

## Colourism: from a Local Legacy of Slavery to a Global Power Dynamics

*Pour son DEA, qu'elle vient de terminer brillamment, Cindy Gabrielle avait rédigé dans le cadre du cours « Postcolonial Civilizations » (donné par Christine Pagnouille), cet essai sur le « Colourisme », un phénomène actuel de discrimination lié au métissage et que le succès déferlant de Barak Obama aux primaires démocrates a mis politiquement en évidence depuis sa rédaction.*

However pervasive colourism has become in the United States and in the Caribbean, it remains by and large an unconscious bias so much so that, while racism is fought against in every possibly field these days, the issue of colourism remains largely unaddressed.

Colourism, Ras Tyehimba explains, is the “preference for lighter-skinned people in all areas, including the choices of spousal partners, symbols of beauty, friends etc.”<sup>1</sup> It seems that colourism has resulted in an important wealth difference between dark-skinned people and their lighter-skinned counterparts. All studies converge in their findings: light-skinned Latinos or Blacks are much better off.<sup>2</sup> Concerning black people, Howard Bodenhorn argues that the privileged treatment of mulatto slaves in plantations accounts for the socioeconomic disparity between the two subgroups. He explains that, since “light-complected [sic] slaves were more likely to receive skill training,”<sup>3</sup> they had access to relatively well paid jobs when slavery was abolished. Little by little, they came to form an elite which, to preserve its wealth, strongly disfavoured marriage outside the group.<sup>4</sup> Without wishing to deny that the favouring of light-skinned slaves marks a starting point of sorts for colourism in many black communities, the fact that today’s elite group not only comprises light-skinned Blacks but also Brown Latinos and people of Asian descent<sup>5</sup> seems to indicate that there might not be such an obvious continuity between the elite group of the mid-nineteenth century which Bodenhorn studied and that of today. What is more, the walls which are erected to separate the two sub-groups are not only the doing of those who stand on the right side of that wall. And, indeed, if one of the children of a dark couple happens to be lighter-skinned than his or her kin, this child will be pushed harder in the formal education system with the result that, eventually, s/he will find a well paid job and cross the boundary between the brown elite and “the dark-complected masses.”<sup>6</sup>

While looking for documents related to colourism on the internet, I was struck by the extent to which some individuals or sub-groups are felt to be at fault for implementing the white colour hierarchy. Unsurprisingly, those who bear the brunt of these criticisms are light-skinned Blacks and women who use skin bleaching creams or hair straighteners. Concerning the latter but also all those who show preferences for light-skinned individuals, it is claimed that they are “guilty of complicity”<sup>7</sup> or “enemies of the [black] revolution.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, the purpose of such harsh words is to raise black people’s awareness on the matter in a way that they will not easily forget. Yet, my impression is that these attacks – however justified they may be – only lead to an impasse inasmuch as they target only the most visible aspects of colourism to the risk of overemphasizing the responsibility of some while exonerating others of any guilt or responsibility. In other words, it might be a mistake to blame individuals for not being strong enough to resist a near unbearable social pressure. For the same reason, the approach which consists in assuming that colourism will be eradicated one and for all if all those who adhere to white values are, so to speak, burnt on the stake may very well be totally misdirected. Besides, it is not because an individual manifests none of the commonly known

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<sup>1</sup> Tyehimba, “Moonlight Gathering Highlights Colourism” in: triniview.com.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Cynthia E. Nance, “Colorable Claims: The Continuing Significance of Color Under Title VII Forty Years After Its Passage” in *Berkeley journal of employment and labor law* [1067-7666] 2005 vol. 26/2, p. 435.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Bodenhorn, “Colorism, Complexion Homogamy, and Household Wealth: Some Historical Evidence” in *The American economic review* [0002-8282] 2006 vol. 96/2, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Bodenhorn, “Colorism, Complexion Homogamy, and Household Wealth”, 259.

<sup>5</sup> Nance, “Colorable Claims”, 449-558.

<sup>6</sup> Bodenhorn, “Colorism, Complexion Homogamy, and Household Wealth”, 256.

<sup>7</sup> Larry D. Crawford, “Racism, Colorism and Power” in nbufront.org

[http://www.nbufront.org.html/FRONTalView/ArticlesPapers/Crawfor\\_RacismColor](http://www.nbufront.org.html/FRONTalView/ArticlesPapers/Crawfor_RacismColor) [26 December, 2007]

<sup>8</sup> See for instance the article posted by Leslie, “Dealing with Colourism: A Step towards the African Revolution” (5 October, 2006) in: africanpeak.com

<http://www.africanpeak.com/leslie/051006.html> [26 December, 2007]

symptoms of colourism that s/he does not carry the disease and transmit it in all impunity. To effectively start deconstructing the practice of colourism and hope to move a little forward in the process of mental decolonization, collective responsibility has first to be acknowledged.

Operating a revalidation of blackness appears to many as the remedy thanks to which the future generations of Blacks will recover from their forebears' 'cultural cringe'. Targeting colourism as if it were restricted to black communities remains nonetheless a partial solution, if only because the phenomenon itself knows no such boundaries. Indeed, recent findings have shed some light on the fact that dark-skinned Blacks are liable to be associated to negative and stereotypical traits such as laziness, poverty, aggressiveness, lack of intelligence, and unattractiveness whereas light-skinned Blacks tend to be described in terms of positive and counterstereotypic traits by Whites as well as by Blacks.<sup>9</sup> Concretely, this means that, in the job selection process, "a dark-skinned male with an MBA [Master of Business Administration] would still receive lower results than a light-skinned male with a bachelor degree."<sup>10</sup> Thus, if an employer (black, white or brown) has the choice between a dark-skinned Black and a light-skinned one, without being able to explain why, s/he is very likely to hire or promote the latter – hence the drastic wealth difference between the two subgroups.

These days, it has become easy for companies or institutions to advertise themselves as non-racist by virtue of the fact that black individuals work in their midst. Yet, a closer look at them would probably reveal that, when it comes to hiring or promoting dark-skinned Blacks, some of these companies or institutions become much less colour blind. This is not to suggest that the discrimination against dark-skinned Blacks in the workplace is the source of colourism. This tendency rather mirrors the near universal denigration of blackness – otherwise why would the vast majority of voters evaluate "the dark-skinned Black candidate [...] much more harshly than his lighter-skinned peer?"<sup>11</sup> As long as having a dark skin will amount to being denied access to mainstream culture, employment and power, self-love will not be sufficient to counter colourism. If a revalidation of blackness indeed is the solution to uproot colourism, then, this revalidation should be operated in all fields of society and on a global scale. Nevertheless, one should not expect the change to come from 'above'. The leaders of empowered nations are certainly not going to campaign against colourism when they, "to maintain an advantage in the negotiation process [...] consistently dismiss information counter to the denigration of dark-skinned groups."<sup>12</sup> In other words, that states or individuals are denigrated and defined as "inferior and less qualified to negotiate global issues as equals"<sup>13</sup> suits the leading nations quite well since it allows them to maintain their dominance, and justify it.

By way of conclusion, I would like to problematize the widely held assumption that colourism is a mental prejudice which Blacks integrated when they saw that "slaves with lighter features would find easier work in the [master's] house, while dark-skinned slaves performed backbreaking labor in the fields"<sup>14</sup> and which they have been transmitting from one generation to the next ever since. First of all, the ever growing market of skin bleaching creams in Asia points to the fact that colourism is well-alive outside black communities. It is possible that the long lasting cultural and political hegemony of white nations has resulted in a worldwide denigration of blackness. In any case, it is clear that colourism is not the "ugly secret"<sup>15</sup> of black people only: no matter what colour they are, teachers, employers and voters (amongst others) discriminate against dark-skinned Blacks. Needless to say that, even if their parents promote self-love at home, black children soon learn that, in the eyes of many, blackness is associated to unworthiness and, when they look about themselves

<sup>9</sup> Nance, "Colorable Claims", 447.

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew Harrison (the first to undertake to study the effects of colourism in the workplace) in an interview with Africaspeak, "Racism Watch: Matthew Harrison Speaks on Colorism Research" (25 August, 2007) in [www.trinicenter.com](http://www.trinicenter.com) <http://www.trinicenter.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1476&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0> [26 December, 2007]

<sup>11</sup> Nance, "Colorable Claims", 448.

<sup>12</sup> Ronal E. Hall, "Skin Color as Post-Colonial Hierarchy: A Global Strategy For Conflict Resolution" in *The Journal of Psychology*, 2003, 137 (1), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, "Skin Color as Post-Colonial Hierarchy", 43.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Blanding, "The Big Taboo" (Fall 2006) in [www.tufts.edu/alumni/magazine](http://www.tufts.edu/alumni/magazine) [Tufts University Magazine] <http://www.tufts.edu/alumni/magazine/fall2006/features/bigtaboo.html> [26 December, 2007]

<sup>15</sup> Crawford, "Racism, Colorism and Power".

they see “support for [this] leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance.”<sup>16</sup> Those who emphasize the continuity between today’s colourism and slavery probably do so to remind the world and themselves of the extent to which they are still mentally colonized by white values, and rightly so. Yet, by failing to acknowledge the continuing significance of colourism as a “critical dynamic of global coexistence”<sup>17</sup> thanks to which Blacks are maintained in a position of subjugation, they serve the interests of those who enforced or benefit from this colour hierarchy.

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<sup>16</sup> Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*. 1979 (London: Picador, 1990), 28.

Although the novel was written in the seventies, it provides interesting insights on the devastating effects of colourism on selfhood and acknowledges collective responsibility in a way that is hardly ever echoed today.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, “Skin Color as Post-Colonial Hierarchy”, 41.