint also lists several other psychological studies as intertextual references that are supposed to add credibility to his account.

continuum. By giving anonymous anecdotal evidence of a number of individuals (possibly current or former patients), he then personalizes the issue and breaks it down to the level of Black-on-Black inflicted psychological pain. While the cases he lists are extreme in nature, as they manifested themselves in nervous breakdowns, paranoia, and depression, they help him to make one thing perfectly clear: Not being accepted by one's own people results in grave emotional conflicts about identity and belonging. Identity denial and confusion are common, as expressed in the examples of some light-skinned patients – both male and female – who wish to be accepted by their darker family and peers. In order to gain this acceptance they try tanning to get darker, or even try to "act Black" (87). Other times the attempt is made to "out-black" everyone else by, for example, an exaggerated use of Black vernacular when speaking (88).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Poussaint lists those who are denying their traces of Blackness when the desired identity is a white one. He gives the example of late Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who allegedly had issues with being Black. The former politician is not the only one whose "problems" with light skin are candidly discussed. The six-page feature opens with a black-and-white portrait of smiling actresses Janice Kingslow and Hilda Simms, both referred to as light-skinned and keen-featured in the accompanying caption. The same caption also describes the second, smaller picture on the page. This is of a much different looking Janice Kingslow, who is photographed sitting on a hospital bed. Lost in thought she seems to be staring into space, or out a window which remains outside the picture frame. Readers are told that "[t]he strain [of being light-skinned] was so great for Miss Kingslow that she suffered emotional problems which sent her to hospitals on several occasions" (85). A bit later, Hilda Simms, her actress colleague Ellen Holly, and model Beverly Johnson are also quoted in relation to "reverse discrimination" (88). This relates to the fact that after the 1960s, as Poussaint writes, light-skinned actresses and fashion models were often no longer considered dark enough and were struggling to find jobs, a problem that had previously affected only those of darker skin tones.

When it comes to his outlook on the future, the psychiatrist speculates that "skin color preference will probably continue to change with the political tides" (90). For African Americans it is thus even more important to "realize that the in-

teraction of blacks on the basis of skin color merely mimics the racism of whites" (90-91). Similar to the metaphor RACISM IS WAR, which was introduced earlier in this chapter, one could say that the metaphor COLORISM IS WAR is evoked when Poussaint writes about the "destructive, self-defeating color conflicts" that need to be overcome. He also evokes the metaphor of COLORISM AS DISEASE by calling it "personally crippling" to light-skinned Black Americans (91).[181] His advice to the "community" consists of dispelling a series of "myths" about skin color, which can be seen as a call to action, thereby giving *Ebony*'s readers what Terry Locke refers to as a "transformative impulse" to change the current discourse (2004, 43).

Change, however, as the saying goes, often does not happen over night. In November 1980, the Clarks published the article "What Do Blacks Think of Themselves." It was based on a study commissioned by *Ebony*'s founder John H. Johnson for the magazine's thirty-fifth anniversary issue and advertised on the magazine's cover as an "explosive and disturbing new study." Essentially, it is a follow-up study of the famous "doll tests" the Clarks performed in the late 1940s.[182] While the new study's results document some progress, the researchers conclude that Black people's self-image in the United States in the 1980s is still "ambivalent," which is a word used three times in the article. This is largely blamed on the racist American society that burdens Black people with racial self-doubt that leads to conflict:

> American Blacks are still involved in a turbulent struggle for self-esteem, self-respect and racial self-acceptance even as they are burdened wit the negative stereotypes, self-rejection and deep feelings of inferiority which the pervasive racism of the larger society imposes upon them and their children. (178)

The Clarks also report on "continued internal conflicts about color" (176-177). These are made visible in the answers given by a national sample of 1,200 Black people who were – among other things – asked whether they thought of African Americans with "traditional Black features" as more or less attractive than African Americans "who look more like Whites" (178). The outcome indicates that "Black is Beautiful" failed to have a lasting impact on the discourse of and the value

[181] Obviously, one could see colorism as a "disease" for the entire Black community, as Elena Featherston does in the preface to her anthology, *Skin Deep* (1994, 2).
[182] As is well-known, the tests' results were used in the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Clarks gave evidence for the sense of inferiority in Black children that resulted from racism in the in the larger U.S. society, specifically the "separate but equal" doctrine in schools. Starting with a summary of this study as an intertextual reference the two psychologists set the stage to explain what they call a "follow-up survey of the contemporary self-image of Blacks," this time with adults (176).

attached to skin color: 41 percent of the Black people polled either felt ambivalent about or downright rejected traditional Black features (178). Additionally, when study respondents were asked to give their opinion on Black people's preference in mate selection based on race and shades of skin, the Clarks found that 30 percent of their study participants thought Black men preferred light-skinned Black women (178). Only 9 percent thought they preferred dark-skinned Black women (13 percent were not sure). When asked the same question about Black women, 15 percent of the study respondents believed a preference existed for light-skinned Black men among Black women, compared to 16 percent who thought this preference existed for dark-skinned Black men (another 16 percent were not sure). While one's personal opinion about other people's behavior might not entirely correspond to reality, it is still significant that one third of the Black people polled believed in a continued preference for lighter-skinned women. In other words, being partial to skin color when it comes to selecting a mate or spouse as a form of colorism seems to have been an openly admitted issue in the 1980s.

Taking at face value the article "From Self-Doubt to 'Black is Beautiful'" (November 1985), published exactly five years later and written – again – by Alvin F. Poussaint, one gets a somewhat different picture. While he is very critical of racism prior to the 1960s, [183] after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts, "[c]olor-consciousness among Afro-Americans that favored light-skinned Blacks markedly diminished, as did the sales of bleaching creams" (120). As Poussaint does not give any (survey) data to prove his claim, and based on the fact that the Clark study only five years earlier still found decisive proof for the persistence of colorism, his statement must be considered slightly premature. What is more, skin bleaching ads in magazines like *Ebony* had not ceased to appear. Although it could be seen as remarkable that on the 364 pages of that issue [184] only one ad is for a skin lightening cream, a cursory glance at several issues prior to and after this fortieth anniversary issue of *Ebony* suggests that this was more of a coincidence than a change in the beauty discourse.[185]

[183] Poussaint blames racism for "a gnawing self hatred [among Black people that] crippled them with self-doubt, self-consciousness, and an understandable cultural paranoia" (118).
[184] According to publisher John H. Johnson this is "the largest [issue] in the history of the company" (Johnson, "Publisher's Statement" November 1985, 37).
[185] While less frequently than, for example, in the 1970s (and obviously prior to "Black is Beautiful") household names like Ambi, Vantex, and Nadinola still appear in the advertising sections of the mag-

Overall, it seems likely that an article commissioned for the "Special Anniversary Features" section of a magazine issue that is titled "Four Decades of Black Progress" would rather stress the advancements that have been made, and therefore be less critical of any persistent intra-racial tensions. While there is little doubt that both inter- and intra-racial relations improved after the Civil Rights Movement, it seems that Poussaint downplayed the fact that colorism was still very prominent in the Black community in the 1980s. To be fair, he concludes by saying that "total psychological emancipation" has not yet been reached and – once again – insists on "the fight against racial discrimination and bigotry," in which Black people should engage so that the "Black psyche" could grow even stronger (120).

Identity issues, as alluded to before, are sometimes also presented from the perspective of individuals, occasionally written in the third person by an *Ebony* editor, but more often from a first-person point of view. One example of the former is an article by Jack Slater about the wife of football star Lynn Swann, the model Bernadette Swann, who considered light skin as a "handicap" (Slater, July 1982). The opening paragraph cuts to the chase of her seeing herself as "imprisoned in her fair skin" and "trapped in a kind of nether dimension" of not fitting anywhere (111). Notably, the word *dilemma* is used four times in the text, stressing the fact that she is in a situation in which she seems forced to choose between two things. Being "neither White nor Black," this choice is hardly possible, however, and thus puts the model in an eternal "proverbial niche between a rock and a hard place" (111).

This is a problem that people of mixed-descent all too often have to face. What is referred to in "The Problems of Light-Skinned Blacks" (February 1975) as the "universal dilemma of the 'half-breed'" is oppression from both sides, Black and white alike. By itself, this statement is reminiscent of historian Werner Sollors's book title, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (1997), and suggests a lack of ac-

azine. The one advertisement in the November 1985 anniversary issue of *Ebony* is a half-page ad for Nadinola "Skin Fade Cream." The ad's body copy promises that it is "a versatile skin cream that gently and safely helps fade many different kinds of skin discolorations," that it "goes to work in the pigment-forming cells of your skin to help fade discolorations and leave skin brighter and clearer," and that it "[h]elps prevent new or recurring dark spots" (156). It is only the language that has changed slightly – not the product, and certainly not its intended purpose to lighten one's skin.

ceptance for people of mixed-race heritage. It is the "neither-this/nor-that" dilemma that is taken up in a series of articles, thereby stressing the importance of being able to pledge allegiance to a racial group and be accepted there. If this is not the case, as the articles show, what often follows is an identity crisis based on having metaphorically fallen between two stools. A quote from the March 1990 article, "Who's Black and Who's Not," illustrates this quite well. There, a biracial law student who identifies as African American claims that, "[i]n Black neighborhoods, I'm not Black enough, and Whites don't accept us because we aren't White" (112).[186]

As several articles on mixed-race identity in *Ebony* show, the 1990s started out with heightened awareness for an increasingly vocal biracial population and what appears to be fear of a "mixed-race" census category. While this discursive context sets the stage for the articles to come, the discussion of mixed-race identities was also fuelled by discursive events in the music and entertainment industries. It was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that Black stars – singers and actors alike – started to capitalize on and make the most of what is now known as "cross-over appeal." The first of the articles to deal with this issue in *Ebony* appeared in March 1990 and – as mentioned in the previous paragraph – was published with the headline "Who's Black and Who's Not." The entire feature story is presented within the realm of celebrity culture and then moves to a more analytical part to establish authority by citing several psychologists and other expert voices on the issue of Black identity. Author Lynn Norment opens with a generic tale of a light-skinned female star. As Norment writes, this unnamed up-and-coming "café au lait singer" (134) started out by self-defining herself as Black but, with some fame and fortune, soon began to stress other ethnicities in her heritage. In other words, after reaching the top of the ladder of success with the help of the Black community, this racially ambiguous starlet announced the end of any racial allegiance to the Black community by calling herself "anything but Black" (134). Clearly, this can be seen as "selling out" in order to maximize record sales and to be most successful by tapping into the white consumer market. No name is given, as the *Ebony* editor argues, because this

[186] Alternatively, as will be discussed later, this can be remedied by aligning oneself in a separate mixed-race group that offers a new sense of identity to people who feel unaccepted among both people of color and among whites.

scenario has repeated itself throughout the years.[187] This example illustrates that the discursive context is clearly shaped by the behavior of Black celebrities who at that time were often purposefully denying their Black identity to gain cross-over success.[188]

Only five years later the article "Am I Black, White or In Between?" (Norment, August 1995) brings up the issue again in what appears as a remake of the March 1990 feature.[189] It seems as if the discursive event was the campaign for a separate "mixed-race" government form and census category, also known as the "multiracial category movement" (108). The provocative subheading of the feature article, "Is There a Plot To Create a 'Colored' Buffer Race in America?," implies some form of conspiracy and clearly demonstrates what could be called "dilution anxiety," to borrow Margo Natalie Crawford's term from her book by the same title (2008). The fear of such a diluted mixed-race buffer zone is prominent in the text, as the verb *dilute* is repeated three times and only once in a direct quote. The biggest concern, if Norment is to be believed, is that such an in-between category would "divide and dilute Black political power" (108). In both articles, Norment and her social scientist sources warn of the creation of a privileged "colored" category, similar to the one during apartheid in South Africa. If given the option to tick "mixed race" on official forms, it is believed that what Lisa Jones refers to as the "stigma" of being Black would cause many mixed-race people to "retreat from their Blackness" altogether (110). This, however, would carry political rather than just personal consequences, resulting in possible funding cuts or affecting school desegregation plans and Congressional apportionment, as the article stated (108-110).[190]

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[187] The description of a young starlet growing up among Black people, dating Black men, and singing as a backing vocalist for a Black star sounds a lot like Teena Marie, who was popular among Black people in the 1980s. Marie, however, was one of the few songstresses who really was white. In spite of that, she played with the public illusion of being Black, worked with Rick James, and produced her first album with Motown Records (Sisario 28 December 2010). Consequently, she could be accused of "passing for Black," although this was less common than the opposite "passing for white."

[188] Examples are Mariah Carey, Tiger Woods, and Prince, who once claimed Italian ancestry (Norment March 1990, 138).

[189] In addition to once again citing Harvard psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint and other experts in psychology, several bi-racial celebrities – from Halle Berry to Lenny Kravitz – are quoted on their take on the issue, particularly on their thoughts of the "one-drop rule" in the United States.

[190] It seems ironic in light of the overall tone of the article, to not deny one's Blackness, that a full-page ad for Vantex Skin Bleaching Cream interspersed the feature story, promising "an even-toned glow" within three to six weeks (111). Other ads in that same issue are for "Palmer's Skin Success Fade Cream," which "gently lightens spots and discolorations and prevents darkening from reoccurring"(22), and "African Pride Skin Tone Moisturizing Cream," which turns "your problem skin areas into … evenly-blended skin" (41).

Such reasoning rests upon the fear that – as Cornel West argues – "America's will to racial justice is weak and therefore black people must close ranks for survival in a hostile country" (West 2001).

The debate about this new racial category intensified in the months following the 1995 feature story in *Ebony*. A wide-ranging public discussion of an attempt to introduce a multiracial category for the 2000 census was likely the reason why fifteen months later *Ebony* published another multi-page feature on the issue of mixed-race identity. In "'Neither Black Nor White" (November 1996), Lisa Jones Townsel presents the issue from the point of view of numerous advocates and opponents of this category, leaving the reader to try and answer the provocative subtitle "Would a New Census Category Be a Dangerous Diversion or a Step Forward?" Once again the fear of dilution is expressed, while at the same time the right of mixed-race people to legally self-identify is stressed. Among several experts who serve as authority voices, Kathy Russell, co-author of *The Color Complex* (1992), is cited twice. While she is presented as having a balanced view towards the issue at first, her conclusion is – literally – very black and white, but nonetheless accurate: "If you look Black, then you become Black, and that's just what you are. And all of that other stuff is just what you think you are. In this society, things are very Black and White. There are really no gray areas" (50).

A similar argument was made almost two decades later by Adam Swerver in the May 2011 article "Multiracial in America," which is part of a special report on this very sensitive topic: "[W]ho you are is only halfway up to you. The rest is how society looks at you" (86). In writing, he was trying to explain the discursive context on multiracialism triggered by a statement actress Halle Berry had made a few months before. In an *Ebony* interview of March 2011, Berry evoked the one-drop-rule by calling her daughter Nahla, whose father is French Canadian, not biracial but Black (DuBois Barnett).[191] While some saw her comments as inflammatory, particularly because Berry makes clear that she refuses to buy into the myth of a color-blind society, it reflects the experience that many biracial people have in the U.S.

[191] The discussion was so extensive that it provoked the *Ebony* editorial staff, first and foremost editor-in-chief Amy DuBois Barnett, to compile an extensive set of articles on "multiracial life an America today," as she put it in her editorial "Black or Biracial?" in May 2011 (16).

What Russell's and Swerver's arguments have in common is that both speak to the importance of "appearance," which is directly related to the discourse of skin color. Extending Russell's argument, it can be argued that those who do not "look Black" will not be perceived as such by society. This, then, makes perfectly understandable why some African Americans – who are very cognizant of this fact – choose to downplay their Black features in order to gain higher status in U.S. society. Some take this as far as enhancing their (white) European looks, which explains the continuing popularity of cosmetic products to straighten one's hair and lighten one's skin. It is this awareness of the benefits which light color entails that has some Black people making a conscious choice to take advantage of what they know as "light skin capital" in a racialized U.S. society.

As always, there are two sides to every story. Obviously, there are light-skinned African Americans who willfully decide to disavow themselves from their white heritage and actively try to embrace their Black ancestry. Such behavior, however, is not always met with approval on the part of those African Americans who believe that in order to *be* Black one also needs to *look* Black. This, in turn, comes with another set of identity problems for those who long for acceptance within the Black community but fail to achieve it based on their phenotypic appearance. As mentioned previously, articles written from the perspective of light-skinned African Americans were common, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s.[192] The discursive context that these problems arise from is shaped by the attitudes generated in the Black consciousness movement of "Black is Beautiful." It was then that Black people, who were widely embracing the very looks that they have always been told were ugly and undesirable, witnessed a Black nationalist perspective emerge. This attitude, however, had some attempt to "police" Blackness so that not everyone could claim membership, particularly not if they did not look or act "Black." One reason for the aversion against lighter-skinned Blacks obviously is their proximity in appearance to whites, which became particularly relevant during the years of heightened Black nationalism in the 1960s. At the same time, this should be seen as

[192] As such, the coverage of "problems" of light-skinned Black people was not new. As early as 1954, *Ebony*'s sister magazine *JET*, for example, published an article on racially ambiguous African Americans who were referred to as "white Negroes" in the text. The piece elaborated on their "plight" as facing "exile to a racial twilight zone" ("The Tragedy of White Negroes" 16 September 1954, 21). It was not until after the 1960s and the emergence of reverse discrimination based on intra-racial color tensions, however, that these issues received increased attention.

a sort of self-protective mechanism on the part of darker-skinned African Americans. By attacking what seems to be desired in society but what they cannot conform to themselves, they are better able to mask their insecurities and their inferiority complexes.

Perhaps as a result of this "policing" of Blackness, *Ebony*'s articles about light-skinned African Americans typically dealt with the very personal problems they were facing as a result of their light complexion. While accepting the advantages and privileges that come with light skin, it is the personal attacks and accusations of selling out to white America that these light-skinned Black Americans deal with on the pages of *Ebony*. Often, this was linked with an identity crisis, which – in extreme cases – even resulted in suicide. In the 1970s, *Ebony* reported on two separate instances of well-educated light-skinned professionals (a male teacher and a female writer) who both chose to end their lives because they could no longer endure the fact that their own people would not accept them (Smith, October 1972; Slater, September 1973). As explained in the articles, other Black people in the victims' immediate surroundings could not see the person behind the skin color and regarded their light complexion as that of a traitor or a sell-out. Such pains are even inflicted by family members, as was the case of the Black female writer and her father denouncing her because she was so fair-complexioned (Slater 1973, 154).

Claiming the "right" to call herself African American has also been a major issue for Kathleen Cross, a fair-skinned teacher from Oregon. In the October 1990 feature "Trapped in the Body of a White Woman," *Ebony* readers get a first-person account of what happens if a body produces a racial image that the individual disagrees with. Obviously, in this case a sense of alienation is a likely consequence, something into which the article in *Ebony* provides personal insight. Already the title implies serious undertones as the sense of being "trapped" suggests imprisonment. This is based on the fact that while others perceive her as white according to what they see, she strongly identifies as Black.[193] The fact that the racial label as-

[193] The fact that the title is put in quotation marks suggests a direct quote, yet the phrase does not come up in the text. Cross, however, constantly relates to the experience of "living Black and looking White" (74). Whether the headline was her idea or that of a savvy editor remains unknown. While not directly related in content or cultural context, it might also be a play on a 1987 hit single by white

signed by others is not in line with her self-perception leads to a veritable identity conflict, which is later explained by the author.

As becomes clear when looking at the lead-in, the reason for the publication of this article is framed by the larger discursive context of awareness for biracialism in general and a specific article that was previously published in *Ebony* in particular:

> The author … says 'much has been written recently concerning the tendency of biracial children to deny or downplay being Black. How about printing the story of a biracial woman who reveres her African-American heritage … even if she has to fight for the right to claim it.' This is her story. (70)

Obviously, there is an intertextual reference to the March 1990 article "Who's Black and Who's Not." Rather than just writing a letter to the editor to voice her thoughts, Kathleen Cross seemingly wanted her whole story to be accessible to *Ebony*'s readers. This has obvious advantages for the magazine as well, because printing her account as a multi-page feature story allows *Ebony* to appear engaged in a dialogue with its readers by also portraying the proverbial other side of the coin.

The article itself is a first-person memoir that starts off with a childhood recollection of being mistaken for a "white girl" at a party in her own house. This incident made Cross want to apologize "for not being Black enough," a feeling she has had numerous times since. The metaphor of COLORISM IS WAR is present again, but this time in a different context: On the one hand, Cross admits that skin color often "shielded" her "from the target of White racism" (74), in a way allowing her the freedom to not have to fight the white racist system. On the other hand, however, she had to fight a different battle – one on home ground so to speak. Unlike her darker-skinned brother, for example, she was required to "fight for the right" to claim her own Black heritage (70). The "Wannabe"-charge, which is usually used pejoratively to describe someone who pretends to be something they are not, is a common short-hand to describe light-skinned Black people who want to be white (see Spike Lee's Wannabes in his 1988 film *School Daze*). Here, however, the

comedian, and singer Julie Brown. The music video to her song "Trapped in the Body of a White Girl" shows a grotesque Frankenstein-like experiment in which Tina Turner's brain gets accidentally "implanted" into a white woman's head (that of Julie Brown in the video). If the song was also part of the cultural repertoire in the Black community – which is difficult to assess retrospectively – the headline in *Ebony* could be an appropriation of the song title, even though in a different context and with more serious undertones.

charge is used in reverse: Cross reports of being labeled a Wannabe-Black for denying her white heritage when she self-identifies as African American (74). Because her physical appearance protects her from experiencing racism, she asserts that some feel she should not have the right to call herself African American.[194]

The articles mentioned so far discuss the discourse of skin color on different levels and by employing different discourse strands. It is not until the 2000s, however, that the term *colorism* is mentioned in relation to the skin color complex. The article "I Am Not White: Light-Skinned Blacks Defend Their Identity" (Womack, August 2007) is one such example. While not defining the term, it is used in the same breath as racism, which establishes a close relationship between these words, as in this quote by sociology professor Sandra E. Taylor: "Racism and colorism is [sic] still an issue" (80). As the article proceeds to explain, light-skinned Black people continue to face problems with their perceived and assumed identity.

The visual aesthetic of the article adds an interesting dimension to the idea of being perceived as racially ambiguous. In a full-page picture then 82-year-old civil rights attorney Wendell Freeland, who could (but says he never did) "pass for white," is photographed sitting by a table that reflects his face, mirror-inverted, like water would reflect one's image (79). This image could be connected with the dual personality that he was forced to assume as the perception of him by other people was not in line with how he perceived himself (the caption explains that he "has spent most of his life being mistaken for White"). Adding to that visual impression is the fact that while the light shines on one side of his face, the other side is almost completely in the shade, making it difficult to recognize that half. A similar allusion to lightness and darkness can be seen in the next picture, which is a half-page portrait of Melody Colfield, a light-skinned woman quoted in the text (81). The visual

[194] This sense of "policing" Blackness is to a certain extent still an issue today. Most well-known is the recent debate around Barack Obama's lack of the "Black experience" that some see as rooted in an ancestry in slavery. One example was Debra Dickerson's appearance on "The Colbert Report" in February 2007. While little on the satirical late night television show on Comedy Central should be taken seriously, Dickerson, who regularly blogs for *Mother Jones* magazine, created quite some uproar. She maintained that the fact that Obama was not a descendant of West Africans would not make him truly "Black" in the Black American experience (The Colbert Report 8 February 2007). It should be noted, however, that a team of genealogists recently discovered that Obama's white mother could be descended from an African who lived in Virginia in the mid-1700s (Foy 31 July 2012). While the news quickly went viral in July 2012, it seems too soon to come to any definite conclusions, especially as not enough details have been released at "press time" of this dissertation.

aesthetic presents her against an entirely black background, which makes only parts of her face and her hands visible. In a way, both pictures provide a visual dynamic that underscores the central message of the article, which is that skin color, as Marita Golden once said, "is in many ways an illusion" judged subjectively based on "emotions … prejudices … longings … fears … [and] hearts" (2004, 13).

Although the article's title, "I Am Not White", is set in quotation marks, this is not a first-person account like the October 1990 feature "Trapped in the Body of a White Woman." Instead, this article, written by Ytasha L. Womack, serves as a collective report to describe how light-skinned African Americans feel when their identities are mistaken for that of a white person. This, as the author explains, comes not only from white people but also from other Black people who perceive of them as not Black enough:

> Many 'near White' Blacks have to not only defend themselves against racism among Whites, who malign Blacks in private circles they are assumed to be part of, but also must prove their own Blackness to those who feel they're benefiting from the privileges of White or fair skin. (80)

The charge of not being "Black enough" is taken up twice in the article, with people giving testimony to the fact that it takes a strong sense of who you are to withstand this rejection from your own community. Yet, as becomes clear from the passage quoted above, some advantages based on light skin in mainstream American society cannot be denied either. One light-skinned man quoted in the text sees it like this: "Whites are more comfortable. We [light-skinned Black people] can operate in two worlds without being stereotyped and prejudged, whereas our African-American Sisters with African features are prejudged, and 95 percent wrongly" (80).[195] It is this possibility of going unnoticed among whites, this sense of being incognito, that is seen as an advantage, somewhat ironically labeled by the subheading "IN-COGNEGRO" (ibid.).

The second sub-heading on the same page is a reference to a children's rhyme that serves as a mocking racial slur: "Light, Bright and Damn Near White" (80). This saying is only one of several intertextual references in the feature. Additionally, two films are mentioned that portray the identity struggles that light-

[195] This statement calls to mind what Charles Mills said in his book, *The Racial Contract* (1997): "The nonwhite body carries a halo of blackness around it which may actually make some whites physically uncomfortable" (51).

skinned African Americans are facing in a world that judges them solely by the color of their skin. The films are *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1959), both fictional tales of light-skinned Black women "passing for white" that were popular in the 1950s. Another reference is to one of *Ebony*'s own articles, although it comes without mentioning the title in the text: "More than half a century has passed since EBONY first broached the issue of Blacks who are mistaken for being White" (80).

The article this refers to was titled "White by Day … Negro by Night," originally published in April 1952 and reprinted in the magazine's thirtieth anniversary issue of November 1975. It laid out the lives of Black people who were "passing for white," yet not on a permanent basis. What was referred to as a "Jekyll-Hyde existence to hold white jobs" (1975, 80) suggests an identity conflict that comes with a split personality that these people have to assume in order to live their double lives. What is striking is that although this was an article written from a Black perspective in a Black magazine the "evil" side of Mr. Hyde is implicitly likened to the "night" world of the people who are passing: "… these people find themselves in a strange Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde existence – living constantly in fear that their day world will conflict with their night world" (80). It is their African American identity that they can only live out freely once they are home from work at night, yet this is indirectly linked to the evil stock character of Mr. Hyde in the text (80). Such an implied comparison likely reflects an unconscious adoption of dominant white values (white is good and black is bad), as it can be safely assumed that this was not the magazine's intended meaning. By itself, this is a testament to the power of white hegemonic ideologies that color people's perception of the world, both consciously and unconsciously.

While *Ebony* attempts to dispel the common misbelief that Black people can identify someone who is "passing for white" by including a full-page photographic quiz,[196] overall the article focuses on the economic reason of pretending to be white "to hold decent jobs" (80). This gain in professional status is recognized as being based on light skin color, which serves as social capital. The conclusion, too, emphasizes that this would be the prime reason for passing, and not – as often as-

[196] Readers are encouraged to try to identify sixteen faces of people in a quiz that asks "Which Is Negro? Which Is White?" (81). The intention is to demonstrate the arbitrariness in facial features and skin color, which clearly speaks to the social "construction" of race.

sumed elsewhere – an inferiority complex based on self-hatred. Therefore, this article tackles the discourse strand of status in addition to the one of identity. It also demonstrates the agency light-skinned Black people are exercising by realizing their "value" in a society that puts a premium on fair skin and Caucasian features. As one woman asserts, "I'm not ashamed of my race. If I could be a Negro and still hold this job, I'd let everyone know right now" (82). This, in and of itself, suggests a sense of racial pride that the individual chooses to subdue for the sake of her job, thereby playing by the "light-is-right rule" that mainstream America put in place in slavery times and has never revoked.

Taking this analysis "back" to the twenty-first century, it can be said that questions on "light is right" clearly have not yet been resolved. Less than a year after the publication of "I Am Not White" (August 2007), *Ebony* picked up the issue again in a "Two Sides" column in February 2008, a regular content category in the magazine in which two individuals write from their personal point of view on a common subject. This subject is usually addressed in the form of a yes/no question in the headline, such as "Do Light-Skinned People Have an Advantage?" (Atkins and Samuels, February 2008). For this article the two writers, whose portraits are printed along with their one-page first-person accounts, are Elizabeth Atkins, a light-skinned journalist and writer of books that deal with skin color, and Adrienne P. Samuels, a senior writer at *Ebony* who is dark-skinned. Writing from her personal experience as a light-skinned woman, it is Atkins who answers the posed question in the headline in the negative by claiming that light-skinned people "face a different from of racism" (164).

Nowhere in the entire analysis of *Ebony* articles is the COLORISM IS WAR metaphor more pronounced than in Atkins's column. The semantic field of war expressed in military discourse is present throughout the article, adding to the sense of how strongly she feels about the subject. From the "centuries-old *war* that Black people wage daily against each other's minds, bodies and spirits" to the "*mine-filled terrain* of light-dark relations" to the "popular *propaganda* arguing that life in the LIGHT *zone* is less *perilous*" to finally speaking about "*victims* of *biological warfare*" – the article is full of references to colorism being seen as war-like (164, my emphasis). The other prominent metaphor is that of COLORISM AS (psychological)

DISEASE. Examples from the semantic field of illness are words like *insanity*, *craziness*, *infection*, and *victimhood*, which are used in the text. Atkins writes that "every day offers *insane* new material [that divides Black people] and "this never-good-enough *craziness infects* families too," concluding that "we are *victims*" of something that started in slavery (164, my emphasis).

As far as intertextual references are concerned, Atkins mentions the Willie Lynch letter, the document that was purportedly based on a speech by an eighteenth-century slave owner from the West Indies on how to "pit" slaves against each other to effectively control them for centuries. One of the most successful means, according to Lynch's account, was to divide them by skin color. Although historians discovered anachronisms that make them believe the letter to be a hoax, it has gained wide public recognition and is often used to explain origins of colorism (see chapter 1). Atkins, for example, concludes her article with the appeal to "[s]top proving Willie Lynch right" (164).

Another reference, although to an event and not another text, is Atkins's brief mentioning of the "Light Skin Libra Birthday Bash" party poster that advertised a party in a downtown Detroit club in October 2007. What could be a veritable discursive event for this article in February 2008 also makes for a contemporary example of how colorism manifests itself in everyday life. The party organizer, who canceled the event after vocal criticism from all sides, had planned to grant Libras and light-skinned women "free entry all night" (see appendix, page 243).[197] Adrienne Samuels's complimentary piece on the opposite page of the "Two Sides" article also makes brief mention of the Detroit party. This is another sign of the poster being something widely discussed in the Black community, thereby affecting

[197] While – as briefly discussed in a footnote in chapter 2 – this particular party was canceled, events like the "Darkskin vs. Redbone Affair" in New York City (2009) or the "Light Skin vs. Dark Skin" party in Columbus, Ohio (2011) went ahead as planned. The latter contest, which was advertised as the "most anticipated party of the year" even utilized the social network Twitter, with hashtags of "#teamlightskin" and "#teamdarkskin" to gain publicity. The latest outrage in the history of "color conscious" club events was sparked by the "Battle of Complexions" in St. Louis, Missouri during Black History Month in February 2012. The poster featured a "runway contest for [the] sexiest complexion" in the battle of the "LightSkinned V.S. Caramel (Brown) V.S. DarkSkinned Edition." Apart from fueling divisions between Black women of different hues, the objectification of Black women's bodies is not disguised either: All posters show Black female models clad in provocative lingerie and photographed in sexually suggestive poses. The photographs exhibit a conflation of sexist images bordering misogyny and color ideologies that imply one shade of skin being better than the other. Ultimately, the posters are a good example of the intersection of sexism and colorism in Black women's lives (for pictures of the party posters see appendix, page 243).

the public discourse to such an extent that follow-up conversations on colorism were held in the media.

Both authors start off with a childhood memory related to the psychological pains colorism can cause (although on opposite sides of the spectrum), yet Samuels adopts a more analytical viewpoint later on. In what seems an attempt to add credibility to her claim that light-skinned people have an advantage in life and "are likely to get hired first and may earn more money" (165), she cites three different sociological studies. These document the "preferential treatment" of light-skinned Black men when it comes to job applications, their on average higher salary, and – most strikingly – their lower likelihood of receiving a death penalty sentence for murder (165). Additionally, Samuels briefly references a 2003 color discrimination case in which Applebee's restaurant had to pay $40,000 to a dark-skinned employee who had been called derogatory slurs such as "tar baby" by a light-skinned supervisor.

It is interesting that this case was mentioned (although many years later and only in one brief paragraph), but the legal precedent to color discrimination, *Morrow v. IRS* of the late 1980s, never got any coverage in the magazine. *Ebony*'s sister magazine *JET* repeatedly reported on the case (12 June 1989, 7; 26 February 1990, 26), and an extensive feature article on the case as well as the origins of colorism (without naming it as such) even made it onto the front page of the *New York Times* (Applebome 23 May 1989, A.1). Never, however, was the lawsuit discussed in *Ebony*. This omission from the discourse, of course, raises the question for potential reasons. Two possibilities seem plausible, as the news-value-factor was certainly there: On the one hand, one could consider the social and racial climate of the late 1980s, which was characterized by a conservative backlash to some of the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement. Particularly, the Reagan administration's "pulling-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps"-mentality tended to blame someone's not getting ahead on pathologies that came from within rather than on external reasons with origins in the individual's social environment (such as systemic racism). Colorism could have been – and, in fact, often was – misinterpreted as another such pathology. Consequently, if the existence of white supremacy is not acknowledged in the public discourse, it is not possible to relate any intra-racial discrimination to it, which only leaves room to think that colorism originated from within. It is in light

of this reasoning that *Ebony* – maybe – chose to remain carefully silent about a potentially divisive issue at that time.

The other, perhaps more likely, possibility for keeping *Morrow v. IRS* in the realm of the "not sayable" is *Ebony*'s pronounced stance on racial unity. In effect, a court decision that, for the first time in history, allowed African Americans to sue each other based on what was legally termed "color" discrimination goes against this message of unity. This could have motivated *Ebony* to avoid a discursive discussion at that moment in time, as it would have potentially divided its readers. Considering the heightened sensibility for and fear of the "mixed-race" census category, this seems plausible because the last thing "Black America" needed in the 1990s was further division. While all of this remains speculative, there is no denying the fact that the omission as such needs to be considered as significant in the discourse of skin color. Not reporting on the court case prevents *Ebony*'s readers from being fully informed about important developments when it comes to legally acknowledging the existence of intra-racial discrimination. In 2008, however, Samuels's opinion piece presents the possibility of taking legal action against a member of one's own racial group based on color discrimination as a given. This leads to the assumption that the realm of the "sayable" has been extended, possibly with the wider discussion of colorism in the 2000s.[198]

Apart from intertextual references, Samuels also once implies the metaphor of COLORISM AS DISEASE by referring to it as an *ailment*, which is just another word for illness. Additionally, the brown paper bag tests are mentioned, and – as there is no explanation for what is meant by that – the paper bag assumes the function of a collective symbol in the Black community. Such a symbol is so widely known and recognized that it requires no further explanation. Another interesting detail in the article is that Samuels takes a rare stance and acknowledges that colorism is not an exclusively Black issue, or "Black thang," as she calls it. In her words, "Asians, Latinos and 'ethnic whites' (read: non-Aryan) apparently have it bad too, as evidenced by the billions they spend for skin lighteners" (164). Again, one aspect

[198] Here, the Internet with blogs and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter certainly plays a role, as it is now much easier to access timely information on events related to colorism. Moreover, the Internet seems to provide the necessary anonymity to talk about sensitive issues such as those of intra-racial skin color and hair politics, which contributes to an extended discussion of the significance of skin color (and hair) in the Black community.

remains in the realm of the "not-sayable," which is the fact that African Americans buy and use these skin lighteners too. While there were almost no advertisements for skin bleaching creams and their less divisive namesakes printed on the magazine's pages in the year 2008, their frequency increased again in the years to come. Rather than a real change in the discourse of Black beauty, the fluctuation is likely related to new advertising campaigns that cosmetic companies release, which seemed to be the case with both Palmer's and Ambi in 2009.

As the two previous chapters showed, the discourse strands of identity and beauty have been prominent topics in *Ebony* throughout the years. Contrary to what Russell, Wilson, and Hall claimed in their seminal study on colorism (1992, 2), the "color complex" does not seem to be a taboo issue in the pages of the magazines at all. Quite the contrary, intra-racial divisions based on color are frequently taken up in articles on Black beauty and identity. Between 1970 and 2011, moderate progress can be observed when it comes to the ability to self-define one's identity and what constitutes Black beauty. The mainstream media, however, still seems to favor a particular ideal of beauty characterized by light skin and straight hair. This, of course, means continued advantages for people of light skin who can use their beauty as social capital. Such advantages appear to be more prominent a factor for women, as beauty is a quality more valued as feminine. On the flipside, however, light-skinned people are continuously faced with charges of being "sell-outs," "traitors," and "wannabe whites." This often makes for a great amount of psychological trauma, particularly if attempts to prove their Blackness are not honored by other Black people who see them as "not Black enough." While all of this is more or less openly discussed, some things remain in the realm of the "not sayable." Among these is any criticism of skin bleaching creams and their respective advertisements, which simply does not exist in the magazine. Furthermore, it seems that the discourse around legal action based on intra-racial color discrimination has only become acceptable in recent years.

Based on this wide-ranging analysis, the next section provides an in-depth look at four feature articles that specifically focus on skin color (already in their headlines) and discuss its significance or insignificance among people in "Black America." Beauty and identity will again be defined as the major discourse strands,

but the case study will also reveal other elements that come into play when "featuring" skin color in *Ebony*.

[U[nless the question of Colorism … is addressed in our communities … we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us. ~ Alice Walker (1982)

I understand that we would rather not have to talk about skin color, but we cannot afford not *to. ~ Constance C. R. White, editor-in-chief at* Essence *magazine (2011)*

4.3 From Problem to Issue?: "Featuring" Skin Color in "Black America"

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the discourse of skin color in *Ebony* is often broached by means of articles on beauty and identity. Once in a while, colorism in the Black community is also addressed directly. *Ebony's* editors approach this with multi-page feature articles that define skin color as a "problem" or "issue" in their headlines and then deal exclusively with colorism in "Black America" over three to four pages.[199] An in-depth case study of four such articles seems a fruitful approach to better understanding the discourse(s) of skin color in *Ebony* magazine. The articles chosen were published over a sixteen-year span (1984 – 2000). They convey interesting, almost peculiar, similarities, which concurrently expose the "complexities" of the complexion discourse and the inherent contradictions of *Ebony's* stance on the significance of skin color.[200]

It should be clear that without the possibility to interview editors who wrote these feature articles, their motives for choosing specific headlines or illustrations – two elements that will be given particular attention – cannot be brought to light in a truly satisfactory manner. What can be interpreted, however, are the potential meanings of these elements based on looking at the socio-historical discursive context, specific discursive events, and other analytical categories from the "toolbox" of

[199] Articles are frequently "interrupted" by full page advertisements, a fact that explains the wider range of pages in the works cited list.
[200] A shortened and somewhat different version of this chapter has recently been accepted for publication in the SAGE journal *Sexualities*, forthcoming in 2013.

critical discourse analysis defined in chapter 3.2. Such textual interpretations will enable fruitful conclusions about the significance of skin color in *Ebony* as represented through the articles studied.

4.3.1 Writing about the Black Body: Still, No Longer, or Again?

When looking at the individual feature stories, it seems as if the relevance of skin color in Black America has undergone considerable changes throughout history: Whereas in December 1984 *Ebony* still asked, "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?," in May 1988, a mere four years later, the magazine offered explanations as to "Why Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference." Four years later, however, *Ebony* suggests an obvious revival of the color complex with its March 1992 headline, "Why Skin Color Suddenly is a Big Issue Again." The last of the four articles in this analysis then went back to the same strategy that was used in 1984, that is to say, asking a question with regard to the current relevance of skin color. The April 2000 article title, "Is Skin Color Still an Issue in Black America?" (Bennett Kinnon), was an almost exact replica of the December 1984 headline, with the only difference being that then skin color was obviously perceived to be a "problem," whereas in 2000 it was considered an "issue," perhaps indicating a slight change in relevance.[201]

The striking parallels in the headlines of the articles in 1984 and 2000 suggest that the magazine pursued the same two goals in both years: Asking a question, on the one hand, suggests that *Ebony* is undecided about a definite answer but is willing to tackle the "problem" or "issue" and offer some opinions, which was done in the text. The question mark also implicitly encourages its addressees to share their opinions and experiences, and the magazine's readers followed suit in a vast number of letters to the editor for several months after the articles had been published (see chapter 4.4). In contrast to asking questions, the affirmative headlines of the articles in 1988 and 1992 promised to provide concrete reasons, by stating "Why Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference" and "Why Skin Color Suddenly is a Big Issue Again." What seems obvious is that discursive events and also the overall

[201] The April 2000 feature article is the only one that carries a byline.

discursive context changed the discourse of skin color between 1988 and 1992. This change was so dramatic that "suddenly" – as the second title declared – there was a revival of the issue in the Black community. Possible reasons for this resurgence are explained later in this chapter.

Only six months after the reprint of Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s "What is Black Beauty?" (June 1984) *Ebony* takes up the issue again, this time to ask about the larger meaning of skin color in the Black community. The December 1984 feature, "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?," opens by making transparent the discursive events that led to the production of the article. *Ebony* refers to these events as "[f]ast-moving headlines" in newspapers and magazines, which were subsequently "deluged with letters to the editor" (66). This calls attention to the fact that the debates took place in the media over an extended period of time, which created what John Fiske termed "media events" (see chapter 3.1.3). While two such headlines are references to *inter*-racial events,[202] the hot-button issue with regards to divisions based on skin color *within* the Black community was the aftermath of Vanessa Williams's election as Miss America. As mentioned before, her coronation was followed by vocal criticism due to the fact that for some members of the Black community she simply was "too light." This allegedly reflected America's favoritism of white standards of beauty (Norment, "Here She Is … Miss America" December 1983, 133). In December 1984, *Ebony* describes this as "a heated debate over the color or lack of color of Black beauty pageant contestants" ("Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?", 66).[203]

The major discourse strands that inform the article throughout appear to be (female) beauty, identity, and status: Beauty standards are seen to be still in the hands of a mainstream America that continues to value fair skin and straight hair as

[202] These events are vaguely described as divorce petitions and adoption cases. After more research in *Ebony's* archives it seems that the former refers to the article "How Black Women Cope with Their Broken Marriages" (Norment, November 1983). This feature story explains that Black women face different problems than their white female counterparts, which makes it an inter-racial "color" issue, not an intra-racial one. The reference to adoption cases is related to the personal account of Ben Nightingale, an adoptee who, for most of his life, was searching for his racial identity. The story he writes tells of his experiences in the Black and white worlds, respectively ("Am I Black or White?" January 1981).

[203] A few paragraphs later the runner-up Suzette Charles is mentioned, whose winning second place caused "even more furor among critics" (66), because she was also a light-skinned Black woman.

the epitomes of attractiveness in women.[204] Such an appearance is rewarded with increased status and prestige as well as privileges within the larger society. All of this, of course, is related to the discourse strand of identity, as the article explains. The system thereby encourages light-skinned people to develop a superiority complex and "look down on darker Blacks," with this latter group learning "to despise themselves and their features" (68). This occurs as a result of being confronted with the aforementioned hegemonic ideologies day in and day out. The root of all color divisions is thus seen in the "social system that institutionalized conflict in the general society by affirming the absolute value of White skin and European features" (67-68). This system, in turn, has its origins in slavery, discussed in the article in the context of the discourse strand of (institutionalized) racism, which influences African Americans until today.

Colorism has reportedly been significant for African Americans of all socioeconomic classes. It is usually even more of an issue among people from lower classes who need to compete for scarce resources (see Hochschild and Weaver 2007). Yet, when *Ebony* speaks of "Black America" – as briefly discussed in chapter 4.1 – what the magazine really means is its middle class, or what used to be called the Black Bourgeoisie (sometimes including the upper middle class).[205] The December 1984 article is a good example of the representation of false homogeneity in the Black community because all interviewees were middle class. Black people from the lower middle class (working class) and lower class (the displaced and poor) are never included in the discourse, most likely because they are not part of *Ebony's* core readership. It is, after all, a consumer magazine for middle class African Americans. Among other things, the clothes advertised in the fashion sections as well as the many advertisements for cars, alcohol, and cosmetics are a testament to this fact. That the individuals interviewed in the article were likely middle class is made clear by their job descriptions (editorial director, investment banker, and several Ph.D.s working in academia). Apart from this, their clothing also speaks to their middle class status. Black-and-white pictures of the interviewees show the men in

[204] Without being explicitly addressed, beauty is almost always approached as a gendered issue for women. It goes without saying, of course, that white standards also have negative implications for Black men, which are often expressed in identity complexes.
[205] The terminology used here is in line with common usage by American sociologists. For a more precise definition of the individual classifications and their meanings see, for example, Margaret L. Andersen's and Howard F. Taylor's *Sociology: The Essentials* (2009), particularly chapter eight entitled "Social Class and Social Stratification" (179-210).

suits and ties and the women either wearing button-down shirts and blazers, or dresses. Additionally, a study by Howard University referenced in the text is based on interviews with "middle class spouses" (70). This also supports the notion that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not included in *Ebony's* understanding of "Black America."

Four African Americans were interviewed to furnish the article with examples of how colorism manifests itself in everyday life, yet the discourse as such is largely in the hands of "experts" from the realms of psychology and sociology. In addition to several other studies, the ubiquitous "doll tests" of the 1940s and statistics from the 1980 follow-up study by Kenneth and Mamie Clark are cited as intertextual references to provide more credibility. Harvard University psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint takes on a dominant role of authority, as he is the only one who was quoted more than once. Ultimately, the answer to *Ebony's* self-imposed question of whether or not skin color is still a "problem in Black America" can be summarized by a paraphrase attributed to Poussaint: "[S]kin color is still a problem in Black America because racism is still a problem in White America" (66).

The term *problem* signifies something that needs to be solved, which is perhaps why *Ebony* attempts to provide solutions for how to overcome this "sensitive, emotional and divisive issue in the Black community" (66). Looking at the article more closely, this appears in the context of the two sub-discourses of resistance and self-love. It is Poussaint who connects the two seemingly unrelated areas: "We must keep fighting the discrimination against darker-skinned Blacks … For as long as we make distinctions between 'light' and 'dark,' we are only holding ourselves back. The real issue concerns *who* is controlling the beauty standards" (70; original emphasis). On the one hand, this evokes the conceptual metaphor RACISM IS WAR. Racism needs to be fought and resisted, particularly because the racist society is described as the enemy that "*bombard[s]* Black Americans with messages that suggest … that to be beautiful is to be fair-skinned and blue-eyed with long straight hair" (66, my emphasis). This statement also demonstrates the interrelatedness of the significance of somatic features such as skin tone, eye color, and hair texture, as often described in the scholarship on colorism (see, for example, Hill 2002, 1439). On the other hand, Poussaint's assessment appeals to Black people to start accept-

ing all shades of skin as beautiful and no longer let others define their beauty standards, which could be seen as a call for self-love.

All of this, of course, is difficult to attain in light of the dominant images in society that are – although *Ebony* would not admit it – sometimes even present in the Black press. While skin lightening creams are not advertised in this particular issue, throughout 1984 companies like Ambi and Palmer's used *Ebony* as an advertising vehicle several times. In January, for example, a two-page ad promises a "Dreamgirl complexion" in only seven weeks when using the "AMBI system," which consists of a "complexion bar" and a "skin tone cream." The ad shows a customer named Andrea who was allegedly photographed over a period of six weeks while using the product line. The individual pictures show the reader that her complexion gets clearer every week, but also – although very subtly – a little bit lighter from picture to picture (January 1984, 8-9).[206] Accordingly, the fact that the ad's body copy only talks about the product's intended use to lighten "dark spots" becomes irrelevant because the implied meaning is that the "fade cream" will not just fade any dark *spots* on your face but your complexion overall. The visual image thus speaks a different, and possibly more powerful, language than the text in small print. Ambi, in what appears to be a clever advertising strategy, sends contradictory messages to any potential customers. It thereby becomes true to its name of being *ambi*valent, so to speak. This has the effect of saving the company from open criticism in light of the fact that after "Black is Beautiful" skin bleaching was no longer socially accepted, and, concurrently, speaks to the clientele of Black women who (secretly) still long for lighter skin. These women – as the December 1984 feature on skin color implies – are likely to still exist because light skin continues to come with "tangible rewards" in the United States (66).

One of the coping strategies to come to terms with color consciousness, as *Ebony* suggests, is to bring it "out in the open and deal with it honestly" (66). This would mean, of course, to reverse the negative implications of "airing dirty laundry," which is how an open discussion of colorism is often viewed (see Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). The other piece of advice is directed to Black parents who need to become aware of their own prejudices to be able to "break the cycle of color

[206] In May and August 1984 the same campaign is presented in a one-page ad (23; 119).

bias" (70). This implies that family members are often responsible for the perpetuation of colorism in the Black community. While overall the larger racist society and the (white) media are blamed for intra-racial color tensions, in the 1984 article the Black community is also – at least partially – considered accountable. This is seen in the closing paragraph related to one of the interviewees who regards color consciousness as a "self-imposed burden" that needs to be overcome by acknowledging that "beauty comes in all colors" (70). In light of the Ambi campaign, however, it seems as if *Ebony* does part of this "self-imposing" by continuing to accept ads for skin lightening creams.

If an *Ebony* headline only four years later is to be believed, the situation had changed entirely. A May 1988 feature story promises its readers to reveal more about "Light vs. Dark: Why Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference." Reading the headline and the lead-in, one can infer that this is due to "Blacks of every complexion" being successful in business, politics, and the entertainment industry (178). *Ebony* takes its cues from a readers' poll that chose, among others, dark-complexioned actress Cicely Tyson as a beauty symbol. Additionally, the success of dark-skinned Black politicians and the diversity in skin color on *Ebony's* annual list of "100 Most Influential Black Americans" are seen as signs that the color complex had "faded."[207] These are all examples that speak to status, which is now accessible to a group of Black people who are no longer exclusively molded from the light-skinned Black elite – or so it seems at least. While certainly a sign of progress, the unnamed *Ebony* editor later admits that "traces of old color biases linger – largely affecting interpersonal relations and romantic entanglements" (180). This is followed by an unsubstantiated claim that "most enlightened Black Americans" would no longer make distinctions based on "light vs. dark." Of course, this raises questions as to how many people are considered "enlightened" and what that entails, but *Ebony* fails to provide answers. What this statement also reveals is that the changing social context no longer allows for any color preferences to be openly admitted, yet when looking at the very personal realm of love relationships the preferences still seem to "linger," as *Ebony* writes.

[207] The word *faded* is used twice in the article. It strikes this author as quite ironic that there is an actual ad for a "fade" cream in the magazine ("Porcelana Fade Cream," 157).

Contrary to the previous article, the discursive event is not that obviously identifiable. A brief look at what was happening in the United States earlier that year, however, reveals that the movie *School Daze* most likely contributed to heightened interest in the discourse of skin color. The film was released only a few months before and was even the subject of a three-page feature article in *Ebony* ("School Daze", February 1988). The musical drama, produced and directed by Spike Lee, draws on the continued relevance of tensions between Black people of "light" and "dark" skin as well as "good" and "bad" hair. It does so by pitting two sororities at a historically Black college against each other who fight a perennial verbal battle of "light vs. dark." The article in *Ebony*, however, obviously sets out to demonstrate to its audience "Why Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference." It thereby seems to want to contradict Lee's message in the film. Although the reason for making light of the significance of skin color is not made transparent in the article, the attempt as such should be considered meaningful and reveals the underlying relevance of the issue.[208]

Without mentioning Lee's movie, the *May* article starts out with the recollection of a woman's memories of her undergraduate years at a historically Black university thirty years prior when the color complex was present everywhere on campus. This story is, however, clearly framed as one of the past, backed by the opinion of a retired school teacher who believes that "most Black folks with any sense are over that foolishness now" ("Light Vs. Dark", 178). Later in the text, representatives of several Greek organizations vociferously defend themselves. This implies a subliminal attempt to correct the negative image that Lee's film imposed on Black fraternities and sororities. The president of one sorority is quoted as follows: "Color is not an issue in Alpha Kappa Alpha and it should not be an issue anywhere in the Black community" (184). This is followed by an unconfirmed editorial claim that "virtually every Black American across the color range" would agree: "Whether or not they believe that color is no longer an issue in the Black community, everyone believes that it should *not* be" (184, original emphasis).

[208] This downplaying goes so far as to quote a psychology professor at Howard University who maintains that much of the research – including the "doll tests" – exaggerated the importance of skin color. He alleges that "[t]here is a great deal of folklore surrounding this research" and that in reality "Black people, when asked to make judgements about complexions tend to prefer something in the middle of the color range" (182). This claim, obviously, stands in contrast to the history of color prejudice dating back to slavery, which is well-documented and mentioned elsewhere in the article.

Compared to the unambiguous verdict in the headline, the attentive reader realizes that color preferences in the Black community are not yet entirely an issue of the past. There is, at best, a "declining significance of skin color in Black America" (180), a term *Ebony* perhaps borrowed from William Julius Wilson's book *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). It is, however wishful thinking on behalf of the magazine to consider this a "faded" issue, like a caption suggests (178). Moreover, if skin color had really ceased to make a difference there would have been no need for the final appeal to parents, which is similar to the one in 1984: "[W]e must impress upon our children that we are just a unique people … if you're taught that at a very young age … there won't be any discrimination against one another. … We have to fight the entire world. We don't need to fight one another" (184). Invoking the metaphor RACISM / COLORISM IS WAR once again speaks to the importance of race unity, which is required in light of what are seen as the more important problems of racism in society. In the end, however, this somewhat simplifies the issue because it presents colorism merely as a divisive issue inherent in the community, rather than the very result of racism in the overall society. While awareness and education among Black people are indeed ways to stop the color complex from being perpetuated, it is the larger society that needs to change. As long as sociological research continues to show advantages tied to light skin (see chapter 2.2), colorism will continue to exist, although *Ebony* – for reasons that remain opaque – chose to think differently in 1988.

The magazine's premature verdict that skin color was no longer important was revoked in March 1992 when *Ebony* published "Why Skin Color Suddenly Is a Big Issue Again." A closer analysis of this article reveals that the discursive context seems to be a combination of what is widely considered a conservative backlash of the 1980s' "increasing racial and economic tensions" throughout America (120). Retrospectively, the comment on mounting racial tensions could be regarded as an almost uncanny premonition, because less than two months after the March issue of *Ebony* hit the newsstands the Los Angeles Riots occurred. The jury acquittal of four white officers from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in the beating of African American motorist Rodney King brought thousands of people to the streets, resulted in fifty dead and more than 2,300 injured (see Hughey 2007, 376-385). Of course, the *Ebony* article in March referred to tensions prior to that event,

caused in part by the economic recession in the early 1980s and the cuts in social programs during the years of the Reagan administration. All this helped to create a somewhat changed political climate, which is described with the collective symbol of a dangerous, threatening flood: "[T]he new *wave* of conservatism that *swept* through the country … brought with it a return of negative messages about race and color" ("Why Skin Color Suddenly Is a Big Issue Again", 121, my emphasis).[209] Two pictures accompanying the article underscore this claim: For one, there is a photograph of a Ku Klux Klan member clad in white sheets and burning crosses in the background, with the caption mentioning a "resurgence of hate groups" (121). This visually reinforces the notion of a threat that is brought about by the aforementioned conservatism and racist backlash.

The second image, according to the caption, shows "the country's economic downturn" (121). This is symbolized by a long line of people, Black and white alike, who had allegedly been waiting "for hours in freezing weather" to apply for a job at a new hotel in Chicago (121). The connection to increased *intra*-racial tensions is explained by sociologist Cedric Herring who maintains that "in bad economic times people make all kinds of distinctions among themselves" (122). According to the author, stereotypes in film and other media which purport that "dark is evil" only intensify these negative messages. Lastly, Black music videos that glorify fair-skinned women are listed as a "fairly accurate barometer of trends in popular culture" (121). In contrast, the author sees progress in the regular nomination of dark-skinned campus queens (121) as well as the "predominance of darker-skinned role models and power models on the national scene" (120). Examples are given from the realms of entertainment (Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, and Wesley Snipes), sports (Michael Jordon), and the high fashion and modeling industry (Naomi Campbell, Iman). Additionally, *Ebony* mentions the trend to promote an "ethnic" look in mainstream America, symbolized by full lips and tanned skin.[210]

All this, however, merely shows that beauty standards are being slightly broadened, not altered, with the exceptions always proving the rule. This does not

[209] See chapter 1.2.4 for a more detailed description of the historical context of the 1980s and Reagan's popular story of the Black "welfare queen."
[210] With this trend it is important to consider that the idea for white people is to look "exotic," but definitely not "Black."

mean that negative images of dark skin have vanished. Quite the opposite, as the article demonstrates. It starts, for example, with anecdotal evidence of a family whose self-described "enlightened, Afrocentric" mother came to realize her hidden color prejudices when looking at pictures that she thought showed her as "too dark" (120).[211] Additionally, *Ebony* authoritatively cites its latest readers' poll, early results of which confirm Black people's continued belief in light-skin privilege, even in their own community. One area where this manifests itself is adoption, as Black couples at the time of the article's publication purportedly "express an overwhelming preference for light-complexioned or mixed-race children" (121). Apart from the adoption issue cited in the text, another discursive "event" is the increased scholarly interest in colorism in the early 1990s, as shown in the numerous sociological and psychological studies cited in the article. To mention but one example, *The Color Complex* came out in 1992 (Russell, Wilson, and Hall). An intertextual reference to that book in *Ebony* shows that this release was a likely, although certainly not the only, reason for the magazine to work on a feature story on colorism that same year.

Like previous articles, this one also ends with appeals for unity, self-love, and resistance. Again, the need to openly talk about colorism rather than sweeping it under the rug to be able to "lay it to rest once and for all" is emphasized (122). Only through communication, as one psychologist insists, is it possible to understand the effects of colorism on members of the Black community and heal the afflicting wounds. This includes what *Ebony* calls "proactive intervention," such as using ethnic dolls in child therapy or making parents aware of their own color issues (122). The goal is to "combat this syndrome" (122), which is an interesting conflation of the metaphors COLORISM IS WAR and COLORISM AS (psychological) DISEASE. Extending the theory of collective symbols in critical discourse analysis mentioned in chapter 3.1.4, this could be called a catachresis or fusion of two collective symbols (Jäger and Maier 2009, 47-48). One is derived from the semantic field of war, that of the necessity to fight or *combat* colorism. The other is described by means of a word from the semantic field of medicine, more specifically of diseases. There, colorism is labeled as a *syndrome*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary*

[211] The fact that this woman is also described as "college-educated" suggests she and her family are members of the middle class. Although this article briefly mentions economic tensions, it is not the lower classes that are addressed here. Rather, the feature seems to speak to the challenges the Black middle class is facing, which is another argument for the theory that "Black America" in *Ebony* is a homogeneous group that does not include the poor.

defines as "[a] concurrence of several symptoms in a disease" ("syndrome, n."). Often used in the realm of psychology, the color complex – with *complex* being another allusion to a (mental) disease or disorder – is seen as a syndrome that manifests itself in what Elena Featherston also called the "disease" of colorism (1994, ii).

The concept of self-love is visually strengthened by pictures of Black dolls, among them three examples from Matell's "Shani" line. On the opposite page, however, a full-page ad for "Vantex Skin Bleaching Creme" (123) could not be more contradictory to the message of all shades of Black being beautiful. The ad shows a fair-skinned African American woman whose already light skin is even more accentuated by her Black hair and light pink lipstick, which is the same color as the lettering for "Fashion Fair Cosmetics" on top of the page. The slogan "For an even-toned glow …" is written in white letters, just like the jar with the cream itself, which underscores the image of skin whitening. Comparing the Shani dolls with the model used in the Vantex ad, the model's face looks just as doll-like, which is probably the effect of digital photo retouching, yet it is the dolls' skin tone that is darker (see appendix, page 247).

Eight years later *Ebony* decided to once again revisit skin color in a large-scale feature story. In doing so it reiterated the question posed already in 1984, albeit in slightly altered form. The headline no longer asked "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?," but exchanged one word for another, thus turning the *problem* into an *issue*: "Is Skin Color Still an Issue in Black America?" (Bennett Kinnon April 2000). This might seem an insignificant change on the surface, particularly because in everyday speech the two words are often used interchangeably, yet there are subtle differences in meaning: A problem usually has a definite solution. It can and should be (re-)solved, as in the dictionary definition of "a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome, harmful, or wrong and needing to be overcome; a difficulty" ("problem, n.") An issue, by contrast, has less obvious solutions, may be debatable and/or controversial, and is defined, among other things, as "a choice between alternatives, a dilemma" ("issue, n."). The article is therefore appropriately placed in a section called "Controversy" in the magazine's table of contents, whereas all three articles previously analyzed were placed under the rubric of "Race." In comparison to the other articles, there also seems to be less concrete advice on how

to overcome the "issue," with the common ground only being that African Americans "really need to get over it" (Bennett Kinnon, 56).

Despite these differences, several similarities to previous articles also exist. Although discursive events are entirely missing this time, the discourse strands of beauty, identity, and status are employed throughout the article. Additionally, author Joy Bennett Kinnon uses several intertextual references, from poems to songs to proverbs, all drawing on traditions from Black literature and music: The article opens with a line from Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem Sweeties," which is a tribute to the rainbow beauty of Black women. This is followed by quoting the title of a song in celebration of brown-skinned women by Eubie Blake ("If you haven't been vamped by a brownskin, you haven't been vamped at all"). Lastly, Bennett Kinnon mentions the ultimate proverb for loving Blackness, which allegedly dates back to the early slave poets who sang, "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" (52).

In contrast to all these expressions of self-love, the *Ebony* editor recites the mocking children's rhyme "If you're White, you're all right. If you're brown, stick around, but if you're Black, get back" (52). The author claims that it was this "childhood poem" that resonated for many African Americans in the twentieth century. Asking the question as to whether this changed at all, Bennett Kinnon posits that skin color has lost some of its significance, but still remains "a hidden and dangerous issue": "[It] is shouted in letters to the editor, whispered softly in clubs and coffee bars, at poetry slams and casinos, at church fellowship and funeral repasts. It is the family secret that won't go away" (52). People would still know the meanings of the "hushed murmurings of high-yellow and redbone, high-brown, medium brown, and blue-black" (52). The mere fact that she does not need to explain any of these terms in the article and assumes that *Ebony's* readers would understand this "code speak" probably proves her right. This "inner language of skin color, shade and variation," as Bennett Kinnon calls it (54), can therefore be seen as part of the Black community's very own system of collective symbols. It can be assumed that several of these terms are unknown to non-Black people, possibly because they are not publicly used. All this relates to the claim of colorism being a race secret, and something that is not considered appropriate to be addressed in public American dis-

course. This does not necessarily mean, however, that it is "taboo" because, as the many articles in *Ebony* show, it is talked and written about, just not in the presence of white people.

Oft-consulted expert Alvin F. Poussaint is again the major voice of authority, essentially agreeing with Bennett Kinnon by saying that "color hang ups … still persist, but not as acutely or severely as … in years past" (54). He continues to see it as more of an issue for women, which is expressed in both the prevalence of light-skinned female dancers in music videos, as well as in the recurring trend for straight(ened) hair among Black women (56). The continuous preference for Caucasian standards relates to the notion of "comfort" when it comes to white Americans. This is expressed by a relationship therapist who claims that "people who look less African are more likely to make White Americans more comfortable to be around" (54). Looking back at the previous chapter, this is a notion that has been repeatedly expressed in *Ebony* articles on skin color.

Just like in the May 1988 feature, members of fraternities and sororities are also quoted in the April 2000 feature, essentially agreeing with Poussaint and other "experts". They all maintain that skin color is of declining significance in the Black community and that there is no need for additional divisions, as racism in the larger society would already be divisive enough: "[W]e can't change our skin color. We are all Black people no matter what hue, and we need to start to look at ourselves as a collective body as opposed to trying to find ways to divide ourselves [which is] done by enough other people" (56). In light of this statement about not being able to change one's skin color, *Ebony's* ad for "Vantex Skin Bleaching Creme" (147) once again expresses the magazine's apparently ambiguous approach to skin color discourse. Although not suggesting that skin color can be changed – the language in cosmetic ads has changed to refer to merely treating "skin discolorations" that can be "faded" – the mere fact that the product still carries the word "bleaching" in its name should be considered significant ("Vantex Skin Bleaching Creme", April 2000, 147). As two dermatologists claim in a beauty guide on ethnic skin, while today's "fade creams" are advertised to get rid of dark marks, "many people buy these

creams and soaps in a futile and dangerous attempt to change their skin color" (Downie, Cook-Bolden, and Nevins Taylor 2004, 104).[212]

4.3.2 Visualizing the Complex: Hierarchies and Ambivalences

Closely analyzing magazine articles with regards to the discourse of skin color also requires a focus on any visual elements present. After all, *Ebony* has always seen itself as a "picture magazine" ("Great Pictures from Ebony", November 1980, 94). It can be regarded as a glossy consumer monthly that constantly offers visual representations to its readers. Skin color as an inherently visual element is, of course, not just represented in a written form but also in a visual way in articles on the subject. In other words, the editors of the four feature articles closely studied in the previous section, by necessity, also had to find ways to visualize the relevance (or irrelevance) of the skin color "problems" or "issues" in the Black community about which they were writing. Visualizations of colorism among African Americans, as represented in *Ebony*, can thus reveal a lot about the overall discourse of skin color in the Black community.

Image analysis, as the British media scholar Nick Lacey maintains, moves away from passively consuming images to an active act of "reading" them (1998, 14). In the context of the visual analysis that is to follow in this section, the focus is on "reading" recurring patterns and tropes in the images and photographs used. Additionally, an attempt is made to interpret contradictions in both the visual and the written representation of the discourse of skin color.[213]

[212] Interestingly, this guide was also advertised in *Ebony* (May 2006, 30).
[213] An abbreviated visual cultural analysis of these four *Ebony* articles is included in a German collection of essays on visual culture. The original German title of the essay is "'Light vs. Dark': Eine visuelle Analyse der Bedeutung von Hautfarbe in der afroamerikanischen Zeitschrift *Ebony*" (which could be translated into English as "'Light vs. Dark': A Visual Analysis of the Meaning of Skin Color in the African American Magazine *Ebony*"). The essay collection is tentatively titled *Klagenfurter Beiträge zu visueller Kultur* (roughly translated into English as *Contributions to Visual Culture from Klagenfurt*). It is edited by Jörg Helbig, Arno Russegger, and Rainer Winter (Cologne: von Halem, forthcoming 2012).

IS SKIN COLOR STILL A PROBLEM IN BLACK AMERICA?

Experts say Blacks must bring subject out into the open and deal with it honestly

FAST-MOVING headline events, including divorce petitions, adoption cases and a heated debate over the color or lack of color of Black beauty pageant contestants, have brought to the surface long-simmering issues about the continuing relevance of skin color in Black America.

To the surprise of some auditors, who believed the question had been laid to rest in the "Black is Beautiful" days of the '60s, newspapers and magazines have been deluged with letters to the editor, and a number of groups have circulated petitions on both sides of the issue. As if things weren't complicated enough, there have been counter-charges from light-skinned Blacks who say they have been discriminated against because they were *too* light.

It is obvious from all this that skin color is still a sensitive, emotional and divisive issue in the Black community. No less obvious is the urgent need, emphasized by psychiatrists and sociologists interviewed for this article, for Black Americans to bring the issue out into the open and deal with it honestly.

The roots of the problem, according to these experts, are the intolerable psychological pressures of a racist society which bombard Black Americans with media messages that suggest, day in and day out, that to be beautiful is to be fair-skinned and blue-eyed with long, straight hair. More ominously, the society offers tangible rewards to Blacks who meet White society's idea of what a Black ought to be. Black America was again reminded of this dynamic when fair-skinned, green-eyed Vanessa Williams was chosen as the first Black woman to win the "Miss America" title. Causing even more furor among critics was the fact that her successor, Suzette Charles, was also fair-skinned.

What all this means, noted Harvard University psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint says, is that skin color is still a problem in Black America because racism is still a problem in White America. "In a racist caste system," he says, "the blacker you are, the more you are demeaned. Within the Black community, there has always been a caste system, with the lighter-skinned Blacks having more status, more prestige and being more acceptable to White people. This is still true today, though to a lesser extent."

By way of illustration, we can cite the case of Lesley Cresson, who grew up in New York City with a keen awareness of the importance of skin color. When she was about 10, she overheard her father tell an uncle, "Lesley will have to go to school so she'll be able to take care of herself because dark girls like her have a hard time finding a husband."

Lesley, the darkest child in a family where skin hues include very fair shades, did indeed go to college and is able to take care of herself rather well as editorial director for WCBS-TV in New York. A few years ago, she also married physician Rodger Fraser, though she admits, with a chuckle, that her fairer-skinned sister married at a much younger age.

Given these and other perceptions and problems, it is scarcely surprising that some Blacks succumb to societal pressures and judge themselves and others by the external standards of White America. What is surprising, and worthy of long thought, is that so many Blacks have maintained a sense of self-esteem and balance in the face of the cruel and violent conditioning of more than 400 years of American history.

At the very beginning of that history, many fair-skinned Blacks were created by large-scale mingling and the marriage of Blacks and Whites. Contrary to the generally accepted view, many of these fair-skinned Blacks were the products of the unions of Black males and White females. With the rise of the plantation system and the institutionalization of racism, the focus shifted to the White planters and their allies who played a major—and violent—role in increasing the number of fair-skinned Blacks. In succeeding years, the number of mixed Blacks increased not only because of additional Black-White unions but also because of the union of mixed Blacks and unmixed Blacks and Blacks and Indians. The grand outcome was a thoroughly mixed Black population. By 1930, according to one authoritative study, 70 to 80 percent of Black Americans had White or Indian ancestors.

The existence of Blacks with different skin tones was not a problem. The problem was—and still is—a social system that institutionalized color con-

Illustration 2: "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?" (from *Ebony* December 1984, 66-67)

The first of the four articles ("Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?" December 1984) is fairly straight-forward in its visual representation of skin color politics. Portraits of people interviewed in the text appear in black-and-white, as this was before *Ebony* was fully printed in color (see illustration 2). Apart from the differences in skin tone that are apparent among individuals, there is little in the visual representation that speaks to skin color. Of note is that on the first two-page spread, women, one dark-skinned and one light-skinned, are placed as if directly opposing each other at the center-fold. From reading the caption it becomes clear that these are the two women whose personal stories about intra-racial problems with skin color are mentioned in the text. Looking directly at the reader, they represent the two different "camps" of light and dark skin that are discussed in the feature story. Their rather serious facial expressions are in line with the approach taken in the article, which is classifying skin color as a potential "problem." Overall, everything in this visual representation seems to be consistent with the apparent intention of the text, which is to address some problems of the "battle" between "light vs. dark" in Black America.

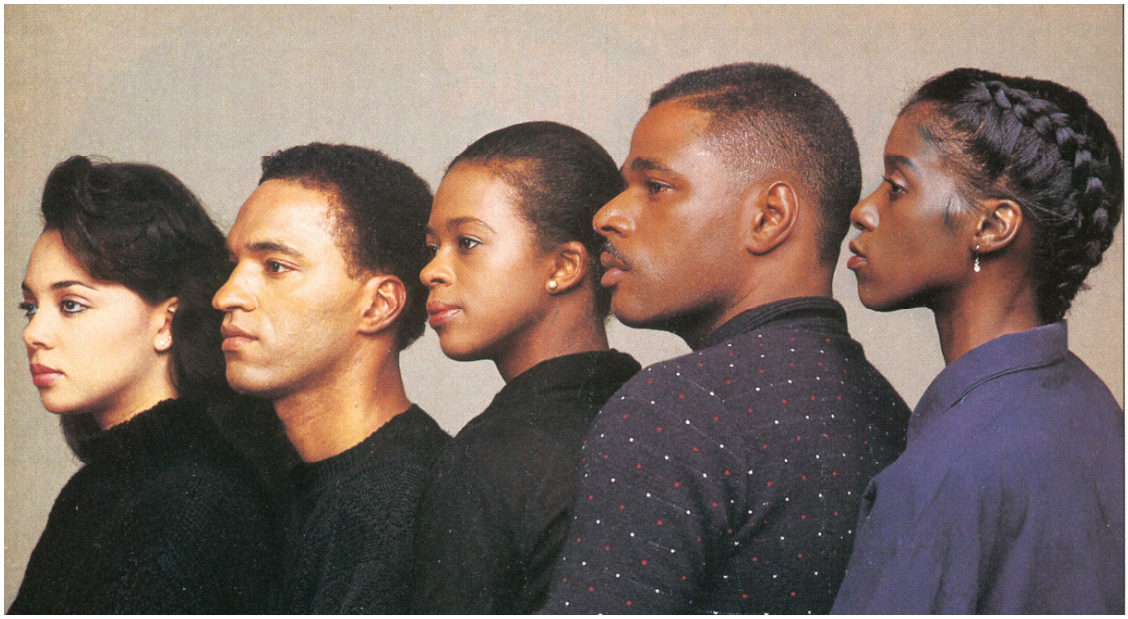

Illustration 3: "Why Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference" (from *Ebony* May 1988, 178)

By contrast, the May 1988 feature seemingly intended to convince readers that "Skin Color No Longer Makes a Difference," as the headline claimed. The opening image (see illustration 3) shows five African Americans, three women and two men, who, to use a phrase from the article itself, "run the gamut of complexions" (182). This is obviously a posed picture, possibly created specifically for the *Ebony* article but perhaps simply taken from a stock photo agency or image bank. It shows all five models photographed looking sideways to the left. Their heads and shoulders appear to be almost touching, they all wear more or less high-necked dark shirts, and their facial expressions are quite serious. The fact that they encompass different shades of skin color seems in accordance with the headline, which suggests that skin color has become irrelevant in the Black community. Moreover, all of the models are looking in the same direction, which additionally supports the notion that the metaphorical battle between "light vs. dark" is over. With the image placed on a left page of the magazine readers also get the impression that the models are looking "out" of *Ebony*, perhaps into the larger American society. There is no visual effect of them opposing each other, which is why the Black people on the photograph appear to be united, possibly against the outside racist world. Looking more closely, however, the visual representation seems to subtly contradict the

message of skin color being irrelevant. Critical viewers cannot help but notice a distinct hierarchy from the lightest (the woman on the far left) to the darkest (the woman on the far right). Apart from the very light skin color, the woman on the left also exhibits other desired "white" beauty ideals, such as almost straight "good" hair and a thin pointy nose. This visual "rank ordering" invites the interpretation that skin color hierarchies have not ceased to matter and that certain people are worth more than others.

One could even say that the color hierarchy in the photograph is reminiscent of the iconic representation of "The Babylonian Marriage Market," an oil on canvas painting by the Victorian painter Edwin Long (see illustration 4). The 1875[214] painting shows a similar, although exclusively female, hierarchy, with young women sitting on the floor waiting to be "auctioned" into marriage. Most strikingly, they are all ranked according to their skin tone. As such, the painting is reminiscent of a sexualized slave auction and represents a "Western" view of the "Orient." It can be taken as an example of what Edward Said coined as "Orientalism," in other words the idea of the "East" in Western culture (Said 1978). Stuart Hall, who includes Long's painting in his essay "The Spectacle of the 'Other'," sees this obviously sexualized representation of women from right to left as arranged "in ascending order of 'whiteness'" (1997, 260). The near-white complexion of the woman on the far left is all the more accentuated by the mirror into which she gazes. It reflects light on her face, thereby making her complexion appear even lighter. It is clear that she is next in line to be sold, implying her higher status that seems to be attached to her light skin color. In other words, the women with lighter skin are more desired, which is why they are sold first. In contrast to the light-skinned woman on the far left, the woman on the right possesses the most undesired physical qualities, including "Negroid" features such as dark skin, broad lips, and a wide nose (see Pinder 2002, 125-126). Fair skin in the painting thus signifies a prized possession and genuine "social capital," just like it does in Western society. Concurrently, Hall sees the visual hierarchy in the painting as "an example of Orientalism in visual representation" (1997, 260).

[214] The date of origin for the nineteenth-century painting is sometimes listed as 1882 (see Pinder 2002, 125).

Illustration 4: Edwin Long "The Babylonian Marriage Market" (1875) (from Wikimedia Commons)

Although taken from an entirely different cultural context, a similar impression is created by the hierarchy of the five Black people on the photograph printed in *Ebony*. Just as in Long's painting, the woman with the lightest skin tone (and Caucasian facial features) leads an imaginary line in which the woman with the darkest complexion comes last. Translating this for an American social reality, one could say that Black people with lighter skin tone are put in line first. What this means is that they are more accepted in society and enjoy a higher social status. All this, one could argue, is implied by the rank-ordering on the picture. Hall's argument could thus be appropriated here to claim that the photograph in *Ebony* is an example not of Orientalism but of *colorism* in visual representation. This is significant because it is the opposite of what *Ebony* seems to have wanted to convey with its headline. Only a random order of the models on the *Ebony* photograph, however, would have supported the claim that "skin color no longer makes a difference." While there is no way of retrospectively telling whether this ambiguity was intended, or simply escaped the editor's notice, one thing becomes apparent: The discourse of skin color is a complex issue, and any representation – whether of visual or written nature – is potentially subject to the dominant color discourse in West-

ern thought. Put differently, the Western "idea" of skin color, just like people's "idea" of the Orient, colors people's perceptions of the world.

Why Skin Color Suddenly Is A Big Issue Again

Increasing racial and economic tensions and unresolved identity problems cited as factors

IT was a telling moment in the personal history of one Black household. While arranging snapshots in the family keepsake album, a young, college-educated wife and mother, paused disgustedly at a series of recently taken black and white photographs in which she was prominently featured.

"I really don't like these," she said to her husband as she studied the pictures. "They make me look so . . ." She hesitated, in a futile attempt to find a word that would blunt her meaning. ". . . Well, so dark!"

A surprised hush fell over the room, as the full weight of the admission was absorbed. For a couple that prided themselves on their exaltation of Black culture, the fact that any member of their family would recoil at appearing "too dark" was an unsettling disclosure, even to the young woman making the confession.

"I never thought of myself as being really color-conscious," says the 30-year-old mid-brown-complexioned mother of two, who asked that her name not be disclosed. "If anything, I've always thought of myself as an enlightened, Afrocentric person who considered all Black people beautiful. That's what I've tried to teach my children. But it just goes to show how ingrained some of this stuff is."

"This stuff" is the resurgence of the skin color issue that Black America had, to a large degree, laid to rest during the consciousness-raising efforts of a generation ago.

There has been constant pressure around this issue, but that pressure changes in different periods and has changed enormously since the turn of the century when light-skinned Blacks occupied almost all positions of power and were the reigning elite in Black America.

Today, one can point proudly to the predominance of darker-skinned role models and power models on the national scene, including Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, John Jacob, Michael Jordan and Wesley Snipes.

Similarly, the growing popularity of the "ethnic" look (tanned skin, voluptuous lips) and the ubiquitous presence of brown-skinned high fashion models such as Naomi Campbell and Iman are

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EBONY • March 1992

Illustration 5: "Why Skin Color Suddenly Is a Big Issue Again" (from *Ebony* March 1992, 120)

While the opening image of the 1988 article was an actual photograph, the main image on the opening page of the March 1992 article in *Ebony* is a graphic representation of an abstract face silhouette, reminiscent of rather simple computer-generated clip art. It is divided into five equally wide vertical elements that are colored differently in an attempt to signify different shades of color. The color gradations range from black on the very left to yellow on the very right of the picture. This once again implies a clear hierarchy, but this time from dark to light. The silhouette appears gender-neutral, which could be read as skin color being an "issue" for both men and women. What makes it recognizable as a face is just the outer shape of a human head because the headline is written where actual facial features, such as eyes, nose, and mouth, should have been. The differently colored "stripes" create an obvious allusion to different shades of skin tone, even though they appear

as a rather plain illustration in today's world of modern computer graphics. For the early 1990s, however, this was probably already a more advanced picture given the limited technological possibilities of the time.

The fact that this is a graphic image and not an actual photograph of a human face implies abstractness, but also anonymity. This goes in line with the woman quoted in the article who admitted to being color-struck but wanted to remain anonymous with her account. The text tells us that she "asked that her name not be disclosed" (120), which implies that being color-conscious is something that is neither socially desired nor accepted. Additionally, looking at the picture, one can probably not help but think of a "caste system," and "skin color stratification," which are two common labels for colorism. However, by just taking the image with the headline and without knowing the exact context of the article, the meaning remains ambiguous. In other words, without the context readers cannot know whether the article itself is about racism or colorism, and the headline could be a reference to both, which brings to mind that the two "isms" are very much interrelated in the first place.

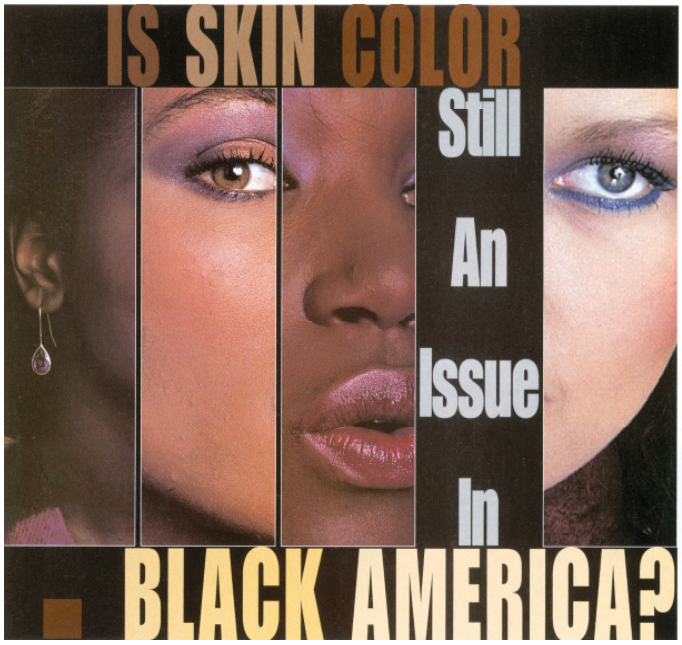

Illustration 6: "Is Skin Color Still an Issue in Black America?" (from *Ebony* April 2000, 52)

Last but not least, the opening image on the first page of the fourth article is what could be seen as a twenty-first-century photographic version of the fragmented face "clip art" from 1992. It shows parts of four Black women's faces, cropped and placed next to each other in four equally wide stripes. This gives the illusion of one Black female face that consists of a "collage" of several different images. Each photograph shows different parts of a woman's face: parts of an ear, two differently colored eyes which are both highlighted by make-up, as well as a picture detail of a nose and mouth with full lips in the center of the collage. To intensify the notion of fragmentation even more, the pictures are "interrupted" by text. That way, parts of the headline "Is Skin Color Still an Issue in Black America?," form their own "stripe" and thus appear as part of the collage of cropped images. What is important is that each of the fragments is of a woman with a different skin tone, the darkest being the cropped shot of the nose and mouth in the center. The absence of a color hierarchy, which was still in place in the illustration from 1992, suggests ambiguity. This is also what the article seems to want to express, by talking about progress on the one hand and lingering color preferences on the other hand.

Illustration 7: "Is Skin Color Still an Issue in Black America?," part 2 (from *Ebony* April 2000, 54)

Even more interesting than the fragmented face on the opening page is the image on the second page of the article (which requires turning pages because the feature is interrupted by two full-page ads). Comparing this second photograph (see illustration 7) with the one used in 1988 (see illustration 3) it soon becomes clear that it is the same motif with the same people. Apart from the fact that it is not the exact same shot, which is seen in the slightly different facial expressions and distances between the five people, two other important differences catch the eye: For one, the five people in the photograph in 2000 do not wear any clothes, at least from what is visible in the cropped image. While their upper bodies are shown to just below the shoulder, one sees a lot more skin than on the 1988 image in which all the models wore black or dark blue shirts.

Even more striking, however, is the fact that the skin tones of all five people in the 2000 picture seem to be a lot more alike than in the "original" photograph of 1988. In other words, while the woman on the far left looked racially ambiguous and very "white" in comparison to the other four people in the 1988 picture, her skin tone appears much more "tan" and similar to that of the other models in 2000. Likewise, the skin of the woman on the far right, which was noticeably darker than that of the others in the 1988 photograph, has "faded" considerably. This makes her complexion appear much lighter than in the "original." What follows from this interpretation is that, clearly, digital touch-ups were done in 2000. This did not just

lighten people's skin tones, which is more often the case, but also darken them, as the example of the woman on the far left shows.

While the readers cannot be expected to remember the image from 1988, and would therefore likely remain oblivious to any of these changes to the "original" photograph, several open questions remain for the analyst: Did *Ebony*'s editors want to imply that skin color issues have really "faded," as the caption claimed already in 1988 when the hierarchies were still visibly present? Did they realize that the hierarchy from the photograph in 1988 suggested a rank ordering from light to dark that was reminiscent of dominant discourse? If that was the case, were the digital touch-ups an attempt to work against this hegemonic discursive representation of skin color? Or did *Ebony* just choose to alter the image to make it more aesthetically appealing for a twenty-first-century audience? Additionally, were aesthetic reasons the motive for why the models were shown without clothes? Was this done to make the image appear more modern, perhaps to "sell" some sex appeal? Or was it merely done to be able to show more skin? Conversely, was it deemed too provocative and too sensual to have the models appear with naked upper bodies in the 1980s? And, last but not least, were there really two different sets of images made in the original photo-shoot, or are the removed clothes just a result of creative twenty-first-century digital image editing technologies? All these questions are difficult, if not entirely impossible, to answer in this research context, nevertheless it is important to still keep them in mind. After all, the ambiguities in visual representation of the discourse of skin color also speak to the "complexities" of the issue, which – no pun intended – can never offer any black or white answers.

No matter what article you feature, your "Letters To The Editor" column continues to be the most telling because it informs us where we are as a people. ~ Susan McClain-Knight, Ebony *reader (1992)*

4.4 EXCURSUS: WHEN THE READER WRITES BACK

From its inception in 1945, *Ebony* has welcomed reactions from readers and devoted much space to its "Letters to the Editor" section in each issue. In a 1968 article for *Journalism Quarterly*, Paul M. Hirsch even claimed that *Ebony* was "unique in devoting so much public attention to reader response" (264). He related this to a lack of direct competition on the Black magazine market that allowed for more openness on the part of the publishers. This had two benefits for Johnson Publications: On the one hand it could – and often did – assure *Ebony*'s readers that their opinion was valued and had a possible influence on future content of the magazine. With letters to the editor, private citizens gain "access to the public sphere" (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2009, 239) and become part of a public discourse that they help to shape. This is important, because readers get the impression that their voices will not only be heard but also potentially have an impact, both on *Ebony*'s pages and beyond. On the other hand, including a large number of letters in every issue was a good selling point among advertisers who were made to believe that *Ebony* was "customer-oriented" and "reflects the interests, desires, and aspirations" of its audience, as one advertising circular from the early 1960s stated (qtd. in Hirsch 1968, 264).

Examining letters to the editor generally allows for making comments about a diverse group of people that has one thing in common: The readers who wrote these letters were compelled by a certain intrinsic motivation to share their thoughts on editorial content of "their" magazine. This, of course, implies that the issues they wrote about were of great importance to them, otherwise they would not have taken the time and effort to write in the first place. Hence, letters to the editor become a means to reflect on social reality and discursive knowledge at different moments in time. As one reader correctly observed in the August 1992 letter section

of *Ebony*, "No matter what article you feature, your 'Letters To The Editor' column continues to be the most telling because it informs us where we are as a people" (Susan McClain-Knight, 137). While any systematic analysis of the countless letters written on skin color in *Ebony* would have gone beyond the scope of this research project, they are too important an aspect to be left unaddressed. Thus, the comments in this brief "excursus" are merely on exemplary trends identified while performing a detailed analysis of *Ebony*'s feature articles, the core focus of this dissertation. Nevertheless, this cursory glance at letters offers valuable clues for understanding how *Ebony*'s articles on skin color were "consumed" in the Black community.

There is obviously no way of analyzing the entire body of letters each article provoked. *Ebony*'s editors, necessarily, acted as gate-keepers and likely excluded a vast number of letters monthly. From those that were published, however, it seems that both critical and complimentary responses were equally welcome. Moreover, when a particularly sensitive or controversial topic was broached, the discursive echo extended for several months. Skin color and intra-racial color issues usually were "hot button" topics. While magazines often attempt to manufacture and facilitate a certain degree of consent among their readership, articles on skin color almost always bred controversy. Responses frequently came from both sides of the color continuum, and if one article focused more on the trials and tribulations of dark-skinned African Americans there was likely a critical response from a light-skinned reader who felt that the article had been one-sided (see, for example, Smith, March 1985, 18).

In looking at any arbitrary set of letters to the editor over the analyzed time period, it soon becomes apparent that readers tended to have little patience with the Black community's ongoing color complex. In numerous calls to get over it, reject white-defined standards, and finally "wake up," it becomes clear that there has been a wish to move on (see, for example, Harris, April 2008, 32; Phox, August 1990, 16). As such, these letters form an integral part of what could be called "community building" and strengthening the bonds of racial unity.

Studying how the reader "writes back" also offers insights into the interaction between a popular magazine and its readership, which can ultimately impact editorial content and the magazine's treatment of matters of skin color. This became visible in some of *Ebony*'s feature stories, which pointed to the fact that there was a prolonged discussion of certain skin color issues among readers. Such references served the magazine's editors as one legitimate reason to once again pick up the discourse of skin color in its journalistic content. This was done in an attempt to appear responsive to readers' opinions and to address some of the "hot button" topics in the community. As discussed in previous chapters, one such topic was Vanessa Williams as the first Black Miss America, which was followed by heated discussions in the magazine's "Letters" pages. The argument in the letters centered on whether Williams was "Black enough" in terms of physical appearance to represent genuine progress in white America's public acceptance of Black people. One reader in the February 1984 issue openly criticized the judges' choice by claiming that "Vanessa Williams is proof that the old 1940s and 1950s standards of what is an 'acceptable Negro' to the White race still exists. The day of skin bleach and light-skinned Blacks who could go either way has dawned once more" (Jackson, 10). Equally outspoken was another reader in the same issue who commented on what she called "our so-called Black Miss America": "I have a color TV, and she was so close to White you could barely tell the difference. … [W]hen Blacks finally achieve something, you can bet your last dollar that they will be 'high yellow' to White, long straight hair, with green or very light eyes" (Massie, 10-11).

Despite the overwhelming disapproval reflected in the letters – not necessarily of Williams as a person but of the white jury's selection of her – some readers also came to Williams's defense. They either praised her beauty, emphasizing that her fair skin did not make her any less "Black," or pointed out that light-complexioned African Americans were also negatively affected by the prejudice resulting from colorism. One reader, for example, asked: "Are 'fair-skinned' Blacks to be condemned, to feel ashamed, less proud, less worthy for something beyond their control? … Three cheers to Vanessa Williams. Fair-skinned Blacks have been subjected far too long to prejudices within their own race" (Young, February 1984, 11). Other readers, by contrast, used this moment to appeal to "their" Black community to get over white-imposed hierarchies and recognize that "the beauty of our race is

the rainbow of colors" (Stovall, March 1984, 17). Overall, the attention that Williams's case received in *Ebony*'s letters section contributed to the fact that her winning of the title became a discursive event. As mentioned, the magazine responded to these letters by subsequently including two multi-page feature articles asking, "What is Black Beauty?" (June 1984), and "Is Skin Color Still a Problem in Black America?" (December 1984), thereby extending the public discussion on skin color.

In general, when looking at letters to the editor on the issue of skin color, three dominant discourse strands seem to stand out: an identity discourse, an interpersonal discourse, and an intra-racializing "beauty" discourse. On a personal level, the identity discourse is the most prominent. It addresses aspects of the readers' own racial identity, with self-perception often being shaped by a conflict between a definition by others and a definition of self. Letters that center on the identity discourse may serve as a means to share deeply personal, often hurtful, experiences from growing up Black– whether light-skinned or of a darker hue. Darker-skinned readers, for example, often reported taunts and slurs relating to their physical appearance of being "too black." One reader wrote that she long thought her name was "Blackie" because that was what her mother constantly called her (Epps, May 1992, 12). Lighter-skinned readers, in turn, write about similar experiences based on their not being accepted in the Black community, as they were perceived simply as "not Black enough." One example is found in *Ebony*'s August 1988 issue: "From kindergarten through junior college I was called names such as 'yaller gal,' and 'half-breed'" (Tolbert, August 1988, 13).

By contrast, some readers also report on positive experiences in their own homes and tell stories about loving mothers or other family members who would try to instill a positive sense of Black identity in their children, despite Eurocentric beauty standards in the larger society (see, for example, Wilson, March 1985, 20). It is the emphasis of self-definition and self-love on the one hand, and the disapproval of letting other people define this self, on the other hand, that form the bedrock of these letters on identity. Often, the personal stories are followed by an appeal to the entire community and a call for unity and pride in what readers frequently call "the spectrum of the rainbow" (Jones, 10). One such example is from the June 2008 issue of *Ebony*, in which Linda Ellis wrote that "[w]e as Black people need to stick

together, love one another, no matter what shade of Black, or brown we are. … God made us beautiful. Whether we are dark or light. The shade of our skin should not matter" (22).

The second important discourse that stood out is the interpersonal discourse, which is characterized by a focus on relationships between Black men and Black women. This includes the complexities that arise when skin color is perceived to be involved in the choice of a sexual partner. Frequently, Black female readers accuse Black men of being only attracted to light-skinned women with long, straight hair. In "A Message for Black Men", Helena Askins, a self-described dark-skinned Black woman, issues a strong appeal with regards to interpersonal relationships:

> Black men who think ebony skin is ugly, open your eyes to the beauty of Blackness! … You should get your act together for you are promoting prejudice within your own race. It is bad enough to experience prejudice from Whites, but the utmost insult is experiencing it from a Black man. (September 1984, 17)

Clearly, this reader sees the personal act of choosing a potential spouse as decidedly political, which is reminiscent of the slogan "the personal is political."[215] Again, one can see the purpose of this letter as a call directed beyond the scope of the magazine's readers to the entire community.

Finally, on a more abstract level, yet still affiliated with self perception, is the intra-racializing "beauty" discourse. It tackles Black perceptions of beauty that are, on the one hand, informed by a dominant white culture, but, on the other hand, can be seen in the oppositional discourse that evaluates "authentic" Blackness based on factors that are often only skin-deep. This is observed, for example, when readers pose questions as to what Black beauty is and voice disapproval of certain cover pages in *Ebony* or rankings of the "most beautiful" Black women, which feature only women of a certain appearance. One example is from the October 1987 issue of *Ebony* when a female reader questions the choice of the "Ten Most Beautiful Black Women" from July 1987: "Why is it that the majority of 'Blacks' tend to think that beauty is only the so-called 'light-skinned'[?]" (18).

[215] This phrase, although allegedly originating in the (white) women's movement, also came to be used in the African American Civil Rights Movement and the Black Feminist Movement.

Ultimately, reader responses in *Ebony* range from the deeply personal to the profoundly analytical – and thereby political. This shows that the slogan, "the personal is political," rings just as true as the fact that once awareness and consciousness are raised, it does not always require the view of an authority, such as a psychologist or sociologist, to adequately analyze the racialization and commodification of beauty in Black America. When readers "write back," they are themselves capable of contributing to the education of their community as well as to the shaping of the discourse of skin color. That there are always a variety of conflicting discourse strands surfacing in these letters demonstrates that – until this day – skin color gradations need to be openly discussed and *Ebony*'s readers are quite willing to contribute to that discussion.

The legacy of the past – of conquest, slavery, racial dictatorship and exclusion – may no longer weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living, but it still lingers like a hangover or a sleepless night that has left us badly out of sorts. ~ Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994)

Hue-based hierarchy, of course, is ancient — and also very modern. ~ Karen Grigsby Bates (2012)

CONCLUSION: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME?

In *The Color Complex* (1992) Russell, Wilson, and Hall pointed out that "[i]n our media-driven culture, print and visual imagery inevitably mirror and promote the same color prejudices that are found in our larger society" (135). As the previous chapters have shown, this also applies to one of the very outlets that is committed to race unity and a positive portrayal of the Black self. *Ebony*, the longest-standing and one of the most influential African American monthly magazines in the United States, has always claimed to have emphasized and celebrated the "rainbow beauty" of Black people. At the end of the day, however, it is still a consumer magazine subject to economic pressures in a capitalist society. This includes a dependency on advertising revenue in order to stay in print. The implication of this is that even though the magazine's editorial content heralded Black beauty in all its shades, some of *Ebony*'s advertising content has consistently been featuring narrowly-defined Eurocentric standards of "white is right."

While these standards have been more and more disguised over the years, they still reflect the color prejudices that have dominated in the United States ever since the institutionalization of slavery. Until this day these standards are "sold" in *Ebony* in the form of skin bleaching and lightening creams. Although the words for describing the products have changed and cosmetics to lighten one's complexion are now sold under euphemistic labels such as "fade creams" and "dark spot remov-

ers," the message has remained the same throughout the years: anything dark is considered undesirable, and Black women in particular are expected to remove these traces of Blackness in order to be considered (more) beautiful. In other words, the significance of the old saying "If you're light you're all right … if you're Black get back" has remained.

Feature articles of *Ebony* analyzed in this study that covered a period of just over four decades (1970 – 2011) have regularly reported on the continuing significance of skin color in the United States. Contrary to what some scholars have claimed, colorism in *Ebony* cannot be considered a taboo issue at all. While it was treated as a sensitive issue, *Ebony* editors seem to have tried to portray intra-racial divisions based on skin color without fear of being accused of "airing dirty laundry." This is probably due to the fact that *Ebony*, being targeted at and mostly read by African Americans, could be regarded as a "safe" place to discuss the more sensitive issues that one would like to keep hidden from the larger society.

As such, the articles draw on both personal accounts of people who feel themselves affected by colorism and on "expert" voices who report on research performed in the field of skin color stratification. Both individual and "expert" perspectives in these articles document how light skin has continuously manifested itself as an advantage in areas such as politics and economics, education and the workplace, as well as in everyday social relations. Throughout the years, *Ebony* has alternately described this as the "problem" or "issue" of skin color in "Black America." The "Black America" that *Ebony* refers to, however, is – for the most part – a Black middle class America, the main target readership of the magazine. In other words, only what is of concern to the Black middle class is of concern to *Ebony*. The fact that – as ample research has shown – colorism is intensified among the working classes and the poor is not part of the discourse in the magazine.

A detailed examination of selected articles from a critical discourse analysis viewpoint reveals that there are three dominant and intersecting discourse strands at work. Beauty, identity, and status can be viewed as discourse strands which constitute and are constitutive of the larger discourse of skin color. Summarizing the interplay of these discourse strands in all articles under review, one could say the

following: The discourse strand of beauty draws attention to the dominance of white Eurocentric standards, but highlights Afrocentric alternatives that celebrate all shades of Black as beautiful. The discourse strand of identity juxtaposes negative identity concepts ascribed by a racist white society with positive self-defined Black identities based on self-love. Lastly, the discourse strand of status concerns itself with descriptions of aspects of success, professional and private, which are considered to be influenced by shades of skin color.

Whenever the beauty discourse is present in *Ebony*'s articles, a focus is placed on the media's perpetuation of white-defined European standards, particularly when it comes to female beauty yet. Only the mainstream media, however, are held accountable. What happens in the Black media, which are often similarly biased towards light skin color, is hardly ever discussed. The only exception is the occasional mentioning of Black music videos that seem to express the most obvious manifestations of colorism. At the same time, articles on the beauty discourse document progress, with the concept of beauty having slowly become more inclusive over the years, both in Black and white America. If we believe recent studies, "biracial" has now become the new beauty ideal (Harris 2009, 4; Penrice 15 March 2011).[216] This move away from a "white" standard to one that better reflects the realities of a twenty-first century multi-racial America, however, only extends skin color privilege to the group that is closest to those being "white." Therefore, as Margaret Hunter claims, the new beauty ideal is "simultaneously inclusive, multicultural, and new, while remaining exclusive, Eurocentric, and old" (57). In other words, while there is a trend towards a broadening of beauty ideals, this does not necessarily imply that old standards vanish, merely that they become less obvious when they are perpetuated.

As mentioned, *Ebony*'s editorial content unapologetically celebrates the "rainbow" of Blackness – an often used metaphor that has achieved the status of an intra-racial collective symbol signifying unity and race pride. *Ebony*'s advertising pages, however, continue to sell a racialized version of Black beauty that is still biased towards the lighter versions of brown. Black skin is still seen as undesirable

[216] The media have been heralding this "new global beauty" for some time now. In 1993 *Time* magazine published a special issue on multiculturalism featuring a cover of "The New Face of America" and in 2003 *Newsweek* featured an article on "The Global Makeover."

and not considered beautiful. Clearly, such advertisements are marketed in a different way than in the past. When "fade" creams and other skin lightening products are sold in *Ebony* today, Black women are assured that these products do not bleach their skin, a term that over the years has acquired negative connotations of being a "sell out" and "wanna-be-white." Consumers are merely promised that their unattractive dark spots will "fade" and their skin will become "even" and "bright." Consequently, Black women are led to believe the industry when it tells them "that they are not trying to be white, and that in fact, they are enhancing their ethnic identity" (Hunter 2005, 59). Nevertheless, the promised results of using these beauty products imply that skin color will get lighter. After all, "bright" is a synonym for "light," and "to fade" means to lose intensity in color, which all speaks to the underlying message of erasing dark skin. Of course, the aspect of agency on behalf of Black women cannot not be ignored here. As Jessica Hemmings contends, "[s]kin bleaching both upholds the desirability of whiteness and acts as an empowering gesture against oppression" (2005, 181). It is the knowledge that a lighter skin tone comes with tangible advantages in U.S. society that often motivates Black women to use these products in the first place.

The discourse strand of identity juxtaposes concepts of (negative) identities ascribed by the white hegemonic society, and a self-defined Black identity based on self-love. The latter is regarded as an outgrowth of the "Black is Beautiful" spirit of the 1960s, whereas its counterpart, self-hatred, is viewed as a remnant of ideas created by what bell hooks habitually refers to as the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (1992, 22). Such negative views date back to the early days of slavery and have been – as emphasized in the articles analyzed – often maintained by the mainstream media throughout the years. As the analysis of *Ebony* articles on the discourse of identity demonstrates, negative concepts of self often lead to deep-seated feelings of inferiority and identity complexes. The magazine tries to counter these by pointing out – with the help of authority voices such as psychologists and sociologists – that the origins for such complexes do not lie in a pathology created from within, but rather are created by the larger racist society. In other words, that the "system" is to blame for divisions rather than individuals; a system that in the United States is based on a racial order in which the state's main objective has always

been, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, to repress and exclude those that are considered "Other" (1994, 81).

Articles on the continuing (and at best only slowly declining) significance of skin color in the Black community support the notion that the "Black is Beautiful" movement has failed to have a long-lasting transformative effect on the discourses of race and skin color in the United States (see hooks 1989, 16). Nonetheless, the Black consciousness movement of the 1960s and 1970s did succeed in bringing about a range of positive identifications with being Black, something that Omi and Winant called a "*rearticulation of black collective subjectivity*" (1994, 98; original emphasis). On the flipside, however, this also led to increasing prejudice against those of a lighter hue. As a result, the frequent pre-1960s charge of being "too Black" was all too often replaced by its post-1960s version of not being "Black enough." This "policing" of Blackness, in turn, created yet another set of problems for the Black community and was often subject to discursive debate in *Ebony*. Claiming the right to call oneself Black has become an important identity issue, particularly for people of mixed descent. The need to "prove" Blackness if their phenotypic appearance makes them look racially "ambiguous" often subjects light-skinned African Americans to questions on their racial allegiance to the Black community. This makes for an extended discursive debate in the pages of *Ebony*, whose readers often demand that articles not be one-sided but address issues on both sides of the color continuum. While this debate was intensified by "dilution anxiety" based somewhat on the fear of a multi-racial census category in the 1990s, articles that look at the discourse of skin color from the point of view of light-skinned African Americans are still common today.

Status, as the final major discourse strand apparent from the analysis, addresses the very material benefits light skin color entails, both on professional and inter-personal levels. On the professional level this is explained by means of statistics that, for example, document positive correlations of lighter skin color with education, type of job, and income. Although the increasing diversity in skin tones among people in the public sphere, such as among entertainers and politicians, is often used to demonstrate progress, studies continue to show that light skin is still regarded as valuable "social capital" (Hunter, 2002). In other words, while beauty

standards have seemingly expanded, Elena Featherston's provocative assertion that "black is the most un-American color of all" (1994, iii) still holds value. This is clearly seen, for example, in articles of the 1990s in which *Ebony* reported of singers and entertainers who chose to capitalize on their biracial or multiracial heritage at the expense of relinquishing their Black identity. For some time at least, there was a trend in the entertainment world to, in effect, deny any traces of Blackness to gain a better cross-over appeal. Debates about these entertainers in the magazine's "Letters to the Editor" section often turned such stories into discursive media events, which *Ebony* used to repeatedly discuss the discourse of skin color in its editorial content.[217] When status is discussed within the private realm, articles frequently talk about light skin affecting people's chances on the dating and marriage market. Both experts and readers alike believe in the continued, although perhaps decreasing, preference of Black men for light-skinned Black women. This is but one testament to the fact that skin color is more of an issue for women, a notion that much of the coverage in *Ebony* supports as well.

Looking at all three discourse strands together, it becomes evident that they intersect and overlap on many different levels. Simply put, beauty and status are inextricably linked in a color-conscious society, and both inform people's sense of identity. Moreover, all three manifest themselves in the Black body, both on a physical level, when considering appearance, and on a psychological level, as seen in concepts of identity and status. This mediated complexion discourse displays a clear focus on the psychological dimension of the Black body. Its most prominent example is the emphasis on color consciousness negatively affecting people's identity, and subsequently – like a mental disorder – their psyche. This culminates in continuously likening colorism to a virus, a sickness, or a syndrome. On the level of the physical Black body, the focus is on beauty, which might even serve as "capital" to increase an individual's status. While *Ebony* refrains from making any such definite comments, the logical consequence of all this is that as long as the U.S. society "rewards" those with lighter skin with certain benefits, colorism will continue to exist.

[217] A close look at the singer Beyoncé might reveal similar motivations, particularly in light of a recent promotional album shoot that shows her photographed as much lighter than her natural self (see chapter 1.3.2).

Metaphors that are regularly employed in the articles under review refer to both racism and colorism as a *war* that needs to be fought, reminiscent of military discourse and calling for the need of resistance. The practice of calling colorism a virus and a sickness, or – in more psychological terms – an obsession, a syndrome, and, obviously, a veritable complex, is another example for a collective symbol used in these articles. Concurrently, colorism is often explained with the metaphor of a (psychological) *disease* that needs to be cured, thus evoking the discourse of medicine. The treatment of this disease, as the articles suggest, is based on both open discussions within the community (particularly of parents with their children) as well as a commitment towards the fight against the larger racist societal structures. These are the two major coping strategies the magazine offers to oppose the dominant discourse of skin color.

Large-scale discursive events that shape and influence the discourse of skin color in *Ebony* are rare to find. The 1983 election of Vanessa Williams as the first African American Miss America is probably the most prominent example in the past forty years. The fact that Williams is light-skinned and has green eyes had a number of African Americans voicing criticism. In the selection of Williams they saw confirmation in their belief that white America was still only accepting of Black Americans if they looked "near-white." Other events that contributed to a discursive discussion of skin color on the pages of *Ebony* were the afore-mentioned debate about a multi-racial census category, Black singers and entertainers denying their Blackness, and Spike Lee's movie *School Daze* (1988), which revived the debate about colorism in Black fraternities and sororities. Often, however, book releases and the publication of sociological and psychological research studies that *Ebony*'s editors considered of their readers' interest served as the impetus for articles. In this case, such studies were frequently used as intertextual references in an apparent attempt to give *Ebony*'s articles more credibility.

An interesting example for an event that never became discursive is the court decision *Morrow v. IRS* (1990). The first intra-racial color discrimination lawsuit never received any coverage in *Ebony*, although other media – including the *New York Times* – reported on it. Therefore, skin color as the reason to file a discrimination complaint never became part of the discourse on skin color in the mag-

azine. While the rationale for this omission on the part of *Ebony* can only remain speculative – after all, its sister magazine *JET* ran two brief articles on it – one reason could perhaps be related to *Ebony*'s firm attitude on racial unity. The implications of someone from a racial minority group suing another member of that same group as a result of intra-racial color prejudice might have been something that *Ebony*'s editors felt was too divisive for the community at that time. This becomes all the more plausible when considering the discursive context of the late 1980s that was characterized by the racial backlash of the Reagan era as well as heightened intra-racial tensions brought forward by the planned "mixed race" census category.

What remains even more conspicuous by its absence throughout the entire period studied is the discourse of physiological health. Not once, for example, do any of the articles mention skin bleaching products and their often harmful physical side effects (see Downie, Cook-Bolden, and Nevins Taylor 2004). Skin bleaching, in general, is hardly ever discussed, with only one or two marginal references in forty years. If addressed at all, it is treated as a distant issue of the past rather than something that is still of relevance. This is, however, precisely what a close look at *Ebony*'s advertising pages implies, where – as discussed before – "fade" creams are still promoted on a regular basis. Nevertheless, the editorial sections of the magazine never explicitly mention attempts to approximate one's looks to the Caucasian ideal of beauty by using cosmetic skin lighteners. This major exclusion from the discourse of skin color can hardly be considered accidental. Obviously, *Ebony*'s own stake in Fashion Fair Cosmetics, which they proudly call "[a]nother fine product from EBONY and JET" (April 2000, 147), should be viewed as one possible reason for the omission. Another related factor is *Ebony*'s dependence on advertising revenue, which accounts for certain discursive limits that protect the magazine's publishers from losing important advertising contracts with cosmetic companies. These economic pressures likely account for the fact that skin bleaching remains in the realm of the "not sayable," thereby creating ambiguities in the discourse of skin color in the magazine: While colorism in the Black community is openly discussed in the editorial content sections, the issue of skin bleaching becomes a veritable taboo and is treated as non-existent.

Taking together the editorial and advertising content, a complex set of color narratives becomes visible. The ideological orientation of the magazine is clearly towards race unity, a self-definition of (beauty) standards, and a celebration of Blackness, both on a physical and a cultural level. Nevertheless, *Ebony* started out, as founder John H. Johnson once claimed, with the goal to "make money" (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 156), and economic considerations seem to continue to drive the magazine until today. It is likely that this is the reason why critical discussions of skin bleaching products remain outside the boundaries of the "sayable," particularly since Johnson Publications owns its own cosmetic company. As a Black consumer magazine which has selling beauty as one of its goals, *Ebony* faces a somewhat difficult position. Trying to please both its consumers and its advertisers alike, it sustains ideological antagonisms in the discourse of skin color that result from wanting to express race unity on the one hand and retain advertising contracts on the other. As a result, what seems to be missing is an honest discussion about the beauty industry and the commodification of (Black) beauty. This would come with critically evaluating ads for "skin tone correctors" and "fade creams" that still appear in the magazine. Although this kind of discussion might hurt *Ebony*'s advertising sales, it would contribute to its claim of being a magazine that truly celebrates the "rainbow" of Black beauty (Johnson and Bennett Jr. 1989, 169).

Overall, an analysis of both the editorial and advertising content of *Ebony* indicates that because white society continues making distinctions based on skin shade, and, at the same time, continues to grant advantages to people with light(er) skin, Black people in the U.S. continue to be socialized with the idea of "light is right." The study at hand also shows that race is a commodity and that light skin color comes with a distinct value in U.S. society that allows upward social mobility. Using skin bleaching products can, therefore, not be seen as merely internalized racism but also as a tool to survive *with* racism. In other words, Black people using these products recognize the tangible benefits associated with lighter skin and are using their agency to live in what essentially is a racialized society.

Future studies should look at other Black popular magazines, perhaps replicating this study with *Essence*, America's first and foremost Black women's magazine. A comparative analysis of both *Ebony* and *Essence* would certainly make for

an interesting contribution to the field. Moreover, such a study is likely to offer new insights on aspects of gender, with *Essence* being targeted exclusively at Black women. More research is also needed on the intersections of colorism and Black masculinity, a much neglected area in the academic world, and perhaps also still a taboo issue in the Black community. Based on a cursory glance at articles in *Essence*, there seems to be an interesting – and unexpected – focus on men and skin color, with several articles being written from a Black male point of view. It seems as if *Essence* wants to offer its female readership some personal insight into how Black men deal with the trials and tribulations of skin color, something which should be more thoroughly explored. Impending studies should also take into account new "print" media outlets of the twenty-first century, with the blogosphere offering just one fascinating source of new material that might clarify the significance of skin color for the Black community in a contemporary context.

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" ~ James Baldwin

POSTSCRIPT

As I was putting the final touches on my dissertation in the summer of 2012, African American R&B singer Eric Benét released a new album with a song titled "Redbone Girl." On this track he croons about his "redbone girl … coffee cream, thick and lean," and – a few beats later – has Lil Wayne rap, "I like them light skin, lighter than a feather."[218] Not surprisingly, this quickly became a social media blitz. Bloggers unleashed their wrath on an artist who once again reduced Black women to their shade of skin (see Lucas 25 July 2012). Some, however, came to Benét's defense, claiming that, one, he had previously recorded the song "Chocolate Legs" in which he was praising dark skin, and, two, that everyone should have a right to personal taste (see, for example, Whitfield 2 August 2012). In light of this latest controversy and social media debate, it is perhaps Akiba Solomon from the online magazine *Colorlines* who said it best when reminding readers that "once again we're playing out internalized *white supremacy*, a system that keeps so many people of color – and white folks – hypnotized by flawed and dangerous perceptions" (2 August 2012, original emphasis).

By putting the emphasis on white supremacy, Solomon locates the origin for colorism in a system that – among other things – racializes (Black) beauty in terms of "light is right." A system that has – for centuries – privileged those with light skin and disadvantaged all others, so much so that this has crept into communities of color (Black and Brown alike). It made them not just internalize these externally defined standards but also take advantage of them, because, after all, this is what society showed them how to do. With all this talk about internalized racism, we also need to see the agency that Black people exercise when choosing to not just buy into the beauty myth but take advantage of it too. At the same time, these color hierar-

[218] The lyrics can be found on many websites, for example at *ELyricsWorld.com*: http://www.elyricsworld.com/redbone_girl_%28ft._lil_wayne%29_lyrics_eric_benet.html (accessed on 5 August 2012).

chies have contributed not just to an inter-racial but also an intra-racial divide that harms and hurts people on both sides – light *and* dark, Black *and* white.

It is for all these reasons (and many more) that the battle to fight white supremacy needs to continue; not just on the written page but also in real life; not just among Black people but also in a dialogue with "white folks." In her essay, "Black Beauty and Black Power," bell hooks calls for "[p]rogressive non-black allies in struggle" to draw attention to the popular fallacy of internalized racism: "Everyone must break through the wall of denial that would have us believe hatred of blackness emerges from troubled individual psyches and acknowledge that it is systematically taught through processes of socialization in white supremacist society" (1995, 131). Speaking of breaking through walls of denial is a powerful metaphor – but if it is not possible for a single committed individual to break those walls just yet, it might be a good idea to resort to what Angela Davis wrote in her autobiography: "Walls turned sideways are bridges" (1988, 346). Turning those walls is hard work, too, and again it is only through a concerted effort and dialogue across "color lines" that things can be changed. As Marita Golden once said in an *Essence* interview, "Racism is learned. Colorism is learned. We can unlearn it" (qtd. in Audrey 2004, 202). — It is high time for *each* of us to start unlearning.

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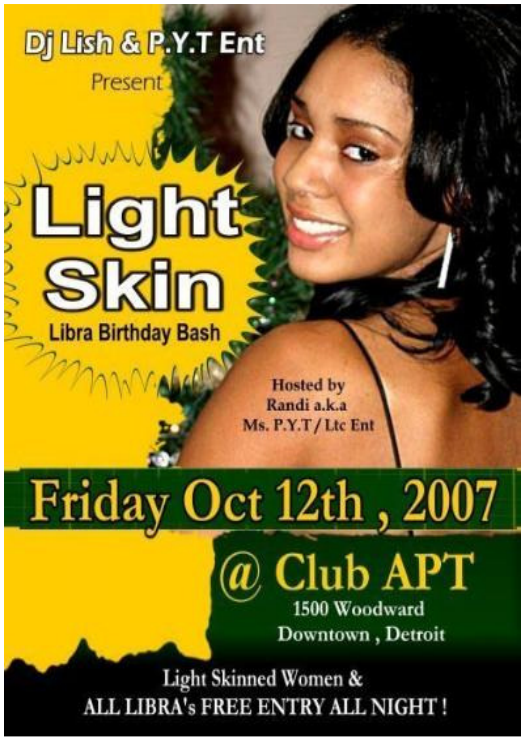
APPENDIX

"Fair & White" Beauty Center in Paris (Château d'Eau)
(photo taken in April 2011)

"Topsygel" Whitening Products in Shop Window (Paris, Château d'Eau)
(photos taken in April 2011)

"Fair & White Daylight Center" in Paris (Château d'Eau)
(photo taken in April 2011)

Bleaching Creams sold at CVS Pharmacy in Syracuse, New York
(photo taken in August 2011)



"Light Skin Libra Birthday Bash" and "Redbone vs. Darksin" Party
(http://jasmynecannick.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/2007/10/14/flier.jpg;
http://www.myspace.com/crownhsmith/photos/52494987#{%22ImageId%22%3A52494987)

"Light Skin vs. Dark Skin" Party and "Battle of the Complexions"
(http://www.thegrio.com/entertainment/light-skin-vs-dark-skin-party-sparks-outrage.php
http://usnews.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/02/24/10500787-african-american-complexion-pageant-outrages-many-in-st-louis)

BACKSTAGE

IF THIS issue of EBONY feels thicker and heavier to you than ever before, you have a perceptive set of fingers. The November EBONY has more pages, both editorial and advertising, than any previous issue—including our huge 10th Anniversary issue of November, 1955.

The issue you hold in your hands has a total of 188 pages and contains an all time record of more than 100 pages of advertising. This is a far cry from the first EBONY printed just 14 years ago. That issue contained a total of just 52 pages and almost no advertising—the financial life blood of any publication.

Here at EBONY, November has always been considered a "lucky" month. Mr. John H. Johnson, founder of the Johnson Publishing Company, has started all his magazines in November and practically all records in the company's history have come in that month.

This month a record of more than 350,000 copies of the magazine will go to subscribers through the mail—a tremendous increase considering that just two years ago less than 100,000 subscribers were on our mailing lists—the bulk of our readers at that time purchasing their copies from the newsstands. Today, with our circulation approaching 650,000 copies a month, more than 50 per cent of our readers are mail subscribers. And our newsstand sales still remain at near their top level.

Naturally, this huge increase in subscriptions has put a heavy load on our subscription department which is working literally night and day to see that our readers get their magazines on time.

The subscription department reports that one of their greatest problems is getting subscribers to renew subscriptions early enough so that there is no interruption in their receiving copies. Many overlook the expiration date of their subscriptions and then write frantically to try to keep from missing an issue. Right now you should take a look at the code number under your address on the mailing label of this issue. The last two numbers tell when your subscription will expire. For instance, if the last numbers are "12 9" it means that your subscription expires the 12th month in 1959. The number "1 0" would mean the expiration date is the 1st month of 1960. Always send in your renewal several months before the expiration date so that you will not miss a single issue.

The December issue will wind up 1959 in grand style. There will be a picture spread on a well-known Negro physician who became an authentic hermit (above) and has forsaken civilization. Pictures will tell the religious story of Black Virgins in the Catholic faith. Men will enjoy a story on a sports cartoonist.

"Wonderful things happen ..." Nadinola Bleaching Cream Ad
(*Ebony* November 1959, 24)

LIFE IS MORE FUN **when your complexion is clear, bright, Nadinola-light!**

Give romance a chance! Don't let dull, dark skin deprive you of popularity. Don't let oiliness, which helps to cause blackheads, cheat you of charm. Chase away those bad-complexion blues with NADINOLA Bleaching Cream. It will do such beautiful things to your skin, improve it so many ways!

Contains wonder-working A-M! This medicated ingredient is the secret of NADINOLA's effectiveness. Gently, surely, it acts to brighten and lighten your complexion, helps combat blackheads and externally caused pimples. Soon your skin feels cleansed and cleared, smoother and softer, glowing and glamorous.

Effective but oh, so gentle! NADINOLA is so effective yet so *kind* to your skin that we guarantee you'll be pleased or money back! Choose whichever type is right for *you*. NADINOLA, Chattanooga, Tenn.

NADINOLA®
BLEACHING CREAM

FOR OILY SKIN. *Nadinola Deluxe is a non-oily formula. Brightens skin, lessens shine at the same time. Three sizes, 75c to $2*

FOR DRY SKIN. *This is the original Nadinola Bleaching Cream, enriched with fine cosmetic oils to relieve dryness. 25c to $1.25*

"Life Is More Fun ..." Nadinola Bleaching Cream Ad
(*Ebony* January 1962, 13)

"Look How Men Flock Around ..." Nadinola Bleaching Cream Ad
(*Ebony* October 1961, 8)

"For an Even-Toned Glow ..." Vantex Skin Bleaching Creme Ad
(*Ebony* March 1992,123)