

## **The missing social movement: colorism in black America**

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### **Abstract**

*As social movements have been sparked across the United States over recent years to bring attention to and combat various forms of racial inequality, from police violence to mass incarceration to economics, one issue has been conspicuously absent as a target: colorism. Among black Americans colorism is almost ubiquitous, creating vast skin tone disparities. Recent studies reveal that darker skinned black Americans are considerably more likely to experience violence at the hands of law enforcement, receive longer criminal convictions for the same crimes, and suffer an economic penalty of thousands of dollars relative to their lighter skinned counterparts, among a wide variety of other social and economic inequities. In some cases, the gap between the social and economic outcomes of light skinned black Americans and dark-skinned black Americans are as large as the gap between white Americans and black Americans. This leaves an important outstanding question: why, then, have racial social movements in the United States consistently neglected not just to center a discussion of color but to even emphasize it as an important factor shaping the lives of black Americans? This manuscript will answer this question by using theories of durable inequality and path dependence to explore the history of color in the United States to explain how skin color stratification became cemented among black Americans and how it became so taken-for-granted that it has neglected to attract significant social movement attention. I argue that the crux of the issue builds from the United States' historical infatuation with fixed and immovable racial categories as the country sought to institute Jim Crow segregation laws in the wake of Emancipation and Reconstruction. This led black Americans to counter with calls for black collectivism that decentered the importance of color in favor of presenting a unified front to combat segregation. This "black is black" orientation remains dominant among black and white Americans leading both to ignore vast intraracial color disparities in favor of a focus on race that fails to adequately address the needs of the most vulnerable: dark skinned black Americans.*

### **Introduction**

Racial justice social movements have exploded across the United States over the past decade in a way that is perhaps more public and widespread than at any other time since the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. In 2020 alone hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest and tens of millions of dollars in donations poured into racial justice organizations (Morava and Andrew 2021). Black Lives Matter, a slogan turned movement turned

organization turned network of organizations, has become the standard bearer for national racial justice mobilization, surpassing traditional organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League. Black Lives Matter was founded in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his admitted murderer George Zimmerman. The organization spawned a number of concurrent slogans and movements aimed at bringing targeted attention to specific segments of the black American population. For example, Black Trans Lives Matter emerged to raise awareness of violence perpetrated against black trans people, particularly trans women. And throughout 2020 anger over police violence after the murder of George Floyd became anger at a number of other forms of racial injustice, including economic injustice and healthcare injustice. However, conspicuously absent from these discussions, never receiving a march or a prominent hashtag or even a substantive mention on the websites of Black Lives Matter, the NAACP, or the National Urban League is a discussion of color and colorism, which by their very nature are intertwined with the issues at the core of these organizations.

“Color” describes the combination of racialized phenotypical characteristics that serve to stratify people of the same racial group. In particular, characteristics such as skin tone, hair color, hair texture, lip and nose size and shape are racialized in ways that make certain members of a racial group seem to appear either more stereotypically “ethnic”—and for the purposes of this manuscript, more black—or more “white.” “Colorism” describes the process by which people of color—in this case black people—with more stereotypically ethnic features, especially dark skin but also dark hair, nappy hair, dark eyes, wide noses and lips, are disadvantaged relative to their less stereotypically ethnic, whiter looking, counterparts with lighter skin and hair, straight hair, light eyes, thinner lips and noses ((Keith and Herring 1991; Monk 2014; Reece 2020).

Colorism is a powerful force shaping almost every aspect of black American life. Light skinned black Americans earn higher incomes and wages (Goldsmith et al. 2006; Goldsmith et al. 2007; Hersch 2006; Keith and Herring 1991; Kreisman and Rangel 2015; Monk 2014; Reece 2020; Sweet et al. 2007), enjoy better mental and physical health (Diette et al. 2015; Laidley et al. 2019; Louie 2019; Monk 2015; Monk 2021; Stewart et al 2018; Perreira et al. 2018; Uzogara 2019), experience fewer negative encounters with law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Blair et al. 2004; Crutchfield et al 2017; Finkeldey and Demuth 2019; King and Johnson 2016; Monk 2019; Viglione et al. 2011), are punished less and less harshly in schools (Hannon et al. 2013), and are viewed as more attractive and competent (Hannon 2015; Reece 2016). In some cases, the impact of color of black Americans’ life chances has been shown to be stronger than the effect of parents’ socio-economic status (Keith and Herring 1991), and in others the gap between light skinned black Americans and white Americans is smaller than the gap between light skinned black Americans and dark-skinned Americans (Goldsmith et al. 2006; Goldsmith et al. 2007). At least two studies show no difference between the social outcomes of light skinned black Americans and white Americans (Burch 2015; Reece 2019). Moreover, Kreisman and Rangel (2015) find evidence that color stratification among black

Americans may be increasing. And this color stratification has persisted since at least the 1800s (Reece 2018). While this extensive research demonstrates the far-reaching impacts of colorism and the growing number of scholars invested in understanding the phenomenon, scholars have not tied these strands of research together. While scholars and activists have become adept at describing the extent of colorism, where and when it manifests, the question of *how* it operates and how it has continued to shape social outcomes since the 1800s despite consistent changes in how we view race remains. Moreover, with the exception of a few articles (eg Monk 2015; Reece 2019, 2020) the theoretical and historical interaction between color and race is largely unexplored. This gap in the literature leaves anti-racists unable to adequately explain the importance of colorism to contemporary society and limits our ability to develop social policy to combat it. With this manuscript I hope to offer a historical and theoretical guide to how color and race have interacted and how race came to dominate, limiting our capacity to organize against colorism.

Despite the near-ubiquity of colorism in influencing the life chances of black Americans, a social movement that prominently and consistently targets colorism continues to elude us. Early investigations found that despite differences in life chances there was no significant difference in how black Americans of different skin tones perceived their racial identities or their political attitudes, which they dubbed the skin color paradox (Hochschild and Weaver 2007a). However, recent evidence suggests the social, political, and racial attitudes of dark and light skinned Americans are starting to diverge (Hutchings et al 2016). Light skinned black Americans have begun to exhibit more conservative attitudes in contrast to their darker counterparts. For example, light skinned black Americans are less likely to support economic redistribution policies and more likely to endorse stereotypes about black people in general. But these divergent attitudes have not led to social movement mobilization against colorism. This manuscript explores the processes that continue to dampen the potential for a colorism social movement despite material and burgeoning attitudinal differences between light and dark skinned black Americans.

My approach to the question of why black Americans have not mobilized *en masse* around colorism is threefold. First, I will use a durable inequality (Tilly 1998) framework to describe the history of colorism among black Americans in the United States and explain how color stratification has endured since the 1800s despite consistent changes in how the country conceptualizes race. Second, I will deepen my discussion of this history using a path dependence (Pierson 2004) model to explore how race rather than color has become and remained the dominant axis of identification for black Americans and how Americans' particular focus on race has impaired discussions of colorism, let alone anti-colorism social movement mobilization. Finally, I conclude the manuscript with a brief discussion of how to advance a social movement agenda that addresses colorism among black Americans and the difficult questions we are forced to grapple with in pursuing public policy that dampens the impact of the phenomenon.

## **Durable inequality and the start and persistence of colorism in black America**

Colorism among black Americans can be traced to chattel slavery. Reece (2018a) shows that the density of local slave labor directly influenced color stratification after Emancipation. The more slaves there were in a county, the larger the economic differences between light and dark-skinned black Americans. This correlation grows from 19th century eugenic logics. Slave owners and white people exhibited a strong preference for mulatto—mixed black and white—people relative to their supposedly “pure” black counterparts. They believed that mulattos’ white blood made them smarter and more industrious (Frazier 1930; Reuter 1917; Toplin 1979). Indeed, some white people thought mulattos would ally with white people against other black people if given the chance. A legislative report examining a planned slave revolt in South Carolina in 1822 sought to assuage the concerns of Southern white people by reminding them that free mulattos were valuable allies against their slaves:

Free mulattos are a barrier between our own color and that of the black and in cases of insurrection are more likely to enlist themselves under the banners of the whites...Most of them are industrious, sober, hardworking mechanics, who have large families and considerable property; and so far as we are acquainted with their temper and dispositions of their feelings, abhor the idea of association with the blacks in any enterprise...(as cited in Jones 2000, pp. 1508-1509).

White people saw mulattos as not only different from and superior to black people but also useful for shielding them from the anger of the black masses. As a result, they heaped favor onto mulattos.

Even while enslaved, mulattos enjoyed advantages that were denied to blacks. They were often given positions as house servants, where they could avoid the rigors of field work, or as tradesmen, where they could acquire skills and education that would prove useful outside of the plantation context. They were even afforded the flexibility to move throughout and off the plantation without white supervision (Frazier 1930; Toplin 1979).

Plantation privileges also translated into mulattos being about twice as likely to be manumitted as blacks, which led to disproportionate numbers of free mulattos (Bodenhorn 2011). In 1860, only 10 percent of enslaved people were mulatto while about 41 percent of free southern African Americans were mulatto. In the Deep South only 9 percent of enslaved people were mulatto while 76 percent of free African Americans were mulatto (Berlin 1974). Free mulattos also owned more successful businesses--sometimes through leveraging favor and connections from their white parents--which allowed them to accrue appreciably more wealth than free blacks (Schweninger 1989, 1990). By 1860, mulatto wealth was about 50 percent of white wealth, while black wealth was only 20 percent of white wealth (Bodenhorn and Ruebeck 2007).

The stratification that characterized blacks and mulattos during the antebellum years eventually became the stratification that continues to characterize light and dark-skinned black Americans today. After Emancipation many of the roles that differentiated mulattos from blacks were eliminated. The boundaries between free African American vs slave and field slave vs house slave would have to be replaced with new roles. The question would be whether the new roles would disrupt or reinforce the existing color hierarchy.

Ruef's analysis of this period of Emancipation (2014) would refer to this question of roles as "uncertainty." Uncertainty describes the state in an economic transition where the actors involved are unsure about the new roles governing the economic system. In the absence of agreed-upon rules, actors are unable to predict the outcomes of their actions, which underscores the importance of quickly establishing new principles to guide the new economic system. According to Ruef "the norms, routines, and governance structures that constrain economic action...are...in flux" which tends to lead economic actors to "reassemble elements of older traditions and organizational forms in order to confront uncertainty and find a new basis for social order" (2014, p. 4).

Because building new social and economic roles and rules can be costly in terms of time and money, it is often more efficient to import previous models of social interactions into the new system. These imports are not vetted for their ability to exacerbate or diminish stratification so the new system will likely include roles and norms that reinvent the inequality of the past system. In this case, according to Reece (2018a) emulation "recreates old local knowledge and social relations, repurposes old institutions, and imbues new institutions with old norms, a combination of processes that combines to reconstruct past inequalities. These new, emulated forms of interaction appear similar but not identical to the past, but inherit similar power relations. Ultimately this would mean the interactions that governed blacks relative to mulattos may be imported into the post-Emancipation south, thus maintaining the boundaries created during the antebellum years and perpetuating the system of colorism" (p. 10).

The success of the emulation project in the immediate postbellum period is evident in the ongoing color-based social stratification. Mulattos continued to enjoy advantages relative to blacks. Mulattos benefited from greater occupational prestige (Gullickson 2010; Reece 2018a; Saperstein and Gullickson 2013), lower mortality rates (Green and Hamilton 2013), lower child mortality rates (Frazier 1933), and married more affluent partners (Reece 2018b). Moreover, while Reconstruction is often hailed as a time of emerging black political power across the country, of the two black Senators and twenty black members of Congress at the time, all but three were mulatto, signifying that black power during this period rested primarily with mulattos (Hochschild and Weaver 2007).

However, formally classifying African Americans by color—differentiating between blacks and mulattos—fell out of favor. As Reconstruction ended and Jim Crow settled across the nation the two groups were forced into a "collective

black” that both facilitated racial segregation and social movement activity but ultimately preserved color stratification while obscuring the potential for an anti-colorism social movement. While officially mulattos and blacks were characterized by their racial heritage—with mulattos mixed black and white and blacks “pure” black—Census enumerators often failed to ask detailed questions about the racial ancestry of the people they counted. Instead, they leaned on local knowledge and the prevailing belief that racial ancestry was easily discernible through appearance and social status (Gross 1998; Hochschild and Powell 2008; Toplin 1979). This meant that the difference between mulattos and blacks did not necessarily reflect differences in racial ancestry as much as they reflected differences in skin tone. Indeed, Saperstein and Gullickson (2013) show that the same light skinned African Americans were often classified differently in successive censuses. Clearly, the Census’ categorical distinction between black and mulatto was relatively arbitrary, but its existence had real consequences on stratification, and on the way it encouraged light skinned black Americans to preserve their social status.

Following the 1920 count, the Census removed “mulatto” from its list of racial classifications. However, by that time the social closure strategies of light skinned black Americans had already been cemented, including endogamous marriages and exclusive social clubs and neighborhoods (Bodenhorn 2006). Consistent with Tilly’s (1998) concept of emulation, which describes how the rules of previous economic systems can guide seemingly new systems, the deactivation of a black-mulatto distinction, and the emergence of a single black category failed to overturn the principles that guided mulatto advantage over the prior century. White people continue to privilege light skinned black Americans relative to their darker counterparts despite the lack of a formal distinction between them. The following section examines these developments as a part of a path dependent process where race came to supersede color in our classification schemas and social justice goals and how ideas about linked fate among black Americans came to limit the potential for social movements targeting colorism.

### **Path dependency, linked fate, and the minimizing of color in black America**

The decision to prioritize race over color was driven by political priorities that emerged long before the Census removed mulatto heading into the 1930 enumeration. By that point states had already adopted many of the infamous “one drop rules”<sup>1</sup> that sought to define who was black (Brown 2014). During the antebellum years, slavery created a sharp social and political barrier between

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<sup>1</sup> The term “one drop rules” refers to the variety of legislation and informal practices that dictated who was black based on their percentage of black ancestry. While legislation from state to state regarded people with anywhere from 1/8 to 1/16 black ancestry as black, informally people were generally considered black if they had any known or visible black ancestry—ie “one drop” of black blood.

black and white people, which left no ambiguity about the racial hierarchy. As I mentioned previously, mulattos were used to provide an additional buffer between black slaves and white people. However, after Emancipation, particularly as black people gained more political power during Reconstruction, white people experienced a racial crisis as they sought to maintain and secure the power they had accrued during slavery (Washington 2011). This led them to begin to emphasize race over the color differences that had become salient over the previous century.

Prior to Emancipation, many courts and legislatures rejected one-drop arguments for race out of fear of turning white people into black people through their rulings and laws. For example, in the 1830s Virginia passed the “Not-A-Negro” law to shield white people with less than ¼ black ancestry from the restrictions placed on black people at the time. Over the following decades courts across the South—e.g. in Virginia in 1853, North Carolina in 1852 and 1857, and Louisiana in 1856—would respond similarly, conceding that people who were perceived as white were often white enough to live as white (Cooper 2017). Indeed, Justice William Harper wrote in 1835 that “race was ‘not to be determined solely by the distinct and visible mixture of negro blood, but by reputation...reception into society, and...having commonly exercised the privileges of a white man” (as cited in Sharfstein 2013, p. 528). The argument elevated color over race by allowing that even people with black ancestry could be considered white and accepted into white society if they were simply light skinned enough to do so.

Emancipation shifted the country’s collective focus from color to race. The strong mulatto class and multiracial white people posed a problem for white America after emancipation because they had historically straddled the line between black and white. But without slavery to maintain racial order, white people sought to reactivate that boundary with racial segregation. Mulattos troubled the introduction of racial segregation because they introduced racial ambiguity, meaning whether they were subject to racial segregation or not was a largely unsettled question. The answer to that question came from the well-known Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, where the Supreme Court ruled that racial classification fell to individual states (Brown 2014; Washington 2011). This case set in motion the process of formally deemphasizing color in favor of race, even as other social process worked to maintain color stratification in the absence of the formal mechanisms that set it in motion.

*Plessy v. Ferguson* challenged the Separate Car Act of 1890, in which the Louisiana government legislated that all railways provide separate black and white passenger cars. Golub (2005) offers an account of the case that focuses on color and racial ambiguity. He argues that the legislation threatened to unseat the privileged place of the black Creole community in New Orleans, who thrived on racial ambiguity. Formalizing black-white segregation would strip them of their status. In response, they recruited Homer Plessy, a man who was so light skinned that the court remarked that his “one-eighth African blood was not discernable in him” (163 U.S. as cited in Golub 2005, p. 564), to challenge the

legislation precisely because he was racially ambiguous. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Homer Plessy looked white, and if he had not declared that he was black he would likely have been admitted to the white passenger car with no problem. While the move to challenge the legislation on these grounds was criticized by the New Orleans black community as simply an attempt to maintain the advantages afforded to mulattos, they nonetheless proceeded.

Plessy's lawyer argued that in a country where people of many different racial groups had been procreating for multiple centuries, leading to people who are racially mixed in innumerable ways, it is nearly impossible to accurately determine someone's race at all, let alone a busy train conductor. He went on to claim that attempts to separate people by race inevitably deprived people like Plessy, who looked white despite his partial black ancestry, the rightful privileges owed to him by virtue of his skin color. The judges' response diminished the role of color in determining social worthiness, turning instead to race and the inherent and damning racialization of black ancestry. He said:

It is claimed by the plaintiff in error that in any mixed community, the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is property, in the same sense that a right of action or of inheritance, is property. Conceding this to be so...we are unable to see how this statute deprives him of, or in any way affects his right to, such property. If he be a white man and assigned to a colored coach, he may have his action for damages against the company for being deprived of his so-called property. Upon the other hand, if he be a colored man and be so assigned, he has been deprived of no property, since he is not lawfully entitled to the reputation of being a white man (163. U.S. as cited in Golub 2005, p 572).

The judge summarily dismissed the claim that looking white entitled a person to the privileges of whiteness. This represented a turn from previous court cases that often sought to uphold the differences between blacks and mulattos and make fine grained color differences.

However, the judge did not necessarily dictate any racial biology in the case. Instead, he conceded that racial classification was fundamentally a legal procedure that should be left to state legislatures:

The power to assign a particular coach obviously implies the power to determine to which race the passenger belongs, as well as the power to determine who, under the laws of the particular states, is to be deemed a white, and who a colored person (163. U.S. as cited in Golub 2005, p. 583).

This meant that states had broad discretion to decide what percentage of black racial ancestry would make a person black for the purposes of segregation and were not bound by the inherent ambiguities of racial classification. Over the



following decades, states would take full advantage of this power and craft laws that leaned into a dichotomous view of race, from which the country has yet to return.

Pierson (2004) explores the concept of path dependency which explains how political decisions become cemented and difficult to reverse. He argues that people become invested in institutional norms and develop skills, relationships, identities, and organizations that build on those norms, continuing to cement them. He quotes Levi (1997) when he writes:

...once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice (p. 20).

He goes on to say:

“...each step in a particular direction makes it more difficult to reverse course” (p. 21).

This is exactly what happened as the United States started down the path of emphasizing racial classifications over color distinctions. After the decision in *Plessy*, states were empowered to make their own laws dictating racial classification—the aforementioned “one-drop rules.” Tennessee was the first in 1910, which established that a person was black if they had any black racial ancestry. They were followed by Mississippi in 1917, North Carolina in 1923, Virginia in 1924, Alabama and Georgia in 1927, and Oklahoma in 1931 (Brown 2014). Subsequently, the Census did not include the mulatto category on the 1930 Census or on any subsequent years. The age of color had formally come to a close and American institutions would continue to build around ideas of racial difference instead, relying on rules about clear dichotomous racial categories to guide legislation and social norms, including Jim Crow segregation and anti-miscegenation laws.

The panic white people felt over the racial ambiguity exemplified by mulattos can be summarized in a story recounted by Womack (2017). She writes:

In 1910, a man named Q.T. Simpson who attended the American Association for the Advancement of Science “declared it was only a matter of time” when black people “could be made” to look as white as any Caucasian. He claimed that since scientists discovered chromosomes and how they functioned, they could find a way to control or destroy the “color units” of black men through “baths or injections” and later, their “offspring” (pp. 27-28)

His fear exemplified the shift to a totalizing view of race, where color distinctions no longer held sway. From this perspective blackness was an inherent, permanent position determined by black ancestry regardless of physical appearance and the possibility that people with black ancestry may cheat the destiny of their black blood and appear to the world as white, either through their natural appearance or scientific alterations, drove policy through the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and continues to shape racial classification today.

Although the emerging one-drop rules were not without their critics. One prominent example came from Mississippi politician Alfred Holt Stone who wrote

The mulatto is not a Negro, and neither written nor social law can make him one. By consent of all parties, including himself, he may be called a Negro. But we can no more make a Negro by such a process than we can alter the life traits and nationality of a Russian peasant by bestowing upon him an English name. The essential fallacy which underline this classification will sooner or later make the latter impossible to maintain (as cited in Hochschild and Weaver 2007b, p.164).

But Holt's views were decreasing in the minority as even the term mulatto fell out of favor, decreasing from prominent use in national media over the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to scant use during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to eventually no use at all (Hochschild and Weaver 2007b).

However, prioritizing race over color had other impacts as well. Again, Pierson (2014) reiterates that people invest in institutional norms by developing skills, relationships, identities, and organizations that support those norms. In this case, even as colorism strongly persisted in the background, black Americans built their racial identities and organizations in response to legislation and norms that made formal distinctions based on race rather than color. Prominent black American leaders even explicitly downplayed the relevance of color to American racial politics and championed the need for black unity to combat racial segregation. In 1921, after Marcus Garvey criticized the NAACP for its lack of dark-skinned black people in leadership positions, WEB DuBois countered in *Crisis Magazine*

...there is no doubt what Garvey has sought to import to America and capitalize the antagonism between mulattos and blacks in the West Indies. This has been the cause of the West Indian failures to gain headway against the whites. Yet Garvey imports it into a land where it has never had any substantial footing and where today, of all days, it is absolutely repudiated by every thinking Negro; Garvey capitalizes it...and has aroused more bitter enmity inside the race than has ever before existed. The whites are delighted at the prospect of a division of our solidifying phalanx, but their hopes are vain. American Negroes recognize no color line in or out of the race and they will in the end punish the man who attempts to establish it (p. 114).

Not only did DuBois scold Garvey for attempting to bring attention to light skinned uniformity of black American leadership at the time, he argued, in sharp contrast to the evidence that was available to him and us, that colorism never held any “substantial footing” in black America.

DuBois, and other black American leaders that echoed his sentiments, were engaging in what has come to be called “strategic essentialism” (Eide 2010), which describes how social groups seek to flatten their identity differences, in this case differences in racial ancestry and skin color, in the pursuit of political goals. Fortunately, perhaps ironically, DuBois and his contemporaries were helped along by Jim Crow segregation laws and one drop rules that forced Americans with black ancestry into a collective black identity, regardless of their color, with little possibility of escape from that category save for the rare instances of passing, where someone with black ancestry was light skinned enough to identify as white and go unquestioned. Over time, this strategic essentialism would lead to a sense of “linked fate” (Dawson 1994). According to Hochschild and Weaver (2007)

...once partial or complete exit from being black was no longer possible for those with light skin or known white ancestry, imposed loyalty to the group became, over several decades, genuine loyalty...by reinforcing the line between black and white, the one-drop rule and segregation primed black group consciousness and reduced the likelihood of division by color, at least in the public arena (pp. 164).

Linked fate is the idea that tensions—class and in this case color—among black Americans were subsumed under the interests of the race because of the perception that race was the dominant factor shaping, and indeed limiting, the lives of black Americans (Dawson 1994). This means that black Americans, regardless of class and color, believed that their group interests were more important than their individual interests and the supposed niche interests of their various other social identities because it was *race* policy, not class policy, not color policy, that continued to deny them full participation in American life. In response, from the early-mid 1900s through today, they saw race-based social policy as a net gain for the entire race and rallied behind such policies.

This sense of linked fate has been demonstrated by the skin color paradox mentioned earlier, where, using data from the early 1980s and mid-1990s, Hochschild and Weaver (2007a) find no statistically significant differences in the political attitudes, perceptions of linked fate and discrimination, and racial identity between light, medium, and dark-skinned black Americans. This attachment to racial identity and the fate of all black people might serve the race well when combatting racial injustice but it stunts their ability highlight and combat colorism, which has proven to be just as pernicious as racial discrimination.

## **Now what? Logistical hurdles and ongoing difficulties**

While ideas such as linked fate and the skin color paradox certainly serve to diminish black Americans' motivation to organize against colorism, even if they choose to do so there are significant logistical hurdles to clear. Many race-based policies rely on self-identification to decide who is eligible and who is not. While self-identification is certainly flawed, for black Americans it tends to be a relatively reliable measure of who has black ancestry and a person's racialized life experiences (Roth 2016). However, color poses a more complex question as there is no standard scale for who is considered light skinned and who is not. Indeed, when adjudicating discrimination cases where the plaintiff's case relies on color judges tend to be stumped by the same problem; they simply cannot determine who is and who is not light skinned (Data 2019). Even scholars of colorism find that the color scales they use in their research are subject to some inconsistency and black and white people tend to judge color differently (Hannon and DeFina 2020). Even though they both rate light skinned black people as more favorable, exactly *who* is light skinned and who is not varies based on the race of the observer.

Moreover, color is relative and not fixed. Some research suggests that rather than a progressive scale of color, the operative difference may be between light skinned black people and darker black people. Even if we were able to consistently demarcate the boundaries of light skin, perhaps using a tool like a spectrometer, which measures the amount of light that skin reflects and has been used in some colorism research, people's skin tone tends to change over the course of the year. Along the boundaries of whatever demarcations we draw, people at the margins may move back and forth along the line based on the season or whenever they chose to go on vacation. This would mean that their eligibility for whatever benefits are allotted for non-light-skinned people would be inconsistent in a way that is atypical of racial policy. Although the difficulty of reliably identifying skin tone may point us towards continuing to lean on race-based policy, policies designed to focus on race that rely on self-identification are likely to primarily benefit those with lighter skin. These may actually exacerbate skin tone stratification rather than minimizing it by offering lighter skinned black people more avenues for upward mobility (and to be sure, I am not advocating against race-based social policy; instead I am advocating for accompanying color-based social policy to ensure the benefits are equitably distributed).

Perhaps one solution to the problem of deciding who is light skinned and who is not is to simply ask. While this seems imperfect, perhaps simplistic, when faced with more hi-tech tools such as the aforementioned spectrometer, Monk (2015) shows that self-rated color is a strong and accurate predictor of discrimination, even more so than interviewer rated color. This breakthrough finding offers a gateway to broader color-based policy solutions. Not only does it offer a way to determine color, it provides an *easy* way to determine color. Similar to how a wider range of gender identification options have begun to appear on official documentation and how questions about race tend to have two components—

one for Hispanic heritage then another for racial identity—it may be a relatively simple matter to add another question along the lines of “do you consider yourself light skinned or dark skinned?”. This small change offers organizations considerable leverage when considering affirmative action or diversity and inclusion efforts. They would be armed with more data so that they can ensure they are offering opportunities to segments of the population—in this case dark skinned black Americans—that are uniquely disadvantaged. Similarly, including a color self-identification question on federal documentation such as the Census would provide the data necessary to guide federal policy targeting dark skinned black Americans.

A study by Notter and Logan (2021) shows that by 1920 blacks and mulattos were strongly residentially segregated, even more than they were in 1880. While we can speculate that color-based residential segregation may still manifest in American neighborhoods, we lack the data, namely Census data, to empirically investigate fine-grained neighborhood details. Collecting color data through the Census would give us the tools to leverage policy structures that have previously been used for race-based policy to enact color-based policy. For example, if we identify that dark skinned black Americans cluster in certain low-income or otherwise disadvantaged neighborhoods, we can use policies that target the neighborhood level to begin to address color-based disparities. Models for such programs already exist and are generally relatively uncontroversial. Community health centers, after-school enrichment programs, Head Start, job training programs, and neighborhood housing programs that offer local residents a path to homeownership are all ideas for race and income-based policies that can be adapted for color-based policy if the proper data is available.

Neighborhood based policies have the added benefit of not fracturing the movement by highlighting individual color differences. As exemplified by the heated debates between WEB DuBois and Marcus Garvey, colorism can be a polarizing issue in black American communities. How the impacts of colorism may sometimes supersede racism can be an understandably difficult pill to swallow as a light skinned black American, knowing that their racial group continues to rest at the bottom of the American racial hierarchy. Distributing resources individually based on color, particularly considering the variability and subjectivity of skin tone, may create tension and increase antagonism among movement actors and the broader community and risk cleaving movements that have relied heavily on racial collectivity.

However, building the momentum to change data collection standards and institute federal interventions requires a thorough awareness building phase. Colorism denial continues to run rampant and even those who acknowledge the impacts of skin tone on the life experiences of black Americans may be reticent to admit or completely unaware of the magnitude of its impact. Prioritizing race over color in regressive social policy has created ready-made targets for progressive race-based policy but leaves a gap in our understanding of how to target color specifically. For example, Jim Crow segregation provided an easy target for activists. They readily identified the inherent inequality in segregation

and sought to dismantle the systems that upheld it. There are few such targets for color. The most prominent outlet for color-based activism so far has revolved around beauty standards. Public concerns and activism about color and beauty tend to focus on skin lightening products (eg Van Hout and Wazaify 2020) and unjust treatment in the entertainment industry (eg Blay 2021). This is an exceedingly narrow focus for a phenomenon that touches almost every part of American life, including devastating injustices such as incarceration and police brutality. While conversations about beauty may offer a reasonable start to larger understandings of colorism, it is vital not to home in on beauty and attractiveness as the only or primary ways that colorism manifests in black American communities. It remains only a small part of the total impact of colorism and our awareness-raising efforts must keep that in perspective. However, the snail-like pace of awareness efforts seems inadequate when faced with such an urgent social problem, which means accelerating awareness-raising and ultimately interventions must be a top priority. Colorism cannot continue to be a lower order concern for racial justice organizations because true racial inequality cannot be achieved without addressing the stark color stratification in black American communities. This demands an “all hands on deck” approach where discussions of racial justice issues must be paired with discussions of how those issues are also shaped by color. That means when, for example, representatives from Black Lives Matter appear on CNN to discuss police brutality, they must remember to shed light on the fact that darker skinned people are at higher risk for victimization. Pairing the issues provides a ready-made way to introduce colorism into discussions that are already happening and may help quicken the process of raising awareness and building a strong movement.

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