

## COLOR

**COLORISM:** A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequities between Light people and Dark people, supported by racist ideas about Light and Dark people.

**COLOR ANTIRACISM:** A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between Light people and Dark people, supported by antiracist ideas about Light and Dark people.

MY VOICE CREAKED like an old staircase. My arms flailed sluggishly as I stood on the highest of the seven hills in Tallahassee, Florida. I wasn't tired from climbing on that September day in 2000. I'd been on campus for a few weeks and the school spirit had already mounted me and worn me out, just as it had the thousands of people around me—my fellow Rattlers of Florida A&M University. We called our school FAMU, pronounced as in “family,” FAM-YOU.

I looked again at Bragg Stadium's football scoreboard. FAMU 39. MORGAN STATE 7. But I had no time to rest my tiring arms and screams. Halftime approached.

I should have saved my energy, but as a freshman I did not know any better. I had never seen a performance by the Marching 100, the high-stepping pride of FAMU, arguably the most accomplished marching band in history and certainly the most imitated marching band in the land. I'm biased, but see my receipts. William P. Foster had just retired after fifty-two years of raising what *Sports Illustrated* dubbed “the best college marching band in the country.” FAMU band members hit the Grammy

Awards stage in 2006. But nothing compared to that Super Bowl in 2007, when I bragged incessantly and danced horribly as my friends and I watched the Marching 100 play for Prince.

Back in 2000, though, the Marching 100 confused me on first sight in the first quarter. Winter-clothed in thick pants and long-sleeved orange, green, and white uniforms, adorned with capes and towering hats, they made me hot just watching them roast in the Florida sun. They played off the heat like jam sessions between plays. But nothing prepared me for what I was about to see at halftime.

My roommate, Clarence, stood next to me. Clarence and I arrived at FAMU from different places, had come running from different trails that converged in friendship. Him: an academic titan from Birmingham, Alabama. Me: an academic minion from up north. My daring, untethered ideas complemented his methodical analyses. My fuzzy sense of self and direction embraced his clarity. Clarence considered FAMU a pit stop on a mapped-out trail to a top law school and corporate law and wealth. I considered FAMU an inclusive Black commune to explore and find myself. My explorations amused Clarence. But nothing entertained him more than my eyes.

Clarence's hazelnut skin matched his hazel eyes, an eye color that is rare for anyone around the world but most commonly found among people of Southern and Eastern European heritage, not African Americans. When I first saw his lighter eyes, I assumed they were fake. It turned out, his genes provided him what I had to buy.

Before arriving at FAMU, I'd started wearing "honey" contact lenses, or "orange eyes," as my friends called them. My colored contacts were hard to miss on me. Hazel contacts were perhaps the most popular colored contact lens among Black folk, but I picked one shade even lighter. It seemed okay to me to play with my eye color. I knew some Black people who wore blue or green contacts, which I thought was shameful. I saw them—but not me—as straining to look White.

Above my orange eyes, Clarence did not see a low haircut.

sometimes with fading up the back and sides, all times a brush flattening the kinks that struggled to stand and band in freedom before the next killa haircut. I started cornrowing my hair in college, twisting them up in small locs, or letting the kinks stretch out, hardly caring that racists judged these hairstyles as the unprofessional uniform of thugs. My cornrows signified an antiracist idea. My honey eyes a capitulation to assimilation. Together, they braided the assimilationist and antiracist ideas of my dueling consciousness.

Did I think my honey eyes meant I was striving to be White? No way. I was simply refining a cuter version of myself, which studies show is the explanation of most buyers of artificial eyes, complexion, hair, or facial features. I never asked myself the antiracist question. Why? Why did I think lighter eyes were more attractive on me? What did I truly want?

I wanted to be Black but did not want to look Black. I looked up to the new post-racial beauty ideal, an outgrowth of the old White beauty ideal. Lightening eye color. Killing kinks. Lightening skin color. Thinning or thickening facial features. All to reach an ideal we did not label White. This post-racial beauty ideal is Lightness: the race of lighter skin and eyes, straighter hair, thinner noses, and semi-thick lips and buttocks, perceived as biracial or racially ambiguous.

The dueling consciousness of antiracist pride in one's own race and assimilationist desire to be another race stirs this paradoxical post-racial beauty ideal. "It is simultaneously inclusive, multicultural, and new, while remaining exclusive, Eurocentric, and . . . old-fashioned." It is "white beauty repackaged with dark hair," sociologist Margaret Hunter explains.

I had no idea my light eyes embodied the latest form of "colorism," a term coined by novelist Alice Walker in 1983. The post-racial beauty ideal hides colorism, veils it in euphemism. Colorism is a form of racism. To recognize colorism, we must first recognize that Light people and Dark people are two distinct racialized groups shaped by their own histories. Dark people—the unidentified racial group of darker skins, kinky hair, broader noses and

lips—span many races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Light people sometimes pass for White and may yet be accepted into Whiteness so that White people can maintain majorities in countries like the United States, where demographic trends threaten to relegate them to minority status. Some reformers project Light people as the biracial key to racial harmony, an embodiment of a post-racial future.

Colorism is a collection of racist policies that cause inequities between Light people and Dark people, and these inequities are substantiated by racist ideas about Light and Dark people. Colorism, like all forms of racism, rationalizes inequities with racist ideas, claiming the inequities between Dark people and Light people are not due to racist policy but are based in what is wrong or right with each group of people. Colorist ideas are also assimilationist ideas, encouraging assimilation into—or transformation into something close to—the White body.

To be an antiracist is to focus on color lines as much as racial lines, knowing that color lines are especially harmful for Dark people. When the gains of a multicolored race disproportionately flow to Light people and the losses disproportionately flow to Dark people, inequities between the races mirror inequities within the races. But because inequities between the races overshadow inequities within the races, Dark people often fail to see colorism as they regularly experience it. Therefore, Dark people rarely protest policies that benefit Light people, a “skin color paradox,” as termed by political scientists Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver.

Anti-Dark colorism follows the logic of behavioral racism, linking behavior to color, studies show. White children attribute positivity to lighter skin and negativity to Dark skin, a colorism that grows stronger as they get older. White people usually favor lighter-skinned politicians over darker-skinned ones. Dark African Americans are disproportionately at risk of hypertension. Dark African American students receive significantly lower GPAs than Light students. Maybe because racist Americans have higher expectations for Light students, people tend to remember edu-

cated Black men as Light-skinned even when their skin is Dark. Is that why employers prefer Light Black men over Dark Black men regardless of qualifications? Even Dark Filipino men have lower incomes than their lighter peers in the United States. Dark immigrants to the United States, no matter their place of origin, tend to have less wealth and income than Light immigrants. When they arrive, Light Latinx people receive higher wages, and Dark Latinx people are more likely to be employed at ethnically homogeneous jobsites.

Dark sons and Light daughters receive higher-quality parenting than Light sons and Dark daughters. Skin color influences perceptions of attractiveness most often for Black women. As skin tone lightens, levels of self-esteem among Black women rise, especially among low- and middle-income Black women.

Dark African Americans receive the harshest prison sentences and more time behind bars. White male offenders with African facial features receive harsher sentences than their all-European peers. Dark female students are nearly twice as likely to be suspended as White female students, while researchers found no disparity between Light and White female students. Inequities between Light and Dark African Americans can be as wide as inequities between Black and White Americans.

THE SECOND QUARTER ticked away. I stared as the world's longest multicolored Rattler uncurled itself. The Marching 100 should have been named the Marching 400. Hundreds of band members slowly stepped onto the field, one after another, into lines of instruments, into a rhythmic strut. Lines low-stepped behind FAMU's team on our side of the field, to the other side of the field behind Morgan State's team, and into the end zones. The line colors draped over the green field like strokes of paint on a canvas. Skin color didn't matter in this procession. It never should have mattered.

I watched the spreading lines of cymbals, trumpets, trombones, saxophones, clarinets, French horns, flutes, and those big

tubas. Instruments rhythmically swayed in unison with bodies. The half ended. Football players ran through band lines and departed the field. Instead of a rush out to the concession stands, people rushed to their seats to stand and wait.

Some male students didn't care about watching the Marching 100's first performance of the season and instead prowled inside the shaded concourse or outside the stadium, searching for a new friend, hoping they had more game than football. If they were anything like my friends, then Light women were their favorite, and it showed up in the words they spit. "Ugly-Black," they called darker women. "Nappy-headed." But straight and long hair was "good hair."

"She's cute . . . for a Dark girl," was the best some of them could muster for darker-skinned women. Even Dark gay men heard it: "I don't normally date Dark-skin men, but . . ."

The first woman I dated at FAMU was lighter than me, with almost caramel-colored skin. Straight hair fell down her petite body. I liked her (or did I like that she liked me?). But I did not like how my friends fawned over her and overlooked her darker roommate and best friend. The more my friends ignored or denigrated the Dark woman, the more I resented myself for liking the Light woman. After a few months, I had enough. I abruptly cut off the Light woman. My friends thought I had lost my mind. To this day, they deem the Light woman the prettiest woman I dated at FAMU. After her, they say, I rolled downhill into the Dark abyss.

They are right about the darkness—if not the abyss. That first Light college girlfriend ended up being the last at FAMU. I pledged to date only Dark women. Only my Light friend Terrell did not think I had lost my mind. He preferred Dark women, too. I looked down on the rest—anyone who did not prefer Dark women, as well. I hardly realized my own racist hypocrisy: I was turning the color hierarchy upside down, but the color hierarchy remained. Dark people degraded and alienated Light people with names: light bright, high yellow, redbone. "You're never Black enough," a Light woman once told Oprah about her feelings of

rejection. Light people constantly report their struggle to integrate with Dark people, to prove their Blackness to Dark people, as if Dark people are the judge and standard of Blackness. The irony is that many Dark people—read me, circa 2000—do think of themselves as the judge and standard of Blackness, while at the same time meekly aspiring to the standard of Lightness or Whiteness.

White people and Dark people reject and envy Light people. White people have historically employed the one-drop rule—that even one drop of Black blood makes you Black—to bar Light people from pure Whiteness. Dark people employ the two-drop rule, as I call it—two drops of White blood make you less Black—to bar Light people from pure Blackness. Light people employ the three-drop rule, as I call it—three drops of Black blood mean you're too Dark—to bar Dark people from pure Lightness. The “drop” rules of racial purity were mirages, just like the races themselves and the idea of racial blood. No racial group was pure.

When people look at my chocolate-brown skin, broad nose, thick lips, and the long hair I locked during my junior year at FAMU, around the time I retired my orange eyes for good, they do not see a biracial man. They do not see my White great-great-grandfather.

Nothing has been passed down about this White man except that he impregnated my great-great-grandmother, who bore him a Light child named Eliza in 1875. In the 1890s, Eliza married the Dark-skinned Lewis, who had recently arrived in Guyton, Georgia, from Sylvania, West Virginia. In 1920, they bore my grandfather Alvin. Eliza, Alvin, and Ma, all lighter-skinned, all married Dark people.

An ancestral pull toward Dark people? Wishful thinking to exonerate my anti-Light colorism. I had antiracist intentions, unmindful that the car of racism can drive just as far with the right intentions. To be an antiracist is not to reverse the beauty standard. To be an antiracist is to eliminate any beauty standard based on skin and eye color, hair texture, facial and bodily features

shared by groups. To be an antiracist is to diversify our standards of beauty like our standards of culture or intelligence, to see beauty equally in all skin colors, broad and thin noses, kinky and straight hair, light and dark eyes. To be an antiracist is to build and live in a beauty culture that accentuates instead of erases our natural beauty.

“FOR IT IS well known,” attested Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn in an antislavery pamphlet in 1680, “that the Negro’s . . . do entertain as high thoughts of themselves and of their Complexion, as our Europeans do.” Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the so-called “father” of Western art history, endeavored, like his fellow Enlightenment intellectuals, to bring down my ancestors’ high thoughts. African people must accept the “correct conception” of beauty, Winckelmann demanded in *History of the Art of Antiquity* in 1764. “A beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the whiter it is.”

The slaveholder’s philosophy extended this further: A body will be all the more superior the Whiter it is—an enslaved body will be closer to the slaveholder the Whiter it is. Large slaveholders more often worked Light people in the house and Dark people in the fields, reasoning that Light people were suited for skilled tasks and Dark people for more physically demanding tasks. A body will be all the more animalistic the darker it is. Slaveholders crafted a hierarchy that descended from the intellectually strong White down to the Light, then to the Dark, and, finally, to the physically strong Animal. “Ferocity and stupidity are the characteristics of those tribes in which the peculiar Negro features are found most developed,” intoned one writer.

The U.S. father of colorism is Samuel Stanhope Smith, a longtime theologian who taught at and then presided over Princeton University in early America. In early 1787, the young Princeton professor gave the annual oration to the new nation’s most distinguished scholarly group, the American Philosophical Society. He spoke before the White men who wrote the U.S. Consti-

tution that year, pledging to use “the genuine light of truth.” Smith’s racist light: “domestic servants . . . who remain near the [White] persons” have “advanced far before the others in acquiring the regular and agreeable features.” Since “field slaves” live “remote from . . . their superiors,” their bodies “are, generally, ill shaped,” and their kinky hair is “the farthest removed from the ordinary laws of nature.” In an 1850 book, Peter Browne leaned on his unrivaled human-hair collection to classify the “hair” of Whites and “wool” of Blacks, to swear, “The hair of the white man is more perfect than that of the Negro.”

Some enslavers considered Dark people more perfect than the so-called human mule, or mulatto. The biracial “hybrid” is “a degenerate, unnatural offspring, doomed by nature to work out its own destruction,” wrote Alabama physician Josiah Nott in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1843.

Enslavers’ public racist ideas sometimes clashed with their private racist ideas, which typically described Light women as smarter, kinder, gentler, and more beautiful than Dark women. Slaveholders paid much more for enslaved Light females than for their Dark counterparts. From long before the United States even existed until long after American slavery ended, White men cast these “yaller gals” and “Jezebels” as seductresses, unable to admit their centuries of attempted and actual rapes.

Some abolitionists framed biracial Light people as “tragic mulattoes,” imprisoned by their “one drop” of “Black blood.” In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 bestseller, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the only four runaways are the only four biracial captives. Stowe contrasts the biracial runaway George, “of fine European features and a high, indomitable spirit,” with a docile “full Black” named Tom. “Sons of white fathers . . . will not always be bought and sold and traded,” Tom’s slaveholder says.

Freed sons of White fathers will always be “more likely to enlist themselves under the banners of the whites,” *Charleston Times* editor Edwin Clifford Holland contended in 1822. Maybe Holland had the Brown Fellowship Society in mind, a biracial mutual-aid organization dedicated to “Social Purity” in Charles-

ton. Or maybe he foresaw the White and Light only barbershops owned by Light people in Washington, D.C., before the Civil War.

When emancipation in 1865 thrust all Black people into the land of freedom, White communities built higher walls of segregation to keep Black people out. Light communities, too, built higher walls of segregation to keep Dark people out. To maintain Light privilege, the segregated Light people further segregated their Dark brothers and sisters, preserving prewar racial disparities between Light and Dark people. After slavery, Light people were wealthier than Dark people and more likely to have good-paying jobs and schooling.

By the end of the nineteenth century, dozens of cities had “Blue Vein” societies, which barred Dark people “not white enough to show blue veins,” as Charles Chesnutt put it in an 1898 short story. Light people reproduced the paper-bag test, pencil test, door test, and comb test to bar Dark people from their churches, businesses, parties, organizations, schools, and HBCUs.

But these segregators were still segregated from Whiteness. In 1896, shoemaker Homer Plessy—of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, which deemed constitutional “equal but separate accommodations”—hailed from a proud Light community in New Orleans. But Mississippi professor Charles Carroll considered the interracial intercourse of the White human and the Black “beast” the most diabolical of all sins. Naturally rebellious Light men were raping White women, leading to lynchings, Carroll warned in his 1900 book, *The Negro a Beast*. In 1901, North Carolina State University president George T. Winston disagreed, framing Dark people as committing “more horrible crimes.” Sociologist Edward Byron Reuter added to Winston’s position, declaring that biracial people were responsible for all Black achievements, in his 1918 book, *The Mulatto in the United States*. Reuter made Light people a sort of racial middle class, below White people and above Dark people.

Reuter defended Light people from the wrath of eugenicists demanding “racial purity” and from Dark people challenging

their colorism. By the final days of 1920, the famous grandson of a biracial man had enough of Dark activists, especially Marcus Garvey and his fast-growing Universal Negro Improvement Association. "American Negroes recognize no color line in or out of the race, and they will in the end punish the man who attempts to establish it," W.E.B. Du Bois declared in *The Crisis*. This from a man who probably heard the Black children's rhyme: "If you're white, you're right / If you're yellow, you're mellow / If you're brown, stick around / If you're black, get back." This from a man who in his own "Talented Tenth" essay in 1903 listed twenty-one Black leaders, all but one of whom was biracial. This from a man who heard Light people say over and over again that the Dark masses needed "proper grooming," as imparted by North Carolina educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown, who took pride in her English ancestry.

Du Bois's avowal of a post-color Black America after the presidential election of Warren G. Harding in 1920 was as out of touch as John McWhorter's avowal of a post-racial America after Barack Obama's presidential election in 2008. Either racist policies or Black inferiority explains why White people are wealthier, healthier, and more powerful than Black people today. Either racist policies or Dark inferiority explained why Light people were wealthier, healthier, and more powerful than Dark people in 1920. Du Bois snubbed the existence of colorism, claiming it had been "absolutely repudiated by every thinking Negro."

Du Bois had changed his thinking by the 1930s, moving closer to the deported Garvey. He replaced Garvey as the chief antiracist critic of the NAACP, which initially shied away from defending the Dark and poor Scottsboro Boys, who were falsely accused of raping two Alabama White women in 1931. Du Bois could not stand the NAACP's new executive secretary, Walter White. The blue-eyed, blond-haired son of biracial parents had advocated assimilation and reportedly believed that "unmixed" Negroes were "inferior, infinitely inferior now." In *The Crisis* in 1934, months before leaving the NAACP, Du Bois bristled: "Walter White is white."

Entrepreneurs were hard at work figuring out a way for Black people, through changing their color and hair, to pass as Light or White, as Walter White had in his earlier investigations of lynchings. The post-World War I craze of the conk—short for the gel called congolene—made it as fashionable for Black men to straighten their hair as for Black women. “I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America” trying “to look ‘pretty’ by white standards,” Malcolm X recalled after receiving his first conk as a teenager. Skin-lightening products received a boost after the discovery in 1938 that monobenzyl ether of hydroquinone (HQ) lightened Dark skin.

By the early 1970s, Black power activists inspired by Malcolm X and Angela Davis—including my parents—were liberating their kinks. No more killa cuts for the Black men. No more straight hair for Black women. The higher the better was in. Not many men had a higher Afro than my father. Dark people like my father were saying it loud: “I’m Dark and I’m proud.”

SOME DARK PEOPLE took too much pride in Darkness, inverting the color hierarchy as I did at FAMU, deploying the two-drop rule to disavow the Blackness of Light people even as they adored the Light Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Huey P. Newton, and Kathleen Cleaver. And, eventually, the Light ideal came back with a vengeance, if it had ever left. In his 1988 film *School Daze*, Spike Lee satirized his experiences in the late 1970s at historically Black Morehouse College as a battle between the Dark-skinned “jigaboos” and the Light-skinned “wannabes.” My father slowly cut his Afro over the years, and my mother straightened her kinks by the time I arrived.

In the 1980s, Light children were adopted first, had higher incomes, and were less likely to be trapped in public housing and prisons. “The lighter the skin, the lighter the sentence” became a popular antiracist saying as the era of mass incarceration surged in the 1990s. In 2007, MSNBC’s Don Imus compared

Rutgers's Dark basketball players—"that's some nappy-headed hos there"—to Tennessee's Light players—"they all look cute"—after they played in the NCAA women's championship. In a 2014 casting call for the movie *Straight Outta Compton*, the Sandi Alesse Agency ranked extras: "A GIRLS: . . . Must have real hair . . . B GIRLS: . . . You should be light-skinned . . . C GIRLS: These are African American girls, medium to light skinned with a weave . . . D GIRLS: These are African American girls . . . Medium to dark skin tone. Character types."

By then, singer Michael Jackson had paved the skin-bleaching boulevard traveled by rapper Lil' Kim, baseball player Sammy Sosa, and so many more. Skin-bleaching products were raking in millions for U.S. companies. In India, "fairness" creams topped \$200 million in 2014. Today, skin lighteners are used by 70 percent of women in Nigeria; 35 percent in South Africa; 59 percent in Togo; and 40 percent in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Some White people have their own skin-care "addiction" to reach a post-racial ideal: tanning. In 2016, the United States elected the "orange man," as NeNe Leakes calls Trump, who reportedly uses a tanning bed every morning. Paradoxically, some tanning White people look down on bleaching Black people, as if there's a difference. Surveys show that people consider tanned skin—the replica color of Light people—more attractive than naturally pale skin and Dark skin.

HALFTIME ARRIVED. LINES of musicians linked together and outlined the entire football field. The largest human-made rectangle I had ever seen. Colored orange and green. Not Dark and Light. My eyes widened in awe at the length of the FAMU Rattler. On the far side, seven tall and slender drum majors, five yards apart, slowly low-stepped to the center of the field as announcer Joe Bullard yelled their names over our screams. They stopped when they reached the center of the field, facing us. Slowly, they

twirled. The drum line sounded. The drum majors sat and then stood, leading the band in a twerk, twerk, twerk, twerk, twerk. We went mad.

"Please welcome what has become known as America's band," Bullard said as the band played and high-stepped around the field, knees folding into their chests with the ease of folding chairs.

"The innnnn-credible, the maaaaagnificent, the number-one band innnnnnnn the wooorld. The faaaantastic Florida A&M University Marching Band!"

Band members stopped in straight lines and faced us. They kissed their instruments.

"First the souuund!"

*Daaaa . . . da, da, daaaaaaaa*—the trumpets blew Twentieth Century Fox's thunderous movie introduction, blasting our ears off.

Then the show. High-stepping band members changed in and out of intricate formations and played choruses by Destiny's Child, Carl Thomas, and Sisqó, as the tens of thousands of people sang backup as the world's biggest choir. The R&B ballads warmed us up for the climax—the rap songs. Bucking and twerking and twisting and jumping and swaying all in unison, the band and the backup dancers were one as the crowd rapped. I kept rubbing my eyes, thinking they were deceiving me. I could not play an instrument and could barely dance. How could all these heavy-coated students play tough songs and dance sophisticated routines in harmony? Ludacris, Trick Daddy, Three 6 Mafia, Outkast—the band paraded these Southern rappers before high-stepping off the field to the theme song of *Good Times*, to our deafening applause. Utterly exhilarated, I don't know if I ever clapped and stomped harder and louder.

Halftime over, the exodus out of the stands startled me. The people had come to see what the people had come to see.

I HAD COME to see Clarence. I walked into our off-campus apartment, all giddy, like after watching the Marching 100 that first

time. Quietness shrouded the afternoon. Dirty dishes sat in the open kitchen. Clarence had to be in his room, finishing homework.

The door was open; I knocked on it anyway, disturbing him at his desk. He looked up in wonder. We had roomed together for nearly two years. Clarence had gotten used to my midday interruptions. He braced himself for my latest epiphany.