Colorism and African American Women in Literature: An Examination of Colorism and its Impact on Self-Image

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DEDICATION

Knowing the importance of and the significant impact that skin tone can have on one’s life, I dedicate this thesis to my beautiful nieces. I adore you girls more than anything else on this earth. You all are the reason I strive for excellence in everything that I do. Each different shade of brown that each of you embody is gorgeous. I still wonder what I did so well to ever deserve such a blessing as you all. I love each of you with all of my heart: Untariyounsha, Zikiya, Aaliyah, Jaliyah, Yaliyah, Ziniya, Maliyah, and Kamille.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would have been impossible for me to create a work of this magnitude on my own. For that reason I must acknowledge those that have helped me throughout the completion of this thesis.

Dr. Ethel Young-Scurlock, in the beginning I approached you with ideas that were broad. You work diligently with me to narrow these ideas down and helped me create a work that I am very proud of. You tirelessly gave me advice and edited my work. You kept me encouraged and throughout my college years you have truly made a lasting positive impact on me. Without you the completion of this thesis would have been impossible. So thank you again for allowing me to work under your guidance. I hope to one day impact this university community and the lives of others just as I see you doing.

Dr. Patrick Alexander, I was so fortunate to be able to take a course under you. In class you challenged me to work harder as you always came up with questions that would required deeper thought. I am blessed to have been able to have a professor like yourself. Your knowledge and helpfulness throughout this process has not gone unrecognized. In you I found a professor that is interested not only in his subject matter but also one that is willing to go over and beyond for students like myself.

Dr. Marvin King, having you as a third reader was a joy. When I first met with you I was presented with questions as to why someone not interested in Literature or someone that was not African American would be interested in colorism. Because of you I was able to explore how colorism could impact those types of individuals. Thank you for making me think outside the box and thank you for working with me.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents. Throughout my life you all have always been supportive of my decisions. Because of the two of you I am the young woman that I am today. Thanks for keeping me in your prayers. I’m certain that much of the favor God has bestowed upon me is because of the prayers from you two. Thanks for instilling in me a hard work ethic and letting me know that I can achieve any goal that I set my mind to. I know there are many sacrifices that have been made to ensure that I never had to go without and I hope to one day be able to repay some of this back to you both.
ABSTRACT
Jakira M. Davis: Colorism and African American Women in Literature
(Under the direction of Ethel Young-Scurlock)

The purpose of this study is to explore how African American women in literature have been impacted by colorism. Through this study which included a fictional novel from the twentieth century and a non-fictional novel from the twenty-first century we are able to see how women of color have been impacted by colorism. This thesis explores evidence of the impact of colorism and its impact on the image of African American women and young girls. This thesis suggests that there is evidence of colorism found in literature and thus colorism is a real issue in the African American community that has an impact on the self-image of young girls and women.
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Introduction to Colorism

My love for reading has always been strong. I remember reading Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love by Patricia McKissack in the fifth grade. At the time I was unaware of any connections between the texts that I chose to read and found most enjoyable. However, I can now see that my reading choices were grounded in texts that involved characters like myself that were struggling with finding their own identity. I was puzzled about how I fit in my class at my predominately white elementary school. I was also puzzled about the importance of my skin color. I wanted to know the limitations that being African American would place upon me.

Color Me Dark was formatted as though it was the diary of the protagonist Nellie Lee Love. Nellie Lee was an eleven-year-old girl that had just moved to Chicago with her parents. In one of the beginning diary entries Nellie Lee Love writes “Some people are so color struck. They think being light-skinned is better than being dark! Mama says that's nonsense and I think so, too” (McKissack). Nellie Lee Love was eleven like myself and a victim of the ugliness of prejudices. Not only was she subjected to this ugliness because of the white community, but what she struggled most with was the way in which her own black community subjected her. Nellie Lee was darker than her sister and on many occasions this was negatively brought to her attention by her family members and the neighbors. Although she had a mother who constantly attempted to build her up the world around her seemed determined to tear her down and make her regret what she could not
change: her skin color. Nellie Lee was an evident victim of colorism within the black community and this story of her was one that I proudly advocated for in the fifth grade reading fair at Hayes Cooper Center for Science, Mathematics, and Technology.

This is still vividly a part of my memory as I remember being happy that I had someone like Nellie Lee Love to relate to and see that being dark was not a curse but rather a characteristic that I could be proud of in my everyday life.

Another book that impacted me that I remember having to read is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. This book allowed me to imagine living in a society where color could not be seen. *The Giver* had the intention of depicting a perfect society. In this society where Jonas, the main character, and his family lived everything was controlled by the government. As each community member turned twelve years old the government assigned them a specific job based on what the elders of the community felt each person was best at after close observation. Jonas’ job assignment was special because of his advancement over his peers. For the purpose of understanding the importance that came along with Jonas’ job it is important to know that in this perfect world color could not be seen. Likewise, the same routines were repeated daily by everyone that lived in this perfect society. The government’s control on the social order was strict. However, for Jonas this perfect world changed as he received more training for his job.

Jonas’ job encompassed the responsibility of remembering the past. This allowed him to become knowledgeable of a world outside his own. Through rituals, the giver, gave Jonas all his knowledge. Gradually Jonas began to see color and know the ugly truths about what kept his society so perfect as he learned there was also the existence of
a world where everything was not controlled. He learned about how his own city had been before it became controlled by the government and he also learned about neighboring communities that were not controlled by government. What’s important here is not the hope that our society can be perfectly controlled like the one in which Jonas lived. This is especially important as Jonas, through his acquired knowledge from the giver, was allowed to see the ugly imperfections that were evident but not seen because of the lack of knowledge. However, what I remember admiring most about Jonas’ world was that color could not be seen. Neither basic colors nor skin color were blatant. I recall admiring how everything in this society was perfect. While I was fully knowledgeable of the fact that I would not want a life that was dictated by others and consisted of the same daily routine, I yearned to not be able to see the skin color of others or allow them to see mine.

While I am no longer the fifth grader struggling to find where I fit into my predominantly white elementary, I am now the twenty-two year old that questions where I fit into society. I find myself still challenging both racism and colorism, constructs that I struggled with as a fifth grader and still struggle to understand as I seek ways to overcome them today. As an African American woman I still see the influence and the impact of color. The issue of color within the black community is constantly brought to my attention in many conversations and interactions with my peers. Issues of color are still a concern for many of my friends and family.

I find myself struggling to combat colorism in many different social settings. Most recently I was asked by a friend whether I preferred to be lighter or darker. While I admitted that I had no preference as it had no impact on my confidence I was then asked
whether I tanned in the summer. I hurriedly admitted no. The final question was whether I chose to stay inside during the summer so that I would not become darker. Another friend of mine who is also African American and of a lighter skin complexion admitted to staying inside in the summer so that she would not become “too dark”. I stated that I did not go out when it was midday and extremely hot but that it was not because I was worried about my skin complexion becoming darker. My reasoning was my concern with being hot.

Attempting to combat colorism in social settings brings me to reference some individuals that I adore more than anything else in this world: my nieces. My nieces are the most gorgeous individuals that I know. They are of all complexions. Some are very dark while others are extremely light. What troubles me most is that their innocence is often distorted by others that are not a part of my family as they make references to the differences between many of them. I am hoping for a day when skin tone will not be as relevant as the character of individuals themselves.

While skin color does not impact how I see beauty, it is apparent that it significantly shapes the perceptions of many people. Colorism presents limitations for African American women in social settings, education, and employment. O’Brien notes that skin tone affects African American women in the marriage market. She states:

Marriage is one means, in addition to employment, of advancing oneself socially and gaining access to social power…Gradations in skin color affect the socioeconomic status of African Americans as strongly as does race itself. Several studies show that, as a way of advancing oneself via the marriage market, lighter-skinned African Americans are more likely than darker-skinned African
Americans to marry and to marry higher-earning, better financially endowed spouses (148).

In the education and employment markets O’Brien references Herring, Keith, and Horton who conclude that “skin color is a strong predictor of educational attainment, occupational status, and income, with lighter skin color consistently influencing opportunities for higher social and economic status among African Americans” (148). Colorism’s effect on African American women can be detrimental. Being affected in the marriage market as well as educational and employment spaces because of skin tone presents obstacles for women of color.

As we can see colorism is not only being experienced, but it is also being documented. From early works of literature that are both fiction and non-fiction we see individuals struggling to accept who they really are and how valuable they really are. In many of these documented texts, colorism is the underlying issue that is often not directly stated but obviously present. Colorism has played a role in determining how many African American women in literature identify themselves. In The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison and Native Guard by Natasha Trethewey we see female characters struggling to create their own identity and conceptualize exactly who they are because of the impact of the role of colorism. These texts prove that colorism does have damaging effects on females. This is not to argue that males are not impacted by colorism. However, this analysis is to look at the direct impact that colorism has on these females and how this effect transcends centuries as it is evident in these texts that are dated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Taking the works of literature that transcends generations allows us to begin discussions about colorism in hopes of combating it.
*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison was published in 1970 and is a novel from the twentieth century that shows the effects of colorism. In this novel the main character, Pecola Breedlove struggles with her self-image. She feels that she is ugly and the only thing that can make her pretty is having blue eyes. Pecola idolized anything that depicts Shirley Temple: white, blonde hair, blue eyes. In an attempt to be accepted and loved by her friends, parents, and herself Pecola finds herself subjected to the negative effects of colorism as she seeks to change herself. Toni Morrison has had a significant impact in the world of literature as she was the first African American woman to win the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature.

*Native Guard* by Natasha Trethewey, published in 2006, shows evidence of colorism as well. This collection of poems allows us to see colorism present in the twenty-first century through a real person. This series of poems reflects the life of Natasha Trethewey who was born in Mississippi to an African American mother and Caucasian father. The product of miscegenation, Trethewey, through poetry, allows us to travel back to before her birth, throughout her parent’s union and divorce, and into her own adulthood. Through her poems, Trethewey shows how colorism not only existed in fiction novels, but also exists in the everyday life of mixed raced children. *Native Guard* was widely celebrated and it secured Trethewey the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

Through these two literary productions we are able to see different ways that colorism impacts the everyday lives of African Americans women. Turner believes that “what renders colorism additionally insidious is that each generation passes the poison of their prejudice on to the next generation” (43). Colorism is negative and this practice needs to be halted. Colorism denotes the presence of mental enslavement. I believe that
like most practices, it will not be until one is greatly educated on colorism that they will be able to see how limiting and simple minded the practice is and thus able to overcome it.
Chapter 1: Towards a Better Definition of Colorism

So exactly what is colorism? Colorism is the belief that one skin tone is superior to another. In many cases that I am aware of, it is the belief that lighter skin is superior to darker skin. Initially without a name and then coined colorism by Alice Walker in 1983, “the internalized bias and favor for light-skin European features and ‘good hair’ has stratified the black community for generations” (Wilder 185). Colorism is discrimination within the same racial group as individuals note their differences and then separate themselves based on these differences. Colorism is often defined as discrimination based on the color of the skin.

There are many other definitions of colorism that exist and provide the basis for the existence of colorism and support this thesis. Bonnie Berry more precisely defines colorism in the Encyclopedia or Gender and Society:

The term colorism refers to the biased treatment of individuals based on their skin color and can occur interracially (similar to race bias) or intraracially (with members of the same race expressing bias against fellow members based on skin color). Colorism also refers to other identifiable race features, such as hair texture, lip shape, nose shape, eye shape, and eye color. Like gender, skin color and related phenotypical features are readily visible traits that designate minority or majority status. Other minority statuses are not necessarily visible and thus not immediately identifiable: ableism, lesbianism, religious affiliation, social class,
criminal status, and so on. The visibility of a minority trait, racial identity in this
care, is key since it almost automatically invites a public response that can be
experienced as bias (147).

Because skin tone is the most obvious determinant used to categorize humans into race
classes it is the most common physical characteristic that we have been trained to notice.
The separation into races which is socially constructed has had a negative impact over
time as it has deemed the majority group better than the minority group and has had a
tendency to favor those of the minority group with features that are more European in
appearance.

In the Encyclopedia of African American Society according to Gerald Jaynes, an
alternate definition of colorism is:

*Colorism* is a broad term that encompasses a complex set of attitudes, stereotypes,
and practices with African American society predicated on skin color.

Historically, colorism has meant that, even within the black community, some
people prefer fairer skin to dark. But it can also operate in the reverse and refer to
the preference of dark skin over light… Colorism carries with it assumptions that
link behavioral characteristics and personality traits to pigmentation. Intelligence,
trustworthiness, and femininity are among the attributes that are sometimes
thought to accompany light skin. Meanwhile, such attributes as stamina, sexual
prowess, and masculinity are believed inherent to dark skin. These beliefs
associated with colorism began during the era of slavery, when light skinned,
racially mixed slaves were often treated better than their darker skinned
counterparts. Thus, colorism became part of an unconscious set of assumptions held by many African Americans and is still at work to some extent today (208). Here, we are provided with evidence that colorism is a construct that has impacted many people through many generations. Colorism does not always favor lighter skin over dark. It can work in the opposite direction as well. Jaynes’ definition helps contextualize colorism by noting its origin. Colorism began in the slavery era and through its evident presence today we are able to see it transcend generations as many individuals like myself are generations removed from slavery yet still impacted by a social construct that began during its tenure. Different from Berry’s definition which is grounded in the belief that colorism tends to favor lighter skin and more European features, the inclusion of colorism’s ability to work in reverse by favoring darker skin over lighter skin and the belief that skin color determines intelligence as well as other behavioral characteristics by Jaynes allows us to see how divisive colorism is. Colorism is so decisive as it can allow one to favor lighter skin over darker skin or darker skin over lighter skin all while simultaneously succeeding in keeping the race divided.

When an individual of this twenty-first century references colorism the first principle that most often comes to mind is that of the paper bag principle. As stated by Kerr, “the brown paper bag is believed to signify degrees of acceptance and inclusion (that is, if one is fairer than the brown paper bag)” (272). Kerr continued, “Even given its derogatory meaning, the phrase ‘paper bag test’ traditionally has been used liberally and with great frequency by African Americans throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century” (272). The paper bag principle stemmed from a test that was conducted by whites to first determine whether a person had any drop of blackness in them. Because of
the growing capacity of “passing” into Washington schools in the early 1900s there were methods adopted by whites to determine whether any white person was purely white or if they had any bleakness in them using the one drop rule. The one drop rule concluded that any person found to have even one drop of blackness in their blood no matter how long ago was black and not white. In an attempt to find those that were indeed endowed with black blood ridiculous methods such as the ones stated by Kerr included examining the shape of the fingernail, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and the examination of hair roots (277). Anyone found to contain any characteristic that could connect them to blackness no matter how faint the amount would be automatically declared as black. In the 1918 study, white sociologist Edward Byron Reuter accounted for all those that could be mixed by placing them into the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mulatto</th>
<th>Negro and White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quadroon</td>
<td>Mulatto and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octoroon</td>
<td>Quadroon and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cascos</td>
<td>Mulatto and Mulatto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sambo</td>
<td>Mulatto and Negro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mango</td>
<td>Sambo and Negro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustifee</td>
<td>Octoroon and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustifino</td>
<td>Mustifee and White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart of racial categories comes from Kerr’s The Paper Bag Principle on page 5. It shows that no matter how faint the amount of black blood present in a person they would still be considered an “other” and cast into these categories before accepted as white by society. The paper bag principle tended to favor lighter skin over darker skinned as those
that were lighter than a paper bag were often given privileges and admitted into places where those that were darker than the paper bag were forbidden to go. This principle tended to assist with colorism as it did indeed favor lighter skin over darker skin when administering this paper bag test.

Considering Jaynes’ reference to slavery and its impact on colorism we are able to see that many generations of African Americans have been impacted by colorism. Through reading many texts I have seen how colorism subjected many darker skin toned African Americans since the time of slavery. Slave masters who impregnated black women and thus bore lighter offspring still considered as part of the “negro race” began implementing work sites based on skin tones. This lighter skin “negro” belonged to a group that were called mulatto as they were lighter and often the product of miscegenation between a white and black race person. Those that were of the darker skin were mandated to work further in the fields furthest away from the house. Those of the lighter skin tone were allowed to work closer and mostly inside the house. It is my opinion that this treatment led to separation among the blacks as those that were darker grew envious of the lighter work load and better treatment that the lighter skin toned slaves were given, and those that were lighter grew arrogant and looked down on the darker skin toned slaves that were subjected to more harsh work conditions.

Jaynes’ belief that colorism is a product of slavery is supported by O’Brien. O’Brien discusses this same belief in the Encyclopedia of Gender and Society as he references a book by another author:

In his book, Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (2001), historian Walter Johnson chronicles the differences in perceptions held by white
slave buyers in the antebellum period about the usefulness of slaves based on their skin color. Dark-skinned slaves, particularly men, were thought to be exceptionally well suited for hard labor. However, they were also considered inherently unruly, prone to theft, incapable of controlling sexual urges, and likely to resort to violence if given the opportunity. Light-skinned blacks, by contrast, were considered more loyal, better able to grasp tasks requiring intelligence, and more presentable. The resulting division of labor placed light-skinned slaves in or near the owner’s house as servants, chauffeurs, and the like, while darker-skinned men and women performed the hard work of planting and harvesting the fields. Resentment over such differences in labor tasks led to interracial conflict and mistrust (208).

Thus, through the institution of slavery we are able to understand the development of colorism. We are able to see that although not purposefully planned, labor division based on skin color ultimately led to bias and colorism in African American society. We are also provided with evidence to support Jaynes’ definition of colorism as we see that as by Walter Johnson there were stereotypes of the perceived intelligence and work ethics of slaves based on their skin color. These stereotypical beliefs also assisted in assigning more harsh work conditions and manual lab work to darker skin toned African Americans and work that was not as hard or required less manual training to lighter skin toned African Americans.

Once slavery was abolished, many African Americans still found themselves in bondage because of the negative mental impacts of slavery which included colorism or discrimination based on skin tones. Skin tone prejudice was still practiced by freed slaves
as they sought to find their place in the free world and worked in hopes of achieving anything that the white men had. For this reason separation based on skin tone was still prevalent and at this time proved more vital than ever. It was easier for lighter skin toned African Americans to transition from a life as a slave as they often were more desirable in terms of hiring to White Americans because of the positive stereotypes that surrounded lighter skinned African Americans in contrast to those stereotypes of their darker skin toned brothers and sisters. Turner states, “One of the more easily identifiable vestigial of the slavery era that has been incorporated into the socialization of many descendants of slaves in the Americas is color racism and a class hierarchy based on skin color” (38). She notes how mulattoes during slavery were able to be sold for more and how this practice continued once the slaves were free because of the crippling of the system of slavery which had allotted lighter skinned African Americans the chance to learn some basics of reading and writing at times. This gap drove a wedge between the different skin toned African Americans as those that were usually lighter had more education and were thus economically better well off than those that were darker and lacked the fundamental skills needed to do anything other than manual labor. The physical impact of slavery had been outlawed but the mental still lingered while the newly constructed social impacts of slavery were derived.

Slavery in America is often viewed as a southern practice as it was worst in the south and took the longest to end there as well. Considering the derivation of colorism from the institution of slavery which was more prevalent in the south causes us to look at colorism geographically. However, we are provided with evidence that colorism was not only a southern social issue and therefore it would be problematic to associate colorism
as only a southern practice. Colorism impacted individuals in the north as well. Turner notes that, “The practice of favoring the lighter-skinned mulattoes with education, opportunity, and manumission, combined with the racist brainwashing about the superiority of people with whiter skin deepened the hierarchical rift along color lines in the African American community in the North as well as the South” (39). We are able to see that like the existence of slavery, colorism was not only limited to the South. It was practiced in the North as well.

About 150 years have passed since the abolishment of slavery yet through texts like the ones we will have an in-depth look at later, we still see evidence of colorism thriving to survive and impacting the lives of African Americans. Most often subjected are African American women. When we look at the media and see top figures such as Michael Jackson and Beyoncé accused of taking medication to lighten their skin tones we see how problematic colorism is. When these figures that are admired by so many people desire to become lighter the message that they may be sending to their audience is that in order to succeed or even be considered beautiful, you have to be of the lighter skin tone. We are also able to see this with many marketing advertisements as many celebrities’ pictures are filtered in order to make them appear of lighter skin tone to sell more ads.

What we have here is colorism that sends the message that the socially accepted norm is to be of a lighter skin tone and all those that aren’t are not aligned with society and are thus inferior.

Today, African Americans still find themselves discriminated against because of colorism. I argue that colorism still exists because of mental enslavement of African Americans that are unaware of this term and its origin. We are able to see the possibility
that this mental enslavement may still affect those in today’s society and we have literature for the ground basis of this study. Great steps have been made to eliminate the oppression that comes along with colorism by eliminating racism itself. We have seen civil rights achieved in hopes of ending racism. I believe that through ending racism, we will be able to combat colorism within the black race. However, while there have been great steps made in regards to civil rights, there are still greater efforts that must continuously be sought after as many people of mixed race and lighter skin tones such as Natasha Trethewey, whose work we will discuss later in great depth, are still seeking to see where they fit in within America because of their biracial ethnicity and lighter or darker skin tone.
Chapter 2: Looking into Colorism

When examining colorism it is important to remember that colorism is discrimination within ANY race that favors one skin tone over another. The negative impact that colorism has had not only in the lives of African Americans but also other minority groups is explained in Burton’s 2010 research through the shift in the color line. In this research the scholars noted that as the color line in America shifted, “accompanying the shifts was a growing awareness among some social scientists of what Hunter (2005) described as a once hidden form within group discrimination: colorism” (Burton, 441). The color line that was referenced here was the change in variations of skin tones because of interracial relationships. Because of so many interracial relationships which were not only limited to white and black, but also the inclusion of Mexicans, Asians, and Puerto Ricans, we saw the skin tones begin to vary significantly. Variance in the skin tones led these scholars to conduct research on the inequality and socioeconomic mobility limitations presented because of interracial relationships and also the way in which children of these relationships were socialized. Through the conduction of this research, the scholars found that there was evidence of favor for those of lighter skin tones as these individuals were given special privileges and advantages (Burton, 447). There was also evidence that race, ethnicity, and skin color also played a vital role in the similarities and differences in the incomes of families (Burton 447). Finding evidence of patterns like this suggested that there was some correlation between skin tone
and income as well as skin tone and societal treatment. This shows why a study on colorism would prove vital in today’s time as we see its negative effects affecting the economic gains of individuals that are subjected to it.

What’s unique about this study is that although colorism was not its central focus, it found that because of the presence of the variance in skin tones, there were prejudices involved and thus evidence of the presence of colorism. In this research, these scholars found evidence of women of South Africa, India, Latin America, and Southeast and East Asia still choosing to consume whitening products even after being informed of the potential damage that could be caused to their overall health (Burton 451). To these women the benefit of having lighter skin was greater than the risks associated with the consumption of these products. This should challenge us to determine how far we are willing to go and how far we are willing to compel others to go in order to fit the socially accepted norm. Should our own prejudices be so relevant that they force others to fit what we consider as normal and question their own identity and sense of self-worth? Should we in this present day still be focused on skin color even though we have been able to witness a moment in history when those that were once kept from learning to read and write are now able to lead this great nation through education and the termination of mental enslavement? Because of the work of these scholars we are made aware that the construct of colorism still exists today.

In another study from the *Journal of Marriage and Family* scholars conducted research in 2013 to explore the many different skin tones that have emerged in America because of interracial relationships. The primary goal of this research was to examine the inequality and socioeconomic mobility within and across families, interracial romantic
pairings, and the racial socialization of children. This research examined families of color within the last decade and the effects of the variance in skin tones. It is through this study that conclusions about whether colorism was still prevalent could be drawn. It is important to note that these scholars concluded that colorism has a negative impact on those subjected to it. In this journal, the scholars quoted the definition of colorism which aligns with Berry’s definition and then concludes by stating, “The practices of colorism tend to favor lighter skin over darker skin as indicated by a person’s appearance as proximal to a White phenotype (Hall, 2005)” (Burton 440). These scholars support my earlier notion of the socially accepted norm of society being white. It is the “white phenotype” which can be seen that allows a person to have more privilege than they would if they possessed physical characteristics that belonged to a minority group. An example of this would be a person striving to be blonde hair and blue eyed as we will see one of our main protagonists struggle with this later in this thesis. Because society has associated whiteness with being superior it is not at all surprising to see people conform to fit this description or as close to it as possible in order to be more closely identifiable with this social construct of superiority.

Last but not least, Beth Turner’s review of the composition of a play entitled Yellowman by Adel Orlandersmith was a play that also depicted the negative effects of colorism. The main characters in this play were Alma, a dark-skinned girl and Eugene, her light-skinned lover. Orlandersmith’s idea for the composition of this play came from her visiting South Carolina while younger and learning that there were families there that “used to interbreed to keep the light skin going” (33). For this reason, mating was only done with those that were of lighter skin to ensure that dark skin children were not born
from the union. With the play as her ground basis for argument, much like myself, Turner argues that, “Colorism (skin color prejudice) among African Americans is an insidious remnant of the traumas of American slavery” (33). Through literature that has left us evidence of the cruelties of slavery and its inherent practice of rape by slave owners, we are able to trace colorism’s founding and practice back to this time period in American history. Colorism is what drives Orlandersmith’s play. Considering the fact that this fictional play was based on a true story challenges us to have open discussions about colorism and the impact that it makes. Orlandersmith recalls from a young age individuals of certain families only marrying those that were lighter in order to ‘breed’ very light offspring. One can see how problematic this practice is as love is not even the driving force for marriage or children. Instead the fear of having dark children kept lighter individuals from intermingling with darker skinned individuals and basically required that they marry someone else lighter in hopes of achieving light offspring.

Different from O’Brien and Jaynes, Turner is able to provide evidence of the existence of colorism before slavery. She notes that, “Color prejudice which provides the dramatic impetus for Yellowman is a conceit that long pre-dated the existence of slavery in the Americas. There is evidence of such preference for lighter skin among pre-colonial East Indians, and among other pre-colonial people” (37). This fact was astonishing to me as I had always associated the practice of colorism beginning with slavery in the Americas. Through Turner’s work I was educated about how it pre-dated slavery in America and was not initially began as a separation because of the white man favoring lighter skinned blacks. Turner still argued that, “However, the color prejudice that afflicts African-descended people was seared into their psyches during slavery” (37). Confirming
my belief about the beginning of colorism in America Turner argued its initial presence in America as slaves were raped, lighter skinned children born, and separation practices engrained by masters. Tracing colorism back before slavery shows how colorism is a construct that not only subjects whites and blacks as we have seen but is rather able to subject any minority group as deemed by the majority.

The practice of colorism is very dangerous to African Americans and especially our African American women. Wilder is a scholar that has most recently conducted a study that looks at the naming of women based on their skin tones. Using the work of Charles Parrish that was conducted over sixty years ago Wilder set out to find whether there had been a decline, no change, or progress made in the stereotypical names given to women of color based on their shade of skin. In Parrish’s work, he found that the names associated with medium skin toned women were most favorable while those associated with extremely light skinned women were generally negative and those associated with extremely dark skinned women were usually derogatory (Wilder 184). The pattern in this study to me was shocking as I thought that the lighter skin toned women would have had the more favorable names. However, my own conclusion was wrong. Wilder goes on to state that “the results of his [Parrish] analysis found 25 readily identifiable ‘color names,’ from high yellow to chocolate brown and a barrage of ‘color notions,’ connecting each skin tone to certain stereotypes and personality traits” (184). While most stereotypes associated with the black race are negative, stereotypes within this race for females also had degree divides based on the skin tone.

Some may wonder why Wilder chose to use Parrish’s work. Wilder was certain to note that while this study was conducted over sixty years ago, it still proved relevant
today. Wilder states that this study “is nonetheless an appropriate starting point for reexamining the prevalence of skin tone bias and discrimination against African Americans in the 21st century” (185). While we have evidence of colorism that was present in the past, finding this article that had a study that was conducted in the 20th and 21st century helps to examine the society that we live in today and whether colorism is changing within it.

While Wilder found that colorism is rarely mentioned in the black community, she did find that “there exists an extensive and sophisticated vocabulary for identifying and distinguishing skin color categories” (185). Thus, colorism without a name directly being stated. Wilder notes that “Mark Hill (2002) and Margaret Hunter (1998) point[ed] out, in the present day, colorism affects black women more than black men, particularly in the areas of beauty, mate selection, and self-esteem” (185). In my opinion we see this as ads that are placed in magazines are more favorable to lighter skin toned women with the exception of black owned magazines such as Ebony. We are also living during the age where we can see our stars on the television and as we can see over time many of them have become lighter possibly through methods to brighten their skin tone to align with society’s norm of the lighter, the better. Through examining the everyday lives and talk of young black women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, Wilder’s own experiment was fairly consistent with Parrish’s finding of name variations based on skin tones. However, differently from Parrish’s findings, in this 21st experiment there were no names found to describe nor favor those of the medium skin tone. They were only commonly referred to as brown. Wilder’s experiment along with Parrish’s provide the division of African Americans based on the skin tone naming associated with each shade.
Looking at the experiments of each of these scholars prove vital as we see colorism still present yet changing in its name classification of females. Especially important in this finding is the notion that women are most commonly the victims of colorism.
Chapter Three: Colorism in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

*The Bluest Eye* was written and published in 1970 by Toni Morrison. In this fictional novel the main character is an eleven year old girl by the name of Pecola Breedlove. Pecola struggles with her self-identity as she believes that she is ugly and is determined to fix this problem. The issue lies with how she plans to fix this issue. Pecola believes that the only characteristic that can make her pretty is to have blue eyes. Pecola idolized anything that depicts Shirley Temple: white, blonde hair, blue eyes. In an attempt to be accepted and loved by her friends, parents, and herself Pecola finds herself subjected to the negative effects of colorism. This book is essential to my thesis as it provides evidence that colorism was an issue that was still being dealt with in the twentieth century. Through this novel Morrison allows us to explore colorism through Pecola’s struggle as a young black girl that is infatuated with European features and unhappy with her own features because she feels unaccepted and unappreciated by those around her.

“Before we decide that we are all beautiful and have always been beautiful let me speak for just a moment here for some of us that didn't get that right away,” stated Morrison in a clip from a 2004 interview about her motive for writing. Morrison admits to writing a story in which she could give voice to the female black children which was a group that was often underrepresented and misrepresented. She wanted to be the voice that spoke for the females that had to deal with issues of racism within their own
communities: colorism. This thread is what we are able to see in many of Morrison’s novels including *The Bluest Eye*. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison depicts the effect of colorism on African American girls. In this fictional novel the standard of beauty is associated with having white or European features. This leads to resentment and hate for Claudia at and fascination with whiteness for Pecola that ultimately drives her insane. African American young girls in this novel help bring into discussion beauty and its association. In the search for their identity and love we see these young girls struggling to understand colorism. As the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007 it is no surprise that the work of Toni Morrison is remarkable.

Before exploring the characters in this novel, it is important to note Morrison’s purpose for writing a book like this one. The thoughts of *The Bluest Eye* all began with a conversation that Morrison had with a childhood friend who desired to have blue eyes as she saw it as a way to make herself feel more beautiful. In the foreward Morrison states:

> Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do. *The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her (xi).
Morrison felt that this was an issue that faced many young African American girls, so she decided to write her first novel giving voice to young females like Pecola who struggled with their own concept of beauty in hopes of helping other young girls realize that their beauty does not have to align with what society believes to be beautiful.

Allowing a character like Pecola to exist helps contextualize colorism in African American girls. As stated earlier Pecola was infatuated with Shirley Temple and European features. As defined by Berry, colorism refers to the biased treatment of individuals based on their skin color by identifiable features such as hair texture, lip shape, nose shape, eye shape, and eye color (147). In this novel skin color and eye color prominently drive the plot. In A Study of Black Feminism and Womanism in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye from the Viewpoint of Alice Walker, Walker states that Pecola:

> As the protagonist of the novel because of her blackness and her darker skin is doubly pressed and victimized. One the one hand, she [is] pressed by a white racist society due to her black race, but on the other hand, she is victimized within her own black community due to her darker skin. Thus the blackness of her skin gradually disgusts her and leads her to embrace white beauty standards (1307).

We are able to see this victimization as Pecola struggles to see herself as beautiful and thus idolizes whiteness and idolizes blond hair and blue eyes. Through the novel we are able to see this idolization ultimately drive Pecola insane. This twentieth century look at colorism allows us to see that colorism was not nonexistent and simultaneously allows us to see that it is not an issue that had been overcome since slavery or one that is just becoming present in this twenty-first century.
Exploring Pecola’s experience we must first understand what drove her to not feel beautiful. In order to do this we must examine her family structure. Pecola did have both her mother and father in her life but they were only physically present. There were not emotional ties to the family as her father suffered from alcohol abuse and her mother was always working and caring for the child of a white family by whom she was employed.

Pecola’s parents’ relationship started off as one that was admirable. Her father, Cholly, made her mother feel good about the physical deformity of her foot caused by a rusty nail that pierced through it at the age of two. In the beginning the Morrison notes that Cholly, “Instead of ignoring her infirmity, pretending that it was not there, he made it seem like something special and endearing. For the first time Pauline felt that her bad foot was an asset” (116). However, with time things in the relationship changed and Morrison notes that “They were beginning to have less and less to say to each other. He (Cholly) had no problem finding other people and other things to occupy him—men were always climbing the stairs asking for him, and he was happy to accompany them, leaving her alone” (118). The change in the relationship caused more issues in the family structure for the Breedloves. In the novel Pecola is raped by her father. Then she is not believed and thus shunned by her mother. As a result of the Breedlove’s family dysfunction, Pecola’s mom takes her to live with Mr. and Mrs. Macteer who have two daughters named Claudia and Frieda which are about the same age as Pecola. For this reason Pecola seeks to find love in alternative places. On page 32 of The Bluest Eye Pecola asks Claudia, “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” It is here while with Claudia and Frieda’s family while seeking to be loved after separation from both of her parents that Pecola begins to see whiteness as a means to love. Pecola’s
infatuation with Shirley Temple and Mary Jane begins while in this household. Claudia
recalls Pecola’s introduction to Shirley Temple:

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-
white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at
the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving
conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn’t join them in their
adoration because I hated Shirley (19).

Here we see Pecola’s introduction and love of Shirley Temple rooted. Because of this
love of the physical features that Shirley Temple possessed, Pecola always wanted to
drink milk so that she could have the opportunity to drink from this cup. This drives
Claudia and Frieda’s mom mad as she cannot fathom how or why someone would drink
three quarts of milk in one day. However, the reason for this for Pecola was that each
time she drank from this cup she was reminded of what beauty was. Colorism because of
her lack of love from her parents who had not instilled in her that she was beautiful
despite or because of her skin color victimized Pecola as she did not know her true value.
Pecola associated beauty with the whiteness of Shirley Temple and through drinking
from this cup she hoped to gain Shirley Temple’s physical characteristics to be more
beautiful.

In contrast to Pecola, Claudia, despises Shirley Temple. Claudia dislikes Shirley
Temple’s relationship that she has with a black man. Claudia states that she did not adore,
but rather hated Shirley, “Not because she was cute, but because she danced with
Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-
shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance
thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels” (19). Calling attention to the blatant fact that she despised this “little white girl” that danced with black Bojangles we are able to also see Claudia victimized by colorism. She allows herself to harbor hate for Shirley because they are not alike. Shirley is a white girl that is able to dance with a black man, and Claudia feels that the black man is a possession of hers as she sees him as her friend, uncle, and dad. I would argue that Claudia’s unconscious assumption of dislike is prominent because of the engrained phenomenon of colorism.

Claudia’s hate for Shirley transcends into her hate for white dolls as well. Rejecting what society sets as the standard of beauty by whites, Claudia’s dislike of whiteness grows. In addition to Shirley Temple, she also hates white, blue-eyed dolls. She recalls receiving these types of dolls as gifts and how ecstatic the adults were as they felt they were giving her a gift that she would enjoy. Instead, her only desire was to dismember this gift. Claudia states, “To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow haired, pink-skinned dolls was what every child treasured” (20). This was not reality for Claudia. This shows how colorism renders the most social power to those that are white and leaves nonwhites like Claudia unequally viewed in society. The doll market encouraged colorism as it was without black dolls, and had adults that purchased these white dolls for their children believing that they were giving them an invaluable gift. Learning from her hate for whites, Claudia concludes that
she “had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of [her] psyche which would allow [her] to love [Shirley]” (19).

It is not until Claudia witnesses Pecola going mad that she is able to have greater appreciation for her own beauty and self worth that does not align with having to have physical features that denote whiteness.

Shirley Temple was not the only little white girl that Pecola idolized. Pecola was also fascinated with Mary Jane. Mary Jane served as another little white girl that exemplified beauty to Pecola. Claudia describes the Mary Jane Candy that she, Frieda, and Pecola ate:

    Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola, they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane for whom the candy is named (50).

In addition to the doll market signifying beauty as having blond hair and blue eyes, the candy market did the same. In hopes of possessing these features Pecola loved eating the Mary Jane candy. Morrison sexualizes the act of eating this candy for Pecola to show the deep satisfaction that eating this candy brought Pecola as Mary Jane provided the image of what Pecola dreamed to be.
Consumption of milk and candy are not the only ways that Pecola attempts to fulfill her quest to get the blue eyes that she feels will win her the love from anyone that she desires. Pecola also seeks God in prayer to disappear or have blue eyes. She prays: ‘Please, God,’ she whispered into the palm of her hand. ‘Please make me disappear.’ She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away… Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything… Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike (45).

Walker notes Pecola is trapped as, “She believes that if she had blue eyes, she would be loved and her life would be transformed. More than anything she wants to be loved because she is constantly abused and tormented by her family and an abusive community” (1307). Pecola experienced discrimination because of her skin color. Viewing white and the possession of blue eyes as a way to receive love leaves Pecola unable to identify herself as she attempts to create her own identity through little white girls. Pecola saw not having blue eyes as the source of her own ugliness and was determined to change her eye color so that she could be pretty and be loved. Pecola pressures herself to gain these characteristics so that she can align with the majority white race in society. This belief is directly related to colorism.

Pecola was bullied at school because of her skin color. Her classmates would taunt her because she was so dark. Claudia recalls, “They [the boy classmates] had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no
control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence” (65). These boys called Pecola ‘black e mo’ and continuously taunted her. Pecola could not change the color of her skin and these young boys were subjecting her to colorism. They too were victims of colorism as they saw Pecola’s skin color as a negative trait. This supports Turner’s belief of how colorism is taught and becomes problematic as it is passed on throughout generations. Where did the idea that being dark begin? It was something that they had gained throughout their interactions in their community. This is evident as others in the community saw believed Pecola was ugly because of her skin tone while praising those that were of lighter skin tones.

We are able to see Maureen Peal, a light-skinned African American girl experience colorism for reasons opposite from Pecola. Claudia admits that she and Frieda were bemused, irritated, and fascinated by Maureen. Morrison describes the new girl in school Maureen as, “the disruptor of seasons. A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided… Rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of white girls, swaddled in comfort and care… [with] a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion” (62). Considering Jaynes definition of colorism we are able to see how the description of Maureen Peal and her light skin phenotype associates positive terms with her existence. Maureen, to her classmates as well as Claudia and Pecola, is seen as more feminine and pretty because she is lighter. For this reason everyone wants to be Maureen’s friend. Maureen is also believed to have a comfortable home life and to be rich by the children. This is an example of colorism as it is bias in assuming that Maureen is better off because she has light skin. Next to Maureen, Claudia and Pecola feels less beautiful because Maureen has pretty skin, hair, and eyes. This is
problematic as these young African American girls measure their value through others. One day while going to get icecream, Maureen questions Pecola about her rape and the girls end up in an altercation. This infuriates Claudia and she confronts Maureen telling her that she should not ask about Pecola’s dad and eventually that she is not cute. Maureen runs to the other side of the road to avoid contact with Claudia. Then, “safe on the other side, she screamed at [them], ‘I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute’” (73). Again we see the definition of colorism that Jaynes gives as Maureen is also a victim of colorism. Because she has lighter skin, she believes that she is pretty. She also sees the other girls as ugly because of their dark skin tones. She even goes as far as to also call them ‘black e mos’ which is derogatory and used to belittle the girls’ self worth and image.

Pecola’s mother also plays a role in distorting her self image and igniting her quest to have blue eyes. Pecola wants to be loved but is instead shunned by her mother. When Pecola goes to a white family’s house that her mom works at she sees her mother giving a white child the love and attention that she does not give her. When Pecola knocks over a pie in the house, Mrs. Breedlove calls her a fool and then runs to comfort the white child that the noise from the accident startles. Claudia recalls, “As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl” (109). As Walker’s study explores major character’s ways of forming self-concept in the face of sexism and racism, I conclude that racism leads to colorism. Mandated by her job and society to comfort the white child, Mrs. Breedlove subjects Pecola to colorism as she internalizes that she has to possess the physical traits of a white child to receive her mother’s love.
To understand why Pecola’s mother behaves this way and chooses to comfort the crying white child it is worth examining Mrs. Breedlove’s own standard of beauty. Before the birth of Pecola and her brother Mrs. Breedlove sought going to the movies as a way to occupy her time and feel her lonely void while away from work. It is at the movies that Morrison notes that “Along with the idea of romantic love, she(Mrs. Breedlove) was introduced to another—physical beauty… She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty… It was really a simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate” (122). It was in these movies that she saw the way white men and women behaved and cared for their families. She began to make comparison between these men and her husband. Mrs. Breedlove admitted how hard it was to go home to her own husband after watching how these men interacted with their families. This internalized depression and longing for a life that she did not have. She longed to live like these white families but was faced with reality each time she returned home to her African American family.

Looking for love through eyes eventually leads Pecola to Soaphead Church. Church is astonished to hear what Pecola wants. He recalls all the things people had come to her seeking before and remembers how he has pretended to help these people by only instilling in them the belief that a change would come. After this request from Pecola, Church writes a letter to God and states:

We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious of our white master’s characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics mostly gratifying to
sustain and least troublesome to maintain… And now, consider: Not according to my deserts, but according to my mercy, the little black girl that came today. Tell me, Lord, how could you leave a lass so long so lone that she could find her way to me?... Do you know what she came for? Blue eyes. New, blue eyes, she said, Like she was buying shoes. “I’d like a pair of new blue eyes.” She must have asked you for them for a very long time, and you hadn’t replied (177-80).

Church questions God in trying to understand how he would allow such a young girl to go through a situation like this. He tells God that the girl must have prayed to him and he did not answer. This is true as Pecola’s unanswered prayers led her to Church. Church traces the beginning of this identity struggle from Pecola to the many African Americans that took on the acceptance of the white master’s traits as being superior many years ago. In an attempt to understand why God would allow such a thing to happen especially to someone so young and innocent as Pecola causes Church. He also questions the way that God not only allowed colorism to lead Pecola to him but he also questions whether God himself had shunned all African American people as he notes how many of the hardworking efforts of African Americans were going unnoticed and unappreciated.

In the end, when Pecola finally does receive blue eyes, she is still not loved or accepted. People are afraid of her because of her blue eye color along with her dark skin color. However Pecola believes that these people are jealous. She states, “He did a really good job. Everybody’s jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off… They all try to pretend they don’t see them. Isn’t that funny?” (195). Pecola does not win the acceptance of her community or the love of her mother. This drives her insane as she gains blue eyes but becomes an outcast to the world. Claudia is deeply saddened by this.
Pecola’s rape that she experienced in the beginning of the novel that leads her to staying with Claudia and Frieda results in pregnancy and Claudia asserts that, “More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (190). Realizing that it is too late to save Pecola, Pauleen wants to save Pecola’s unborn child. She wants this child to be born into a world that teaches the child that she is equal to, if not more than all the light skin and white people in the world. This is the alternative to colorism that favors fair skin over dark skin. This colorism that Claudia wants to instill in the unborn baby is one that will favor dark skin over light to allow the child to feel accepting of herself.

Walker states that in the writings of black feminists like Morrison, “their writings frequently stimulate black women to love themselves, their race, and their culture and not to trap in white superiority or white beauty standards”. We see Claudia and Pecola subjected to colorism throughout this novel as they compare their beauty to those of whites such as Shirley Temple, Mary Jane, and the white child that Mrs. Breedlove cared for. We also see them and Maureen subjected to colorism as these young African American girls use their skin tones to pit themselves against one another. We see Claudia choose to no longer be victimized by colorism as she grows to love herself, Pecola, and Pecola’s unborn child while also choosing to no longer hate the white images that society praised as beautiful. Through recognition of her own self worth, she loses her hate for whites through her growth of love for herself. Pecola, however, allows colorism to drive her insane. Pecola loses herself. It is through this novel that Morrison calls attention to colorism. This hate for what you can’t change: skin and eye color helps send a message
to other young African American girls like Pecola and Claudia that are in the minority race constantly seeking to determine their identity through the acquisition of traits possessed by the majority white race.

Daina Miniotaite conducted a critical review of the radicalised identity in *The Bluest Eye*. What she found was that many Black Americans had internalized stereotypes that were imposed on them and many were trying to conform to meet the standards of beauty that white society had equated as beauty (52). She directly stated, “On the other hand, some Afro-Americans racialised their identity in that the adopted the standards of White dominated culture” (52). Again we are able to see African Americans using the standards of the white dominate class to choose how they identify themselves. Miniotaite continues, “The focus of the 20th century and contemporary Afro-American women writers moves away from the depiction of Black history towards the personality issues – the Black family, community, and a search for identity” (52). Considering the Black Family, community and search for identity we are able to think about Pecola Breedlove who is the main female protagonist in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. We are able to see aspects of all three of these issues as forces that drive the plot of Morrison’s work and ultimately drive Pecola mad as she desires to become more beautiful by attempting to attain blue eyes. Miniotaite’s belief is that the influence of white ideas of beauty on blacks calls into question what beauty is for blacks and shapes how we choose to identity ourselves.

Miniotaite tells how *The Bluest Eye* discusses the ideology of white supremacy on the self esteem on Afro-Americans (52). Considering the discussion of racialised identity
and how it objectifies African Americans and causes them to internalize negative stereotypes on page 52. Miniotaite defends the idea that:

In the novel (The Bluest Eye) the writer poses the questions of the nature of physical beauty, the formation of a self-image, the meaning of love, examines themes of racism, the implanted self-loathing as well as domestic violence, child abuse and incest as outcomes of an inferiority complex and self-hatred. Morrison explains that in the book she was interested in “racism as a cause, consequence, and manifestation of individual and social psychosis” (Morrison, 2010, 9).

For this reason we are able to see racism and thus colorism prevalent throughout the novel. Morrison uses Pecola Breedlove as the one complex character who is faced with all these issues and ultimately loses a battle against herself trying to live up to the beauty of white society. This issue is colorism as Pecola associated her beauty with having characteristics that are more common in whites such as blue eyes. In an opposing view we are able to look at the alternate female character Claudia. Claudia opts against living up to what society defines as beautiful and becomes content with her own beauty as a black girl. She also begins to recognize the beauty of those around her like Pecola who is unable to recognize her own beauty. Looking at the identity struggles throughout this critical analysis we are able to examine characters such as Pecola and Claudia who attempt to find and appreciate their physical beauty while living in a world where beauty is most often aligned with being and having white features.

When reading The Bluest Eye which was very interesting I was constantly in thoughts that drifted away from the text. I began to wonder about what I thought beauty was and whether I like Pecola found beauty in things that were considered attributes of
White Americans. What I realized was that I did not compare my beauty standards nor align them with anything that was considered more European or White American. I understood that I took beauty on an individual basis and did not compare standards that were incomparable to one another. I do believe this had to do with the fact that I myself grew up with both parents in my house and have had a very strong foundation of faith and confidence built around me. For this reason I am able to compare myself with Claudia from the novel as she also had both of her parents present in her life and was able to appreciate her own beauty. Growing up and still today my parents continuously tell me how much they love me, how proud of me they are, and how beautiful I am. They have always encouraged me in my academics and went over and beyond to make sure that anything that was needed was always gotten. For this reason I do not have to look to society to seek what is beautiful because I was raised to believe that beauty was what I saw each day as I looked in the mirror and as I looked around my loving family what is comprised of all different variations of skin tones.
Chapter Four: Colorism in Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard*

Born in the United States during a period when anti-miscegenation laws which outlawed interracial relationships and marriages were still in act, Natasha Trethewey’s life was sure to be one that was both difficult and different. As a product of a Caucasian male and African American woman born in 1966 Trethewey was shunned by society long before birth. It was predetermined that the white community would never fully accept her as their own because of her African American mother. Likewise, the black community would never fully embrace her either because of her Caucasian father. In a memoir of poems which give recollections of her life, Trethewey recalls the difficulties that she faced because of the color of her skin. This book of poems entitled *Native Guard* represented a significant achievement for Trethewey as it helped her work through understanding how she identified herself. Kim best summarizes this work in a critical review by stating that *Native Guard*’s message is that “Underlying these endeavors is her [Trethewey’s] own struggle to find a meaning of being African American, biracial, and southern. The collage Trethewey creates in her works, then, not only tells a “fuller version” of history (Trethewey, “Interview” 103), but also shows her identity development as a biracial African American southern poet” (91). Kim believes that Trethewey’s subject and purpose for writing was history and because of this belief also believes that “it is imperative to remember those disowned by history, in opposition to accepting what history tells us to remember, has shaped Trethewey’s poetic career” (91). Trethewey’s interest in the history of her own life and the life of others drove her passion
to create these poems. In an attempt to recall the memory of her mother and the forgotten soldiers Trethewey uses the poems throughout *Native Guard* to stake claims to the forgotten past. It was not until working to remember the past of these men and her own mother that Trethewey realized how much she had forgotten about her own identify struggle and decided to reflect upon and document it.

Other scholars have written critical reviews on *Native Guard*. Ellis best summarizes the work of Trethewey as so: “From the empty spaces her deceased mother leaves to the empty spaces of forgotten black history, Trethewey attempts to fill in holes” (19). Trethewey attempts to fill in this holes by being a voice for those that have been silenced. Throughout these poems Trethewey works through being a voice for the Native Guards, her mother, and the silenced young girl that she once was. Ellis concludes, “In Trethewey’s poems. each word, each line represents syllables uttered in the mouths of those silenced by grief, pain, and history” (19). Whether through racism or colorism much of America’s history is hidden and silenced and we are able to see authors like Trethewey work to educate others on this history. Theodore Haddin agrees that this work “enables the reader, too, to become an interpreter of history and time” (116). Interpreting both history and time prove promising for Trethewey and the readers of her work as they are able to contextualize the events that were endured and their impacts. This work was also so well written and widely accepted that Trethewey won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry.

Before exploring the work of Trethewey it is important to explore her purpose for writing. In a 2010 Phyllis Wheatley Distinguished Chair in Poetry lecture for the Distinguished Faculty Trethewey discusses her purpose for writing. She talks about being
told at an early age by her father that she would be a writer but being uncertain of what she would write about. It was not until she moved to Georgia with her mother and her stepfather that she gained her first audience and began to write. This audience was her stepfather that she knew was secretly reading her diary. This situation helped Trethewey link her early development as a writer to circumstance. She learned as she quoted that “words could not only speak for [her] but that they could also speak to and for other people”. It was also through literature that Trethewey began to look for a way to identify herself as a biracial woman. While reading the Races of Man section in the 1967 edition of the encyclopedia Trethewey began her racialized inquiry. She read that there were distinguished racial characteristics and took it upon herself to see where she aligned and whether it was with whites or with blacks. Of course this method failed. In the lecture Trethewey admits that it was through reading the work of Orwell that was suggested by her father that she began to understand her place as a writer. Orwell had four primary motives for writing: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. Trethewey stated, “Though compelled by each of these four purposes it was in historical impulse and political purpose that [she] found [her] dominant motivation”. Trethewey admits in this lecture that “as [she] grew older it occurred to [her] that the world was changing… gradually and that some of the more insidious forms of injustice were beneath the surface of what [she] could see around [her]. She noticed that “along with the insidious and overt injustices that came nightly on the world news report the injustices of day to day life in the various forms of institutional injustice was evidence to her that geography was fate”. It is for this reason that Trethewey was troubled throughout her life to identify with Mississippi and sought to do this in her poems. It is also for this
reason that many of Trethewey’s poems are about social justice as she attempts to provide “a lens through which she sees the world” to her readers. Growing older and being able to recollect on her life experiences as she was writing these poems helped Trethewey realize that her purpose was to allow her words to help document apart of her own history that she had tried for so long to forget.

Natasha Trethewey uses *Native Guard* to tell the story of her life. She begins with how her African American mother and Caucasian father met and married during a time when marriage between the two was still considered illegitimate in many states throughout the United States of America. This frowned upon union and the offspring of herself that it bore caused many problems for many people. For whites she was a problem as she was too dark and for blacks she was a problem as she was too light. Being biracial also caused Trethewey to struggle with her own identity as she struggled to find who she was and where she fit in into society. She was constantly labeled a misfit and “other” by society. Society named her as an other when it did not allow her to identify with the black or white communities. *Native Guard* is broken into three separate parts and indirectly addresses colorism as it is the central problem that guides her life’s events. In Part I we are given the history of Trethewey’s mother. In Part II we see Trethewey attempt to reconnect with her southern heritage. In Part III we see Trethewey grapple with understanding her own history and life events. These poems prove vital to understanding colorism as they help open discussions about the significance of skin color that was still present in the 1960s when Trethewey was born and were still relevant in 2006 when these poems were published.
After the publication of these poems and win of the Pulitzer Prize many discussions whether about the guards, the south, or the life of Trethewey were begun. These discussions ignited interest in the life of Trethewey and led to many interviews. “I don’t know what I would have written about if I hadn’t written about those things that I had been grappling about my whole adult life,” stated Trethewey (McHaney 4). In an interview with Pearl Amelia McHaney Trethewey discusses Native Guard. She tells how in the beginning she was attempting to write about the forgotten existence of the black soldiers on Ship Island. These men had been omitted from the history of the island that was taught while the White Confederate Soldiers were still celebrated. When asked what she discovered in writing the three sections of Native Guard Trethewey responded:

Some of that goes back to what we talked about before—why all these things went into the same book. I discovered something of what Mark Doty says: “Our metaphors go on ahead of us;” that all of the research I was doing outside of myself, looking at history and looking at the Native Guard was leading me toward that I was really deeply concerned with, a monument for my mother. I started out saying, I want a monument for these lesser known soldiers and I ended up finding out that who I really wanted to create a monument for was my mother:

Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough (5).

Trethewey used the art of poetry to create a monument of her mother. In poems that discuss her mother she is attempting to remember the woman that she had tried so hard to forget because of her brutal murder. Trethewey’s mother created the space that would allow open discussions about miscegenation and ultimately colorism to eventually be explored. When asked about the metaphorical meaning of the title Native Guard
Trethewey acknowledges the obvious, “it is about the Louisiana Native Guards… But [she] started thinking about what it meant to be a native guardian, of not only personal memory but also of collective memory— and that is certainly what poets are often charged with doing” (7). As a poet who is charged to document recollective memory Trethewey explored the life of her parents and her own life to build a foundation that would allow her unanswered questions and uncertainty of her own life to be explored. During this interview McHaney stated, “You have also said, ‘We must identify with the despised parts of ourselves’.” Trethewey responded by stating that she believed her writing had come from the elegies that helped her think about her past in the South. She directly stated, “And perhaps returning to the South after many years in the Northeast made me rethink my Southern history, American history, and my place in it, because I can get really angry about my South. Though I love it, it has given me plenty of reason to hate it” (3). It’s ironic that the same place that caused so much hate is also the same place the Trethewey could identify most with. Being able to identify with the South which she despised because of the way that it had treated her and her parents through the burning of crosses, injustice, and real danger threats that were imposed on her family daily which she talked about during her 2010 lecture led Trethewey to write many of these poems. It was also the south that Trethewey admits undergirded many of her poems and gave them purpose.

In Part I of Trethewey’s poems she tells the story of her mother. This was not an easy talk as Trethewey had avoided talking about her mother for years after she was murdered. However, we see Trethewey gently recall the memory of her mother. Then in Part II we are able to see Trethewey herself attempt to reclaim her southern heritage and
explain how the history of the south has shaped her. In *You Are Late* Trethewey calls attention to the importance of race. As a young girl that is eager to read and sets out to go the library upon her arrival she is still not permitted entrance. Trethewey writes: “Even though / it must be hot, she takes the step; her goal / to read is the subject of this shot — a book / in her hand, the library closed, the door / just out of reach. Stepping up she must look / at the two signs, read them slowly once more” (1.3-4 & 2.1-4). Eager to read, upon arriving at the library Trethewey’s dream is slowly crushed as she notices that the library is closed. More detrimental than the library itself being closed is the dilemma she is faced with at the library. Trethewey continues: “The first one, in pale letters barely shows / against the white background. Though she will read *Greenwood Public Library for Negroes*, / the other, bold letters on slate, will lead / her way, out of the frame, a finger / pointing left. I want to call her, say wait. / But this is history: she can’t linger. / She’ll read the sign that I read: *You Are Late*” (3.1-4 & 4.1-4). Here, we are able to see the dilemma that Trethewey is faced with is being a black girl that wants to read and is obligated to go to a library that is for negroes. Then upon her arrival she is told by the white librarian that she is too late. Trethewey is burdened with having to live as a black girl while she is biracial. Nevertheless we do see this first encounter with what Trethewey believes is racism in the south. Having been provided with definitions of colorism we know that it is directly correlated with racism. We will see colorism advance in more of her poems.

The impact of colorism on the poetic works is most apparent in Part III of Trethewey’s poetry. It is in Part III that we see history come into play for Trethewey. In *Pastoral* Trethewey writes:
“In the dream, I am with the Fugitive / Poets. We’re gathered for a photograph. / Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta / hidden by the photographer’s backdrop — / a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows / lowing, a chant that sounds like no, no. Yes, / I say to the glass of bourbon I’m offered. / We’re lining up now — / Robert Penn Warren, / his voice just audible above the drone / of bulldozers, telling us where to stand. / Say “race,” the photographer croons. I’m in / blackface again when the flash freezes us. / My father’s white, I tell them, and rural / You don’t hate the South? they ask. You don’t hate it?”.

Here, we see Trethewey confronted by colorism yet again as she tells the photographer about her father. After learning that she is the daughter of a white rural man the photographer asks her whether she hates the south. One can imagine why he would ask this. As already mentioned unions and sex between whites and blacks was still not widely accepted during this time. Therefore, to learn that Trethewey was the daughter of a white rural man the photographer’s initial response referenced whether she had any ill feelings towards the south. It is my opinion that the photographer asked this question because he too knew that like slavery that existed all over America yet was worse in the south, racism and limitations on the life of biracial children like Trethewey would also be worse in the south. For this reason he expected Trethewey to hate the south. In some regards I do believe that Trethewey had grown disappointed in the south and this may be the reason that as she grew older and began writing these poems that she wanted to rekindle her southern heritage and stake her claims to the south. After all, it was the south that had a profound impact on her life. Arguably more important that Trethewy’s feelings about the south are the people she is being photographed with. It is the Fugitive Poets which
were writers from Vanderbilt University that were determined to show that southerners could produce valuable work that she was with. Being in the same setting as these white men that were known for celebrating the idea of separatism also help us understand racism and colorism as Trethewey is unable to wholly identify with this group of men. Into *Pastoral* we see how race impacted Trethewey’s life. Race was the word she imagined having to say as opposed to the common “cheese” that one is asked to say to embody a smile with the lips. This is a deep poem as it calls attention to not only the differences in the landscapes of the north and south as it references both Atlanta and the rural south but also the differences in the expected behaviors and attitudes towards the north and south. This poem is also deep as it calls into question Trethewey’s view of the Fugitive Poets, their stance on the art of poetry, and their stance on whether her work would be well written enough to gain their approval even though she was a woman and black.

*Miscegenation* is unquestionably one of the most important poems as it tells how Trethewey’s own life was formed. In a critical review Kim, notes that, “When Trethewey turns to her personal history in the final section of Native Guard, she deliberately employs the familiar literary types and themes such as the tragic mulatta and passing to refashion her story” (93). Both of these themes which are linked to colorism help provide the framework needed to thoroughly examine this poem. Connections to colorism are made as the derivation of the term mulatta came from slavery and intermixing of races which ultimately created a lighter skinned African American that could in many instances “pass” as whites. In “Miscegenation” these are the conventions that are explored. Trethewey writes: “In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi; / they went to
Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi. / They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name / begins with a sound like sin, the sound of wrong — mis in Mississippi”. Trethewey’s mother and father knew that their union would be frowned upon by many yet still chose to travel to a state that would allow them to marry and return to Mississippi after the deed had been done. She continues: “A year later they moved to Canada, followed a route the same / as slaves the train slicing the white glaze of winter, leaving Mississippi”. We aren’t directly told why the couple chose to leave Mississippi and relocate to Canada but we can imagine a southern couple with a biracial child would make this move during 1965. Miscegenation concludes with the birth of Trethewey to her parents as she is the product of miscegenation. We know from the definitions that we have been provided with by Berry and Jaynes that colorism grew from interracial relationships like the one between Trethewey’s parents. Therefore, it is not surprising that we later learn that Trethewey is a victim of colorism as she searches for her identity and a place in society that she fits in. We see Trethewey parallel the route that her parents traveled with that of slaves that had once left Mississippi. This parallel helps us to think about the blatant racism that existed which directly correlated to colorism that Trethewey eventually faced. Kim also notices a connection between Trethewey’s own life and that of Joe Christmas in Faulkner’s Light in August. Kim recalls. “Whereas Joe’s last name was given so because he was left at an orphanage on Christmas day, Trethewey's first name, Natasha, means ‘Christmas child’ in Russian. Trethewey approaches the issue of race through this name connection. Joe Christmas’s tragedy lies in his obscure paternity and consequently obscure racial identity” (94). Aligning herself with another fictional character that also endured race identity issues helps Trethewey assert her own
relevancy to race. Kim best describes *Miscegenation* by stating,

“‘Miscegenation,’ … plays with several conventions. Her parents’ northern migration from the Deep South… reminds her of runaway slaves’ routes. Then she identifies a famous mulatto figure in southern literature to whom she can compare: Joe Christmas… [through this] Trethewey demonstrates that she has a control over literary and historical stereotypes that have victimized the mixed-race” (93). Trethewey uses *Miscegenation* to alert her readers of the difficulties a family of a mixed-race child could face.

In *My Mother Dreams Another Country* we see more evidence of Wilder’s experiment and the existence of colorism in the life of Trethewey and her mother. Trethewey begins: “Already the words are changing. She is changing / from *colored* to *negro, black* still years ahead. / This is 1966 — she is married to a white man — / and there are more names for what grows inside her” (Lines 1-4). Choosing to be with a white man caused Trethewey’s mother problems as negative black names were being thrown at her. Likewise, before Trethewey was even birthed, she knows that there are many names that she was already being called. Trethewey continued: It is enough to worry about words like *mongrel* / and the infertility of mules and mulattoes / while flipping through a book of baby names. / She has come home to wait out the long months, / her room unchanged since she’s been gone: / dolls winking down from every shelf — all of them/ white. Everyday she is flanked by the rituals of superstition” (Lines 5-10). These first few lines provide quite a bit for us to examine in the context of colorism. First off, we see the reference to the notion of mulatta again in reference to unborn Trethewey. Society has chosen to label this unborn child as a mulatta and will not allow this name to be shunned. Instead it is imprinted into her identity on earth long before she is even birthed. Secondly,
we see the issues that Trethewey’s mother also may have suffered with and could have caused her to make many of the decisions that she has. We see in lines 9 and 10 that in her room that she (Trethewey’s mother) returns to while awaiting childbirth that she has has dolls from when she was a small girl herself. More important than having dolls from one’s childhood is the fact that this African American woman’s childhood dolls were white. Here, it is questionable of why the dolls are white. Were the dolls chosen by Natasha Trethewey’s mother own parents or did the now African American pregnant woman choose these dolls herself as a small girl. Either of the two options of how the dolls came to be is possible. It is important to explore both to see how no matter which claim it was, there is still evidence of colorism.

Before exploring either of the two options the significance of the dolls should be examined. In The Bluest Eye we were provided with evidence of Pecola’s infatuation with Shirley Temple and white dolls and Claudia’s apparent hate of the same dolls as she breaks them apart. The study of the significance of dolls and their relevancy in relation to beauty is not new. In the 1940s the Clark Doll Experiment which was conducted to examine children’s attitudes about race was conducted and proved vital to understanding what children associated with beauty. In this study it was found that most often white dolls were seen as better. Thinking about the dolls that Trethewey’s mother possessed we are able to question her standard of beauty and reason behind purchasing and still having such dolls many years later.

In claim option it is possible that Trethewey’s grandparents were the ones that could have purchased the dolls for their daughter. Then you began to wonder what would make African American parents buy their African American child a doll that does not
look like her and thus one that is not relatable or can depict her own beauty. It could very much be that these dolls were the cheapest and most readily available because of their popularity. It could also very much be that society and its notion of beauty and its relevance to whiteness led the parents to choose these white dolls for their little girl because they too accepted society’s idea that white is what was most beautiful. If this is so it still supports the fact that the decision for the choice of doll was made because of colorism. It is important to examine where these dolls that were still possessed came from as they allow us to see evidence of colorism not only in Trethewey’s generation but possibly also in her mother or grandparents’ generations also.

The second option is whether the now pregnant African American woman chose the dolls herself as a small child. If she in fact did choose the dolls the reasoning behind this decision would be beneficial. Was she like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and obsessed with whiteness? Perhaps she too idolized these dolls as they set the standard of beauty for her even though this was a standard that was impossible to achieve for herself as she could not change her own skin color. One then begins to wonder whether Turner’s research is relevant here as well. Perhaps like the family that “Yellowman” is based on because of Trethewey’s mom’s glorification of beauty in whiteness she chose to love a white man in order to bear children of a lighter skin tone. In order for this to be true we have to wholly accept the poems that Trethewey has written at face value and as true to understand the reasoning behind many of the choices that her mother made. No matter which alternative we choose to believe we still see that colorism may have been the driving force behind many of these actions.
Like *Pastoral, Miscegenation*, and *My Mother Dreams Another Country*, both *Blond* and *Southern Gothic* from Part III are crucial to examining colorism and its apparent impact on the life of Trethewey. In *Blond* Trethewey discusses the recessive traits of her parents and how “an even mix of her parents’ skin tones could have allowed her to pass for white” (39). Trethewey does not stop at the mention of passing which we know was relevant and a survival mechanism which was used to secure better education, jobs, and more opportunities for blacks that were able to pass. Trethewey instead continues to call attention to colorism as she discusses the events that occurred in her house on Christmas day. “When on Christmas day I woke to find / a blond wig, a pink sequin tutu, / and a blond ballerina doll, nearly as tall as me, / I didn’t know to ask, nor / that it mattered, / if there’d been a brown version. (Lines 9-13)” Again we see the reoccurrence of dolls and their impact on young girls. We are able to see Trethewey think about why the doll that had been purchased for her did not look like her but choose to instead brush the idea off and choose to enjoy the fact that she had a new doll altogether. Thinking about this doll in the context of colorism would allow us to ask whether Trethewey used this doll incidence to decide on her view of beauty. We are left to contemplate whether the doll that was purchased could have made Trethewey insecure about her value as a “brown” girl. We are also left to contemplate the impact that a purchase that was intended for good but presented an issue as minute as the skin tone of a doll could have on a young girl. This is how colorism was brought into discussion in *Blond*. Trethewey was questioning whether it was white skin and blond hair that she should seek or her own brown skin that she should embrace.
In *Southern Gothic* we see the impact of colorism that is not caused in the home setting like in *Blond*. Instead we are able to see Trethewey affected by colorism in her school community. Trethewey writes, “I am again the child with too many questions— / the endless *why* and *why* and *why* / my mother cannot answer, her mouth closed, a gesture / toward her future: cold lips stitched shut. / The lines in my young father’s face deepen / toward an expression of grief. I have come home / from the schoolyard with the words that shadow us / in this small Southern town— *peckerwood* and *nigger* / lover, *half-breed* and *zebra*— words that take shape / outside us. We’re huddled on the tiny island of the bed, quiet” (Lines 6-15). We are able to see Trethewey affected by colorism at school. We then began contextualize the role that parents and the community play in regards to colorism. It is obvious that at home Trethewey’s peers were exposed to and negatively educated on the different variances in skin tones. Her young peers were taught to taunt and frown upon people like her that were biracial. They were also taught these negatives names that for those of a lighter skin tone. It is the school children that send Trethewey to her parents asking why. Trethewey’s parents were unable to give an explanation of why she was taunted because of her skin tone and were greatly affected and hurt by this. This shows how colorism affects those on both side of the spectrum. The children may have not known that they were doing wrong because this is obviously something they had been taught and children like Trethewey were left feeling as a misfit for something that they had no control over: their skin tone.

Another poem that is vital to understanding colorism and its impact on the life of Trethewey is *Incident*. In this poem the story of a confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan is told. Peering through the window Trethewey recalls: “At the cross trussed like a
Christmas tree, / a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns. / We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps, / the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil” (3.1-4). Here we Trethewey using irony in her poetry as she references the men of the KKK as angels yet what they are doing is wrong. These “angels in their gowns” have come into their neighborhood and set a tree on fire. Trethewey calls attention to the underlying issues of colorism and racism through irony as these white men are seen as having done nothing wrong. Instead these men are seen as angels by society as she continues: “It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns / When they were done, they left quietly. No one came” (3.1-2). We see that there was no punishment issued to these men for their acts of violence. It is because these men were part of the majority group and thus it was acceptable for them to intimidate and even as they did here in this cause cause physical damage to the property of the minority group. Incident calls attention to racism that was present and as we already known it is through slavery and racism that colorism was formed. It also calls attention to colorism as Trethewey plats on the irony of these men being seen as angels though they are committing heinous crimes.

Many of Trethewey’s poems throughout *Native Guard* are centered around how she as a biracial woman dealt with racism and colorism in all aspects of her life in both the north and the south. She sends the message that skin color is something you have no control over yet are judged by daily as it can sometimes provide opportunities for yet but also at time places limitations on other opportunities. Trethewey admits to struggling with colorism internally the majority of her life as she sought to find where she stood in with both sides of her families and in society in general. Her poems are critical to discussion of colorism as it is made apparent through an analysis of many of these poems
that colorism in an issue that she and many other biracial and African Americans of many different skin tones face. Trethewey’s poetry provides a unique insight into colorism’s impact on women. In contrast to *The Bluest Eye*, colorism in Trethewey’s life allow us to explore the relevancy of colorism in a different century and in a non-fictional character. Trethewey’s work helps readers better gauge colorism and its impact as it provides evidence of how this socially constructed phenomenon troubled Trethewey throughout much of her life. As stated by Kim, “Her [Trethewey’s] exploration of racial and regional identities culminates in *Native Guard*, where a self-conscious poet-speaker integrates all aspects of her identity and redefines southern identity by reading both her personal history and a collective history of southern blacks through the central metaphor of miscegenation” (91). It is through works like these by authors that have been oppressed by colorism that we are able to prove the detrimental affects of colorism.
Chapter 5: Colorism in the 21st Century

While looking at literature as a guide to understanding colorism it is also beneficial to use other avenues to examine the existence and impact of colorism. For this purpose it is vital to look at a documentary entitled “Dark Girls”. What stood out to me when watching this documentary was that not only were adults and teens finding themselves victims of colorism. There were also very young children that were already dealing with what it meant to be a dark skinned child.

Before delving into the documentary itself it is worth mentioning my reason for being interested in colorism. As I have already stated I went to a predominately white elementary and middle school. It was not until high school that I went to a school that had not one single Caucasian student. Because I have been in both environments and have experienced the burden of being the black friend that every white child wanted and also the black friend that acted too white I have been more receptive to noticing colorism and the impact that it makes.

When I first began looking for a thesis idea I thought about what I loved and what I wanted to see changed. I knew that I had always loved reading and I had taken some African American literature courses because they secretly helped give me a comfort zone on this campus at the University of Mississippi. Before I came to Ole Miss I remember my high school guidance counselor advising us about schools. She gave us the pros and cons of attending very large and smaller schools as well as the pros and cons of attending
a PWI or a HBCU. Ole Miss had always been my dream school so I happily disclosed to anyone that asked why this was the school that I would attend. In September of 2010 when I received my acceptance letter I was ecstatic. I honestly can’t put into words how happy I was that I had been accepted. However, when I went to school and told my teachers and mentors that I would indeed be attending Ole Miss they began to make me question my decision. My high school was very small and I was basically the face of it. When it came to class officers, class queens, or anything else I was usually one of the people chosen if not the one chosen alone. I was asked whether I wanted to go somewhere where I would be a name or a place where I would be just a number. I thought long and hard about this and decided that if my college experience was anything like my high school experience I could come to Ole Miss and excel.

Reality hit and my first few months at Ole Miss were great but not exactly rewarding because of my lack of campus involvement. I tried out for many things around campus and was usually let down. I began to question whether I had made the right decision when choosing to come here because I could not understand why I was being overlooked for many positions. Then I began to look at the African American people that were chosen and notice the difference between them and myself. While I do think I am a pretty articulate person I noticed that many of the people that were being chosen for positions that I wasn't chosen for were African Americans that were friends with whites and thus more familiar with the behavior and conversation that was acceptable and certain to win you any position around campus that you chose. While I knew it would be ignorant to come to college and not change as I grew, I also knew that I would not come and change or fake who I was to be accepted. Academically I was succeeding. Socially
with friends I was winning. However, my campus involvement was not doing great. I began to join clubs that accepted me for who I was and challenged me to grow as a person. I say all of this to say that it was my own struggle with my identity as an African American woman here on this college campus that led me to think about who I was and the things that had shaped the person I would ultimately become. For this reason I chose to incorporate my love for reading and my challenge of finding myself and defend the existence of colorism.

Because of my personal experience with colorism I could relate to many people that were filmed in this documentary: “Dark Girls”. What stood out to me the most was when the documentary opened up with the young dark skinned girl stating that she didn't like to be called black because she was brown. When this statement was made I immediately began to sympathize with the small child. It saddened me most that she was so young and already having to deal with and be ashamed of her skin tone. In all honesty the little girl was gorgeous but she struggled with seeing her own beauty as she took the word black and its negative connotations and thought that it was a term that was being used to talk about her instead of uplift her. I began to wonder where she had even gotten the idea that the word black was a bad word from, but then I stopped and thought about our twenty-first century society. Each year children are getting exposed to more negative things at an early age because of the role of media and technology. Therefore I had to step back and remember that although at an age as young as this young girl I do not recall being ashamed of my skin tone, it was a few years later when I was. This young girl’s experience bothered me even more because when she told about her encounter I began to think about my own niece who is very dark skinned. As we know colorism is usually
within the same race and many people are subjected to it by their families. I thought about my niece who is the most beautiful little girl I know. Yes, she is dark skinned but when I think of her beauty I don't say she's “pretty for a dark skinned girl”. I say that she is pretty in general because I know about colorism and how it can affect a person. However, many of my aunts and grandmother all of whom always talk about how beautiful my niece is often point out her dark skin. They say things such as “She’s a beautiful black girl”. I try to educate them on not calling her that because there have been times when she has come home from school crying because she has been called black and ugly. I let my niece know how beautiful she is inside and out. After all, the world is based on favorites and she is mine! This documentary and my own experiences show that colorism still exists today just as it did many centuries ago. Colorism has many negative effects as it causes people that are discriminated against to question their own identity when they do not align with the socially accepted norm of society. Exactly why a person’s skin tone has such a profound impact on others is a question that is still being explored today.

What really bothered me most throughout this documentary was seeing the older women cry as they talked about how they had been impacted by colorism by those that they loved most. It was in many instances mothers, sisters, and other close family members who maybe thought their small comments on beauty and skin color would do no harm. However, many of the smaller comments were the ones these women held as most profound as these were the people that they love that they felt had hurt them. What this documentary help contextualize by interviewing these women and young girls is that
colorism is still impacting many African American girls and women today. No certain age or class is excluded from colorism.

This documentary that was published in 2013 is significant as it allows us to examine African American women and children. It provides us with videos that allow us to see the pain that colorism causes as we see many of these women and children that are interviewed shed tears when talking about their skin color and the impact that it has had on their lives. Through the numerous interviews with African American women and children, one can see how colorism has impacted those of many different age groups and is continuing its trend in this twenty-first century. This documentary interviews the women and children that have been impacted by colorism and allow us to have a discussion about what colorism is and how it impacts women and children within the African American community. The documentary was conducted because of the presence of colorism within the African American community that was still being ignored. Allowing a space throughout this documentary that allowed women to discuss colorism began a study into colorism and its origin as well as ways to combat this race bias. By providing insight and interviews from not only dark skinned women but also children, we are able to see colorism has an impact on more than just dark skin toned African American women. The reverse also causes women that are lighter to be discriminated against or impose their negative views on darker skinned women. This practice is taught to the children that are born and thus the cycle continues. One lady that was interviewed ended her speech by stating “Rise Dark Girls”. It is through documentaries of these type that we are able to note an issue in society and work to fix it. For this reason I do believe
that this documentary was intended to educate viewers about the victims and culprits of colorism.

Colorism as an issue that can still be seen in the twenty-first century was made evident at the University of Mississippi in 2014 during Black History Month. I attended Soledad O’Brien’s speaking at the Gertrude Ford Center on February 25, 2015 when she came to campus. It was an eye opening experience as it provided an outlet for many students like myself and those of others races the opportunity to come together and have an open discussion about many of the issues that had recently been faced by the university. O’Brien spoke about what it meant to be both Black in America and Latina in America from her own personal life. She then opened the floor to discussion and questions and many of my peers asked brilliant questions that allowed O’Brien and her panel of professors from the University to answer them. While I did not entirely agree with the student representative for African Americans about his experience at Ole Miss as an account for the majority I was intrigued to see my peers and University having an open discussion about race and colorism on this very campus. With that being said colorism is not only an issue that is being discussed in literature all over America, it is also being discussed here on our college campus when activists like O’Brien come and give their experience about being black in America and what that means.

Still having to deal with colorism and what it is to be a black woman in America during the twenty-first century has given rise to two very positive groups. Both Black Girls Rock and the My Black is Beautiful campaigns are creating spaces where African American women of all skin tones can gather and note their similarities instead of differences. It is a celebration for young girls and women of color no matter what skin
tone they are. It is my belief that these campaigns are vital in the twenty-first century as they give positive outlets that African American girls and women can find comfort in. These campaigns call for the praise of African American women of all skin tones to work together and defy stereotypes and prove society wrong of any negative stereotypes that it imposes on these women.
Conclusion and Relevancy of Colorism

With much evidence of colorism still impacting many individuals today, in *Skin Tone and Racism in the United States*, Landor states that “there is a dearth of research that examines the relationship between skin tone and racial discrimination… Some research shows that darker skin African Americans report more discrimination where as others indicate no significant relationship between these two variables” (818). We have to determine whether there is a correlation between being of darker skin tone and being discriminated against and why there are some individuals that are of the darker skin tone that have not experienced this discrimination. I believe that those who believe there is no relationship between these two variables should explore alternative reasons for the absence of discrimination. Does geography, education, or class play a role? The finding of no relationship between these variables is possible, but I argue that the idea of a relationship between the two is not at all entirely dismissible. Examining the research method that was used to find no correlation between the two variables would prove vital to this type of research. The belief that there is no correlation between the two could possibly have begun with individuals that were not subjected to feeling inferior because they are not struggling to be accepted because of other factors.

How will we overcome colorism? Overcoming colorism can start with the families of those that are subjected to this phenomenon. Landor’s article asserts that, “African American families play an important role in teaching their children what it
means to be a member of an ethnic minority group. Racial socialization serves as an important protective factor” (819). Families have to teach their children about the importance of their minority and also educate them on colorism and how to not be subjected to it or allow others to subject them to it. Evelyn Glenn notes that “colorism operates freely within societies. As with many discriminatory practices, colorism acts under the guise of nonexistence” (765). Glenn makes a valid point. No one points out that there is colorism like those that once advocated for racial equality. Instead because colorism is often disguised, recognizing and thus combating it is made more difficult. Another aspect of colorism that presents difficulty is that it is present within one’s own race. Finding a way to get along with your own race while still deeming their practice wrong is a struggle itself. How is one to tell their own race that it is potentially being discriminatory and ignorant as it spends more time focused on the variations of skin tones within the race instead of being accepting of all skin tones and focusing on greater issues that need resolving? Challenging this is, indeed! O’Brien concludes that, “Colorism continues to be a significant phenomenon. It affects access to social power and denies equality to those who are nonwhite. Because of the visibility of racial and ethnic markets, people of color are pressured to appear as members of the powerful group, which then encourages a continuation of colorism” (150). In this thesis I hope to show evidence that colorism transcends generations through its documented presence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It is important to understanding colorism and its relevancy in the twenty-first century. While colorism does impact African American women studies have found that women of other minority groups are also discriminated against because of their skin tone
as well. Understanding colorism is not only important for African American women. Males and those that are women and men of other races need to know about colorism if we are to ever move beyond it. Everyone needs to know about colorism as it can potentially limit its victims socially and economically. Colorism limits the confidence and interactions with those that are not like the victims themselves because of the fear of rejection. Colorism also imposes barriers in the job market. Employers may be practicing race bias and do not realize it because they have not really given much thought to the possibility that race discrimination exists in colorism. As stated in the Dark Girls documentary women that are lighter skin are more likely to be seen dating and headed towards marriage as opposed to those women that are darker and thus confronted by men in a more sexual approach.

As I conclude this undergraduate chapter of my life and continue my education at The University of Mississippi School of Law I am anticipating continuing to learn more about colorism and its impact in the law as well. I am looking forward to understanding the real and persistent impact of colorism as more studies like this one are being conducted world wide as they presence of colorism has surfaced. I am also looking forward to the future where the impact of colorism has been so well studied that we are eventually presented with a solution to combat this issue. Until them it is my hopes that those of you that read this thesis and other works on colorism are able to take something valuable away and begin the discussion and eliminate the practice of colorism in your own lives.
Bibliography


