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The Racialization and Identity Construction of
Light Skinned Black Womanhood

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in African American Studies

by

Brittany Botts

2017

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2017

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Racialization and Identity Construction of Light Skinned Black Womanhood

by

Brittany Botts

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Robin Davis Gibran Kelley, Chair

Much of the common discourse around skin color politics in the United States of America and the African Diaspora more broadly focuses on the ways in which light skinned Black people are privileged by the patriarchal white supremacist system of racial hierarchy. This discourse often highlights the ways in which dark skinned Black people have systematically been disenfranchised by these institutional models of access that limit understandings of Black humanity. The histories of global colonization, both physical and mental, have evidently left behind remnants of internalized beliefs that linger within Black communal spaces, especially when considering the ways in which the intersection of race and gender complicate the discussion. While the prevalent scholarship on colorism highlights the dichotomy between dark and light skinned people by highlighting dark skinned people's exclusion from a privileged

positionality within Blackness, this project is interested in expanding the conversation to reveal the nuanced challenges faced by those seen as most privileged within Black communities.

The Racialization & Identity Construction of Light Skinned Black Womanhood is a project that looks at the ways in which light skinned Black women understand, negotiate, embrace, and/or reject notions of their gendered, racialized identity across borders. This project is grounded in theories from African American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Anthropology, and Women and Gender Studies. It is anthropological in methodology utilizes qualitative research tools within the ethnographic tradition to broadly engage the following questions - How have light skinned Black women in the United States of America experienced their Black womanhood within the context of Black communal spaces? How have their childhood experiences with skin color politics shaped their understanding of self? How does light skinned women's understanding of racial identity and ingroup membership change as they move across international and racial borders from the United States to South Africa? How does the South African racial project of dividing Coloured and Black people inform light skinned African American women's negotiation of South Africa? In what ways do light skinned women experience racial privileging and alienation in South Africa, and how does this differ from their experiences in the United States of America? Each of these questions speak to larger questions about the complex intersection of gendered colorism, privilege, and alienation.

Using both Dr. Yaba Blay's and Dr. Margaret Hunter's work to frame my understanding of light skinned women's racial experiences within the Black community, my research will combine existing theories of colorism within the African American community with Diasporic scholarship on racial identity across borders. I utilize Dr. Jemima Pierre's *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* to engage international racial

construction through a nuanced lens. My framing of South African racial categorization is based on Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation*, and my historical context is based upon *Burdened by Race : Coloured Identities in Southern Africa* and *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African* by Mohamed Adhikari. Using these texts as the foundation to my work, I conducted a series of person-centered interviews with one light skinned African American woman who had traveled to South Africa in order to capture her story. While I recognize that this story is not generalizable to the larger population of light skinned African American women, it does provide great insight into this phenomenon, making room for a larger range of experiences to be interpreted in future research to come. This project seeks to expand the conversation of African American skin color politics to an international level to better gauge the impact skin complexion may have on racial identity across international borders.

From placing the series of interviews conducted in conversation with the scholarship I engaged, I found that the complex histories of gendered racialization have had lasting impacts on the ways in which light skinned Black women understand their Black womanhood today. The shameful histories of the brown paper bag test, familial passing, miscegenation, and rape all tend to influence how some light skinned women understand their own place within Blackness today. I also found that international travel does in fact complicate how one's racial identity is understood and negotiated across borders.

The thesis of Brittany Botts is approved.

Caroline Anne Streeter

Darnell Montez Hunt

Robin Davis Gibran Kelley, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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Chapter One

PREAMBLE

In just three months, my racial identity changed three times as I traveled from being Black in America to White in Ghana to Coloured in South Africa. My understanding of race had been shaped by my positionality as a light complexioned African American woman within the “One-Drop Rule” American context that limits my diverse ancestral lineage to one standard category of Blackness (Blay, 2013). Yet, although my racial identity did not exist outside of Blackness, it has felt consistently challenged within Blackness since my youth. I sought to be validated by my peer groups as a Black girl who was, to my dismay, considered light skinned according to the standards of most Black communities. Traveling outside the U.S. I encountered, for the first time, others who placed me completely beyond the boundaries of Blackness. The socio-historic racial discourses that existed in each country I visited informed the varied interpretations of my skin color. While encounters with Ghanaians revealed an imposed outsider identity rooted in whiteness, conversations with Coloureds in South Africa revealed an unfamiliar racial tension that positioned me as an outsider to the Black community yet again. While I recognized the very real and material privileges that were so commonly associated with light skinned Black women’s identities, I also felt a strange dichotomy between these privileges and a contrasting alienation. My experiences led me to question how gendered racial categories were complicated by pigmentocracy, and how skin color politics impacted the identities of Black women like myself whose complexion served as a potential barrier for in-group membership. I wondered - What was the criteria for being a Black woman?

Was it skin color, hair texture, or performance of Blackness? Was it a combination of all of these things? Was it guaranteed to change over space and time? What happens to women who identify themselves as Black in spaces where others do not fully acknowledge, recognize, or affirm their Blackness? How does the transition between spaces of acknowledged Blackness and unacknowledged Blackness, and the degree to which each occur, impact these Black women's construction of self? How do these women still embrace their Blackness when it is disputed in spaces where their very proximity to whiteness grants them access to societal privileges? What can be said about the global character of race and racism, if one plane ride led my body to be subjected to a contrasting cascade of this racialization processes?

HISTORY OF RACIAL FORMATION AND COLORISM

A. Overview of Global Racial Formation

As scholars like Yaba Blay and Margaret Hunter assert, skin color complicates race, in that it disrupts the seemingly fixed categorical nature which holds racial constructs together. While race scholars undoubtedly recognize that the social construction of race itself is much less about skin color and phenotype, and much more about power, domination, and control, the common social discourse around race is often tied to such beliefs. This is because those in power have ultimately utilized skin color and phenotype as a scapegoat for the subordination of others in ways that manipulate understandings of personhood and humanity through the guise of racial construction. Colorism -- the complexion based hierarchical system that operates within racial groups to correlate certain skin pigmentations with predetermined value judgments -- is a prime example of this. For Black communities across the diaspora, the term "colorism" is most frequently associated with a mentality that celebrates lighter hues and

shames darker hues as a result of an internalized inferiority complex (Russell, 2013). It's intercontinental presence is a byproduct of the socio-historic discourses of Eurocentric, patriarchal white supremacy. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant state that the global project of racial formation was constructed and maintained by Europeans and their descendants to project power over groups of people by justifying their stratification using skin color and phenotype as an indicator of one's proximity to humanity. Initially imposed as a tactic to enslave African descendants, race was worked into the fabric of our social worlds.

The act of making race, which relied on a problematic understanding of phenotypical features and regional ancestral origins, was used as a tool to distinctly categorize people's differences. Using fictive science to ground claims of inherent subordinate status, Europeans projected these beliefs in order to solidify their entitlement to rule (Omi and Winant, 1994). The process of race making has evolved over time, yet the larger purpose of this project has remained the same - to create and maintain a hierarchy of humanity that operates on a scale that prioritizes certain lives over others. While social discourses often suggest that race is largely about the physical appearance of skin color and phenotype, and directly linked to the process of dehumanization, it is much more and much bigger than that, as it is deep rooted in a complex system of order and control. Yet for this paper, I am most interested in the ways in which race is understood by Black communities who have been impacted by the socialization of racial constructions in the contemporary moment. Thus, by engaging and deconstructing the instability of race as a social construct, we can better understand how contemporary social imaginaries of race impact the lived experiences of Black peoples across the diaspora.

My thesis is concerned with how racial instabilities are illuminated through movement of space, place, and time. In *Partly Coloured: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the*

Segregated South, Leslie Bow, asks similar questions as she examines “how color lines are drawn and what racial identity segregation demanded of those who seemed to stand outside - or rather, in between – its structural logics.. [and] how subjects are made within the space between abjection and normative invisibility” (2010, p. 5). Bow’s analysis shows that, while skin color is often collapsed as an indicator of race because of the ways in which the historicized process of racial formation unfolded, the varying constructions of race across national borders alters interpretations of the skin color hierarchy. Thus, skin color may not properly represent the racial identity that feels most true for a given individual. This is not at all to suggest that someone like Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who labeled herself Black, would have legitimate claims to Blackness. Yet, it does complicate the ways in which race is imagined as a seemingly fixed social entity within societies. As the body is racialized by the larger society in which an individual inhabits, and simultaneously by the Black communities within the given society, assumptions are made about one’s positionality that are based on racial hierarchies which have been distinctively shaped by the given social histories of each nation. Hence, though the process of racial formation is global, it has taken shape and form in varying ways across nations. My work engages South Africa specifically as a site of analysis to discuss these larger questions of racial instability because of the parallels that can be drawn between the history of racial formation in each country. I recognize that similar questions could be asked of other nations like Brazil, Haiti, or Jamaica, but for this project I am particularly focusing on South Africa.

While the privileging of light skin can be witnessed in nations from Ghana to South Africa, the nuanced definitions of Blackness in each of these nations complicate the ways in which we understand colorism and light-skinned privilege. In the United States of America,

Blackness has been strategically governed by the One Drop Rule, which suggests that “one solitary drop of Black blood is enough to render a person Black” (Blay, 2013). In contrast, South Africa’s system of racialization includes the Coloured racial category, which is loosely defined as any person with Black and multiethnic ancestry and is seen as completely separate from the Black South African racialized community. The complex histories of categorizing people of mixed racial ancestry in both nations have changed and transformed over time. The creation and maintenance of these categories served various racial projects of the given time period, and there were intentional reasons why these groups of people were included and excluded at different phases of national moments. There were specific periods when Coloured identity was limited to only encompassing Blacks who were mixed race. When other groups of peoples from Philippines or Madagascar were brought to South Africa, there was an even greater need to reconfigure the labels of race(Adhikari, 2005). Thus, Coloured began to encompass these people, along with others who could not be neatly defined by the current racial hierarchy. The migration of different people from different regions required a reconfiguring of racial caste (Adhikari, 2005). In the United States, there also exists a history of transformation between racial labels. While scholars recognize that the “one drop rule” was not always the measure of Blackness used, it became widely embraced overtime in order to deal with the growing population of mixed race children born under slavery (Hobbs, 2014). People who would not have otherwise been included into these categories were now being included, and this is a result of the socio-historic climate of migration, integration, and the mixing of races.

In a similar context that the One Drop Rule operates, Black communities themselves have ways of policing Blackness by placing boundaries and borders around who is and who is not Black based on numerous factors, including skin tone. In the South African Black

community, such policing also occurs but takes shape and form differently as a result of their tri-racial system (Adhikari, 2005).

B. Racial Formation in the United States

Colorism among Black Americans dates back to the period of American enslavement when light skinned Black people's labor was divided from dark skinned peoples' in ways that seemed to privilege their comfort. (Russell, 2013). While Black feminist scholars have since troubled notions of the house Negro versus field Negro discourse as it pertains to Black women, it is necessary to recognize the ways in which skin color impacted how an enslaved person was treated on a given plantation. Colorism was further established through the early nineteenth century in a period where certain light skinned Black were able to pass for white and free themselves from the burden of Blackness (Hobbs, 2014).

Continuing into the 1950's, colorism took the form of the "Brown Paper Bag Test" which distinguished light skinned Blacks from darker skinned Blacks in order to protect a more "high class and high yellow" society (Russell, 2013). Today, scholars argue that colorism may not be as overtly prevalent as it once was, yet the phenomenon has taken a new shape (Russell, 2013). Therefore, it is undeniable that legacies of this skin color hierarchy have imprinted the ways in which Black womanhood is constructed and understood within the One Drop Rule American context.

C. Racial Formation in South Africa

Upon the Dutch colonization of South Africa in the mid-seventeenth century, the Coloured population was made possible by the offspring of Dutch men and enslaved Khoisan and Bantu women. For generations to come, the divide between the Dutch colonizers, the mixed race Coloured South Africans, and the native Black South Africans would remain

(Erasmus, 2000). During the Apartheid era, Coloured people were given privileges over Black people which solidified the distinction made between the two groups, yet they still experienced harsh discrimination under the South African legal system (Adhikari, 2005). Today, in the “new South Africa”, Coloured communities tend to feel just as marginalized, as they shift from being “not white enough then” to “not black enough now” (Adhikari, 2005, p. 3). Scholar Mark Peach reflects on the Coloured community's racial conflict, stating that there were

selective privileges during apartheid that [we] didn't want to give up to become oppressed like [our] black friends. It created distance between [us] and them... but [we have] always been a little uneasy being close to whites, knowing that [we] are welcomed when useful to them but jettisoned when not (Peach, 2011)

Coloured people were allowed greater freedom of mobility through the laws and regulations regarding passbooks, and they were also provided more suitable housing accommodations in comparison to their Black counterparts (Adhikari, 2005). As Peach and Adhikari both reveal in their scholarship, the national need for Coloured identity as a racialized caste was to appease whiteness, to create a scapegoat for the atrocities of the land, and to secure a class in between the most wealthy and most impoverished. Coloured people were to be manipulated to the will of the Dutch ruling class so that their goals of total domination may be more easily realized. While many Coloured people broke away from this identity by aligning themselves with anti-apartheid struggle, Peach and Adhikari reveal that many Coloured people became comfortable in their limited privilege that secured their place within the fabric of the national South African social context.

In addition to laws and legislation, Coloured people have their own separate culture aside from Black South Africans and white South Africans that influence their identity construction. However, many scholars argue that this identity is inevitably created from a place of a traumatic and embarrassing cultural history.

Back then some called [a Coloured man] a man with a shameful beginning when white and Africans and whomever else, crossed their lines of good behaviour and gave into lust.. In a country that prizes racial and cultural purity, that is a heavy cross to bear.

Coloured people's "bastard child" status has been a burden for generations, yet the privileges they experienced as a result of their in-between status was in constant. On the one hand, their white "blood" provided more legitimacy because they were products of a European parent, therefore the natural born family of the European superiors. However, the Black "blood" tainted them. The mix of the two was an even further taboo because of perceptions about racial purity. In some instances, it was better to be a racially mixed coloured person because one was then granted some entrance into European society which was denied of Black people. Yet, in other instances, the Black people themselves looked down upon the coloureds for their impure mix. As Adhikari states, Africans often "assert that racial purity trumps genetic proximity to whiteness or assimilation to Western culture" (2005, p. 21). It is evident from the works of Peach and Adhikari that the shame of mixing between the enslaved Africans and Dutch men is still carried out in the social imaginary of the South African Coloured community. In a similar way that Peach and Adhikari engage miscegenation as a factor in the ways in which Coloured identity is understood, scholars like Caroline Streeter do the same.

D. The Role of "Miscegenation" in the Color Complex

In both the United States and South Africa, lighter skin tones among non-biracial African descended people are often the result of miscegenation. As Caroline Streeter recognizes in *Tragic No More - Mixed-race Women and the Nexus of Sex and Celebrity*, the historic shaming of light complexioned women for their illicit conception stories has played a role in the ways in which light skinned Black female bodies are read within American Black communities (2008). The term miscegenation itself is rooted in a problematic conception of inappropriate sexual engagement across races. Created during the 19th century to denounce the seemingly illicit cross

cultural mixing, it assumes that the very act of what was called “cross breeding” is an immoral crime against humanity (Streeter, 2008). It was also an actual legal crime as well, in both the United States of America and South Africa. In connection to the broader hyper-sexualization of Black womanhood, the role that race mixing plays in gendered conceptions of colorism impacts how light-skinned women specifically are seen through the lens of miscegenation. Thus, while I recognize that this term is problematic in origin, I engage it as a way to discuss the ways in which race mixing was perceived by broader society within each national framework.

My work engages the overt and covert gendered undertones of racial formation in order to shed light on the racial ambiguity that exists within Black communities as a result of miscegenation, which impacts the communal understandings of tensions between Black womanhood and white femininity. My work specifically examines self-identified light-skinned Black women who have two Black parents yet are still understood within the trope of the tragic mulatta in many ways, from their hypervisibility and over-sexualization to their exclusion from Blackness and the simultaneous celebration of their proximity to whiteness, and more specifically white womanhood.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

My work investigates the aforementioned historical implications of skin color politics in the United States and South Africa by utilizing the story of a light skinned Black women who grew up in the United States and traveled to South Africa for an extended period. I utilize a four part theory, inspired by Charles Cooley’s *Looking Glass Self*, that engages the Black American woman’s perception of self through the lens of Blackness, her fellow Black American peers’ perception of her (both in response to and in spite of her perception of her Blackness), the larger Black community’s perceptions of Blackness, and the ways in which all three of these layers are

challenges upon international travel to South Africa (2006). I seek to explore the following questions in this project– How do Black women who are light skinned in the United States understand their Blackness? In what ways have they navigated the privileges and alienations they may feel within Black communities? How have they responded to challenges of their Blackness while still maintaining a foundational sense of Black self?

This thesis is an ethnographic work that utilizes person-centered interviews as a tool to conduct data on the lived experiences of light skinned Black women. I chose these tools for my research methods because I recognized the importance of interacting and engaging a single person on multiple theoretical levels. After taking a person-centered interviewing class in the Anthropology department at UCLA, I grew to appreciate the singular, in depth approach because it provided a level of richness to the data that I could not get from other methods. After considering survey methods and focus groups, I recognized that, for the way I hoped to shape my work, I wanted to bring stories to life around this topic. While I recognize that the few stories I collect here are not generalizable, I realize that much can be learned about the phenomenon of colorism simply by engaging this personal narrative.

Chapter Two

INTRODUCTION

As Black women, and light-skinned women in particular, construct their individual identities in the midst of this, they are in many ways impacted by such social constructs at personal and communal levels. According to Dr. Margaret Hunter's *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*, many light-skinned African American women in the United States of America experience the dichotomy of both privilege and alienation to varying degrees as they navigate communal expectations of Blackness while existing in their physical bodies (Hunter, 2005). My work looks at how shifting spaces can disrupt a sense of self-affirmed Black womanhood by drawing parallels between how these light-skinned women's Blackness is perceived in the United States of America and how it may be challenged in spaces like South Africa. Using a Black feminist lens to unpack societal notions of womanhood, Blackness, intersectionality, beauty standards, sexuality, bodily representation, and performativity, my larger project is in conversation with Black feminist scholars committed to a broader understanding of Black women's self knowing and self healing. It is my hope that through this work we can begin to further challenge the nuances of skin color politics and the limits of the discourse on "colorism." For this paper more specifically, I am most interested in unpacking the layered understandings of light skinned Black women's process of identity construction through introspective reflections on their own journey.

This thesis is a person-centered ethnography which details accounts from the lived experience of Eva Moore, a twenty-seven year old film production assistant and Los Angeles resident. This project situates Eva as a self identified light-skinned African American woman

within the context of the aforementioned sociohistorical narrative of colorism. By engaging her coming of age story, I examine the ways in which Eva has established her Black identity, I highlight the formative years that shaped her self perception as a Black woman, and I illustrate how larger sociohistorical structures influence her understanding of her identity into adulthood. I also explore the ways in which her understanding of skin color was further complicated as a result of her international travel experiences in South Africa. Eva Moore's contrasting interactions with the racial systems in both the United States and South Africa are examined in this work in order to offer a closer look at the differences and similarities between the two, and the effects varied racial constructions have had on Black women in the process of defining self and making sense of their positionality as a result of their material surroundings.

Eva's story is just one example of many light-skinned African American women's journeys through understanding their Black womanhood in a world where social constructs make it difficult to understand self holistically. As scholars like Yaba Blay, Margaret Hunter, and Russell Kelly all agree, this is a larger, global phenomenon that has not been discussed enough in scholarship. What does Eva's story tell us about the larger impacts global white supremacy has had on the African Diasporic community? How can we use her journey to draw parallels to other women of other nations while still shedding light on the colorism that exists in the United States of America and South Africa? The continuation of this project will explore these questions in further depth, as I seek to enhance the scholarship on skin color politics and their impact on African American women in the 21st century.

In this paper specifically, I will explore the following - racial formation and its impact on light skinned women's personal identities, the history of colorism and its influence on light skinned women's social location today, the hypersexualization of light skinned women within

Black communities, and light skinned women's performance of Blackness in seeking in group membership. I will also explore how travel from the United States to South Africa complicates messages about Blackness that light skinned women have normalized since girlhood. I lay the groundwork for various aspects of light skinned Black women's racialization in the United States before reflecting on the ways in which international travel further complicates light skinned women's understanding of their interior Black self.

Chapter Three

MEETING EVA

It was 4:15pm in Atlanta, Georgia and Eva's flight back to Los Angeles would depart at 5:30. Homecoming weekend at any Historically Black College forced most alumni to lose track of time, but because she celebrated her five year reunion from Spelman College this homecoming season, Eva had been even more time challenged than most. She and I had scheduled and rescheduled our first interview about three different times during that weekend, for she was fully immersed in reliving the collegiate experience that was so dear to her heart. As I sped down I85, swerving in between downtown rush hour traffic, she apologized for her cancellations and for her raspy voice. "It has been such a crazy weekend... drank a little too much, lost my voice, you know how it goes." We giggled about the circumstances of our initial meeting and bonded over the culture of our women's liberal arts college rooted in African American history and empowerment. "It's nothing like coming home," we both agreed. It was through this commonality that I was able to connect with Eva on a deeper, more personal level as an insider to her community. My positionality as a Black woman and Spelman College alumna allowed me access into Eva's world view on an intimate level. I was able to build rapport with her as an ethnographer and a participant observer in her daily life. This initial homecoming encounter was the beginning of my journey to capturing her story.

Eva sat with me for five additional interviews after the first. Over the period of two months, she shared her personal accounts of racism, colorism, sexism, and identity politics,

which were all informed by her skin complexion. One of the most prominent aspects of Eva's identity is her Black womanhood, and our conversations explored the ways in which it was constructed in the United States of America and challenged by her travels to South Africa. She struggled most with comprehending the shifted perception of her Black womanhood across borders. Congruent to my own traveling accounts, Eva's racial identity changed abruptly within the span of twenty-four hours as she traveled from Black in America to Coloured in South Africa. How could it be that a category so foundational to who she is as a person was subject to transformation within one plane ride? During the twenty-seven years she had lived prior to international travel, she had always been defined by the United States of America's arbitrary racial narrative of a white or black categorical binary. It had not occurred to her at the time that race was globally contextualized. Therefore, the socio historic racial discourse that existed in South Africa informed the varied interpretations of her skin color. Engagement with Coloureds in South Africa revealed an unfamiliar racial tension that positioned her as a racial outsider to the Black community, yet a visibly defined racial insider to the Coloured community until they found out that she was an American.

The South African tri-racial system had created distance between Coloureds and Blacks that impacted both groups' assumptions about Eva's positionality as an individual. The hardest aspect of her travel was acknowledging an unforeseen alienation from the ethnic group with which she began her trip to reconnect, and learning to stand firm in her own Black womanhood despite her disappointment. Eva's desire to reconnect with Black people on the continent of Africa was rooted in her limited exposure to a broader understanding of the nuances of the African diaspora. During my in depth interviews with her, she revealed that her upbringing was rooted in a connection to Blackness that romanticized Black pilgrimage to African countries, no

matter where they were. Thus, the lack of knowing exactly where her ancestors were from created a void that she hoped might be filled through this trip. She had felt denied access to the African American community throughout her experiences in the United States, and felt the same feelings at a more alarming intensity upon her “return to the motherland” journey.

Chapter Four

GROWING UP BLACK, BUT NOT BLACK ENOUGH: EARLY FORMATION OF RACIAL IDENTITY

Eva grew up right outside of Washington, DC in Springfield, Maryland where she was intentionally exposed to Black culture. She describes her upbringing in the urban-style residential area, nicknamed the Chocolate City for its thriving Black community. Her mother, who was a social worker raising two daughters on her own, recognized the importance of African American women knowing their history. She worked to instill a strong sense of self in her girls. In one of our first interviews, Eva chuckled as she revisits one of the most memorable days of her childhood; a day that represented for Eva one of the many ways that her mother influenced what being a member of the Black community meant.

For Million Man March, my mother as well as, I know some other mothers from our neighborhood, told the schools, ‘Our children are not going to school’, like, ‘it doesn't matter whether or not we are taking them down to the National Mall, it doesn't matter if we're gonna actually physically be a part of it... my kids are not going to school on the day of the Million Man March.’ I remember spending, and *wanting* to spend, significant time in front of the television just watching what was going on, and I remember my mom making it a point that it was important to us, to *me*, and we were little... I remember being young, and just feeling like it was a holiday... and I'm sure it didn't feel that way to Caucasian kids. They went to school, it wasn't like a thing, it was just something that happened, to them, but for us it was like, wow, this must be a holiday because I'm not going to school and I'm watching what's going on and I'm celebrating it, I'm celebrating me.. I will always remember that day.

As Eva retold her childhood story, the joy she felt was evident. Her facial expression immediately turned into a smile. She sat up straighter in her seat then leaned forward a little, excited to invite me into the sacred memory. The way in which she engaged this personal historic moment revealed just how crucial her mother's passion for the Million Man March had been in the formation of her identity construction. As a young girl, this moment symbolized the pride in a culture of which she was honored to be a part. Throughout our

interviews, Eva shared numerous other stories of her upbringing that solidified her deep connection to the Black community. It was not just the Million Man March, but the family reunions, the Black History Months, and the neighborhood summer block parties. All of these childhood memories were symbolic of her journey to Black womanhood. As an adult, Eva still held onto those foundational lessons her mother had taught her. Her mother's investment in molding a daughter who took pride in her Blackness paid off in the end. She concluded by saying, "I grew up from a proud family.. I grew up from a real proud family.. So, I've always been proud of myself, my race, my gender, every aspect of me I've been proud of."

Eva was equally proud of being a graduate from the number one Historically Black College for women - Spelman College. She gained a more concrete understanding of her Black womanhood as a student there because she was encouraged to think more critically about the intersection of these identities. She challenged patriarchy and white supremacy in her classes, and she celebrated the Black culture she had grown up with in unison with other young people from Black communities around the world. It was during her time at Spelman that she decided to major in film and dedicate her life to creating stories that would combat mainstream media's portrayal of Black women. After immersing herself in African Diaspora courses, she made a promise to herself to visit the African continent. With such pride in her heritage, she wanted to understand where her people really came from.

Although she grew up with pride in Blackness throughout her childhood and into her collegiate years, there were some aspects of Eva's experiences within the Black community that brought her pain instead of pride. Eva's skin color has complicated her positionality within Black communities since her childhood, and from a young age her peers made a point to remind her of this. She was often told that she was not "Black enough" and she felt excluded from the

communities she identified with most. Although the term “not Black enough” is often referred to as “acting white” for many Black American communities, Eva’s case was much more about physical appearance than a lack of cultural identification with Blackness (Hunter 2005). She had grown up around Black people and embraced much of the culture that was so familiar to her peers naturally. She lived on their street, listened to the same music, celebrated the same cultural holidays, and generally embraced the same cultural practices of the very students who told her she was excluded. Thus, her peers’ accusations of “not Black enough” was about color much more than culture.

While there are many factors that influence a given Black community’s willingness to embrace a Black person - from class and gender to body type and sexuality - skin color is often one of the primary factors used to measure Black credibility (Hunter 2005). As John Jackson states in *Real Black - Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, each Black community possesses its own particular set of norms and expectations for Blackness, and even within these communities are nuanced interpretations of this. Black people in these communities often see their Blackness existing beyond the materiality of flesh, meaning that the interiority of their personhood is rooted in a deeper understanding of the Black self. Jackson argues that, as they make sense of their spiritual connection to Blackness, Black people attempt to forge bonds with other Black people who share similar visions of personhood. The need for authenticating Blackness in others is rooted in a desire to create these genuine relationships with like minded people. Thus, they utilize an imagined checklist that is carried around in their mental cloud to regulate and enforce their expectations of Blackness (Jackson, 2007). This later leads to excluded Black people feeling the urge to perform their way into the validation of Black peers. Skin complexion, I argue, is one of these checklist items that, if not offset by the proper combination

of additional aforementioned checklist items, could cause one's Blackness to be questioned and potentially unaccepted. Eva's internal struggle with self identity was birthed from the types of exclusion she faced because her checklist items were not approved by her peers. She felt the deep spiritual connection to Blackness that Jackson refers to in his work, but she could not make her peers see that in her because of her phenotypical features. In her later life, she found ways to perform her Blackness in hopes to combat preconceived ideologies about her personhood. Yet, Eva's personal insecurities about her complexion and hair texture were still continuous throughout her life, and she grew ashamed of what she visibly represented within her own skin. Thus, while she took great pride in her Blackness, there was an undertone of embarrassment in the type of Blackness that she physically embodied.

[I had to] finally come to grips that [colorism] is something that has probably affected why I want to tell [my] story in particular, because it was something that I really struggled with growing up in a predominantly black environment, I had to, uh, face both being discriminated against by white people and being discriminated against by my own people, Black people, because I've always had a color complex, I've always felt a guilt associated with my lightness, my fairness, um, as if being light makes me less of a black person, and having long hair makes me less of a Black woman.

In *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*, Dr. Margaret Hunter argues that light skin can be seen as a "liability in creating a sense of ethnic authenticity" (Hunter, 2005, p. 24). By extending Jackson's framework of authenticated Blackness, Hunter reveals the gravity of light skin as a deal breaking checklist item that may hinder light skinned women's connection to their desired community. Light-skinned African American women are more likely to feel guilt as a result of their rejection from in- group membership in Black communities, because the idea of their "legitimate membership" is constantly challenged and questioned. When Eva admits to having a "color complex", she is referring to the dynamic that Hunter discusses in her work. In *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald E. Hall scholastically coin the colloquial term as a

descriptor for the effects that colorism has on Black people of all skin colors. The “color complex” symbolizes an internalization of the ideological foundation of colorism in some form. Much of Eva’s life experiences illustrate her own internalized insecurities. Eva grew up as a child with a strong sense of a Black self that she had access to in the home, yet was not always able to engage in Black spaces where she was unwelcomed. These challenges, at times, manifested in violent ways.

Having my hair pulled when I was younger, I think that really affected me, like, people pulling my hair and saying ‘You’re not Black, what are you?’ and it was as if it was a crime or an offense that I wasn’t fessing up to, like why won’t you say what you are because you’re not really Black... essentially when you hear these things it’s like, ‘Oh the tragic mulatto story,’ but words really do hurt young girls, they really do make you feel like you aren’t a part of some exclusive club, you’re not a real Black girl because you look like you’re mixed with something and you have this long hair, but essentially you just wanna be a normal Black girl, you just want people to acknowledge you as a Black girl.

The nuances of Black girlhood that Eva exposes reveal the gendered expectations of racial categories. For proof of Black girlhood, the combination of skin color and hair texture worked together against her. Communal discourse on Black women’s hair is often a site of reconciliation of the Black female experience. As a young girl, Eva found herself outside the confines of these Black girl hair conversations because her hair was too straight and long for her to truly understand. The critiques of her hair choices would be a continuing theme throughout her childhood and into adulthood as she made decisions about what her styles told the community about her identity.

Eva also recognized that within the Black community it was generally unacceptable for light skinned women to speak up about their experiences with colorism because darker skinned women had always been seen as the only victims (Blay, 2013). In the retelling traumas from her childhood, she shied away from the “tragic mulatto” trope - the historical figure of the beautiful woman whose emotional instability makes her fragile and flimsy (Streeter, 2013). It was commonly accepted within many Black American communities that

light skinned women were the primary recipients of privileges within the system, therefore they should not have space to grapple with the complexities of their colorism stories (Blay, 2013). When light skinned women do explore such stories, they are often times met with backlash because their engagement is seen as an erasure of the darker skinned women's trauma. Yaba Blay's work seeks to bridge the gap between stories like Eva's and those of women who were once girl bullies towards her. She states, "we need the voice of the light-skinned sister... who stays in the sun and has either loc'ed her hair or cut it very close because she's down for her people.. We needed that balance, if in fact the purpose of the dialogue is healing." By highlighting the voice of light skinned women who feel an urge to perform their way into Blackness for in group membership, we learn about the problematic nature of Black authentication. We also learn what it means to occupy space in the duality of privilege and alienation simultaneously.

I argue that, when the discourse of colorism is engaged without a critical recognition of light skinned women's privileges, the necessary healing across Black women of various skin tones cannot occur. Yet, with acknowledgement of socio historical modes of power distribution, access management, and structural benefits, a more nuanced engagement with colorism is necessary to truly grasp the layered experiences of Black womanhood in the United States of America in particular. While films like *Dark Girls* (Duke, 2011) and *Light Girls* (Duke, 2015) were created as attempts to begin a national dialogue around these issues, there was a lack of diligent contestation of the systematic privileges that light skinned people historically and contemporarily received, thus influencing the types of exclusions that many of the respondents in the film expressed. Eva's tone in the quote above, as well as throughout the remainder of our interviews, demonstrated a sensitivity toward colorism from all angles,

yet it seemed that she still felt like the primary victim in these instances. Through our interviews, it becomes clear that she may not have taken time to thoroughly engage the traumas of the girls who were inflicting violence onto her. What had they experienced in their Black childhood as dark skinned girls that made them adamantly reject her? What messages had they received about their own skin color and hair texture? Why were they so passionately rejecting Eva's Black girlhood and policing the bounds of its margins? Based on analyses of dark skinned women's experiences in works from Blay and Hunter, this hypersensitivity toward protecting Black girlhood can be viewed as an attempt to reclaim parts of their identities that had not been validated. While society sent them messages about the pathologies of their Black girlhood, they took pride in holding power to determine who would be invited into the realms of their Black girl worlds. Eva's failure to recognize this layer of trauma that colorism causes prevents her from holistically avoiding the "tragic mulatta" trope in the ways she hopes, as she fails to face the gravity of the Black girlhood her abusers may have had. Yet, she demonstrates a deep desire to bridge the gap between herself and her former childhood bullies.

Eva's childhood presented a complicated issue for which she was unable to completely grasp until she was older. At home, her family told her that she was Black and she should be proud of that. At school, she learned from her peers that she existed outside of Blackness because they made it a point to consistently remind her that, because of her phenotypical appearance, she was not "Black enough". She knew deep down inside that she felt most connected to a Black community that had raised her and supported her, yet the way she was shunned by her own group of affinity on a daily basis left her confused and unsettled.

I would run home and ask my mom, 'What am I? All the kids at school keep telling me that I am not Black. Why do I look like this? What am I?', and, um, she would say, 'You Black girl, that's all you need to tell them, you Black.' So I would run back to school and say, 'My Mama said I'm Black so I'm Black!'

She giggles.

But I, uh, still hated knowing that they didn't really believe me.

Much of her life was spent subconsciously trying to make “[them] believe her]”, and she did so by developing performed gestures of Blackness to signal her worthiness of inclusion. This process began with a historical exploration of her family's skin color complex which helped her to make sense of her Blackness.

Chapter Five

MAKING SENSE OF LIGHT SKIN FROM PAST TO PRESENT DAY

Later in her life, Eva grew curious about what had occurred in her family's past to make her look so different from the other Black girls at school. While she was appreciative for her mother who instilled a firm sense of Blackness, Eva also resented her for hiding the origins of racial miscegenation in her family's lineage. Eva had spent much of her youth feeling burdened by racial confusion, and she recognized that having more knowledge about her family's past would have alleviated some of her uneasiness. As an adult, she now recognizes that her mother's silence was rooted in shame around the cross-racial sexual engagement in her family, whether it was forced or consented. She also noted that her mother felt discomfort about her family's aptitude to denounce Blackness for personal advancement into the privileges of white supremacy. She states,

My mother's silence was to protect me from feeling the disgrace and dishonor she felt. She hated that we, uh, were associated with that type of painful past, a pain of access to having things we may not always want but knew we should have for mere survival.

While looking through her family's old records, Eva learned that there were cases of her foremothers and forefathers being so light skinned that they would pass for white. "Some of the census data in the late 1800's said M for mulatto, then in the early 1900's it said W for white, then it changed to N for Negro." Eva recognized the importance of tracing the historical trajectory of her family because their racial identities inevitably influenced what she knows of her own as an adult. "I was glad to know a little about my past, but I wanted to know more." Eva longed to understand the details of what circumstances occurred to put her family in this

position, but received no answers from her elders. It was too embarrassing a history for them to discuss.

Eva's family stories illustrate the discomfort around the shifting of racialization across space and time that has been a constant theme for light skinned Black people in the United States and across the diaspora. It is a common Black American narrative of racial passing. The journey from mulatto to white to Black was one directly influenced by shifting societal structures that regulated race based on the laws of the land. As Eva reflects on her own racialization across spatial borders, parallels are drawn between her ancestors' changing racial categories across temporal borders. In the same way that Eva's racial status felt unstable beyond national boundaries, her family felt the same as they transitioned across time periods of disputed, state recognized Blackness.

To pass for white was to intentionally hide one's Black self by dissociating with the Black people they once knew and the Black communities to which they once belonged. What complicates this even further is the internal battle between feelings of belonging. As Hobbs reveals in *A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing in White America*, many of these light skinned Black people felt a deep sense of belonging to Black communities because of their upbringing with Black families, Black churches, Black schools, and a larger sense of Black knowing of the self which was instilled in them through their upbringing (Hobbs, 2014). Yet, these feelings of belonging existed in conjunction with feelings of alienation. At a time when Black people were so harshly discriminated against in the United States of America, those who could pass for white were presented with a choice to escape Blackness. Those who made a choice to do so often, as Hobbs says, felt deep internal tensions between how they know

themselves based on their upbringing and how they have reconfigured their lives afterwards (Hobbs, 2014).

Blackness, then, became an aspect of identity that could be hidden and / or found out. Blackness is, as Jackson states, an internal knowing of self. Those passing for white chose not to engage external signification of their Black selves, and their phenotypical appearance gave them the option to choose. The fact that passing could be a global phenomenon illustrates just how unstable the confines of race can be. Passing reveals what Omi and Winant describe as the instability of race in that it defies the safely fixed constructions of racial segregation that historically allowed for race to make sense under white supremacy. The contradiction of race is that racial formation itself was never thoroughly situated enough to truly maintain the seemingly fixed categories that were undeniably static. This discourse lends itself to the age old recurring questions of Black studies as a discipline - Who is considered Black? How do we know someone is Black? Is it the way that they look? Those Black people who pass for white show us that the way a person looks is not enough evidence to determine whether or not a person is or is not Black, yet Blackness is often assumed to be validly determined by society's interpretation of one's physical appearance. Is it having one Black parent? In the case of those who have passed for white, their ability to disavow their Blackness was based on their separation from the Black family that would out them if they were ever seen together. Is it simply a Black interior knowing of self, as Jackson asserts? If so, how can we properly judge beyond perpetuating authentication of Blackness? These complex questions help us to get at the root of tensions that arise from current colorism discourse today. When we understand how and why Blackness' instability influences the modes of social and communal mobility, we can gain further tools to deconstruct colorism as it exists in the contemporary moment. For, as

scholars like Ariela Gross show us, race has a legal history that is based on much more than the social imagination, but the ways in which communities understand their own Blackness becomes directly influenced by these legalities in many ways (Gross, 2008).

In the early to mid 1800's, it was said that one drop of blood made a person Black, yet being a mulatto allowed for a recognition of mixed race status that provided further social and physical mobility (Blay, 2013). The official United States census recognized mulattos as their own categorized group of people to be counted separately from Blacks. In the following century, passing for white became more of a necessity for those mulattoes seeking privileges when the exclusion of a mulatto racial category which was legalized in 1900 (Hobbs, 2014). Thus, thousands of Black people across the nation who were light enough to pass for white began rapidly migrating themselves into the fabric of new racial identities.

Allyson Hobbs sheds light on the complexities of passing within the Black family in *A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing in White America* (2014). Hobbs' analysis exemplifies how privilege and alienation impact the passing population of light-skinned Black people who denied in group membership for access to white supremacy (Hobbs, 2014). She illustrates that light skinned Black people's separation from Blackness presented a contrasting experience of self detriment and self agency simultaneously. While some individuals made the decision on their own to transition into a white identity and reject their Black communities, others were sent to faraway cities as children by family members to live seemingly better lives as white people (Hobbs, 2014). The transformation to whiteness took an emotional toll on them. They knew that they were entering into spaces where rights and liberties would be provided in ways they never had before, but they also realized that their sense of self was rooted in a false narrative about their existence. They were denying a Black interiority that had once been a

critical part of their identity. Thus, the tensions between Blacks who passed for white and Blacks who knew them prior to their passing created turmoil between them. Some Blacks who were not light enough to pass for white envied those who could pass for having access to these privileges. Others viewed them as sell outs who were disloyal to their people. This strained relationship represents a larger metaphor within the Black community of the divide between light skinned Black people. While skin color is not a valid dictator of the desire to access whiteness, it is one indicator of one's perceived proximity to whiteness, and was historically a source of possibility for Black people to escape the struggles of Blackness. Much of the distrust for light skinned people's ethnic legitimacy is rooted in these affective historical narratives.

Eva will never know the full story of her family's racial ties, but it is clear that much of their experiences overlap in many ways with the families in Hobbs' work. The story of Eva's familial past is not at all uncommon for many light-skinned African American women. The distance that Eva and many other light-skinned women like Eva have felt from their surrounding Black community is in some ways connected to the privileges their ancestors received (Hunter, 2005). From the potential to access the enslaved position as "house Negroes" to having the option to pass for white, these benefits provided further access to an ideological American dream that most darker Blacks at that time had never experienced (Hobbs, 2014). As Eva and other women like Eva grapple with their own identities in the 21st century, reflecting on their ancestral past becomes crucial to understandings of Black womanhood.

Eva grew committed to a deeper exploration of colorism when she realized how much silence there was around this topic. Beyond her own familial lineage, Eva began exploring light skin privilege at various moments in Black history. Years after her research, she decided to

create a film that would bring exposure to untold truths of the skin color complex in her home town. It was her family's silence that encouraged her to speak out through her art. The film, entitled *Sixteenth Street Sonata*, was her attempt to relieve the family lineage of the shame they held onto for generations. It was also a statement about her loyalty to Blackness, as she sought to create a work that challenges the systems of power that gave her the privileges she experienced throughout her life.

The film, which is currently being edited and reviewed, is scheduled to be released in the next two years. Eva explains the overall theme of the storyline.

In the 1960's there was a family... a Black family in DC with the last name Procter... this family was known to have incestuous relations in order to keep the bloodline... um... pure, in a sense... to keep the name prestigious quote unquote, and um keeping their skin light... so, the story is essentially about a young girl growing up in a class obsessed Black bourgeois family who falls in love with a boy from the other side of the tracks... and it's about what her family does to keep them apart. So, essentially it's a Romeo and Juliet tale, or the Notebook, or something that's kind of been done over and over, but it has a very specific cultural twist that we don't get to see...

Eva's vision for this film mirrors much of the class-based color complex that Hobbs explores in her work. The connection between skin color politics and social mobility is key, and Eva understands how entangles these concepts can be within the Black community. The "purity" that the family seeks to preserve signals a clear value judgment of those outside of their desired class background and racial make up. Since light skin historically provided more opportunities for advancing socio economic status, it was commonly understood in those days that lighter skinned people were often times more wealthy. They may have had access to generational wealth for generations, and they also had access to wealth in ways that darker skinned Blacks did not.

The characters in Eva's film represent the bourgeois class of formerly named mulatto families who still held onto the notions of racial purity and segregation. Their attempts to remain pure in these ways put pressure on all family members to isolate themselves from the Black people who did not fit their mold of respectability. Eva's film exposes the gendered

nuances of skin color politics as well, as she uses her main character to reveal the communal expectations for light-skinned middle class Black girls.

Audrey Kerr's *The Paper Bag Principle* (2006) also highlights colorism's impact on Washington, D.C. Kerr analyzes the historical significance of the Brown Paper Bag Test, which was used to determine whether or not a Black person was light enough to be accepted into social societies, from parties and balls to sororities and collegiate institutions. This test was used to keep the light skinned Black population united and to intentionally keep darker skinned Blacks out of these elite social circles. One way that the Paper Bag Test was used was for selection of membership into the very first sorority created for African American women. Kerr states, "Everybody knows that the Alpha Kappa Alphas on campus here (Howard University) used to have what they call the brown paper bag test. That means that in order to be considered for membership they would hold a brown paper bag to your face and you would have to be lighter than that bag" (Kerr, 2006, p.25). The brown paper bag test's goal was to draw clear lines between the type of Blackness that these elite circles would accept, and the kind they would reject. Eva's work highlights this type of alienation while simultaneously grappling with the alienation she experiences today. She recognizes how complex racial systems truly are, and how deeply they have impacted the divisions of Blackness that many Black people continue to perpetuate. Eva's engagement with these concepts illustrates a budding awareness of her privilege, and a desire to heal self and peers to bring about a discourse of reconciliation.

When asked why this story is so necessary to understanding the fabric of Blackness, Eva responds, "this is something that was real in our community.. the idea of passing in the 1960's and 1970's.. not even just race but class... the lighter you were, maybe the higher up in society as a class you were." It was evident that Eva was reflecting on her own personal

biography in constructing this story. I imagined the impact viewing her family's census records had on her. It had sparked such an intense interest within her.

It really fascinated me that even though we are collectively fighting for something that unified us all as a race... there were stories about how we were trying to maintain certain class structures like the crabs in a barrel aspect... it disgusted me and fascinated me at the same time... its an honesty that is a part of our history... all the things that are affecting us now... even internationally with Apartheid... all affected us in the long run permanently... one of those things are how we function in society and that can be trying to get ahead of one another and basing it off of something so small as our color complex... which is already a whole 'nother world of damage... that we have continually... imparted on each other. Eva used her passion for film as inspiration for her own healing. The Sixteenth Street

Sonata, although she had not drawn all the direct parallels at the time, was such an intricate compilation of her understanding of self rooted in an African American identity situated between light-skinned girlhood and Black family structures that protected their own shameful histories. She begins to draw parallels between the color classism of light-skinned Blacks in the United States and the Coloured community in South Africa, whose communal racial identity was rooted in similar constructions of privilege, access to whiteness, and disassociation from Blackness (Adhikari, 2005). Eva's analysis is in conversation with South African scholars like Adhikari whose work exposes the ways in which South African Coloured identity was commonly understood as a privileged positionality wedged between whiteness and Blackness. Although there were segments of Coloured communities in South Africa who were rooted in anti-apartheid struggle, Adhikari reveals that there was, among the broad mass of Coloured people, an intentional desire to immerse themselves in the privileges that whiteness provided. While the nuances of Coloured identity is not exactly the same as light-skinned Black identity in the United States, there are commonalities in the histories and experiences because both groups' racial identity was birthed from the same overarching global racialized hierarchical construction. Eva also becomes more aware of her own privilege, which allows her to understand the impetus for her exclusion from Black communities. As she grasps a more solid

conception of these complexities, she also becomes more interested in the nuances of gendered racialization and how these processes have impacted Black women's sexuality.

Chapter Six

GENDERED RACIAL CATEGORIES AND OVERSEXUALIZATION OF LIGHT-SKINNED WOMANHOOD

There's also an aspect of my lightness being oversexualized... a sexualization and um, kind of fetishism associated with me just being a fair skinned Black girl... growing up as a young girl, which is really sad, and um, being a young woman... the sad thing is I experienced it very early on and I still experience it as a young woman in my late 20's.

Upon revealing details of her own oversexualization, Eva becomes visibly disturbed as she describes the ways that this “sexualization” at an early age robbed her of her innocence.

While she was never physically or sexually assaulted, the catcalling on the streets, long, discomfoting stares, and belittling words of men made her feel objectified in her body.

The sexualization... that, that really kind of hurt, because the worst thing to do for a young Black girl, and I don't think that this is something people acknowledge a lot, is rob them of their innocence, whether that be of just like a very physical traumatic situation or just verbal, and I think verbal is kind of what I experienced... you're making them feel like they did something bad because you are, in your eyes, you are fetishizing them.. but in reality this is still a young girl... and for me this was something so hard for me, just growing up as a light skinned girl, it really bothered me and had an impact on me as I grew older.

The oversexualization of Black womanhood has historically been a continuous site of trauma. It is an experience that cuts across intersectional margins of class, age, sexuality, and skin color.

Eva associates her oversexualization most with her light skin because she understands the ways in which her proximity to whiteness is seen as desirable to those who adopt a patriarchal, Eurocentric, heteronormative male gaze. As a femme identified, heterosexual woman with a slender frame, Eva knows that she fits their white supremacist beauty standards for Black women. She attempts to present her womanhood in ways that might make her less noticeable to men. She tries to hide her appearance behind hair choices and outfit combinations, yet she is

still met with unwarranted attention that makes her feel hypervisible and violated. Although many Black women experience various forms of hypersexualization on account of gendered and racialized objectification, there is still a particular reason why Eva's phenotypical presentation warrants a sexualization that is rooted in the aforementioned context of "miscegenation." As Streeter reveals, there is a direct connection between discourses of sexuality for the tragic mulatta trope, and the ways in which the social imagination of American society perceives and responds to her as a result (Streeter, 2006).

Eva's predicament is one that many light skinned Black women experience as they contend with their own physical representations of femininity under the guise of skin color, hair, and beauty politics within Black communities. These tensions that women like Eva face are rooted in a broader discourse about the ways in which light-skinned womanhood challenges the construction of Black womanhood and white womanhood. Since the origin of African peoples' global enslavement, tropes of Black womanhood have been cyclically reproduced to stabilized notions of white female sexual purity and fragility (Hammonds, 1994). As gender, race, and sexuality have been projected in white supremacist societies, white women's proximity to femininity is posed in contrast to Black female masculinity. In *Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality*, Evelyn Hammon's quotation of Lorraine O'Graddy speaks to this dichotomy (1994).

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side it is white; on the other, not white, or prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of 'woman.' White is what a woman is; not-white (and the stereotype not white gathers in) is what she had better not be" (O'Graddy via Hammonds, 301)

This quote illustrates white womanhood's codependency to Black womanhood, for it is through the negation of Black women's womanhood that white women's femininity is validated. The semiotic relationship between the two allows for white womanhood to symbolically represent

the opposition of the Black female self. As Sarah Haley exposes in *No Mercy Here : Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, the othering of Black womanhood made it possible for white femininity to exist (2015). It was the comparison to the queered and nonhuman Black female body on which white women's femininity was based.

As a result of these social constructions, Black communities often internalized expectations of Black women's beauty and based their desirability on their aptitude to emulate white womanhood. Skin color became a key determining element of normative femininity. Hence, light skin became associated most with femininity, while dark skin was associated with masculinity. In order for women to be deemed "good" and respectable, they were expected to embody the feminine (Jones, 2009). Within Black communities, dark skinned women were not always afforded the same access into femininity because of this internalized social imagination of womanhood (Blay, 2013). This communal understanding of femininity begins during Black childhood. As Nikki Jones exposes in her book, *Between Good and Ghetto*, darker skinned girls growing up within Black communities are more likely to be labeled "ghetto", meaning unfeminine and unacceptable by the standards "good" womanhood (Jones, 2009). A woman who does fit the standards of a "good" woman is one who "[distances herself] from behavioral displays of physical aggression or overt sexuality that are commonly associated with poor or working-class Black women." (Jones, 2009, p. 8) Jones explores how an individual's embodiment of Black girlhood impacts whether or not, and to what extent, she may have access to each of these narrow categories. The "good girl" is more likely to be slim, light-skinned, "pretty", and she often exudes a "youthful simplicity" (Jones, 2009, 46). The value judgements placed of various presentations of Black girlhood speaks to larger societal pressures of Black femininity and respectability. This, too, was a nuanced privilege of light

skin. While Black male patriarchy granted invitations to femininity to light skinned women more frequently, the consequences of this invitation oftentimes led to hypervisibility and hypersexuality. Skin color continues to serve as a measure for exceptional womanhood within Black communities across the diaspora, and this impacts the way women like Eva are read as beautiful sexualized objects for the satisfaction of the male gaze.

As Caroline Streeter and Eva Allegra Raimon highlight in their works on the mixed race women, there has been a common historical theme of hypersexuality regarding perceptions of mixed race women in the United States. Mulatta women became sexual fantasies for Black men at a time when white women were not attainable due to harsh laws regarding miscegenation and interracial marriage. As Raimon argues, the desirability for engaging relations with white women was rooted in a fascination with experiencing the forbidden sexuality of white femininity. Mulatta women were the closest to white femininity that Black men could experience (Raimon, 1956). Because women's bodies were viewed as property, light-skinned women's sexuality was used as a status symbol to flaunt in public spectacle to demonstrate a Black man's proximity to attaining whiteness (Streeter, 2006). These women existed on the color line, in the midst of tensions between the two halves of themselves created by a nation rooted in hegemonic Eurocentric patriarchal masculinity. The trope of the tragic mulatta was created based on the contrast between the privileges that mixed race women gained by accessing limited notions of white womanhood and the internal discomfort they felt in their own interior Blackness. As Streeter states, "Hybrid vigor was reflected in ideas about black/white women's singular beauty, and hybrid degeneracy in representations of them as emotionally fragile.. Both physical beauty and psychological vulnerability are hallmark traits of the tragic mulatto" (2012, p. 61).

Light skinned women, like Eva, who are not biracial but may appear biracial to others, in many ways are still viewed through the lens of this mulatta trope today (Streeter, 2012). The heteronormative Black male gaze influences the sexualization that Eva has experienced in her own life, as Black men themselves continue to grapple with notions of colorism, beauty standards, and desirability. While pathologies of dark-skinned women perpetuate notions of hypersexualized beings contrasted with light-skinned women who are often labeled more desirable and pure, Eva's testimony illustrates how this dichotomy is further complicated by the broader objectification of Black womanhood (Blay, 2013). If light-skinned women are seen as more physically desirable, an enhanced sexual assignment can also lead to their unwarranted over-sexualization as well. In no way does this observation denounce the simultaneous oversexualization that darker skinned Black women face. Yet, it complicates how we imagine the overarching sexualization of Black womanhood in its various forms.

In my preliminary research conducted in 2014 at Spelman College, I found that many light skinned women among my sample of thirty five felt that their personhood was limited to physical appearance in a similar way to Eva (Botts, 2014). Feeling trapped in their own bodies, their physical embodiment of Black womanhood prevented others from embracing more important aspects of their holistic being. Alesha, one of the students who took part in my study, expressed frustration regarding her peers' perceptions of her womanhood throughout the four years she had been a student at Spelman.

During the Annual Social Awards Contest we have at the end of the year, there's always these categories that people are nominated for. There's the Most Likely to be Famous, Most Likely to Win a Grammy, and so on, all the superlatives.. Well, I'm smart, I have a 3.85 GPA and I was recently inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, but no one sees that. They never nominate me for the Einstein award. But they nominate my friend who has a lower GPA and fewer academic accomplishments, because her physical appearance aligns more with what they perceive as 'smart.' And then they nominate me for Sexiest Girl in the Class and I feel like what the hell, like that's not all that I am!

Alesha's sentiments echo Eva's in a way that is common for light skinned African American women, according to Hunter's analysis (2005). Both women are looking for recognition from their peers beyond their physical bodies but feel reduced to sexual beings because of their skin color. Eva concludes by reflecting on the larger effects these encounters have had on the construction of her Black womanhood- she became more invested in the aspects of her being that felt stifled and limited. She chose to present her Black womanhood in ways that actively rejected the trope of the hypervisible mulatta. She distanced herself from investing in constructing an image of herself that fit the expectations of those who excluded her, and instead invested in a Black femininity that she believed would change others' perception of her.

Chapter Seven

LIGHT SKINNED WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE OF BLACKNESS

I kind of wanted to rebel against these images or ideas that were kind of forced upon me. So, very early, when I was even in high school, is when I decided, like, that's not gonna be me, um, I am gonna get my education, I'm gonna fight for - like, I wanted to be a lawyer, but, I wasn't passionate about law at all, I just wanted to do something for my race. So, I felt like being a lawyer could, at some point, afford me the opportunity to defend my race or um, women or - I just wanted to do something for my people, I felt like I needed to do something for my people.

As referenced in the *Formation of Racial Identity* section of this paper, Black performativity became a useful tool for Eva to combat limiting notions of her identity. Eva's response to the limiting perceptions of her Black womanhood was to intentionally separate herself from the hypersexual and overexoticized assumptions her peers and her community had perpetuated. She asserted agency over her own personal representation which made her feel more powerful in constructing the identity she sought to develop for herself. Yet, she was still somewhat reactionary in the strategies she used to combat her exclusion from Blackness. She was committed to becoming someone "Black enough" to fit in, and not to becoming her truest and most authentic self. It was only after her travels to South Africa that she realized how trapped she had become in fighting stereotypes of light skinned Black womanhood. Prior to this revelation, Eva adopted models of Black performativity with hopes of gaining acceptance from the communities that had rejected her since childhood.

As John Jackson states in *Real Black : Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, many Black people possess a racial "interiority [that] is predicated on a spiritual connection to race that grounds identity in intention, faith, belief, inclination, and commitment" (2005, p. 21). The construction of the Black self, then, is foundational to definitions of personhood for Black

people like Eva, whose Blackness is at the core of her identity. As Black selves seek to create their ideal Black community with other familiar Black selves, Blackness becomes policed by the sets of checklist items aforementioned in the *Formation of Racial Identity* section of this paper. External embodiments of Blackness can jeopardize one's ability to access Blackness in this way. Black performativity becomes a tool used by those who feel most excluded from Blackness to signal externally the connection and commitment they feel to Blackness internally. Black performativity becomes a tool used by those who feel most excluded from Blackness to signal externally the connection and commitment they feel to Blackness internally. In continuation of the aforementioned context of John Jackson's engagement with Black performativity, I am most interested in the ways in which overt expressions of self through physical presentation consider inclusion into in group membership. At the core of a desire to authenticate Blackness is a need to know who shares a common "commitment" to the race and who does not, yet authentication essentializes Blackness and flattens the depths of the spiritual self that Jackson discusses in his work. Eva grappled with this contradiction in her own sense making of self.

Eva has spent much of her life feeling the pressure of authenticating her Blackness to Black audiences. From having her hair pulled as a child to being told she was not Black by classmates, there were continuous messages sent about her racial sense of self that were inconsistent with how she viewed herself. Since then, Eva has worked to develop a self-determined Black identity that would denounce these assumptions. In many ways, her desire to be a lawyer and "defend her race" was ignited by a need to prove her commitment to her race, since it had been questioned for much of her life. This was a type of performance, in that she adopted a vocal identity in order to prove her Blackness to those who rejected her from in

group membership. She sought to prove her intellectual and emotional commitment to the uplift of the Black community with hopes of deemphasizing her perceived attractiveness that was linked to her hypersexuality. In finding herself, she felt very clear about who she did not want to be - the stereotypical light skinned girl who was unaware of her privilege, who was engaged in the disconnect from her community, and who did not have the depth to engage with those who shared her passion for Blackness.

As Hunter reveals in her work, Eva's performance of Blackness is not at all uncommon among light skinned Black women. In my 2014 study, I also explored light skinned women's performance of Blackness. I found that light skinned women were more likely to overtly project an intentional Black aesthetic in order to signal to their viewers that they were Black enough for group inclusion. Paula, one of my research participants, shared her journey of performance for in group membership. She reminisced on her mindset in high school when she began her investment in Black aesthetic performance.

It was tenth grade year and I was struggling to solidly define my Black self. I thought, 'let me go to Wet Seal and get my skinny jeans and my colored Nikes.. None of the white girls wore any of that... But I didn't care. I didn't want to look like them or hang out with them. I was like, okay, this is what I see Black culture to be, in the movies and the media, this is the way they portray, you know, what it means to really, truly be Black, like Black forreal, like, to be actually accepted and embraced by Black people, and there's not that around me so I'm gonna create that for myself, with hopes that maybe one day, I don't know, maybe one day they might see me walking down the street and smile back, and recognize me.

Paula knew that if she projected a more urban style of fashion, then the few Black girls who did live in her neighborhood might be more prone to embrace her. Her strong desires to fit in and be validated by the culture that was hers, yet she felt so distant from, led her to explore a performance of herself that was not fully genuine, and she later realized how detrimental it was for her as a teenage girl to embrace the limiting versions of Black girlhood that had been handed to her by society.

Paula associated Blackness with material outer appearance – with her ability to dress the part, which required a knowledge of what she called “street life” that she could only get from the movies, and from distant interactions that she had with the Black girls and their cousins from the neighborhood who never included her in their community. Yet, she realized that she was presenting aspects of herself that did not feel genuine to her spiritual Black self. “By junior year, I realized, this is a bit much.. This isn’t really who I am.. Then I decided to start just being myself.” For Paula, being herself was wearing the clothes she wore before she tried to impress the Black girls in her neighborhood. For Eva, being herself meant freeing herself of labels and constructs of Black womanhood from her youth. Both women had to come to a moment in their lives where they asked themselves what it mean to be a Black woman in their skin, on their own terms, without the extra pressures of just getting by and fitting in. Asking these questions because transformative for their growth and healing as Black women.

Chapter Eight

BLACK IN AMERICA, COLOURED IN SOUTH AFRICA SHAPING RACIAL IDENTITY BEYOND HOME

As she grappled with her Black womanhood in the United States, Eva grew curious about the origins of her ancestral roots beyond what she had found in the census. She wondered where her people came from before they were enslaved and how she could reconnect with them. While she recognized that she may never know exactly which country her family descended from, she felt a deep connection to the African continent after all she had learned in her African Diaspora courses at Spelman. These courses exposed her to aspects of her Black identity that she had known deeply and personally, but lacked the language to define. They taught her how to see her personal struggle within and outside of her community as a global struggle against white supremacy and hegemonic masculinity. Her pride in Blackness coupled with her unanswered questions around her identity prompted her desire to travel to Africa, but it was specifically her passion for film led her to South Africa.

The stories Eva had created through film in the United States of America had been informed by the intersectionality of her race, skin color, gender, and class. They illuminated the uncomfortable conversations that many Black Americans were, as she states, “too afraid to engage.” She felt an urge to learn more about the long lasting global consequences colonialism had on other Black people in various parts of the world. She was particularly interested in South Africa and the ways in which Coloured identity was constructed in order to further segregate what she perceived to be the larger South African Black community. So, in 2012, at age twenty five, during the summer after her second year of film school at the University of

Southern California, Eva created a Kickstarter account and raised the money to travel on her own and capture this story. She learned during her travels that the assumptions she had made coming into her new environment as an American, an African American, a Black woman, and a privileged person were based on her own positionality and lack of exposure. She was quickly made aware that her preconceived notions of race relations in South Africa were wrong. After being exposed to a new racial context, Eva shifted the direction of her video project, and also shifted her understanding of global Black womanhood in its entirety.

I changed the subject of my documentary... When I first got there, the documentary was about South African identity post-apartheid.. It was coming to the country and realizing that's not what the subject was, it was about Coloureds losing their identity because Black South Africans didn't really have the same kind of issues with loss of identity post-Apartheid... So, the documentary became, basically comparing the experiences of Coloured South Africans in Cape Town and African Americans, obviously, in the States, and comparing their experiences of loss of identity post colonization, uh, because there's so many similarities, uh, between like a rootlessness... like, I wanted to name it People Who Fell From the Sky, uh, it's part of that theory around the African American novel, but it really resonated with me because we aren't aware of our roots, like, we fell from the sky, there's a lack of identity kind of that comes along with that.

The messages Eva received about her complexion in South Africa were, to her surprise, not congruent with the messages she received in all of her twenty seven years in the United States of America. While both nations privileged her lighter skin and also excluded her from Blackness to varying degrees, she was placed in an entirely different racial category in South Africa. In the United States, she knew that even when she was denied access to Blackness in many cases, she still had space and room to validate her Blackness through performance in ways that could potentially yield in group membership. Yet in South Africa, her phenotypic features completely prevented her from having any access the Black communities that existed there. In their eyes, Eva was a Coloured woman, and she was not seen as one of them. Eva was left to grapple with the complex tensions between Coloured and Black people in South Africa while still trying to make sense of where she stood in the midst of it.

They racialized me as a Coloured person. It was just an assumption. If I hadn't opened my mouth to speak and show my accent, they would just come up to me and start speaking in Afrikaans, and I had to

learn in Afrikaans how to say I don't speak Afrikaans... I knew what Coloured meant, but I didn't realize that it was going to be so broad. I didn't realize that it was going to be anyone who did not know exactly what tribe they are from are Coloured, you know? I just thought it was going to be like a biracial person here. Like, I didn't realize that they were also, like, what I am explaining in my documentary, a rootless people.

The identity conflicts of Coloured South Africans is an aspect of scholarship that Mark Peach especially speaks to in his essay entitled *What is a Coloured, Really?* (2012). Using a fictional character named Paul in order to expose the current social predicament of the Coloured community, Peach states, "Paul learns that he is rootless and short on loyalty.. He feels like a man broken into uncertain parts, powerless" (Peach, 2014). Paul's "uncertain parts" are the product of a shameful miscegenation that has tainted the nation's perception of his identity. The stain of miscegenation is, as many scholars argue, at the root of Coloured people's discomfort within their own identities. Thus, there exists a constant tension between who Coloured people envision themselves to be within the political context and climate of present day South Africa. On the one hand, many Coloured communities are still purposefully associating themselves with the elitist structural positionality that had been granted to them since apartheid. On the other hand, a population of Coloured people are more invested in showing their solidarity between themselves and Black peoples in order to prove loyalty and dependability. Coloured people often times navigate these two polar extremes in nuanced ways, and Eva's documentary sheds light on this. Eva recognizes what Margaret Hunter notes in *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone* - that light-skinned Black people also feel a similar burden regarding loyalty and rootlessness. She seeks to draw the parallels between the two. Yet, Eva's interviews with members of the Coloured community in South Africa exposed her to a broader understanding of Coloured culture and history.

There was a Coloured girl at my job who took me around the the Coloured neighborhoods and introduced me to people to interview. I sat down with all kinds of people, from a young rap group who sought to reclaim Coloured identity and make it more positive, to an older woman who wanted to reject the term Coloured because it was given from the oppressor. But I realized how separated they were from Black people, and how they felt shunned for not being as racially pure.

This feeling was one that was all too familiar to Eva, not only from her experiences in the United States, but in South Africa as well. Learning these various stories painted a fuller picture of the Coloured community which she grew to identify with most because of these unintended commonalities. One of the major commonalities Eva noticed between Coloured South Africans and Black Americans was the phenomenon of existing in multiple racial categories at various points of one's life. While racialization of Coloured and Black identity was implemented by the state in directly invasive ways within the South African context, Eva still noticed a similar instability in the categorization of racial identity. She was careful to note that the ways in which racial distinctions were enforced in the United States were governed much more by the individual's choice than the sanctioned projections of government officials like in South Africa. Still, the state's investment in distinctly drawing boundaries and borders around exactly who was and was not able to access Coloured identity felt, in many ways, like the passing of Eva's ancestors. The main aspect of the familiar tension was that Coloured siblings of the same family, who may have the exact same mother and father, could have two totally different lived experiences as a result of their skin color and other phenotypical features such as hair texture, nose structure, eye color, and the like. Eva noted how the same was true for her ancestors, which she believes is a primary reason why colorism still exists in the United States of America today. In remembering one of the most alarming moments in her interviews with Coloured respondents, she states,

In my interviews, I learned about families torn apart because of physical appearance during apartheid... a lot of them were physically separated into different districts in Cape Town... they, [the government], would literally separate families and say you're Coloured so you live here, you're Black so you have to move here, and um, it was all, like, based on lighter skinned, darker skinned, just like in America... racialization was like literally based more on physical appearance than on family lineage, kinda like how Black people could be white if they wanted to, not because they had parents who were white, but just because they looked like they were white. So, it was just like passing in America... It doesn't matter what your family is but it matters all about your racial appearance.

As Peach and Adhikari reveal in their work, the effects that these occurrences had on Coloured families were traumatizing . Darker skinned Coloured people who had known themselves to be Coloured all their lives were now told that they were Black and could no longer exist among their families. They were no longer allowed to live in Coloured neighborhoods. They were forcefully segregated and sent to live among Black South Africans whose culture and heritage felt drastically different from their own. There were tests to authenticate Coloured identity that mirrored the “Brown Paper Bag Test” in the United States of America. For instance, in addition to the tests regarding skin color, there was a test to measure the coarseness of one’s hair texture. If a pen could not smoothly go from the scalp of one’s head to the tip of the hair, then they would be more likely to be categorized as Black and they would be separated from the life they had always known (Adhikari, 2005).

Eva came to realize that the drastic need to label Colouredness and Blackness came from the same insecurities that she experienced during her upbringing in the United States of America. It was the need for those in power to further validate themselves by devaluing the lives of those whose racialization made room for their oppression. Even though it was clear that race was a social construct that held no true weight or value in regards to who a person was, there still remained a pressure to associate with a given race in order to validate one’s self identity. What began in the United States and South Africa as a state sanctioned project to alienate groups of marginalized peoples from each other turned into the internalization of a hierarchy that pitted lighter skinned people against darker skinned people by making certain character traits seem inherent to the individuals of particular groups. While the term mulatto is no longer used in the United States of America, there is a lingering legacy of the mulatto trope that has impacted the way Eva and women like her see themselves. In South Africa, however,

the connotations of Coloured identity are still extremely prevalent. Eva learned more in depth just what Colouredness meant to those who were affected by it most as she developed the content for her documentary.

Eva was additionally exposed to the complex identity construction of Coloured people in South Africa which felt in many ways similar to that of African Americans. With so much uncertainty around exactly where ancestors originated, Coloured people felt a certain level of rootlessness. Their understanding of their lineage remains limited because of the miscegenation that occurred centuries ago. While there is an understanding of the KhoiSan ancestry, there is still much debate internally about what linkage deserves to be reclaimed. Many of the youth in Cape Town that Eva encountered were interested in reclaiming Coloured identity as its own separate identity that should be engaged with pride. She describes in further detail her interview with the young rap group.

They had a clear understanding of their lack of identity, and they tied everything back to that. A lot of their music was shedding light on the Coloured condition, the lack of knowledge about their own culture and a need to latch on to the culture of others because they feel so lost. In their music, they want to reclaim that identity and not make it a shameful thing. They want to show that Coloured youth are conscious and not just going by the standards that this country has piled onto them. They were so young, maybe 14 or 15 years old, and so aware of what was going on. They were so cute, they reminded me of my little cousins from back home. They reminded me of something familiar from back home.

As Eva proclaims, the people who know their roots are seen as Black. Therefore, the Coloured people who seek to embrace the KhoiSan heritage do so out of a desire to reclaim a definitive identity that is not historically based on the ambiguity associated with Colouredness. As Eva describes the pursuit of connection with KhoiSan identity that one of her respondents engaged, it was clear that she had a condescending tone. *What kind of woman would be so eager to embrace a lineage that she was not certain was her own?* While Eva did not explicitly ask these questions, her tone made these sentiments evident. It was as though she could not see that her own quest to the African continent was not mirrored in this woman's desires; both women

clinging to a forgotten past that may be too blurry to sort out in the end. The unknowing, and the longing to know, make the African American experience and the Coloured experience similar, but the process of reconciliation for both groups may look and feel different. Eva further explains the dichotomy between those who were seen as pure, the Black South Africans, and those who were seen as impure, the Coloured South Africans. She says, “It was like a lack of knowledge, an ignorance, and a need to claim something that wasn’t really theirs.”

Eva’s four months in South Africa also taught her more about the internal struggles she faced in relation to societal skin color politics. She was forced to reimagine what her light-skinned Black womanhood meant to her by the way she was received by Black South Africans during her visit. She traveled to South Africa with hopes of being embraced by a Black African community to which she longed to reconnect. However, she was met with consistent reminders that she was not seen as a true member of the Black diasporic community that she envisioned for herself since her days at Spelman College.

It was my first time going to the market in Cape Town, I was going to get some new fabrics made to get a dress that I planned to wear at one of the gatherings, and I was there with some other girls who were in my program. Of course, I was the only Black girl in the program. The other girls were white, and I tried not to look as American as them. I felt like I was there for a different reason than them, I felt like my presence in the country was more, you know, meaningful in a lot of ways, because it meant so much more to me. So, I was talking to this woman, who was selling her fabrics, and I guess Sam, my roommate, had said she was interested in purchasing a bracelet but the price was too high. So, this woman said to me, ‘Go and tell your sister that I can make her a good deal.’ I was like literally so shocked, so hurt, so astounded, that she chose to call this white girl my sister. A part of me wanted to shout out to her that *she* was my sister, but I realized that she did not see me that way. I am sure part of it was because I was American, but I could not help but think it was also because of my appearance, too. Because I had light skin and because I had light eyes and I did not look like what Black meant to her. I left the market that day empty handed. I couldn’t even bring myself to purchase any fabric from her that day, and I didn’t get an outfit for the gathering. I was just disappointed in how I was being perceived, and it left me feeling confused and isolated.

The woman at the market surely picked up on Eva’s American accent and her American style of dress. She surely could tell that Eva was an American woman. But, she did not register Eva as a Black American woman who was a part of a diasporic sisterhood of connection. While Eva’s desired bond was very much imagined based on limited expectations of global

Blackness, she felt denied access to what she had so often in her life been told she was excluded from - Black womanhood. This interaction was only the first of many that made it evidently clear who she was and who she was not in the South African context of racialization.

Eva recalled another incident that occurred on the job which was even more hurtful because she was to return to that space daily. It was important for her to build community in her work space, but it felt impossible because of the emotional walls that were put up upon her presence in the room. On her first day of work at a local film company, she was unpleasantly surprised by the evident ostracization that she felt from most of her Black coworkers. She recognized that it was a result of her American identity, but her skin color only further emphasized their mistrust of her. To her dismay, she felt no community with the people categorized as Black in South Africa initially. The Coloured woman who befriended her explained more of South African history, and helped Eva better negotiate her space.

My Coloured friend from work... uh, she just basically showed me the ropes, taught me that Blacks and Coloured really were not the same there, and that because of how I looked, I was Coloured too, and uh, it really hurt because I thought I was going back to Africa to feel at home with my people, and it just was not that at all... I felt more connected honestly to the Coloured community than I did to the Black community... Because they were uprooted too. Their stories felt more similar to my own. The Black people did not even acknowledge me as a part of their group... it was just like I felt in America actually, but worse.

Eva's naiveté to assume such instant kinship ties was also rooted in her inability to connect deeper with the Black communities of her youth. While Eva hoped to build Diasporic solidarity with "her people" during the four month trip, she instead built a stronger sense of self and was forced to recognize a disheartening reality of global race relations. One moment in particular described best her initial engagements with the South African Black community.

It was another day at work, doing pointless spreadsheets and feeling ignored by her counterparts, when finally one Black woman came into her office. Eva felt slightly thrilled to finally have some company. She was excited at the thought of one coworker making an effort

to reach out to her. Yet, the way the conversation carried on made Eva wish she had no company at all.

There was one girl at my job, a Black South African woman, and um, she was an interesting girl, she had obvious, long weave and fake lashes and fake nails and blue eye contacts, and um, she had the nerve to ask me if I had identity issues. At first, it really bugged me because I couldn't understand what she meant by that. She pointed to the Blog I was reading, it was a Black woman's Blog, the type that I read on any regular day, and I guess she just didn't know what to make of me. At the time I was wearing my hair in locs too, and I guess it all just made her think I was trying to be someone that I am not, but it amazed me, because, uh, I surely thought the same of her! I thought it was so odd, that this woman is judging me and quite possibly feeling pity for my lack of cultural connection, or quite possibly my overcompensation to connect. My Coloured friend from work had to explain to me that most Coloured people don't wear locs in South Africa, and because I was racialized as Coloured, it felt very strange for them to see me with my hair like that.

While Eva believed that her visible representation of Blackness had always been an authentic aspect of her being, she was constantly challenged by Black South Africans about her aesthetic choices. Although Eva felt that her overtly emphasized alignment with her Blackness was not solely an overcompensation for her skin complexion, she grew more aware of the subconscious decisions she made about her physical appearance. In my preliminary study from 2014, I used Patrick Johnson's *Performance Theory* to explore light-skinned women's attempts to visibly achieve in group membership by aesthetic performance (Botts, 2014). I argued that the alienation light-skinned women experienced caused them to seek alliance with Black communities through overt representations of a Black self. Eva's decisions about her appearance is a prime example of the ways in which the performativity cycle exists in response to the aforementioned policing of Black communal affiliation. In this instance, she was experiencing something similar to her childhood- the complexities of her hair choices being defining implications of her personhood. Performativity of Blackness became a tool for Eva to access Black girlhood and Black womanhood when her skin color jeopardize it. She learned at a young age that her hair was too long and too straight. She decided to loc it to portray a more respected portrait of Black femininity among her desired Black community. Still, her performance was not enough to justify her Blackness in the ways that John Jackson

mentions in his work. Eva's checklist items were too problematically unaccounted for in the eyes of her coworker and other Black South African people who shared her mentality.

During our final interview, as Eva reflected on this particular experience in context with her overall journey, she examines how skin color politics and hair politics both have equally played a role in her understanding of self. Hair for Black women is a major aspect of self expression, and Eva's realization of her own hair journey helped her make sense of her entire journey through Black womanhood (Blay, 2013).

Because I've had such a long journey with my hair, from having long long permed hair down to my butt when I was younger, to as soon as my mom let me cut it off, having hair to my shoulders in the 8th grade, then when I got to college, I chopped it off into a bob, and all these choices were just what I wanted to do. Now, obviously, they were caused by a more subconscious reality. But when I got to college, especially at Spelman, becoming a Women's Studies major and an African American Studies major, I was like, I am NOT gonna conform to these Western standards of beauty anymore, and I am gonna loc my hair! For me, at the time, that was the ultimate test. And, I think after that experience, I realized, maybe I am subconsciously trying to reconnect to a culture that I have lost, and maybe it won't work all the time - [my Black South African coworker] clearly had made that very clear to me - but it made me understand something broader.

As a result of this encounter, Eva understood her privileged positionality more broadly. She understood how divided South Africa was, and how rooted this division was in the same structures of oppression that allowed colorism to exist in the United States. On a more personal level, she understood that she no longer needed to invest in proving she was or was not the image of Black womanhood that she had grappled with for years. She decided that, instead of perpetuating an overperformance of this image so far beyond the stereotype she'd fought against for so long, she would invest in doing what truly made her feel like a proud Black woman despite the pressures from her community. Shortly after returning from South Africa, Eva cut off her locs and decided she would wear her hair "however I feel that day.. Sometimes I wear it curly if I feel like it, sometimes I wear it straight if I feel like it. And that is really what freedom is, um, having the chance to do what you feel, and not be so burdened by oppression, or avoidance of oppression."

By the end of our final interview, Eva was able to concretely speak to the ways in which her experience in South Africa had provided a more nuanced understanding of her own identity. She drew necessary comparisons between her experience in the United States and her experience in South Africa. She understood how global racialization worked to maintain hierarchies of power, and how it benefited and troubled those whose identities placed them close enough to whiteness to attain some privilege, yet far enough to still be seen as othered. She made sense of her own trauma around these experiences by recognizing that all of these experiences were a result of the societal structures of power which allowed these problematic ideologies to exist and impede on the individual lives of marginalized peoples.

Identity almost, I hate to say derive from, but when I think about identity I think about the one drop rule, and how my concept of identity as a Black American woman really did come from that. The way I grew up, one drop of Black blood made you Black and that was a fact, and if you tried to deny that then there was something wrong with your sense of self. If you are biracial in America, most likely you look like you are Black and you are going to be identified as a Black person. If you are Afro-Latina you will be identified as a Black person. If you are from the Caribbean or the islands or even any part of Africa and you look like us, then you are going to be a Black person. From the outside looking in, you will look like a Black person, even if you do not want to be, so you better start wanting to be!

Eva's concept of what Blackness meant was challenged by her travels to South Africa. It took her some time to unlearn the way she had been socialized to think about projecting Blackness onto others. There was a way that she had been raised to validate and invalidate others based on their claims to Black identity. Even though Eva was a product of such bullying and harassment based on notions of Black authenticity testing, she was still perpetuating the ideology of a Blackness that forcefully included those who did not see themselves as such. In an odd way, it was similar to that of Coloured people's message to her; that she was Coloured there, whether she wanted to be or not. In reflecting on her final thoughts about how she was perceived during her time there, she states,

It was almost as if, in the 1960's I'm a light-skinned Black person. I am still a Black person, however, if a white person sees me, they might see me having the potential to have a better job, or see me being

better than. However, I am still a Black person at the end of the day. I think it's the same thing for Coloured people here in South Africa in many ways. Even though I know it's different, it's still so the same, you know? When a white South African sees a Coloured person, they still see them as associated with Blackness, however they see them a little bit separate as being Coloured... Based on my experience, that is what they saw me as. It was like, you're still Black, but you're Coloured. And then it was like feeling like I was in America all over again, when it came to the interactions with Black people, just them thinking that I was choosing to adopt an identity that was better than them, not knowing that my intentions were the total opposite of that.

The way that Eva uses Blackness in this quotes is different from how she uses the term in previous quotes because here she recognizes Blackness as an indicator of an othering process that is taken up by white South Africans in a way that resembles white people from the United States of America during the civil rights era. Both light-skinned Black people in the United States of America and Coloured people in South Africa exist in a space between Blackness and whiteness. Their proximity to Blackness prevents them from accessing full inclusion into the benefits of whiteness, but their proximity to whiteness affords them the opportunity to experience aspects of privilege that darker-skinned Black Americans and Black South Africans would never know on the basis of appearance. Eva realized that Blackness and Colouredness were much more than a skin color, hair texture, and a combination of facial features. While they became cultural identities that these groups of people had reclaimed for themselves, the origin of their creation was a tool for exclusion. These titles served as metaphorical representations of a categorization of peoples used to validate their mistreatment.

Chapter Nine

CONCLUSION

Eva Moore had struggled with her self identity throughout her life in various phases. As a child, she was not Black enough because her skin was too light and her hair was too long. As an adult, she felt oversexualized for the intersection of her race, skin color, and gender. In South Africa, she felt further ostracized from her Black ancestral lineage. She felt torn between who others said she was and what she knew to be true within. As a result of her physical appearance, she lived with guilt and shame. Her family intentionally grounded her upbringing in Black culture so that she would know where she came from, but the children who questioned her identity made it harder for her to believe her family about the truth of her identity. Regardless of these trying years, as an adult, Eva made a conscious decision to be a proud Black woman and use her story to enhance her art. She would then use her art to spread a message to others in her community to hopefully prevent the things she had experienced in her lifetime.

While Eva initially traveled to South Africa seeking solidarity with Black people of the African diaspora, she left feeling like even more of an outsider once she arrived. Eva was labeled Coloured and initially felt resentment as a result of her further exclusion from Blackness. Yet, she found community in the place she never expected. Eva saw herself in the Coloured struggle because she saw the commonalities between her own journey of seeking belonging and validation. The broader disconnect that both Eva and those she identified with most in South Africa was between what it meant to be Black, what it meant to be lighter skinned, and what it meant to experience a limited level of privilege as a result of physical appearance within a society that perpetuates white supremacy. She found some level of healing

in this context because she was able to make sense of her condition through a new lens. What I found most interesting was the level of shame that the Coloured communities felt as a result of miscegenation, which mirrored that of Eva's family. Miscegenation became the center of these problems as the shame was deeply rooted in an unknowing of familial ties and heritage. The burden of that stain made both South Africans and light-skinned African Americans feel that their rootlessness in a way that caused feelings of displacement.

As Eva struggled with her sense of self, and the ways in which her sense of self was influenced by communal responses to her physical appearance, she gained perspective about her identity. The impact of gendered racialized categories on Black women's understanding of their Black self also played a key role in how Eva came to see herself. Through international travel and intentional study, she came to recognize that her peers' perspectives of her were inevitably influenced by the sociohistorical make up in the United States of America. It was the same global white supremacy that dictated how those in South Africa viewed her. When she traveled to South Africa, what she knew of Blackness was challenged. For a moment, she felt a strong sense of instability in her self identity. Yet, by realizing that the same structures that caused her challenges as a child caused her discomfort in South Africa, Eva was able to reimagine herself free from these societal expectations.

Eva's story is just one example of many light-skinned African American women's journey through understanding their Black womanhood in a world where social constructs make it difficult to understand self holistically. As scholars like Yaba Blay, Margaret Hunter, and Russell Kelly all agree, this is a larger, global phenomenon that has not been discussed enough in scholarship. What does Eva's story tell us about the larger impacts global white supremacy has had on the African Diasporic community? How can we use her journey to draw

parallels to other women of other nations while still shedding light on the colorism that exists in the United States of America and South Africa? Eva's story is one of many. While her accounts are not entirely generalizable to the broader population of light skinned women, her truth provides important insight into the realities of lived experiences of light-skinned African American women in the 21st century who have struggled with skin color politics and its impact on their lives.

In her efforts to disassociate with the tropes of the light skinned, hypersexualized, tragic mulatta, she poured energy into fitting the box of Black womanhood that she hoped to be accepted into most. However, she was still boxed in. Today, Eva is more concerned with breaking free from all the boxes of Black womanhood - whether it be light skinned Black womanhood or "woke" Black womanhood - and connecting with the representations of self that feel most suited for her personality. She recognizes that this may influence the way groups of Black people engage her, but she has decided to be more concerned with doing what makes her feel comfortable and less concerned with performing for the acceptance of those who cannot see past her physically embodied Blackness.

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