

Black Solidarity: Combatting Colorism in the Black Community

Race and skin tone have always been points of contention in American society.

Unfortunately, even with the progress society has made in terms of recognizing racism, that does not mean its impact is magically erased. Communities that face discrimination on such a massive scale like the African American community internalize these notions of a superior race, ethnicity, and skin color. While the African American community is quick to call out the bigotry it may face from other communities when discrimination comes from within the community, many are quick to dismiss it. Colorism is the notion that individuals of a lighter skin tone within a racial group are perceived to be superior in relation to their darker counterparts. Colorism does not only affect African Americans, but its implications for this group are the most far-reaching. Though colorism is perpetuated both within and outside this community, its psychological implications are far greater from within. While many solutions have been proposed to combat this issue, such as educating our communities on the roots of colorism and holding the media accountable for perpetuating, the most viable solution is to reinforce a sense of pride in our Black identity regardless of where we fall on the skin tone spectrum.

Colorism is a rather complex issue that is deeply rooted in the power structures of society. Colorism is a byproduct of white supremacy. Many believe that to combat this issue, understanding the history behind its manifestation is necessary. Tenille McCray provides a brief summarization of the events that created colorism as we know it today. She writes that “The sexual oppression of enslaved Black women by White slave owners resulted in the creation of a large mixed-race population,” blurring the distinct division between White and Black communities (McCray151). The rise of this new population posed a threat to the established

racial climate of the period. Pressures to maintain the purity of the White race created the “one-drop rule,” the notion that even the smallest amount of Black ancestry rendered a person a member of the Black community (McCray 151). McCray concludes, “The inclusion of mixed-race individuals in the Black race made it evident that the term Black no longer indicated those of only Black blood, but all those who were somehow biologically *tainted* by Black blood” (152). This new definition ingrained Blackhood as sinister, creating a pigment-fueled hierarchy in the Black community. Those of lighter complexions were elevated by Whites to the top of the Black community because they were seen as less tainted by their blackness than their darker counterparts. They experienced a certain set of privileges that were withheld from darker individuals. While analyzing the roots of colorism is essential in beginning to see the problem, it has been used to shift the focus of our search for solutions from within the community to outside it.

In recent years the media’s role in upholding colorism has become indisputably evident. In the age of instant streaming, the media has infiltrated every aspect of our day to day lives. Now more than ever, on-screen images, specifically the stars we idolize, play an integral role in shaping our views of reality. We’ve created a celebrity worship culture, where we use celebrities to define success, beauty, and morality. For many minorities, representation, if any, is limited to a rather skewed version of their people. In an interview conducted at the 2018 Beautycon Festival in New York, Actress Zendaya noted that Hollywood has an ‘acceptable version of a black girl’, which just so happens to be lighter-skinned women with Eurocentric features (Vagianos). With the media’s ever-extending reach into our lives, the implications of constantly being told that one version of a group is superior to the rest are inescapable. The Black community internalizes these ideas and in turn holds itself to these standards, perpetuating the

cycle of colorism. Based on the inescapable nature of the media and its overwhelming power over our self-image, many people believe that the solution to colorism lies in ending its presence in the media. While I whole-heartedly acknowledge the media's overwhelming role in preserving colorism, it's important to realize that at the present moment, tackling colorism in the media is not a feasible solution given the current state of the Black community. The media relies on the preferences of its audience to create content. The goal of the media is to entertain and maintain a steady audience. Therefore, the audience holds the power to demand changes because the media needs the audience. The media wants the audience's approval. Thus to enact change, the audience must call for change. However, the Black community can barely acknowledge that this problem exists, let alone call it out. We cannot expect to see a change in how the outside world views skin tone while the same ideas are being upheld in our community.

One of the biggest obstacles the Black community faces when combatting colorism is an unwillingness to acknowledge that African Americans are as much responsible for perpetuating it as the power structures created by White supremacy. The environment a child is brought up in has a momentous impact on the child's mental development. In many African American families, complexion dictates a majority of the language used around a child. I vividly remember my mother applying her favorite skin-lightening cream, Fair and Lovely, every morning as part of a beauty regimen passed down to her from her mother. As a curious child, I asked her about the purpose of this cream she loved so much and she told me that it "brightens" skin. I later came to realize that "bright" was code for lighter skin, which was the ultimate goal. From a very young age, children are conditioned to recognize skin tone and treat others based on it. Children will be taught that there is such a thing as being "too dark." As the child grows, they will be warned not to play outside in the sun too long during the warm summer months to avoid getting darker.

We've all seen it—Black children hiding from the sun, afraid to deepen their brown skin. Eurocentric standards of beauty will be pushed onto young black girls. We teach our daughters that relaxing their curly hair will make it more “manageable,” when in reality the community still views our natural hair texture with resentment. Phrases like “nappy,” “frizzy,” and “brittle” paint a similar picture: Black hair is not desirable, it's a burden. Though they are not outright telling the child that being darker is bad, they are insinuating that there is something to fear in being associated with their Blackhood.

To effectively end the pain and suffering inflicted by colorism, we must actively create a form of Black solidarity that fosters a sense of pride in the diversity of Blackhood. At the present moment, our children are being force-fed the notion that one version of Blackhood is above the rest. Young Black children are constantly being told from all angles, the media, outsiders, and now their communities that they are simply not good enough. Perhaps the most painful part of this is that these ideas rooted in white supremacy are being perpetuated by the people closest to them. It's one thing to face discrimination in your daily life, but it's a rather traumatic experience to then come home to it too. In a study conducted on the link between skin color and ethnicity on suicide risks among African American women, researchers found that “having strong ethnic identity buffered the harmful effects of gendered racism” (Perry et al. 1). Though equating racism and colorism are grossly oversimplifying and misrepresenting the nuances of each issue, it is important to note that both issues ultimately revolve around discrimination. These findings illustrate that creating a strong identity serves as a barrier to the harmful effects of discrimination. On this basis, one can then conclude that having a strong racial identity can also help to mitigate the effects of colorism. This is where the role of reinventing Black solidarity comes into play.

While the concept of reinventing Black solidarity is difficult to visualize, it ultimately boils down to understanding the power of the language we use to describe ourselves. For far too long the Black community has allowed itself to be separated by skin tone. Popular terms like “team dark skin” and “team light skin” illustrate that rather than forming one unified community, we have opted to self-segregate. When we divide ourselves up based on our skin tones, we’re validating the very ideas of superiority that we find so abhorrent. The community as a whole has the responsibility of teaching the youth that their Blackhood is something to be celebrated, regardless of where they fall on the skin tone spectrum. We must strive to eliminate these words that serve very little purpose other than to further categorize and alienate members of the community. The brunt of the work falls upon the environment that is created at home. Rather than teaching our children that there is a value associated with skin tone, we must redirect the conversation to the diverse beauty of our community. We must replace our terms of divisive language with melanin-positive language. We must take the stigma away from being Black. While there are still people who believe that this approach is too small of a starting point, I would argue that the key to this solution is that it is one that can enact change rapidly. The problem of colorism is an urgent one, and while many outside forces control it, ultimately we can only have power over ourselves. There is no guarantee that the next generation will adopt these ideas for themselves, but at the end of the day we’re trying to assume responsibility for our role in colorism.

Though the physical shackles of slavery were lifted, the mental chains have been continuously nurtured, ultimately causing the Black community to destroy itself from the inside out. We must hold ourselves accountable and realize that we have been complicit in the destruction of our communities. This is not to say that African Americans have not been

conditioned to think this way, but rather asks us to seriously evaluate what we have done to end the cycle of pain. It is easy to place the blame on outside factors, but this only prolongs the healing process. The healing will only begin once we take ownership and collectively decide to change. Our Blackness, no matter the pigmentation, represents our beauty and strength. How can we expect others to value us when we cannot seem to find the value and beauty in ourselves? We can only tackle this issue from the inside first and then as a united front on the outside.

Works Cited

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