March 2014

Taking Off the Rose-Colored Glasses: Exposing Colorism through Counter Narratives

Traci Baxley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Baxley, T. (2017). Taking Off the Rose-Colored Glasses: Exposing Colorism through Counter Narratives. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 14 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.14.1.05>

Taking Off the Rose-Colored Glasses Exposing Colorism through Counter Narratives

Traci Baxley

[The] color complex is a form of intraracial genocide. Because it positions Blacks versus Blacks, the emotional toll it imposes and the lack of trust or acceptance of others that it breeds are exhausting and demoralizing. (Golden, 2004)

Introduction

My journey with skin color privilege began at an early age growing up as the sole brown-skinned female in my immediate family, having a light brown-skinned mother and three light brown-skinned sisters. A vivid memory dating back to elementary school includes my constant need to explain why my skin color was darker than my sisters' skin: "I am darker only because I play sports and spend a lot of time in the sun." I also remember having feelings of inadequacy based upon a sense that I was less physically attractive than my sisters because of my darker complexion. How at such a young age was I cognizant of the need to rationalize my "darkness" to people? Why did I so readily *internalize* the "black sheep" mentality? What had society already conveyed to me about not being good enough? How did I discern that I needed to create ways to distract others from noticing or judging me by my brownness?

As the mother of five children, I quietly watch them play and interact with each other and I am rendered almost apoplectic by the thoughts of how the pigment of their skin, the hue of their eyes (my daughter has light brown eyes), and the texture of their hair (my children have what is coined as "good hair" by African-American standards) may impact their future journeys and experiences, define who they are, or who they will become. My oldest son, and my only "brown" skinned child, began expressing a dislike of his skin color at the age of five. Do I dare tell him that his path in society may be different from his siblings because of his skin color? Should I constantly adorn him with positive affirmations regarding the beauty of his skin

color which potentially conveys the message that my other four children's skin tone is less beautiful? How can society affirm the beauty in all of our brown-skinned children; specifically Black girls who rely on society's Eurocentric definition of beauty as a measuring stick for acceptance, identity, and self-esteem?

Once a taboo topic, colorism, defined as the intraracial discrimination and privilege system based on skin color (and other phenotypical characteristics such as hair texture, broadness of nose, and lip thickness) (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), is regarded in the Black community as commonplace and continues to divide and impact the identity and self-esteem of Black girls. As a researcher, I recognize that there are concerns that light-skinned Black citizens must confront—like having to convince their darker-skinned counterparts that they are “Black” enough and are not looking or acting white. For example, during his election campaign, President Obama had to prove that he was Black enough to win the trust and votes in the Black community.

However, there is overwhelming evidence that light-skinned Black females receive higher education levels (Hunter, 2002; Hughes & Hertel, 1990), acquire more prestigious jobs (Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992), develop higher self-esteem (Thompson & Keith, 2001; Williams-Burns, 1980) and marry men with higher profile status (Bone & Cash, 1992; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Russell et al., 1992) than their darker-skinned female counterparts. Additionally, research supports the notion that there are adverse effects of having dark skin in a post-colonial society like the United States, including being characterized as being less attractive and trustworthy (Golden, 2004; Wade & Bielitz, 2005).

As a woman, I have successfully achieved numerous goals in various facets of my life, a long way from that little brown-skinned girl who concealed the scars from insensitive remarks, lost friendships over color lines and who fought to be heard and seen. As a Black female scholar, it is impossible to escape from the authenticity of my Blackness and all that it entails, fighting marginalization and disempowerment, while genuinely loving the skin that I am in. Working with adolescent Black girls, I see the confusion, and sometimes devastation, that colorism continues to inflict on the development of their identity and the division it causes within the “sisterhood” (of Black girls). This article uses key tenets of critical race theory, including counter narratives, to define colorism and discuss its impact on dark-skinned adolescent girls. The article also highlights the influences (positive and negative) of multicultural literature in giving voice to Black teenage girls in speaking about and against colorism within various community discourses, including families and “the sisterhood.”

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has its points of origin in the legal realm and ties its genesis to the Civil Rights Movement. It recognizes and acknowledges the con-

nections between race, racism, and power in society (Delgado, 1988/1989). CRT was first introduced into education with the publication of *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education* by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), providing a lens designed to observe, name, expose, and challenge dominant norms and assumptions that appear neutral, but which systematically marginalize, silence, and misrepresent people of color (Harper, Patton, & Woodson, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009; McKay, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Vargas, 2003). Tenets of CRT can be used to examine the sociopolitical construct of skin color from the perspective of “light-skin privilege,” the advantages that light-skinned Black females have over their dark-skinned sisters due to their skin color (Hunter, 2002). The elements of CRT that are pertinent to the notion of colorism for the purposes of this article include power and privilege of (intra)racial identities, finding voice for the disempowered (dark-skinned girls), and the use of counter-narratives to share perspectives in order to begin the mental liberation essential to remedying the effects of colorism.

Historically, dating back to the time of slavery in the United States of America, skin color played a significant role determining the power stratification and racial hierarchies within enslaved African communities. “Mulattos,” the now-offensive term used at the time to refer to the offspring of White slave owners and African slaves, received superior treatment and were viewed as more intelligent and privileged. Lighter-skinned slaves were often assigned easier, indoor, domestic work or skilled labor jobs while the darker-skinned slaves were relegated to more strenuous outside labor (Wilder, 2009). Consequently, “mulatto” slaves were worth more on the auction block, often receiving basic education and eventually, in some cases, their freedom. The White colonists created and encouraged a social structuring based on the “privileging of Whiteness” within the slave community which resembled that of the Black/White stratification of power in society today (Hunter, 2002, p. 176). After the Civil War, these lighter-skinned slaves began internalizing the concept of intraracism and created (social, class, and physical) distances from their dark-skinned sisters and brothers by forming elite communities, civil and cultural organizations, churches, and sororities and fraternities. This color stratification has become naturalized and normalized into the daily practices and consciousness of U.S. society (Hunter 2002; Kerr; 2006; Russell et al., 1992).

CRT offers counter-narratives as a means to recognize and legitimize the perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups of people, in this case dark-skinned adolescent girls. Counter-narratives provide a stage for the Black adolescent girls in this study to name their reality and express their story. The aim in the use of counter-narratives is not to replace one narrative with another, but to give voice to the experiences and ways of knowing of groups who are “Othered” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). According to Delgado (1988/1989), counter narratives can build a sense of community among marginalized groups by offering a voice to hear one another and space to be understood by others. The counter narratives can then be offered as an alternative perspective to gain a deeper understanding of (intra) racial

dynamics (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009) and serve as a source of empowerment for the narrator and those like her (Pollard, 2006; Etter-Lewis, 1997).

Methodology

I had the opportunity to facilitate a literacy group with eight adolescent Black females for three academic school terms (sixth through the eighth grade years). We met after school once a week and occasionally during their lunch time. The participants were registered in the after-school program at a deregulated K-8 public school in the southeast part of the United States. The nationalities of the members of GIRLS (Girls Inspired by Reading, Learning, and Success) Club included African Americans, Caribbean Americans (Haitian and Bahamian), and one Black Canadian. Through book discussions, journal writing, and scrapbooking we developed a trusting community where authentic dialogue and debate were encouraged and a personal, protective bond was created. The books that we read were written by African-American authors (mostly women) and the protagonists were always Black teenage girls. All of the group discussions were audiotaped and each participant was encouraged to maintain a journal to record connections to the text and personal reactions to anything happening in their lives that we needed to discuss during the “Let it out and let it go” session. This 15-minute debriefing session at the beginning of each meeting was established after the girls would arrive each week full of information they wanted to share with the group before we began discussing the book. It was during these debriefing sessions that the girls really began to assess sociopolitical issues related to race, sex, and class. As I transcribed the discussions and coded the journals, transformative themes emerged. The issues surrounding the concept of colorism and the girls’ ability to critically articulate colorism’s impact on their lives compelled me to write this article.

The data were analyzed using critical race methodology as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). In this case, the counter narratives focused on the intraracism that occurs within the Black community and are used as a tool for liberation and conscientization (Freire, 2006). As a methodological tool, counter narratives construct stories “out of the historical, socio-cultural and political realities...and give the readers a context for understanding the way inequity manifests in policy, practice, and people’s experiences” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. xi).

As we approached the final months of meetings, after having been together for three years, we started to discuss the impact the books and the group meetings had on our lives. The GIRLS Club members began to critically comprehend the transformative effect the books had on their development during their middle school years as Black females. Critical race methodology recognizes the intersectionality between race, gender, and class and how it affects people of color (Golden, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It also recognizes the power of counter narratives in

uncovering, evaluating, and challenging the master narratives. Creating the counter narrative, included using the critical lens of intersectionality (race, sex, and class), and the experiences of the adolescent Black girls to examine the themes of societal negative messages, redefining beauty, and increasing self-esteem by using voice. In addition, existing literature and related readings (including adolescent literature) on colorism in the Black community and its impact on Black females is explored. And finally, I draw on my own professional and personal experiences as they relate to colorism. What follows is a composite counter narrative (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002), offering both biographical and autobiographical analysis situated in sociopolitical and historical content of colorism. These various forms of data were analyzed and then compiled to create composite characters who help bring life to the counter narrative.

Counter Narrative

Solórzano and Bernal (2001) describe counter narratives' ability to build unity and sense of community by "putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice" and "open[ing] new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society" (pp. 327-328). Equally as important, counter narratives demonstrate the power of combining narrative and cultural realities in creating a "world that is richer than either the [narrative] or the reality alone" (p. 328). The counter narrative begins with Dr. Parker (Dr. P) and four 8th grade Black girls convening for their weekly book discussion meetings. The group members included: Wilma, a spirited, precocious leader; Melissa, a socially-conscious rebel; Samantha, the spontaneous spunky comedian of the group; and Ava, the shy, reserved and distanced member.

Dr. P: Well girls, we are approaching our last months together. I would love to spend the next few meetings looking back over our time together and discussing the impact the adolescent literature and the group discussions have had on our lives. You all have come such a long way from the first meeting back in sixth grade. Remember the first meeting when you all would only say whether you liked the book or not! Now look at you. The way you critically examine and question what you read and see is very impressive. You have learned to see the power of language and are able to not only read the words, but you have learned to read the world (Freire, 2006). Let's take that transforming power to set goals for what you want for your next experiences in school and in life.

Wilma: I know one thing I would like to see continue. Dr. P, you were the first person to give us choices about what we read. We never got to read books of girls who looked like us. It definitely makes a difference in motivating us to want to read (Gay, 2010). I want to keep having choices! But not just books with characters who are Black girls, but books that depict Black girls in a positive light whose experiences reflect our own and validate our voice. Not just stereotyping.

Dr. P: *Wilma, can you elaborate on that for me. What do you mean by stereotyping?*

Samantha: *I know what she means. For example, can we see a dark-skinned girl with braids, but without the big butt, wide hips, big lips and a baby on her hip!*

There is a roar of laughter in the room and all the girls nod their heads in agreement. This example sparks a lively conversation about how the literature that they read throughout the year portrayed, both positively and negatively, who they are.

Dr. P: *That is one of the goals of critical literacy, right. You want to question what the author is trying to say and how what she is saying positions you as a reader (Gopalakrishnan, 2011). When done well, it has assisted us in engaging in intense dialogue about controversial social issues that are relevant to your lives (Elliott & Dupuis, 2002).*

Samantha: *That's true. I saw myself through the characters sometimes, like when Feni, in The Dear One (Woodson, 1991) had to share her room with 15 year old, pregnant Rebecca. Feni was so angry at first when her mom agreed to let her friend's daughter live with them. When my sister got pregnant at 16 I felt angry too. For different reasons (my mom just became angry all the time and my sister was the reason), but I still could relate to Feni in a lot of ways.*

Dr. P: *I am glad you all are finding ways to connect and critically examine the literature. As we wrap up today, I have an assignment for you for our next meeting. I want you to go through your journal entries, your sticky notes and highlights in all of your books, and read over your discussion notes. Then pick at least five passages or topics that really resonate with you for some reason. Be prepared to discuss which passages you chose and why you chose them.*

As the girls arrived the following week they could not wait to get started.

Ava: *Dr. P, we have been discussing this all week long...at lunch, between classes, during PE. We could not believe how many of the same passages we chose. We really need to talk!*

Dr. P: *I am excited to hear. Grab a snack and let's get started right away.*

Wilma: *We noticed that all of the books that we read had some passages describing somebody's skin color. Nobody liked to be called dark-skinned or black. Look here in The Skin I'm In (Flake, 1998) when Miss Saunders the new English teacher tells Maleeka her black skin is beautiful. John-John says, "I don't see no pretty, just a whole lotta black." She was always getting teased or bullied because of her dark skin. Then here on page four she says "They don't say nothing about the fact that I'm a math whiz...or that I got a good memory and never forget one single, solitary thing that I read. They only see what they see, and they don't seem to like what they see much" (pp. 4-5).*

Dr. P: *That is quite interesting and sad for Maleeka and other girls like her. She did not always hate her skin. Listen, “I didn’t used to mind being this color. I don’t get it. I think I’m kind of nice-looking. Why don’t other people see what I see?”* (Flake, 1998, pp. 41-42). *What do you think happened?*

Melissa: *Peers! Society!* (Tummala-Narra, 2007). *She even says that the kids started teasing her about her skin color.*

Of all the girls, Melissa was the most vocal about sociopolitical realities when it came to race, sex and class. She was aware and capable of naming the oppressions that exists and articulating the way it disempowers her and others like her (Freire, 2006). Through the years together Dr. P has come to depend on Melissa’s wisdom in getting the other girls to a place of “enlightenment” regarding many of the social justice issues that had been addressed.

Melissa: *You know, we let people tell us what and how we should feel all the time.*

Dr. P was intrigued by where Melissa was going with her thinking.

Dr. P: *Tell us what you mean, Melissa. There are researchers, like me, who focus on this very issue that you speak about* (Robinson & Ward, 1995).

Melissa: *Well, I know when I look in magazines or watch TV the ads are always telling us what we need to buy to look beautiful. And there are always skinny White girls or skinny light-skinned Black girls. They think just because they put a really light brown face on the cover then they did something for the Black people to get us to buy their stuff. I don’t look like any of those girls. Does that mean I am not beautiful? Or to be beautiful I need to look like them?*

Samantha: *Yeah, that’s true! How do they tell us what is beautiful? How do they get the power to tell us that our kinky hair, big noses, thick lips and curvy hips are unattractive or wrong in some way? Remember in the book Crystal by Walter Dean Myers (1987) when she was modeling for that photographer for the first time and her agent Loretta said...wait let me look it up. Here it is on page 6. Loretta says: “Honey, you’re so beautiful and fresh that he doesn’t see you as Black. Also your eyes are a little Asian I think he sees you as more exotic than anything else.” And look at page 8. When the photographer came in to start shooting he says “One of your parents White?”* (Myers, 1987, p. 8).

Ava: *Oh look, I marked a passage from Money Hungry (2001) that’s almost the same. Raspberry, the main character, describes her friend Mia. “Her eyebrows are beautiful, though, just like her slanty eyes, and long, thick lashes. Half the time, people can’t figure out what race she is. And they’re always telling her how exotic she looks...”* (p. 37).

Wilma: *What this says to me is you have to have light skin, “good hair,” thin nose and lips. In other words, not have any African features.*

Melissa: *That would leave me out!*

Dr. P: *That would leave us all out! There have been studies that determine that dark-skinned teenage girls are more likely to have lower grades and have higher dropout rates (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). Also some studies show that dark-skinned Black girls have self-esteem and identity issues related to their skin color (Thompson & Keith, 2001; Porter, 1991).*

All of the girls look down at their arms and then around at each other. All of the group members' complexions ranged from medium brown to very dark brown. They felt an unspoken kinship, a solidarity that was palpable.

Samantha: *At least we have Michelle Obama! She is a beautiful, smart, and brown-skinned sista. You gotta love that!*

Dr. P: *And I do! She is a wonderful role model. Do you think skin color matters?*

Wilma: *Yes, even though it shouldn't matter. Discrimination is a big factor.*

Samantha: *Honestly, I have to say, it does even though it should not. Skin color can get you a job, car, and any other "foot in the door" opportunities (Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2002; Hughes & Hertel, 1990). You get treated differently.*

Ava: *No, we are all equal regardless of our skin color. In the end, we all have the same color blood. A person should not be defined by appearance, but by their character.*

Samantha: *You sound like Martin Luther King, Jr.*

The girls all laugh and this lightens the moment.

Melissa: *For real, though. In society it does matter, even though it shouldn't. Think about how many times you are called a name or you call someone a name based on their skin color. Think about all the ball players and Black male Hollywood stars. They either have White wives or Black wives who looks half White (Bone & Cash, 1992; Huges & Hertel, 1990). That is real.*

Samantha: *I even see it in my family. My auntie has two daughters. One is light-skinned and the other one has dark brown skin. Ashley, the one with light complexion, gets treated better. She always gets her way. It is so obvious! I always feel so sorry for my cousin, Lauren. She does not get the same treatment. It's kind of sad that we do it to our own people.*

Dr. P: *Do you know what that is called, Samantha... internalized racism, which happens when we as people of color define each other based on the White Euro-centric system of rules and thinking (Jones, 2000; Tatum, 1992). We are doing to each other what the Europeans did to us for hundreds of years. The standard of beauty is socially constructed. In other words, people in power make the decisions of how beauty is defined and we begin to believe it. If you are in certain countries*

in Africa, women are put in huts for a few months before the wedding and are fed rich creamy milk to fatten up. This is the sign of wealth and beauty. In that society beauty is defined very differently than ours. Beauty in our country is racially defined. Eurocentric beauty is so entrenched in the culture that it appears normal, so we, as black women, don't really question it. We just believe that that is just the way it is. We have internalized this definition of beauty (Tummala-Narra, 2007). So let me ask you this, what is your personal definition of beauty? Think about it and I will give you three minutes to jot down anything that comes to mind.

Dr. P: *Okay girls; let's share our answers out loud.*

Samantha: *Ok, if we are being honest here, I must admit I have just learned that I am an "internalized racist!" I wrote weave, light-skinned, tall and skinny. I know it sounds bad. At least I am now thinking and questioning my definition.*

Ava: *Well, I'm not much better. I wrote when your hair and nails are done, having straight long hair, and when your make-up is on.*

Melissa: *Are you all serious? Okay, sorry. I guess I appreciate the honesty, but we really need to keep talking about this. I think beauty is how you see yourself, not how others define you. I don't want to be a part of the problem of internalized racism. Me and my brown face and natural 'fro are doing just fine!*

Wilma: *I wrote beauty is within and how you take care of yourself. I guess I am somewhere in the middle on this issue. I am not as Eurocentric in my thoughts on beauty as Samantha and Ava, but I am not so "fight the power" like Melissa either.*

Dr. P wondered how these definitions of beauty aligned with their journals the first week of group meetings when she asked how much they loved themselves (Baxley & Boston, 2009).

Dr. P: *Why do you think our definitions of beauty are so different?*

Melissa: *Because as dark-skinned girls we have been brainwashed. We start believing that we are not as pretty. Look at all of us here. None of us are light-skinned, but I think we are all beautiful (Golden, 2004; Russell et al., 1992).*

Samantha: *Black is beautiful, baby!*

Dr. P: *Okay, then let me ask you all this. If you could change just one thing about yourself, would you? If so, what would it be?*

Dr. P was not surprised to hear all of the members chose to change a part of themselves that was directly associated with colorism.

Wilma: *Smaller hips and a maybe longer hair.*

Samantha: *That was two things. Dr. P said just one thing. I would definitely change my nose. It is too wide.*

Ava: *I would like to be lighter because people always call me names like darky, charcoal and blurple.*

Melissa: *Blurple. What is that?*

Ava: *It means I am so dark that I am a combination of blue and purple. My momma even calls me names. It is very hurtful. I try to laugh it off, like it is not a big deal. Sometimes I even say it back to people. I don't know if they feel the same pain and are hiding it too. When my momma is angry she says "bring your crispy butt over here right now."*

And with a sad smile, Ava looks at Dr. P and slowly lowers her head toward the floor. Dr. P can't help but wonder if this contributes to Ava's quiet disposition and her uncanny ability to disappear within herself.

Dr. P: *I am so sorry that you have to go through that, Ava. You are not alone. I am reading a book by Marita Golden called Don't Play in the Sun (2004). It's a book about Ms. Golden's life growing up and dealing with color complex, which is another name for colorism. She describes one summer afternoon when she was young her mother shouts for her and says "Come on in the house—it's too hot to be playing out here. I've told you don't play in the sun. You're going to have to get a light-skinned husband for the sake of your children as it is" (Golden, 2004, p. 4). We need to find ways to empower ourselves and support each other. We have to learn to use language that builds character and self-worth. I have an assignment for you, Ava. This week, I want you to write an unsent letter to your mom. An unsent letter is written to get your feelings and thoughts out, but you don't have to actually send the letter to the person. It is a way to recognize the oppressive force in your way and gain some power over it. Bring it in next week and you can share it to the group, read it to me as if I were your mom, or just keep it to yourself. Whatever you feel comfortable doing is fine.*

Ava: *Okay, Dr. P. That sounds like something I would like to do.*

Dr. P: *Excellent. If anybody else wants to work on an original piece, unsent letters, raps, poems, drawings, or creative writing based on what we are discussing that would be great. We will take some time to share what you have come up with during our next meeting. Before you leave, you know I have an activity for you to work on. I am giving you all a slip of paper with a phrase on it. You are responsible for finding out what that phrase means and how it relates to colorism. Everyone has a different phrase so you will have to explain it to the rest of the group during the next meeting. This was a great session, ladies. Have a great week and see you next Wednesday.*

The following week the girls were anxious to share what they found on their assigned phrase.

Dr. P: *Okay ladies. Who is going first?*

Wilma: *I will. My phrase was blue-veined society. I was so mad when I found out what this was. This was a group of rich Black people, most of them were descendants of African slave women and White slave owners, who had strict rules about who could join their social clubs. They would ask people to hold up the inside of their arms. If you were light enough to see the veins under the skin then you were able to join the club (Golden, 2004; Thompson & Keith, 2001).*

Samantha: *Well, ain't no blue-veiners in here!*

All of the girls held up their arms, laughed and then high-five each other.

Samantha: *Okay, I'll go next. My phrases are the brown bag and brown door test. You all are not going to believe this. And this was going on inside our churches, too! When you walked into a church or organization a member would stand at the door with a brown paper bag, if your skin was darker than the bag you were shown the door (Kerr, 2006; Russell et al., 1992). You couldn't even come in! Another test they had in the church was the brown door test. The members of the church would paint the inside of the front door a light brown and if your skin was darker than that...well you all know the drill now. Don't let the door hit you where the good Lord split you! Amen. Wasn't that very Christian-like of them!*

The girls roared in laughter.

Ava: *Okay, okay. I'm next. My phrase goes perfectly after Samantha's. My phrase was the comb test. The churches would actually have a comb on a string hung on the door at the entrance of the church and the people would line up as members of the church used the comb to judge whether their hair was "good enough" to be a part of the church. They would literally comb your hair and if the comb got stuck in your kinky hair you were asked to leave. They didn't want any nappy heads up in their church (Russell et al., 1992).*

Melissa: *I guess that would leave me out! You know we are laughing, but this is serious. We have things similar to this going on right now. First let me share my phrase and then I will give you an example of it today. My phrase was the color tax. What this means is if a brother in a fraternity brought a date to a party he had to pay an admission fee based on his date's skin color. The darker the girl was, the more the brother had to pay at the door! So you know these brothers were looking for the lightest, brightest, closest to whitest girls they could find. Now think about the sororities and fraternities today. There are still complexion issues with membership today? My mom told me about a movie made by Spike Lee called School Daze*

(1988) in the 80s. She said it was one of the first times that Black people started talking about colorism in public.

Dr. P: Yes, it was. Some critics were not very happy with Spike because they thought he was “airing our dirty laundry” for Whites to see. But other people advocated for Spike and said it was about time we dealt with this issue in public instead of it being the “elephant in the room.” I’m glad you brought that up. If we look back in history, the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement was one of the most celebrated times to be Black. The Movement encouraged racial consciousness and Black pride and power. This time in history is when the phrase “Black is beautiful” was fashioned (Wilder, 2009). Unfortunately, this way of thinking and behaving disappeared a great deal after the Jim Crow Laws were removed. Also, I don’t know if you all watched Chris Rock’s documentary called *Good Hair* (2009), but it deals with colorism issues as well. If you get a chance, you should watch it because I think you all will get something out of it after our conversations. Thanks for taking the time to do your research. It is important for us to know the history of color complex because it can empower us to make changes in our actions. I think we have all learned from each other and we now need to begin to focus on what we can do to continue to transform ourselves and not be a part of what Golden calls “a form of intraracial genocide” (2004, p. 47).

Ava: Dr. P, I want to share with you how I empowered myself this week. First, I wrote my unsent letter, which I would like to share with you all in a minute. After I read it, I cried and then I said to myself. “Now what are you going to do?” At first, I didn’t have an answer. Then I decided to speak up for myself. I went to the kitchen and told my mom that I wanted to read something to her. We sat down at the table and then I read my letter to her. We both started crying. She told me she was so sorry and she knew what I felt because she was called names about her dark complexion by her dad all of her life. It was such a part of her childhood; she never realized that she was doing the same thing to me. She also told me during her teenage years she considered bleaching her skin to make it lighter (Hall, 1995). Instead of being angry with my mom, I felt sorry for her. Having the conversation was helpful to both of us. During the weekend my older cousin came over to our house and right away called me “charcoal” and laughed. For the first time, my mom stood up for me. She said “don’t call my baby no negative names about her beautiful brown skin” and then she looked at me and winked. It felt like a heavy brick was lifted off of my chest. So I am telling you all this, if someone calls you a name and you do not like it, say something. If you hear someone calling another person a name, say something. If you catch yourself calling someone a negative name based on skin complexion, say something to yourself! We can do this girls! It can start with us in this room, right now.

Melissa: *Wow, look at you Ava. Go girl! You can't be out-doing me now. I am the radical one!*

Ava: *Nobody can out "radical" you, Melissa. But for the first time I really get what you have been saying for the last two years! Let me read my letter to you all.*

Momma,

Why do you always call me names about my dark skin? I came from you. Everybody says I look and act just like you and everything about me, including my skin color came from you. You didn't like your skin color when you were my age? You make me feel dirty and bad. It makes me feel like I disappoint you. I want to feel good about myself. It is hard enough trying to fit in at school. I don't need to come home feeling like it's better to be at school. I used to like my skin. Now I wish I could change it. Why do people care so much? Why does it matter so much? How come I cannot be dark and pretty. I wish I had the answers. Do you know why?

Love, Ava

Not a dry eye in the room. Everyone was deeply touched by Ava's letter and they felt her pain, but were blissfully elated for her breakthrough.

Melissa: *Okay, stop your crying. Throughout these years together Dr. P always talked about finding voice and the need for us to define ourselves. Well, I wrote a poem where I attempted to give the sisterhood a voice...one that was designed and defined by us. Here goes...*

Skin, Skin, Skin.

My light skinned sistahs, why you hate on me?

Why can't you let my chocolate skin just be;

Our differences, red, yellow, brown, black are not that great

The white man has taught you the power to hate.

Your skin...your kin...we all fall short and sin;

If we love what is on the inside, we can all win.

Let's define African Beauty,

Defending the sistahhood is our duty.

Stand up Brown sistah and be proud;

Your beautiful cocoa skin will stand out in the crowd.

Don't let nobody define who you are;

Your black skin makes you a superstar.

Brown, Carmel, Tan, or Black;

Let's cut out the colorism and get back on track.

A standing ovation and a roar of cheers filled the room.

Dr. P: *I am so moved by you all right now. You girls Rock! Continue to use your voice. We can knock down these colorism walls, one brick at a time.*

Conclusion

Counter narratives allowed me to tell the story of dark-skinned adolescent girls and their need to redefine European beauty, combat societal negative images and messages (which often come from their own community) regarding their complexion, and ultimately to become empowered and moved to transformative action. Passages from the multicultural literature triggered a series of discussions that led to the uncovering of important issues in the Black community surrounding beauty and acceptance. It was much more common to find examples of colorism in the young adult literature that further marginalized the females in the literacy group, than excerpts that empowered them. Authors, especially Black women, educators, and parents need to recognize the power of literature and the importance of teaching adolescents to read text critically. Having the girls engage in self-reflection is a first step to embrace their African-influenced features and counter hegemonic sociopolitical constructs that attempt to define who they are and the beauty that lies within each of them.

The impact of colorism in society is well documented and is an important factor in opportunities and outcomes for dark-skinned Black females. Light skin color that is admired and sought after is symptomatic of the postcolonial self-hatred in the Black community. The effects of internalized racism have grave consequences on the psyche and self-worth of adolescent Black girls. As a community, we must teach Black youth to critically examine racially-biased images from popular culture (media, literature, and music) that perpetuate color stratification. Redefining beauty, self-love and mental liberation are essential to remedying postcolonial outcomes of colorism.

References

- Bone, S., & Cash, T. F. (1992). Black beauty: Skin color and body images among African American college women. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, 874-888.
- Delgado, R. (1988/1989). Storytelling for oppositionist and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87, 2411-2441.
- Elliott, J. B., & Dupuis, M. M. (2002). *Young adult literacy in the classroom: Reading it, teaching it, loving it*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Etter-Lewis, G. (1997). Black women in academia: Teaching/administrating inside the sacred grove. In L. Benjamin (Ed.), *Black women in the academy: Promises and perils* (pp. 81- 90). Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Flake, S. G. (2001). *Money hungry*. New York: Jump at the Sun.
- Flake, S. G. (1998). *The skin I'm in*. New York: Jump at the Sun.
- Freire, P. (2006). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Revised). New York: Continuum.
- Golden, M. (2004). *Don't play in the sun: One woman's journey through the color complex*. New York: Doubleday.
- Gopalakrishnan, A. (2011). *Multicultural children's literature: A critical issues approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Hall, R. (1995). The bleaching syndrome: African Americans' response to cultural domination vis-à-vis skin color. *Journal of Black Studies*, 26(2), 172-184.
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(4), 389-414.
- Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Moor-Thomas, C. (2001). Empowering African-American adolescent females. *Professional School Counseling*, 5, 19-27.
- Hughes, M., & Hertel, B. R. (1990). The significance of color remains: A study of life changes, mate selection, and ethnic consciousness among Black Americans. *Social Forces*, 68(4), 1105-1120.
- Hunter, M. L. (2005). *Race, gender, and the politics of skin tone*. New York: Routledge.
- Hunter, M. L. (2002). "If you're light you're alright": Light skin color as social capital for women of color. *Gender & Society*, 16(2), 175-193.
- Jones, C. (2000). Levels of racism: A theoretical framework and a gardener's tale. *American Journal of Public Health*, 90(8), 1212-1215.
- Kerr, A. E. (2006). *The paper bag principle*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 17-36). New York: Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). They're trying to wash us away: The adolescence of Critical Race Theory in education. In A. D. Dixson & C. K. Rousseau (Eds.), *Critical Race Theory in education: All God's children got a song* (pp. v-xiii). New York: Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F., IV. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47-68.
- McKay, N. Y. (1997). A troubled peace: Black women in the halls of the White academy. In L. Benjamin (Ed.), *Black women in the academy: Promises and perils* (pp. 11-22). Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Myers, W. D. (1987). *Crystal*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Pollard, D. S. (2006). Women of color and research: A historical and contemporary context. In D. S. Pollard & O. M. Welch (Eds.), *From center to margins: The importance of self-definition in research* (pp. 7-19). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Porter, C. (1991). Social reasons for skin tone preferences of Black school-age children. *Journal of American Orthopsychiatry Association*, 61, 149-154.
- Robinson, T. L., & Ward, J. V. (1995). African American adolescents and skin color. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 21(3), 256-274.
- Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. (1992). *The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York: Random House.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Bernal, D. D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and latcrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in urban context. *Urban Education*, 36(3), 308-342.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2009). In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 131-147). New York: Routledge.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.
- Tatum, B. D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial

- identity theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1).
- Thompson, M. S., & Keith, V. M. (2001). The blacker the berry: Gender, skin tone, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. *Gender & Society*, 15(3), 336-357.
- Tummala-Narra, P. (2007). Skin color and the therapeutic relationship. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 24(2), 255-270.
- Vargas, S. R. L. (2003). Critical Race Theory in education: Theory, praxis and recommendations. In G. R. Lopez & L. Parker (Eds.), *Interrogating racism in qualitative research methodology* (pp. 1-18). New York: Peter Lang
- Wade, T. J., & Bielitz, S. (2005). The differential effect of skin color on attractiveness, personality evaluations, and perceived life success of African Americans. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 31(3), 215-236.
- Wilder, J. (2009). Revisiting "color names and color notions": A contemporary examination of the language and attitudes of skin color among young black women. *Journal of Black Studies*, 41(1), 184-206.
- Williams-Burns, W. (1980). Self-esteem and skin color perception of advantaged Afro-American children. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 49(4), 385-397.
- Woodson, J. (1991). *The dear one*. New York: Penguin Group.

Traci Baxley is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum, Culture and Educational Inquiry of the College of Education at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida.