

The color complex: how skin color affects african americans



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Popular phrases such as, “ the Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the juice,” and “ If it’s White, it’s gotta be right,” have held opposing views in the African American community on the concept of skin complexion. This idea of a “ Color Complex” has psychologically altered the way many African Americans perceive beauty, success, and their personal identity. Although some would disagree, there seems to be a strong connection between skin color and social status in the African American community.

It may appear that African Americans are dispelling this theory of “ light-skinned and dark skinned” to become a more cohesive group, but the politics of skin color and features still remain. Skin color variations among African Americans play a major role in how they perceive beauty standards, social status and themselves. Intra-racial discrimination has been an ever-present issue for African Americans. It dates as far back as the antebellum period in America when African slaves were raped by their White masters.

This new “ race” multiplied in numbers to create the new “ black bourgeoisie,” which served as a buffer between the African American community and the Whites, and further placed dark-skinned people as the lower inferior group (Frazier 215-17). The light complexion of this group allowed Whites to feel comfortable, yet never overlooking their African ancestry. The dark-skinned slaves thought that their light-skinned counterparts felt they were superior, so they developed hatred towards light skinned blacks, as well as a growing hatred for their own dark skin.

In Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*, the protagonist, “ Emma Lou” comments on a new acquaintance, “ Hazel,” as she registers for classes at

the University of Southern California: Emma Lou classified Hazel as a barbarian who had most certainly not come from a family of best people. No doubt her mother had been a washerwoman... innumerable relatives and friends all as ignorant and ugly as she.

There was no sense in any one having a face as ugly as Hazel's, and Emma Lou thanked her stars that though she was black, her skin was not rough and pimply, nor was her hair kinky, nor were her nostrils completely flattened out...No wonder people were prejudiced against dark-skin people when they were so ugly, so haphazard in their dress, and so boisterously mannered (Wallace 43). This passage shows how "Emma Lou" views dark skinned blacks. In the first lines, it demonstrates how she associates dark skin with a lower socioeconomic status and unattractive qualities.

She has already linked European features, such as straight hair, light skin, and a thin nose as the standard of beauty, and in turn created a self-hatred for her African features. A privileged class of African Americans known as "mulattoes" arose due to the racial mixing of blacks and whites during slavery. The term "mulatto," which is Spanish in origin, means "hybrid," yet due to its association with slavery has held a negative connotation.

It also holds a dual meaning: "The word 'mule' is similarly derived from the Spanish for 'hybrid,' and came to serve as a metaphor for a cross between the refined White plantation owner (thoroughbred horse) and the lowly, inferior Black slave (donkey)" (Russell, Wilson & Hall 7). As miscegenation, or race mixing, became more frequent, there began a need to find a way to

distinguish between light-skinned people that had African ancestry and pure Europeans. This is when the “ one-drop rule” came into being.

The one-drop rule simply meant that a single drop of African blood in a person’s lineage automatically made that person black (Gatewood 149-52). Even though whites created this theory, African Americans have strongly adopted this “ rule. ” Especially today, this idea is so strongly reinforced by the African American community that to deny full credit to one’s African ancestry is to be stigmatized a “ sell-out” (Davis 168-69). Some White plantation owners began to be emotionally attached to their Black female slaves and to the children of those relationships.

On the plantation, the light-skinned children of the master would become servants in the house. Slaves that were house servants received better food, clothing and care because they lived with the White master and his family. Thus, further separating the light-skinned “ house Negroes” from the dark-skinned “ field Negroes. ” This preference given to light-skinned slaves subconsciously perpetuated the idea that “ white is right” because of the added privilege that comes along with it.

This situation also added to the contempt most dark-skinned slaves had toward their white master, however, they transferred that anger toward someone more accessible, the light-skinned mulatto. During slavery, some plantation owners even freed their mulatto children, and helped them begin their own business or trade. In some instances, they provided them with slaves of their own. This evolved into a new social caste in the lower South,

with mulattoes “ serving as a buffer class between Whites and Blacks” (Russell, Wilson & Hall 15).

After Emancipation, the overflow of freed slaves into the African American community threatened the mulattos’ privileged position in the social caste. Afraid that Whites would associate them with the poorer, darker-skinned Blacks, they created social distinctions that separated them within the African American community based upon skin color. However, this separation was not entirely due to skin color. In many instances, the offspring of racial mixing benefited from their white parents’ funds and privilege. Most mulattoes had the opportunity to receive a formal education from Ivy League schools or one of the new Black institutions.

Higher education only widened the gap between light and dark-skinned African Americans. There were certain African American schools that were approved by the Black elite: Howard, Fisk, Spelman, Morehouse, Hampton Institute, Morgan State, Wilberforce, and Atlanta University. A few of these prestigious schools required applicants to pass a color test in order to be admitted. The primary goal of these schools were to “ groom mulattoes” in the ways of the bourgeoisie and receive a liberal arts education. The elite thought that a liberal arts education would not benefit dark-skinned African Americans (Russell, Wilson & Hall 28).

Pioneers like Mary McLeod Bethune and Booker T. Washington established their own institutions that taught a curriculum of basic skills that would prepare African American students to do “ real work in the real world” (Russell, Wilson & Hall 29). Bethune-Cookman College was founded

specifically for “ Black girls,” not the light skinned daughters of the black bourgeoisie. The first church established for African Americans was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A. M. E.) in Philadelphia in 1793.

Although this church was created for African Americans to worship together there were other factors that kept them separate.

The different standard of living, interests, and education held by both groups only widened the gap. Throughout the 1800s, skin color seemed to be creating a larger schism in the African American community, so “ the lighter-skinned worshipers split off to form their own denomination, called the Colored Methodist Episcopal (the ‘ C’ in C. M. E. was changed in 1954 to stand for Christian)” (Russell, Wilson & Hall 27). In the late 1800s, the word “ colored” was used to refer to mulattoes, until later when it became a universal term to include darker African Americans.

With color conscious church congregations, African American families that wanted to join had to first pass the “ paper-bag test. ” This test involved placing a brown paper bag alongside someone’s arm, and only if the skin was lighter than the paper-bag would they be permitted into the church (Davis 6). This type of separation didn’t stop with the formation of new churches. In order to maintain their place in society, the colored elite created social clubs like the Blue Vein Society of Nashville, Jack & Jill, Links, Girl Friends, etc.

For instance, the Blue Vein Society had a panel of judges that decided if a potential was light enough for the “ spidery network of purplish veins at the wrists to be visible” (Russell, Wilson & Hall 25). Blue vein members had

exclusive passage to certain vacation resorts and automatic invitation to other societal clubs. Jack and Jill was a club for the elite's children to learn and train to network and gain skills for the "right" schools and eventually the "right" professions (Graham 22-26). Sororities and Fraternities were also apart of this web to network with the "right" people as well.

In Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People*, he refers to a comment made by his parents' friend about sororities, "Now I'm an AKA, and [Delta Sigma Theta] was the only other natural sorority...The other sororities were just not a consideration...They were a tad bit darker than us. And they really didn't come from our background. They were doing good if their fathers were even Baptist preachers" (16). This example simply demonstrates the fundamental thoughts of how sororities/fraternities were based on color and social status.