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The Influence of Colorism and Hair Texture Bias on the Professional and Social Lives of Black Women Student Affairs Professionals

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THE INFLUENCE OF COLORISM AND HAIR TEXTURE BIAS ON THE PROFESSIONAL AND SOCIAL LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

The School of Education

by

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This dissertation is for my nieces, C’Briannah, Cristina, Cayla and Crystal. C’Briannah and Cristina are the motivation behind my work with issues related to colorism. You both are beautiful, important, needed, and loved.
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ABSTRACT

“If it was so honorable and glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned people among us had so much prestige?” Zora Neal Hurston (1942) understood the privilege and oppression associated with colorism. “Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin” (Burke, 2008, p. 17). Colorism is the systematic preference for lighter skin tones over darker tones and stems from larger racial systems impacting education, income, marriageability, job placement, housing and social status for Black Americans (Hunter, 2005). The systematic privileging of light skin over dark skin advocates a hierarchy of skin tones, whereas lighter tones are positioned at the top, which impacts the roles Black Americans play within their own social group and in the larger US consciousness. Other physical characteristics, including facial features, weight, and hair texture also serve as gatekeepers; granting or denying access based on these features.

In recent years, Black women have been encouraged to big chop and go natural, as to wear their natural hair curl pattern without chemicals and extensions. This is evidenced in the countless videos, memes, blogs, and vlogs via social media outlets, which may present challenges for Black women who wish to rid themselves of the mental enslavement Eurocentric beauty ideals have placed on their former crowns of glory, their hair, when entering professional arenas as well as social encounters. Incorporating Black hair politics allows for further exploration of the role aesthetics plays in the experiences of Black women socially and professionally. Skin tone bias has historical underpinnings but is still relevant in today’s society and is pervasive in the modern workplace, affecting Black Americans’ job mobility and professional experiences (Harrison, 2010), while simultaneously influencing the social lives of
Black women. The purpose of the proposed study is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs professionals.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In a place never originally intended for women (Thelin, 2004), women have continued to excel in higher education leadership and student affairs administration and have become leading pioneers in many institutions of higher learning today (Henry, 2010). Broadly, Student Affairs administration is leadership and the day-to-day management of various functional areas dedicated specifically to the holistic development of undergraduate and graduate students outside of the classroom (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Most higher education professionals prepare for advancement into student affairs administration by completing a master's or doctoral degree and gaining work experience in a student services office at the collegiate level. The responsibilities of these individuals vary considerably depending on the type of institution (four-year or two-year, research intensive or emphasis on teaching, predominately White institution or historical Black college or university, etc.), the type of position (entry-level, mid-level, or senior level), and the functional area.

There are a myriad of functional areas in which student affairs professionals can opt to serve including, academic advising; admissions; assessment, research, and program evaluation; athletics; campus safety; career development; student unions; community service and service learning; health and wellness; international student services; judicial affairs; leadership programs; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student services; multicultural student services; orientation and new student programs; recreation and fitness programs; religious programs and services; registration services; and residence life and housing (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Given the limited presence of Black women in student affairs positions, there is very little data on the actual number of women that occupy these positions. Perhaps the explanation for this is, “the opportunity to study women administrators in numbers and content similar to men is still not available; and professional organizations in higher education do not maintain statistical data
on women of ethnic groups” (Rusher, 1996, p. 1). This research will add to the limited body of knowledge exploring the experiences of Black female Student Affairs Professionals. Although Black women have taken strides from being denied entrance into higher education institutions to serving in presidential roles, their narratives have been omitted or understudied in the literature.

Despite noteworthy strides, Black women still experience marginalization in higher education settings and hit glass ceilings when attempting to reach upward mobility in their careers (Cook, 2012; Holmes, 2003). Undoubtedly, race and gender can speak to some of the overarching reasons Black women experience marginalization and an unwelcoming work environment in Higher Education (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Holmes (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with 12 Black women to explore their experiences as higher education administrators at various predominately White institutions. In regards to race and gender, this study revealed Black women experienced an inability to “establish strong relationships with White colleagues, experienced alienation and isolation, performed unusual amounts of service … and sometimes imposed unnecessary rules and restrictions upon themselves in an attempt to debunk negative stereotypes and images” (Holmes, 2003, p. 61). In order to better understand various factors that contribute to an unwelcoming work environment for Black women, the researcher will explore if physical appearance; specifically skin tone and hair texture are influencing elements.

Historically, skin tone was a factor for determining job placement. Lighter skinned slaves were assigned intelligent tasks in the home, while darker skinned slaves were relegated to heavy laborious chores primarily in the fields (Goering, 1972; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2002; Keith & Herring, 1991). Dividing job responsibilities based on skin tone was an unfair and demeaning separation tactic that worked to internalize the disparities amongst Black people.
(Kerr, 2005). Similarly, later research has shown unfavorable hiring practices and skin tone discrimination in the workplace for Black Americans (Harrison, 2009 & Sims, 2009); however, there is a gap in research that addresses these issues for Black women working in the higher education professional setting.

Due to intersecting systems of oppression, Black women fall prey to multiple layers of discrimination as a result of their dual minority status, as Black and female. As a result, “African American women with darker skin are oppressed on the basis of both race and nonconformity with the racist feminine beauty ideal” (Perry, Pullen, & Oser, 2012, p. 5). In a society where White culture defines beauty reflective of the majority, introduces stereotypes unfit for the minority, and delineates Blackness as their property, Black women often find that they must straddle the muddy abyss of what it means to be a Black woman in the United States and whom they should resemble (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Harris (1995), a critical race theorist, asserted, the

valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste…the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset—one that whites sought to protect and those who passed sought to attain, by fraud if necessary. (p. 277).

The value of white and light maintains superior status and is embedded in the United States’ culture as seen with the Rule of Hypodescent, which will be discussed in Chapter II.

Skin tone bias and other forms of discrimination based on physical features, only distances Black women from the dominant group, and make them more susceptible to bias-related incidents. Since the identities and experiences of Black and White females differ, problems surface when a member of the minoritized group is treated in a negative way due to those differences (Perry & Oser, 2013; Thompson & Keith, 2009). Some issues may include diminished self-worth, low confidence levels, and possibly being the target of assumptions and
prejudices based on looks including skin complexion, hair texture, and size. According to the Social Identity Theory, as authored by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, people desire a need for self-worth and self-esteem. This theory explains why people are more inclined to react positively to those in the in-group and discriminate against those in the out-group.

Social Identity Theory “provides a basis for why both whites and blacks might treat lighter-complexioned blacks better than darker blacks” (Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2007). Unfortunately, darker skin and highly textured, curly, and coily natural hair (hair free from chemical processing and extensions), are considered attributes of the out-group. These characteristics do not fit the European standard of beauty and are not widely accepted or appreciated in majority White spaces (Morrison, 1990). With light skin and European features associated with intelligence and niceness, and dark skin and other African features associated with aggression and inferiority (Kerr, 2005) what is the reality for the dark skinned Black woman who chooses to display her natural hair curl pattern, in an environment that does not generally revere this as a standard of beauty?

The purpose of this study is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Professionals. Focusing on the narratives of Black women professionals, this research explores how colorism and hair texture bias functions as forms of oppression and resistance, by limiting Black women’s access to opportunities. The lived experiences of Black women and their experiences with skin tone bias and hair texture preference will add to the body of color consciousness literature. Black Feminist Thought will be used as a theoretical framework to interpret the meaning participants attribute to colorism and hair texture bias within their professional and social lives.
Background of the Problem

The United States deep-rooted history related to slave relations was manifested in the ill treatment of individuals with darker skin, and unfortunately, still persists today. To further complicate race and gender differences, skin complexion influences hiring practices, career attainment, and job satisfaction in positions seen in the workforce and corporate America (Harrison, 2010; Hunter, 2005). This form of color-based discrimination works negatively against darker-skinned people of color. Darker skin has been unfairly associated with “savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority” while light skin is associated with “civility, rationality, beauty and superiority” (Hunter, 2005, p. 2). These ideations currently present complications for Black people in United States. The United States’ predominately two-tiered racial structure – White and Black – has socio-historical implications that associate Black people with the former listed characteristics and White people with the latter (Hunter, 2005). Understanding this historical context will aid in providing a general understanding of the philosophical underpinnings related to how colorism may influence work experiences for Black women in student affairs and provide inferences as to how lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Black women navigate these ideals.

It is important to note that racism is the broader, structural issue and by studying colorism, it is not the intent of the researcher to diminish or discredit the importance of dichotomous Black and White racism. However, colorism is another racialized problem that needs attention because of the inadequate amount of scholarship that has examined this issue. “The connection between racism and colorism is evidenced in the fact that colorism would likely not exist without racism, because colorism rests on the privileging of whiteness in terms of phenotype, aesthetics, and culture. However, it is also useful to see these two processes as
distinct because people of color may experience racism in different ways depending on the color of their skin” (Hunter, 2002, p. 176). These implications have negatively impacted the ways in which Americans view darker-skinned minorities and simultaneously have helped to cap career advancement and social opportunities for these individuals.

**Statement of the Problem**

Colorism is a social and political system set to unfairly grant access and privilege to light complexions while unethically denying opportunities to people of color with darker skin. Colorism and hair texture bias should be studied because “complexion discrimination is the implosion of racism-the internalization of slavery and Jim Crowism-wherein the profound and enduring residue of black social quarantine resides” (Kerr, 2005, p. 273). Privileging light complexions over darker hues and hair textures that are closer to resembling European than African hair only perpetuates historic notions of oppression and separation.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Professionals. This study will examine Black women’s encounters with colorism and subsequent modes of resistance. The researcher is interested in the narratives of Black women at a predominately White institution in Louisiana. Given Louisiana’s unique history with a large mulatto and creole population, learning the stories of these women’s experiences are critical in understanding a general view of how complexion consciousness and hair texture bias are presently perceived today among Black women in higher education in Louisiana. As a Black woman interested in student affairs administration, I am particularly interested in the experiences of women of color in student affairs administration. Black women’s experiences typically present more complexities than
White women and Black men; given that White women experience gendered discrimination, Black men may experience racism, but women of color experience both “gendered racism” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 173). The interaction of race, gender, class, and color will be explored to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women.

I will seek to explore the interaction of these categories, rather than the intersection, understanding that “categories such as race and gender do not act independently of one another but instead interrelate and are bound together and influenced by one another” (Wallace et al., 2011, p. 1315). This study will include a theoretical framework to help situate the literature and the study, historical perspective to provide context, review of literature to better understand the importance of exploring colorism and hair texture bias, as well as note the gaps in literature that will welcome my scholarly contribution to the discourse, and the methods to explain the process of understanding the narratives of Black women professionals’ lived experiences.

**Significance of the Study**

Studying colorism and hair texture bias is significant in multiple ways. Colorism and hair texture bias have serious implications for hiring practices. Black women are being denied access to various opportunities because of their dual minority status, Black and female, and their physical characteristics also interject ways in which they may be denied access or given preferential treatment. For purposes of this study, the term *access* will refer primarily to career advancement and positive experiences professionally and socially. Since an increasing number of lawsuits have involved issues of colorism and bias toward physical appearance in the work setting (Harrison, 2010; Rosette & Dumas, 2007) studying colorism and hair texture preference brings awareness to possible oppressors and a voice to the oppressed (Bellinger, 2007; Robinson,
In addition, dark-skinned Black women are viewed as occupying the bottom rung of social and professional ladders (Snider, 2011) and this research will delve deeper into the potential impact of their social standing, their internalization of these issues, as well as help expose possible reasons for their displaced social standing.

This study is also significant in that it exposes Black women’s work experiences in higher education, specifically student affairs and their encounters with colorism and hair texture bias because there is a gap in the literature addressing these issues. With more Black women displaying their natural hair curl pattern and White America not viewing some hairstyles worn by Black women as professional (Bellinger, 2007), this complicates the social and professional atmosphere for Black women. Black women may experience negative micro-aggressive comments related to their hair or complexion that can create an uncomfortable work environment. Microaggressions are hard to address because they are often covert comments rooted in racial ignorance. This form of aggression constitutes “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicie, 2012, p. 186). The often asked and underappreciated question bi and multiracial people hear, “What are you?” or the unwelcomed comment directed toward educated Black people, “You don’t act like a typical Black person” are examples of microaggressions and microinvalidations that can make work environments uncomfortable.

If Black women are uncomfortable in their work environment, this may have a direct effect on the services and support they are able to show the students with whom they work. This in turn, may impact the retention of Black women professionals in student affairs, resulting in limited opportunities for students to seek mentors and administrators who look like them.
Ultimately, negative experiences at work may translate into an unpleasing environment for Black women at home and may consequently negatively impact the relationships these women have with their families. Black women’s physical appearance may also prevent them from receiving equitable professional development opportunities, mentors, unbiased supervision, and may also present complications in their dating and relationships (Hamilton, Goldsmith, & Darity, 2009; Hunter, 2002; Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008). Colorism and hair texture bias present challenges to Black women that may complicate their encounters in ways the dominant group may not experience.

Exploring colorism and hair texture bias provides a voice for Black women administrators because these issues are rarely discussed within a scholarly outlet. Colorism is often considered in regards to students, but not from the lens of the professional. In addition, the emotional and mental well-being of young Black girls and women regarding colorism and hair texture preference signal to academics and practitioners that intellectual and practical activism must happen to invoke change and help encourage positive and healthy attitudes regarding the self for Black females (Perry & Oser, 2012). Providing an opportunity for Black women professionals to share their narratives starts the conversation that may lead to practical changes.

**Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought**

Collins brought the Black feminist movement to the forefront by introducing Black Feminist Thought (2002). In a world where African American women’s voices are omitted from mainstream feminist literature and as a result are silenced, Collins provided an outlet to situate Black and other minoritized narratives and research by providing a safe place for Black women to freely discuss their varied experiences. Though situated as a double minority, the Black woman navigates her spaces very differently than White women, but more importantly actualizes
varied experiences among Black women. Black Feminist Thought has its roots in Afro-centric philosophy, feminist standpoint theory, sociocultural theory, and critical race theory, as well as postmodernism and the sociology of knowledge. Specifically, this theory “illustrates the everyday experiences of Black women and seeks to address issues of race, class, and gender as it affects the everyday lives of Black women” (Holmes, 2003, p. 50). As a result, Black Feminist Thought aligns well with the intentions of this study.

Collins addressed the interactions of race, class, and gender, as well as illuminated issues of color, as color is another identifier that influences the everyday lives of Black women and other women of color. Black Feminist Thought is a relevant and applicable theory because it addresses lived oppression from the standpoint of the Black woman and uses physical appearance as a vehicle to articulate shared experiences. This study uses Black Feminist Thought as a lens through which to examine how physical characteristics, skin color and hair texture in particular, influence experiences for Black women. As a result of absent minority perspectives from Western feminism, Black Feminist Thought emerged to provide an outlet with a political and cultural awareness lens for Black women to provide a broader sense of understanding of the spaces that Black women occupy in a predominantly White American society. Black Feminist Thought allows Black women to make sense of their oppression and inspires social and intellectual activism by encouraging Black women to become agents of change. Collins (2000) stated, “the overarching purpose of U.S. Black Feminist Thought is also to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it” (p. 22). Given this framework, Black Feminist Thought is an ideal theory to use when critiquing the dangers of a homogenous definition of beauty that does not allow for the Black aesthetic synonym.
Black Feminist Thought as a critical social theory tackles institutional practices set to oppress Black women as a unit (Collins, 2000; Stephens, D. P., & Phillips, R., 2005). Realizing that Black women as a group are oppressed within the United States, Black Feminist Thought understands Black women are not all oppressed by the same individual or institutions, are not oppressed in the same way, and may in fact, oppress other Black women (Collins, 2000). Colorism, the bias towards light, proves there are differences in oppression and that physical appearance, particularly skin tone and hair texture, heavily influence how women are oppressed and who has the privilege to oppress within the Black female community. “As a critical social theory, Black Feminist Thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p. 22). Collins (2000) defined intersectionality as “particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p. 18). I would like to encourage the reader to accept my use of interactions in lieu of intersections, as intersections implies one identity can be viewed in isolation. As a Black woman, I am very aware of my identity as a Black woman with a “safe” skin tone, and do not view these identities separately, as they shape my navigational position in society. From Collins, we learn that, “…Black women intellectuals best contribute to a Black women’s group standpoint by using their experiences as situated knowers” (Collins, 2000, p. 19); this further helps to articulate the use of Black Feminist Thought as a critical theoretical framework.

Gender equality is the foundation for the feminist movement. It is widely known that women are an oppressed people and historically viewed as inferior to men. However, with
intellectual women leaders such as Maria Stewart, Susan B. Anthony, Alice Paul, and Emily Murphy, Feminist Theory emerged to provide a voice for women. Feminist theory can be understood in three waves. The first wave, beginning in the late 19th and early 20th century, embarked on a journey to gain access and equal opportunities for women. This wave of feminism “arose in the context of industrial society and liberal politics but is connected to both the liberal women’s rights movement and early socialist feminism” (Three Waves of Feminism [TWF], 2005, p.1).

The second wave of feminism “refers mostly to the radical feminism of the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s… and was theoretically based on a combination of neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis” (TWF, 2005, p.7, 9). It was believed that patriarchy is characteristic of the bourgeois society and that sexual difference trumps race and class. In addition, due to the woman’s role in the family, women make up an unpaid socioeconomic class of their own as a result of their caretaking, childbearing and laboring in the home (TWF, 2005, p.7, 9). Priority given to gender over race is interesting given that many minorities associate themselves with their race first and gender second, i.e. Black woman. However, when you are a member of the majority, race can be omitted. Omission of the Black voice is the foundation for Black Feminist Thought.

Lastly, the third wave of feminism describes a somewhat fortunate group of feminists that had the “privileges that first- and second-wave feminists fought for, third-wave feminists generally see themselves as capable, strong, and assertive social agents” (TWF, 2005, p.15). Patricia Hill Collins would be considered a third-wave feminist. Understanding that feminist theory began with a common goal to provide justice for all women, and has developed in many
different ways throughout the years, it is important to examine exactly who fits the criteria for woman.

Collins (1986) organized U.S. Black Feminist Thought into three themes and six distinguishing features. The three overarching themes of Black Feminist Thought are: (1) the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation, (2) the interlocking nature of oppression, and (3) the importance of redefining culture. The meaning of self-definition and self-valuation discusses the “importance of black women's establishing positive individual and collective images; discovering their own perspective on their life circumstances; and applying their own standards of beauty, thought, and action” (King, 2002). Historically, White men gave the Black woman her identity. She was depicted as either the housekeeping Mammy, the aggressive Sapphire, or the hypersexual Jezebel (Bogle, 2002). Essentially White men controlled images for both Black women and White women.

Although both images were “…important to slavery’s continuation, controlling images of Black womanhood also functioned to mask social relations that affected all women” (Collins, 2002, p. 72). While the identity of the Black woman was controlled, the White woman’s identity was protected as “the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional family ideal, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Collins, 2002, p. 72). Race, class, gender and color are layers of oppression that suffocate the lived experiences of Black women. Lastly, the importance of redefining culture suggest that Black women should be aware of their history, culture, unique place in society, and actively work to redefine and create positive images of the Black woman and continuously uplift each other. It is important to further discuss the role of image and identity for the Black woman.
Although the Mammy and Jezebel depictions were introduced by dominant cultures, Black people play a role in perpetuating an image they were taught to internalize and imitate. Societal images highlighted through media help to inform young Black girls about the image they should ascribe to and it gives a clear message to Black women that their image is not welcomed or wanted. Media cannot take the full blame, as many ideals involving colorism are learned behaviors in the home (Wilder & Cain, 2011). In fact, Wilder and Cain found that Black ideals related to “color differences are learned, reinforced, and in some cases contested within families, ultimately shaping Black women’s perspectives and experiences with colorism” (2011, p. 577). An early feminist, Maria Stewart asked, “How long the fair daughters of Africa shall be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” (Collins, 2000, p. 1). She “challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women’s poverty” (Collins, 2000, p. 1). Black Feminist Thought critiques these various causes from the Black woman’s perspective.

For Collins (2000), Black Feminist Thought’s six distinguishing features: (1) acknowledge that Black feminism remains important because African American women constitute an oppressed group; (2) emerge from a tension linking experiences and ideas; (3) focus on the connections between U.S. Black women’s experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint; (4) recognizes the essential contributions of African-American women intellectuals; (5) accepts the significance of change; and (6) concerns its relationship to other projects in attain social justice. Collectively, these distinguishing features are important to Black Feminist Thought because they heavily impact the similar and divergent experiences among members of the Black community. Resting on the idea that Black feminism
materialized as a long awaited response to the intersections of oppression, subordination and alienation from Western feminist thought, U.S. Black feminism would soon become irrelevant if equality in its totality took an active form in United States. Realistically, it can be assumed that the Black feminist movement will remain embedded in American culture for a long time.

Black Feminist Thought is a critical social theory that extends to standpoint theory. Bowell (2011) made three claims regarding Standpoint View Theory: “knowledge is socially situated; marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized; research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized” (p. 1). When groups of people share the same status or cultural climate, they tend to also share the same experiences. These shared experiences then translate into a common understanding and set of knowledge related to the societal space they share. Collins (2000) added that Black women contribute to their standpoint by situating themselves as bodies of knowledge via lived experiences. One theme associated with Black women’s standpoint stems from the varied forms of struggle Black women endure and interconnecting oppressions. Being Black in a White dominated America lends itself to feelings of internalized inferiority. In addition, being a woman in a male-dominated society introduces another binary power struggle. Having two inferior labels, Black and woman creates a space for the standpoint view theory within Black Feminist Thought.

Catherine Harnois (2010) suggested that “black women’s subordinate racial and gender statuses facilitate their seeing the relationships among particular systems of oppression” (p. 71). Feminist standpoint theory brings together the shared experiences of women as a whole, leaving out exclusive experiences minority women share. Standpoint theory speaks to positionality
within society. Understanding there is not a predetermined formula that explains how Black women should experience navigating a White male-dominated society, Black feminist literature encompasses the works and experiences of the multiple Black women who share a wide range of standpoints.

Collins (1990) spoke to these varied experiences and highlighted the fact that although two women may be Black, their standpoints can be completely different depending on their socioeconomic status, skin complexion, hair texture, marital status, etc. Layers of identity help to develop standpoints that influence how people perceive the world and how the world perceives them. White women do not share the same standpoints or occupy the same spaces Black women occupy and thus are less qualified to speak to these familiarities. Issues related to racism and sexism are unique to women of color, leaving White women with one less power struggle to contend, thus emphasizing the hierarchy in oppression. Black women are subject to oppression by way of race, class, and gender. Though minority women’s experiences add depth to feminist theory, their stories are even more praised in Black Feminist Thought, Critical Social Theory and Black women’s standpoint view, especially given that these theoretical paradigms explicitly address the domination and power struggle minority women frequently face.

Power struggles and domination are evident philosophical underpinnings in Black Feminist Thought, as well. The dominant group establishes what is “normal” by the ongoing need to categorize a marginalized group. To keep power within the dominant group, labels were established to constantly remind minority groups of their social status and to thus, make them feel less valuable than the majority. A few years ago, Harnois (2011) recognized the works of Katie Cannon and made the following observation: “Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black
woman’s reality as a situation of struggle- a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed” (1985, p. 30). Collins (1990) suggested that in addition to Black women; other groups experience the effects of varied levels of domination in relation to their different religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and age. Because of these intersecting systems of oppression, depending on where one lies on the domination matrix, at any given time, someone can be both the oppressor and the oppressed simultaneously. The interlocking of power struggles creates multiple lenses in which power can be used eventually to the advantage of the White American man.

Black Feminist Thought is a theory that provides a self-organizing identity for Black women that have been collectively created by Black women. The recycled perpetuations of man-made identities ignore the lived experiences of Black women and make it difficult for Black women to prove their true identity. As an intellectual, Collins (2002) encouraged Black women to uncover an identity that accurately represents who the Black woman is, encircling what she values, while removing the thick mask that has been placed on her. While this is not to state that there is one collective identity to which all Black women subscribe, it does, however, recognize the unique and oftentimes shared experiences of Black women in society (Collins, 2002). As it relates to colorism, Black women are generally familiar with the concept and have either experienced some form of colorism or are familiar with someone who has, but the experience differs depending on the degree darkness or lightness of the skin. The color variation can either position someone on the outside of the margins or closer to the normalized middle.

The outsider-within standpoint is a common theme used by Black feminist writers to discuss and speak to the power dynamics imposed on Black women historically and today. Outsider-within refers to the notion that one can be afforded certain privileges, but not privy to
other privileges due to their dual identities, positions, or statuses (Collins, 2000). The outsider-within viewpoint is integral in shaping Black Feminist Thought and provides some historical perspective that can help the reader better understand the theory. Black women are automatically positioned in an outsider-within status. Black women are unable to firmly claim the knowledge or possess the full power given to White women because of their outside (Black) status living within a White-dominant world.

Delving deeper into this notion, Black women as a unit create outside/within statuses based on skin complexion and hair texture. Skin tone can either serve as the oppressor or oppressed variable depending on the situation. For example, a group of dark-skinned Black women can make a light-skinned woman feel isolated and unwelcomed. In addition, a group of light-skinned women can cause a dark-skinned woman to feel second-rate (Sims, 2009). Unawareness of privilege can make one more susceptible to being an oppressor (McIntosh, 1988). McIntosh (1988) coined the term “White Privilege” in “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” to highlight the systems that prevent White people from fully understanding their privileged place in society. In doing so, she exposed ways in which White people unconsciously exercise their privilege on a daily basis. While this seminal piece unpacked the invisible knapsack for White privilege, the idea can also apply to other systems of exercised privilege including, gender, physical ability, socioeconomic status, and skin color variation within race and ethnicities. McIntosh leaves a charge by asserting; “describing white privilege makes one newly accountable” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1). This charge should be extended to all forms of privilege, including skin tone privilege.

For Black women, understanding our privileged place, whether dark or light skin, can aid in holding each other accountable for unknowingly acting as an oppressor. Collins described
Black women as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2000), since Black women are qualified to discuss a theoretical knowledge based on their own lived and shared experiences. Black women serve as agents of knowledge in this framework because it dealt directly with them and addressed their experiences with colorism and hair texture bias and preferences.

**Research Questions**

The researcher is interested in understanding how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs professionals. As an aspiring Student Affairs Administrator, the researcher’s goal is to extend research related to color consciousness in the collegiate professional setting. This research is guided by the following questions: (1) How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the professional experiences of Black female Student Affairs professionals? (2) How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the social lives of Black female Student Affairs professionals?

**Limitations**

The researcher seeks to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Professionals. Drawing from the narratives of Black women in Louisiana at a predominately White institution, this study should not be used to generalize the experiences of all Black women in higher education administration. Secondly, this study only explores the interactions Black women have with colorism and hair texture preference without taking into account how dominant groups work to perpetuate stereotypes associated with physical characteristics, or if they even do this at all.

**Important Terms and Definitions**

In order to align the goals of the study with the subsequent findings, the following terms, which have been defined by scholarly literature, are highlighted:
**Colorism:** “a systematic preference for lightness that stems from the larger and more potent systems of racism” (Hunter, 2005, p. 89).

**Complexion/Race Tests:** refers to “racial confrontations executed by whites to keep fair blacks from “passing into” white organizations, institutions, and even white families” (Kerr, 2005, p. 277).

**Microaggression:** “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicie, 2012, p. 186).

**Natural hair:** can be defined as “hair having been unaltered by chemicals and therefore does not have a straight look but is tightly coiled or kinky in nature and appearance (Bellinger, 2007, p. 63).

**Oppression:** “is the presumption in favour of men, white people, and other dominant groups, which skews all social relationships and is encoded in their very structure” (Ward & Mullender, 1991, p. 22).

**Passing:** “is to conceal (i.e., pass) cover, and/or accent aspects of one’s racial ancestries, and the individual and structural-level factors that limit the accessibility and/or effectiveness of some strategies” (Khanna & Johnson, 2010, p. 380).

**Safeness:** refers to “the idea that those who are medium or brown-skinned are not as affected by the consequences of colorism” (Wilder, 2008, p. 100).

**Skin tone bias:** “is a form of homogeneous group privilege, in which people from the same race use factors such as skin tone, physical features, class, and communication to create social caste systems and workplace hierarchies” (Sims, 2009, p. 2).

**White Privilege:** “confers dominance because of one’s race or sex” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 3)
White Supremacy: is the belief that White people are superior to all minority and ethnic groups and are socially, politically, and economically dominant to all non-White groups (Mills, 1997).

Chapter Summary

This opening chapter discussed the background and contextual information for this research. This study is interested in how skin tone bias and hair texture preference influences the experiences of Black women professionals in student affairs administration. Chapter I outlined the background of the study, problem statement, and the purpose of the study. Chapter II will discuss relevant literature that informs the current study. This section includes research related to colorism and hair texture bias pre-Civil Rights Era, during the Civil Rights Era, and a modern day account for the impacts of colorism and hair texture bias. Chapter III focuses on the methodology of the study and describes the techniques used to collect, organize, and analyze the data. Chapter IV discusses the data analysis and findings, and Chapter V will conclude with a discussion of the findings and implications for research, theory, and practice.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs professionals. Chapter II is organized as follows: (a) a historical perspective of colorism; (b) politics associated with Black hair; (c) influence of colorism and hair texture preference in social settings; (d) influence of colorism and hair texture preference professionally; and (e) a discussion of preliminary findings.

Historical Perspective

Historically, skin tone has played a major role in shaping how Black Americans view themselves and how other races perceive and classify Black people. In the eighteenth century, Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist created a pyramid that categorized all living organisms. In the nineteenth century, European scientists expanded the pyramid to divide humans by categorizing them into red, yellow, black and white categories, representing Native Americans, Asians, Africans, and Europeans, respectively. “As these categories were created, the color White and the Europeans associated with it, were placed at the top of the color hierarchy and defined as the most intelligent. Conversely, Blacks were placed at the bottom and considered the least intelligent” (White, 2011, p. 2). Subsequently, White people introduced a color hierarchy within the Black race and both Black and White people privileged light skin. The philosophical underpinnings for America’s skin tone bias can be traced back to sexual relations between enslaved Africans and White slave owners. Prior to miscegenation, sexual relations between races, there was minimal skin tone variation among people with African descent. The homogeneous hues began to vary with the onset of procreation between races.

The earliest documented case of miscegenation occurred in Virginia in 1630, 10 years after the first Africans arrived to the United States (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2005). Although
laws prohibited these unions, sexual relations between Black and White people continued with the majority of instances occurring of a nonconsensual nature, as Black bodies were property, a commodity, expected to perform and serve at the master’s will (Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2005). Black men on the other hand, were prohibited from looking at White women, let alone having sexual encounters with them because the White race was to be left pure; untainted with Black blood produced with a Black penis. Between 1900 and 1909, “nearly seven hundred Negroes had been lynched in the United States…some simply because someone had whispered that they had been ‘too familiar’ with white women” (Johnson, 2005, p. 13). White men were intimidated by the potential of the mixed race and uneasy with having to compete sexually with Black men (Johnson, 2005), which further complicated the position of Black men.

In 1850, mixed-race slaves, often called mulattoes, made up 8% of the slave population (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Mulattoes “were people of every conceivable variety: those of mixed European and African blood, those of mixed European and indigenous blood, those of mixed African and indigenous blood, and subsequently every combination and permutation created by the mixed-race offspring of the first unions” (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013, p. 5). These unions resulted in racially mixed children who then gave way to the “creation of a color hierarchy through systematic privileging of light-skinned African Americans over darker-skinned African Americans” (Hunter, 2005, p.18). Thus, slaves with fairer skin and softened textured hair were deemed more attractive and valuable to White Americans because they more closely resembled the White race. In fact, mulattoes were considered to be genetically superior to dark-skinned African slaves and “…Whites who believed in the genetic superiority theory tended to place light-skinned Blacks in higher status positions” (Neal & Wilson, 1989, p. 325). This blatant separation tactic used to divide the slave community by skin complexion and other
physical features similar to the European body indicated to slaves that the appearance of light could afford them certain privileges. “These privileges allowed light-skinned African Americans to gain entry into predominantly white organizations, including institutions of higher education and places of employment, as their light skin tone signified White ancestry and made them less threatening to Whites” (Sims, 2009, p. 3). An early reference to Black women attempting to achieve light skin is illustrated in a press release in the 1850s. The *American Magazine* condemned Black people for attempting to achieve White beauty standards: “Beautiful black and brown faces by application of rouge and lily white are made to assume unnatural tints, like the vivid hue of painted corpses” (Peiss 1998, p. 41). This statement highlighted the onset of Black skin incongruously appearing lighter, discouraged Black women from assuming unnatural tints, and reaffirmed that Black skin is beautiful, naturally.

Color complexities continued to present difficulties for Blacks throughout the states; however Louisiana was the only state that instituted a three-tier caste system during slavery that separated the population into Whites, Blacks, and “free people of mixed blood” (Kerr, 2005, p. 282). This three-tier caste system “was a way to eliminate camaraderie between mixed-race people and black slaves by raising the status of mixed people above the status of slaves” (Kerr, 2005, p. 282). During this time, 80 percent of free Blacks were biracial (Kerr, 2005). This created a binary between the slaves that translated into the division of job responsibilities based on skin tone. Essentially, this binary helped to internalize the disparity and unequal treatment of Black people in America.

As enslaved Africans began to vary in shades of Blackness, the Rule of Hypodescent or the “One Drop Rule” was used to increase the number of people who could be enslaved. The “One Drop Rule” defined anyone with at least one drop of Black blood as being Black,
regardless of any other ancestry. Despite The Rule, hierarchy based on complexion afforded lighter skinned Blacks with unearned privileges causing clear separation between Black slaves. It also helped to “limit black access to resources, to limit black political power, and to maintain the myth of white racial purity” (Hunter, 2005, p.18). Keith and Herring (1991) asserted, “light-skinned blacks were initially preferred because they were more aesthetically appealing to whites and because the prevailing racial ideology of that time held that blacks with white ancestry were intellectually superior to those of pure African ancestry” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 762). This Rule also speaks to the notion of passing, which worked to afford Black people with White privileges, if their physical characteristics allowed them to pass.

**Legally Black and Socially White: The Act of Passing**

The act of passing suggested the ability “to conceal (i.e., pass) cover, and/or accent aspects of one’s racial ancestries, and the individual and structural-level factors that limit the accessibility and/or effectiveness of some strategies” (Khanna & Johnson, 2010, p. 380). This simply implied that people of color with enough European features to appear White, could pass as White, moving through society and blending in as a White person. This notion contradicted the Rule of Hypodescent that was used to limit resources and instead granted privileges and access to those who could cross the color line and conceal their Black identity. Those who chose to physically and morally pass had internal conflicts to contend with, as Black people who were caught passing were considered to be “deceiving the public with a false identity” (Khanna & Johnson, 2010, p. 381). Although the ability to pass had its privileges, being caught passing suggested even more consequences (Burma, 1946). The fact that someone could be “caught” for being born with a particular identity further enforces the ideas of racism and White supremacy.
The idea of passing, the Rule of Hypodescent, and the Black race has both social and legal implications. Passing, historically took place between 1880-1925 and it was noted that, “approximately 10,000 to 20,000 people with Black ancestry disappeared into the white population each year from 1900 to 1920” (Williamson, 1980 ctd in Khanna & Johnson, 2010, p. 382). As a result of the Rule of Hypodescent, rooted in White Supremacy and racism, an entire race of people had race constraints enforced on them by appearance alone. The White race defines what it means to be Black, while simultaneously awarding and punishing Black people with European features.

It is important to note that there are variations in passing. While many Black Americans could have passed completely into the White population, many remained affiliated with their Black identity to maintain a higher status as not to downgrade their level of status when assuming a White identity. There were also Black people who completely omitted their Black identity, while legally, socially, and permanently identified as White. In addition, there are those who temporarily passed whether intentionally or not, because passing relied on the White perception of race (Burma, 1946). All variations assumed different implications for the Black community, bearing in mind that preference and preferential treatment was reserved for lighter skin and European features.

This preference mirrored work chores assigned. Field hands were disproportionately of pure African ancestry and were assigned to perform physically demanding, menial tasks. Dark-skinned slaves remained largely unskilled throughout their servitude, had less contact with the custom and language of the larger society and generally experienced the harshest aspects of slavery. House servants, in contrast, were largely mulatto offspring, descendants of White men and slave women. “Slave masters assigned them to the more prestigious and socially desirable
service positions (e.g., cook, butler, coachman, personal companion, and the like)” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 762).

For Black people, negative experiences at work have roots within the skin tone binary created from the American system of chattel slavery. Harrison (2010) noted that the, “skin color of slaves was used as the determinant of work chores assigned” (p. 67). The theory behind this argued that lighter skinned slaves, described as “gentle,” were better qualified for light labor tasks such as carpentry while darker skinned slaves were designed for heavy, laborious field work (Glenn, 2008; Kerr, 2005). The harsh and brutal work and living conditions of enslaved Africans alone caused physical agony. One can only conclude that placing a higher financial value on lighter skinned slaves caused emotional and psychological distress as well. Kerr (2005) noted,

Because the ability to purchase light-skinned ‘fancy slaves’ with long hair and European features was a marker of wealth (such women went for extremely high prices on auction blocks), light skin was an indication of status for white communities long before light complexion became a mark of status in black communities. (p. 273).  

The White male slave holder/owner advanced an agenda based on power, control, sexual desires, and economic gains which divided slaves by stripping their sense of community and solidarity. This legacy continued during the Jim Crow era and traces of separation tactics continue to pervade the Black community (Johnson, 2005). These legacies contribute to the continuation of the enslaved Black mindset, hundreds of years later based on a skin tone binary. Following the abolition of slavery, skin color played a significant role on the status and achievement of Black Americans (Goldsmith et al., 2007; Snider, 2011). Black Americans contagiously adopted the separatist mindset and created social divides with skin tone illustrating another binary: light versus dark (Harrison, 2010). The tendency to group and categorize is a universal human characteristic according to social scientist, Sumner (1906), and as a Black
community, we categorize each other by skin tone and have associated light skin with the in-group and dark skin in the out-group (Goldsmith et al., 2007).

Various societies enforced complexion and hair tests to further perpetuate elitism within the Black community. “Blue vein” societies afforded Black people who were so fair skinned that their veins could be seen on the inside of their forearm certain privileges over darker Black people. Paper bag tests allowed those whose skin color was lighter than a paper bag and comb tests confirmed Blacks whose hair was straight enough to comb through without any difficulties, became the norm for entrance into exclusive social societies (Graham, 1999; Robinson, 2011b). Fraternities were also known to require members to pay a color tax at social parties. This color tax depended on the color of their date’s skin, the darker the date the more money the member had to pay (Neal & Wilson, 1989). As it relates to education, prior to the 1900s, 11 of the 12 men Black men who held doctoral degrees in the United States were mixed race Black men with light skin (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Social clubs, fraternities and sororities, churches, schools, and institutions of higher learning used these means to maintain a hierarchy of skin tones within the race.

Many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) instituted skin color tests for admission. Some institutions include Wilberforce, Howard University, Fisk University, Atlanta University, Morgan State University, Hampton University, and Spelman College (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). “In 1916, it was estimated that 80 percent of students attending HBCUs were light skinned and/or of mixed ancestry” (Russell-Cole et al., 2013, p. 63). Inevitably, darker skin became increasingly paired with lower status and lighter skin remained superior (Neal & Wilson, 1989). In fact, “mulattoes maintained their elite position in the black community for 50 years following Emancipation by passing their advantages on to their children, continuing their close
association with whites, and avoiding intermarriage with darker blacks” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 763-764). Unfortunately, maintaining perceived class within the family by way of marriage and skin complexion is not a myth of the past and is still a very relevant conversation amongst families.

The unearned privileging of light skin over dark skin suggested “the more they physically conformed to the White, majority standard of beauty, the more rewarding their lives would be” (Gatewood, 1988, p. 202). Positioned as both an oppressor and oppressed, Blacks continue to contribute to intra-cultural discrimination, or oppression within the same cultural group. In a therapy session discussing issues with skin color and physical features, Neal and Wilson suggested a form of internalized racism, “many Black women report that difficulties with these issues initially arose not from within themselves, but from other Blacks within the community who too frequently commented on their color and features” (1989, p. 330). This differential treatment continues to permeate the Black community and American society as a whole (Hunter, 2005). While the blatant tests may not be as visible and present today, the ideations, stemmed from White supremacy, are still passed down from generations creating a social divide for Black people in social settings and the workplace.

**The Influence of White Supremacy on the Black Image**

The basis of this research referring to colorism, hair texture preference, and ultimately controlling images of the Black woman’s body, all ignite from systems rooted in White supremacy. White supremacy maintains that White people are superior to all minority and ethnic groups and are socially, politically, and economically dominant to all non-White groups (Mills, 1997). This notion ensures that White thought, intellect, beauty, and values are protected while Black and other minority groups’ values are disregarded. As a result, Collins (1991) maintained
that privileging White beauty only works if Black beauty is downgraded. Because beauty is relational, women who are considered beautiful are deemed this status in relation to other women who are considered unattractive. This insinuates “white beauty is based on the racist assumption of Black ugliness” (Hunter, 2002, pp. 178-9). Moreover, Hunter (2002) suggested, “Since beauty is highly racialized, and informed by ideals of white supremacy established during slavery and colonialism, beauty operates as a tool of white supremacy and a tool of patriarchy by elevating men and whites in importance and status” (p. 178). This further explains why intentional marketing efforts showcasing Black beauty, for example, the “My Black is Beautiful” campaign and “Black Girls Rock” are in place to support the notion that Black is in fact beautiful.

Vicious, violent acts often come to mind when thinking of White Supremacist ideologies. For example, seizing and reclaiming occupied land and the capturing of people sold into slavery as seen with indigenous groups and chattel slavery (Ingersoll, 1991); extremist terrorist organizations formed to progress a White superior agenda while terrifying anyone non-White like the Klu Klux Klan (Hodes, 1993); and historical and contemporary Black image control as seen in the physical, sexual, and mental enslavement of Black people (Bogle, 2002) are all notions of White supremacy. White Supremacy, generally controlled by White men, has infiltrated every aspect of society and the constant need to conform to White standards places Black women at odds physically and mentally because we were simply not born with the tools to run the same race.

In recent decades, violent, public displays of White supremacy have not been as widespread as the lynching, raping, and beatings of our historical reality. Yet, the aftermath of these events are in every fabric of our educational, political, judicial, economic systems, (Smith,
2006) in addition to our *at your fingertips* media outlets. Media outlets in particular, are used to glorify White standards of beauty, forcing anyone non-White to feel inferior. This explains why people in the United States and abroad put such a high value on Whiteness, as it is constantly protected, as evidenced by the One Drop Rule. These systems incorporate the ideology that the standard of perfection is to obtain “Whiteness” and all other (minority) traits are to be criticized and punished. White supremacy guards and protects the status of what it means to be White and the privilege associated with it. McIntosh wrote the following regarding of how she came to terms with her privilege as a White woman: "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 192). This misconception misleads people into thinking there is a visible difference between White supremacy, racism and privilege, and perpetuates why the value of Whiteness is undoubtedly seen as greater.

Smith (2006) suggested there are three pillars of White supremacy; slavery/capitalism, genocide/colonialism, and orientalism/war. While Smith does not discuss Blackness in each pillar, I would like to offer an explanation for how each pillar is easily translatable to the Black experience and specifically the contemporary Black woman. Slavery/capitalism inevitably speaks to the Black experience as Smith suggested,

…in this logic of white supremacy, Blackness becomes equated with slaveability…and is the anchor of capitalism. That is, the capitalist system ultimately commodifies all workers--one’s own person becomes a commodity that one must sell in the labor market while the profits of one’s work are taken by someone else. (p. 67).

Take for instance, Sara Baartman, also known as the *Hottentot Venus*, and recently labeled the *Original Video Vixen*. She was an African slave whose body was put on display as she was a “supposedly paradoxical freak of race and sexuality, both alluring and primitive, the very embodiment of desire and the importance of conquering the instincts” (Crais & Scully, 2009, p.
1). Baartman’s body, curvy and voluptuous was seen as animalistic and hypersexual. White men were so sexually fascinated with her body that they raped, beat, mentally abused, and showcased her at freak shows.

   Her naked large buttocks and elongated labia were on display for anyone to see, as if she was a caged animal at exhibits in Europe and France. When she died of illness in 1815, her body was dissected for “investigation” by Scientist Georges Cuvier and her body was remade in a plaster cast to continue the Hottentot Venus displays. Her remains were finally put to rest in South Africa in 1994 (Crais & Scully, 2009). Much like the freak show displays featuring the Hottentot Venus, today’s video vixens are willingly scantily clad in music videos, pornography, stripper poles, and the like. The idea of being a video vixen, praised by men for having a shapely body, and being sexually loose is far more appealing than intellectual talent, as these characteristics are generally glamorized by the media. The Black woman’s body is consistently sold, yet not profiting or advancing Black women. Sadly, Black women willingly perpetuate this image that ultimately benefits White men and promotes White supremacy.

   Smith’s second pillar of White supremacy is the logic of genocide, which proclaims, “…indigenous peoples must disappear. In fact, they must always be disappearing, in order to allow non-indigenous peoples rightful claim over this land” (Smith, 2006, p. 68). Although genocide in its literal since is not a contemporary contention with Black women or even the Black American population, I argue that a form of genocide is still practiced. Cultural genocide, the very essence of stripping away what it means to be Black in America is indeed alive and practiced. Some examples of this are school policies that do not allow Black students to wear natural hairstyles including afros and braids, the fact that Black natural hair in the workplace is even a conversation, Black history in curriculum is relegated to just one month, the displacement
of Black people in low-income housing (Collins, 2000) and the disproportionate numbers of Black men in the judicial system (Smith, 2006) are all examples of unfair exploitation, silencing of the Black voice, which suggests cultural genocide.

Lastly, Smith discussed the third pillar of White Supremacy resulting in orientalism. Orientalism is the “process of the West defining itself as a superior civilization by constructing itself in opposition to an ‘exotic’ but inferior ‘Orient’ (Smith, 2006, p. 68). The Black woman was automatically set up for failure because her existence, as defined by White men, is in opposition to White women. Again, we are not equipped with the tools to run their race. The Cult of True Womanhood, which outlined the values for women including, piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness were in place for women (Collins, 2000; Perkins, 1983; Thelin, 2004). Black women were not included, simply because we were not even considered women (Collins, 2002). In fact, the intellect which speaks to the woman’s experience expressed through feminist ideology also lacked inclusivity of Black women (Collins, 2000). Orientalism maintains that White people are superior and are disconnected from anything non-White. Black women are the inferior Orient, disconnected from what it means to be a woman from the White male perspectives, and left out of intellectual experiences maintained by White women feminists. These three pillars all denote ways in which White supremacy works against Black women in America, displaying constant reminders of our inferiority in all facets of our existence.

**Global Significance: Colorism beyond the United States**

Although it is evident that colorism is a direct result of slavery and oppression in America, it is also globally significant, impacting far beyond the United States. Colorism exists “everywhere African slavery and European colonialism have existed, including North and South America, and throughout the Caribbean” (Robinson, 2011b, p. 352). Whiteness, and more
broadly lightness, is the preferred skin tone in many countries and tends to affect more women than men (Glenn, 2008). However, “… there is a major difference between those countries where whiteness has been explicitly built as the pillar of national discourse (e.g., Manifest Destiny in the United States) and those countries in which whiteness has silently become hegemonic through discourses of mestiçagem/mestizaje” (de Santana Pinho, 2009, p. 44).

Mestizaje, referring to an “ideology of race mixture involving Europeans and Indians, but not peoples of African descent” (Rahier, 2003, p. 44) and mestiçagem serving as an all-encompassing term including African ancestries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Rahier, 2003). “In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, whiteness is less frequently explicitly marked than it is more commonly implicitly and carefully manipulated by individuals and groups in their ongoing microstruggles for power” (de Santana Pinho, 2009, p. 44). This is illustrated in the “discrimination against darker-skinned persons and correlations between skin tone and socioeconomic status achievement in Brazil” (Glenn, 2008, p. 281). In South Africa and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, “an intermediate category of those considered to be racially mixed was classified as “coloured” and subjected to fewer legislative restrictions than those classified as ‘native’” (Glenn, 2008).

Brazil’s pigmentocracy, a “group based social hierarchy based largely on skin color” (Sidanius et al., 2001), illustrates varying degrees of whiteness based on physical characteristics. “One’s ‘measure of whiteness,’ therefore, is not defined only by skin color; it requires a much wider economy of sign where, together with other bodily features, hair texture is almost as important as epidermal tone (de Santana Pinho, 2009, p. 40). De Santana Pinho (2009) argues that some “‘types of mixture’ are clearly preferred to the detriment of others, and that while antiblack racism in Brazil is expressed mainly against dark-skinned individuals, it also operates
in the devaluing of physical traits ‘deemed black’ even in those who have lighter skin complexion, thus creating “degrees of whiteness”’ (p. 40). Textured hair, for example, can cause someone to move down Brazil’s social latter, even if they have the preferred light skin tone.

Because women tend to be judged more on their appearance and men on their achievements, many women look to skin lighteners to enhance their skin and overall physical features (Robinson, 2011a; Glenn, 2008). Glenn (2008) illustrated that “men who have wealth, education, and other forms of human capital are considered “good catches,” while women who are physically attractive may be considered desirable despite the lack of other capital” (p. 282). Thus signaling to women, the prettier you are the better off you are, with prettier directly correlating to a light skin tone and other European features. The “yearning for lightness” as titled by Glenn’s (2008) research on transnational skin lighteners, discusses the global impact of colorism and the ways in which various countries attempt to achieve light skin. It is important to note that not all women who lighten their skin desire white skin (Glenn, 2008; Robinson, 2011a), in fact, pure white skin is not widely accepted in Jamaica, Brazil and possibly other countries. However, the desire for light skin has urged many to achieve an artificial light color with the use of cosmetic and homemade skin bleaching creams (Robinson, 2011a). This desire to achieve light, poses serious health concerns including behavioral health and psychological well-being (Brelan-Noble, 2013).

In the African Diaspora, “the ideology of white supremacy that European colonists brought included the association of Blackness with primitiveness, lack of civilization, unrestrained sexuality, pollution, and dirt” (Glenn, 2008, p. 284). With a black skin color associated with such negativity and harshness, many turned to skin lighteners to soften the attack of their skin. Medical researchers estimate that a total of “25 percent of women in Bamaki, Mali;
35 percent in Pretoria, South Africa; and 52 percent in Dakar, Senegal, use skin lighteners, as do an astonishing 77 percent of women traders in Lagos, Nigeria” (Glenn, 2008, p. 286). The prevalence of skin bleachers is quite alarming, but equally interesting is the population of African women who tend to bleach or lighten their skin. As reported by a South African newspaper, the women who typically bleached their skin were in poor rural areas whereas now, women who bleach their skin are professional degree holding South African women (Glenn, 2008).

The Indian Diaspora interpret the English as illustrating the, 

highest culture and embodying the optimum physical type; they made invidious comparisons between lighter-skinned groups, whose men they viewed as more intelligent and marriageable and whose women they considered more attractive, and darker-skinned groups, whose men they viewed as lacking intelligence and masculinity, and whose women they considered to be lacking in beauty. (Glenn, 2008, p. 289).

This could potentially explain why India has the largest market for skin lighteners. In fact, many women want to present lighter skin for large events including weddings, family events, and to participate in beauty pageants (Glenn, 2008). Light skin here can be seen as an attainable accessory.

Historically, the Philippines had a colonial dependency on Spain and the United States which explains their influence of “Western ideology and culture, both of which valorize whiteness” (Glenn, 2008, p. 290). However, they tend to look to achieve a Korean, Japanese, or Spanish version of white skin as Filipinas they associate “light skin with modernity and social mobility” (Glenn, 2008, p. 291). In fact, 50 percent of young urban Filipinas reported using skin lightening products (Glenn, 2008). Glenn’s (2008) research also shows that East Asia, Latin America, and North America are also influenced by colorism and the skin bleaching phenomenon.
Since colorism extends beyond the United States, it is important to acknowledge the widespread appeal for light skin in other geographical regions of the world. However, for purposes of this research, I will specifically examine how colorism influences America and more specifically, Black women in Louisiana. Due to Louisiana’s unique history, it is imperative to uncover the historical roots and implications of skin tone preference.

**History of Black Women in Louisiana**

Louisiana, a very unique southern state, has interesting historical roots related to slavery, colorism, and privilege based on physical appearance. Louisiana’s three-tier caste system, White, Free People of Color, and Negro (Kerr, 2005; Steward, 1995) separated Blacks by status: Free People of Color or *Gens d’Couleur* and slaves. “Sexual relations among European settlers, African slaves, and native Americas during the period of French rule in Louisiana (1718-1768) resulted in the creation of a third race of people neither white nor black and neither slave nor completely free” (Kein, 2000, p. 57). The Gens d’Couleur, were a mixture of African, French, Spanish, and Indian ancestries who, flourished as a separate category of race in antebellum New Orleans. As late as 1840, these French-speaking mixed-race people made up 20 percent of the city’s population. They were largely the freed descendants of slave women and their white owners or refugees from the Haitian slave revolts. They left a huge imprint on New Orleans’ distinct architectural style, cuisine and culture.  
(http://media.nola.com/175years/other/175colorpg.pdf)

Those with African ancestry were not viewed as a homogenous group however, and even within the mixed-race population, there were different classifications based on the amount of White ancestry and appearance. In Louisiana, varied terms were used to describe mixed-raced Blacks or Creoles. For instance, “Octoroons, (seven eighths White), Quadroons, (three fourths White), Mulattoes, (one half White), Griffé (a child born of a mulatto and a Black), High Yellows, and Fancy Yellows, all referring to how much White ancestry is in one’s bloodline. They considered
themselves socially superior to dark-skin Blacks” (Mitchell-Keita-Doe, p. 6). In fact, many owned African slaves themselves (Ingersoll, 1991). They were prosperous and well educated, and functioned separately from Black and White Americans (Kein, 2000). In the presence of other Blacks, they would often speak French to display a level of separation. Of Catholic faith, they attended St. Augustine Catholic Church (Mitchell-Keita-Doe), which is still a prominent Catholic church in New Orleans, today.

The free people of color women or quadroons were viewed as highly sexual beings and seductresses (Kein, 2000, p. 57). The mulatto woman held a very unique place in the historical milieu in which “white women were the body politic, black women were the womb of slavery and ‘mixed race’ women were placed as the sexually desired” (Tate, 2007, p. 301).

This idea is based primarily on the fact that the very existence of the quadroons is bound up with the notion of illicit sex and forbidden love. Whether the sex was consensual, forced, or something in between, its end results were the same: the establishment of a new race of people with ties to both blacks and whites, itself more privileged than the one but less esteemed than the other. (Kein, 2000, p. 57).

To keep the free people of color race pure, they could only marry and have children with White or other fair skinned free people of color to maintain a superior status. Octoroon or Quadroon Balls were used to ensure these daughters would bear children with White wealthy men and have well-educated offspring. Laws, like the Code Noir and placage, prohibited them to marry White and there were no Black men with such status suitable for these women. The Code Noir, “issued in 1724 by the French metropolitan government to regulate the institution of slavery in its Louisiana colony, explicitly and expressly prohibited martial and non-martial sexual relationships between Africans, whether slave or free, and Europeans” (Spear, 2003). However, at the Quadroon Balls, married White men who were often wealthy sons of Planters would seek the likes of these daughters by communicating only with the mothers or matrons (Kein, 2000).
The daughters were dressed in expensive, elaborate gowns, well groomed, and very familiar with social graces to attract a wealthy partner.

The purpose of these balls was to secure a certain standard of living for the girl through the placement of one’s daughter with a suitable planter’s son. Known as Placage, the agreed upon arrangement would give the girl her own cottage or house outfitted as she would like. Any children from the arrangement were to be, it was hoped, guaranteed an education, usually in France, and the girl and her children were to live a comfortable life. (Mitchell-Keita-Doe, p. 7).

Alexis de Tocqueville, a common New Orleans visitor, documents his account at one of the quadroon balls,

A colored girl is destined from her birth to be a white man’s mistress. When she reaches nubile age, her mother is at pains to place her. It is a sort of temporary marriage. It usually lasts for several years, during which time it is seldom that there is a complaint of infidelity about a woman so attached. They pass like that from hand to hand until they have made a sufficient fortune, when they marry for good a man of their own station, and send their daughters out into the same way of life (Spear, 2003, p. 77).

These arrangements were not made public or even included in the will of the man. Instead, a separate arrangement was then made with an attorney as not to upset the wife, who was usually unaware of an outside union (Kein, 2000). From a privileged, situational, and contextual standpoint, these opportunities were made unavailable for Black slaves.

Following the abolition of slavery, all non-whites were considered “free.” The Gens d’Couleur lost their slaves and were then relegated to the same status as all other Black Americans. So, now that their heightened status was diminished, they were on the same playing field as the other slaves (Kein, 2000). Still elite in a way, as their prior education, wealthy establishments and elitist mindset did not vanish; the skin tone of Blacks with lighter skin was still more appealing to Whites than that of their darker brethren. This society of elitism may not be as blatant today, but traces of colorism are still very real today as they were hundreds of years
ago. While colorism has always been prevalent, it is important to discuss another influencing element of lightness, which includes hair texture.

Louisiana’s unique historical three-tiered racial structure provides an even more interesting location for exploring the ways in which colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women student affairs professionals. The deep-rooted implications for Black women, who closely resemble White whether considered to be Black, Creole, or Mulatto, suggest interesting findings. In Louisiana, the skin color complex may be magnified due to its socio historical history, privileging light skin and White features. As a result, continuing to advantage light skin and the associated features may be normalized with minimal conversation about its effects. Having these conversations and exploring these issues is critical, given that this form of intellectual activism can spread awareness to the harm Black women may be causing to self, family, friends, coworkers, and the larger Louisiana community, rooted in White supremacist views.

Although this research cannot undue hundreds of years of internalized oppression, it can however, help build a bridge to self-love and the appreciation for Black in all of its skin tones, hair textures and physical traits. Having lived in multiple states, the correlation between skin color, social capital, and class is not just unique to Louisiana. In fact, traces of the caste system in Louisiana is no just a historical reference but a very real and currently lived experience that adds an even thicker layer of debris, clouding my perception of self. As a “safe-toned” (having skin that is not too light or too dark, Black woman, I am aware that I may not experience as much negativity or positivity associated with colorism, however, I am aware that light entitlement is heightened in Louisiana and is worth furthering the conversation.
The Politics Associated with Black Hair

Hair. It may seem like a mundane subject, but it has profound implications for how African American women experiences the world. –Lanita Jacobs-Huey

It is important to consider the ways in which Black natural hair texture informs perceptions and shapes Black women’s experiences. Weitz (2004) explained the significance of hair for women: “Our hair is one of the primary ways we tell others who we are and by which others evaluate us, for it implicitly conveys messages about our gender, age, politics, social class, and more” (p. xiii). Hair is central to Black identity and is considered a “symbol of status, identity, and ancestry” (Bellinger, 2007, p. 64). Yet in the larger society, Black hair is the least aesthetically pleasing as it is constantly juxtaposed in comparison to European hair. African’s former crowns of glory were not even considered hair, as slaves’ hair was often derogatorily called wool and “deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans” (Thompson, 2009, p. 833). At the onset of the slave trade, every African’s head was shaved prior to sailing. Shaving their heads served as the beginning of their former identities being removed and lowering their status (Bellinger, 2007, p. 64). This act, foreshadowed the current implications for Black hair.

During slavery, certain hairstyles were status indicators for Black slaves and were one of the few ways they could express pride and identity. As Weitz (2004) narrated, the long work days made it nearly impossible for slaves to tend to their hair daily. Instead, they wore braids wrapped in rags and bandanas to prevent hair damage. However, they were able to take care of and style their hair on Sundays, their only day off. This Sunday ritual allowed time for women to bond and prepare for church. According to Bellinger (2007), the women would braid each other’s hair in “elaborate patterns and designs which would remain in for the rest of the week but once again hidden under a scarf to keep it nice; thus began the ritual and importance of hair in
the African American culture” (p. 65). Bonding over hair was an important ritual for young Black slaves, as they were taught throughout the week to not like their hair and to only refer to their hair as wool (Bellinger, 2007) because it drastically differed from European hair in length and texture. On the other hand, light-skinned domestic slaves were encouraged to straighten their hair and regularly groom as not to offend their slave owners, mistresses, and company (Bellinger, 2007). Straightened hair then became a visible marker of domestic status while braids were the visible marker of non-domestic slaves.

Hair was also used as a sexual symbol, as it elicited eroticism. Since White features were associated with beauty, slaves with White features were deemed exotic, sexually desirable, and “often coveted as sexual prizes” (Weitz, 2004, p. 10). In fact:

Plantation records testify to the importance attached to black women’s hair: In virtually every recorded incident in which a slave was punished by having his or her head shaved, the punished slave was a woman with straight hair and the person who ordered the punishments was a white woman. By doing so, white women could reduce the threat these slaves posed to their marriages while punishing both the slaves and the white men who found them attractive…. In one instance, a light-skinned, long-haired female slave accepted a white man from a neighboring plantation as her lover in hopes of gaining his protection against her owner’s sexual advances. Her owner gained vengeance by shaving her head – an action that, he surely expected, would punish both her and her lover. (Weitz, 2004, p. 10).

Although Black female slaves were seen as the forbidden fruit, sexually desired and sexually mistreated in private, the mulatto slave woman was considered to be the most sexually sought after woman. Racially mixed women interrupted the notions of White beauty and purity and “Mulatto’ women, whether slave or free, were generally viewed by contemporary observers as being more sexually desirable” (Tate, 2007, p. 301) as compared to European women in terms of facial features, skin color, and hair texture. To appear more attractive and in an attempt to benefit from the advantages of straight hair, many women began altering their natural curl pattern to achieve straight hair.
The invention of Madame C.J. Walker’s hair softener and hair-straightening comb transformed the way people viewed Black hair (Thompson, 2009). Softening and straightening hair products asserted that something was wrong with Black hair and it needed to be tamed and fixed. “Because she was also Black, not only did her product sanction the act of straightening, it also turned it from something Whites had demanded that Blacks do into a collective signifier of progress” (Thompson, 2007, p. 834). By the 1920’s, straight hair was the preferred hair texture and also a marker of middle class status (Thomson, 2007). The “kink factor” coined by Spellers (2003) provides insight into why Black hair does not fit the standard beauty norm. The “kink factor” presents difficulties for Black women because the more tightly coiled the hair, the more susceptible it is to breakage. This texture causes hair to lose moisture quickly allowing the hair to become dry and brittle if not carefully moisturized daily. In addition, tightly coiled hair is also the slowest to grow which completely disrupts the long and straight European beauty norm (Spellers, 2003; Robinson, 2011b). Subsequently, although having tightly coiled hair is devalued on the beauty continuum, it is the most versatile allowing for the most diversity of hair styles (Robinson, 2011b). “Nappy hair can be twisted, locked, braided, weaved, curled, dyed, fried, and laid to the side” (Spellers, 2003, p. 235), yet is under appreciated and viewed as a spectacle because it differs greatly from straight hair that is not as easy to manipulate.

Black is Beautiful: A Unifying Movement

During the Black Power Era and Civil Rights Movement, Black people created a unified front to resist notions of Black inferiority while illuminating strength and solidarity within the Black community. Awakening the need to take pride in Blackness introduced a common slogan, “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” which freely flowed from the lips of Black people without discriminating against color. This new-found self-superiority disturbed previous notions
that taught Black people, “If you white, you’re alright, if you’re brown, stick around, but if you’re black, get back.” The “Black is Beautiful” period emerged boosting racial and color consciousness that celebrated darker skin, natural hair, and Afrocentric facial features and body types. During this time, Black was “in” and the acknowledgement for the skin color hierarchy shifted to privilege Black skin within the Black community as opposed to the previous light versus dark social stratification (Udry, Bauman, & Chase, 1971). Hair during this time was viewed as a symbol of power and “was used as a resistant strategy of White beauty standards…and women such as Angela Davis became emblems of power and the struggle to overcome racism and challenge White supremacy” (Bellinger, 2007, p. 65). Afros and natural hair became the norm. Also noted were ideas about marrying someone with darker skin and the desire to wear natural hair increased (Goering, 1972).

Goering (1972) believed these ideals would continue to spread throughout the Black community diminishing the old ways of thinking about Blackness, moreover, “the term ‘black’ became a unifying description of the entire race rather than a divisive term used in a derogatory manner to devalue darker members” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 764). Snider (2011) ascertained, “This movement was a step in the right direction to stir awareness, but it brought about little change in the traditionally deep-rooted values of beauty of Western society” (p. 202). Unfortunately, while this movement inspired growth and self-love, the results were short lived, as “it turned out not to be that easy for most to erase years of deeply ingrained beliefs and feelings associated with the white standard of goodness and attractiveness” (Neal & Wilson, 1989, p. 327). Skin color consciousness had remained an issue of concern since slavery but has taken on different forms throughout the years.
Snider (2011) noted the research in the area of skin color and its implications has spanned from the 1960s to present time. One study conducted in the 1960s showed that a lighter complexion became less uniformly desirable, dark skin remained undesirable, and brown was the hue desired by many Black Americans. In the mid-1970s, when it came to mate selection, light-skinned Black females were still favored over their darker counterparts, “and darker females of lower socioeconomic status were less likely than their lighter counterparts to marry Black men of higher status” (Goering, 1971, p. 235 cited in Snider, 2011, p. 202). Hair texture also played a role in Black women’s appearance and their dating experiences.

Historically, hair has had a large influence on Black women’s lives. This influence has not changed and continues to have social and professional implications. Hairstyle and texture is highly considered when judging someone’s physical attractiveness, as women can be judged solely on their hairstyle (Prince, 2009). In terms of dating and relationships, men are drawn to women who they deem beautiful and according to mainstream standards, Black naturally curly hair is not considered attractive. Understanding that not all women desire heterosexual relationships, it is important to consider hair as an influential element for Black women because of the way Black men view their hair. Given that White men are often gatekeepers for social, professional, and educational advances, roadblocks for these advances can be the level of attractiveness assigned to women, which naturally becomes more difficult and complicated for Black women.

Professionally, Black women have to grapple with the perception that their hair texture is not professional. Because Black women’s hair generally does not grow in the same manner as White women’s hair, the hair of the former is automatically considered kinky- as if it needed to be straightened or fixed. Thus, something wrinkled and broken is not fit for a professional setting
and Black women’s hair may be viewed in this fashion. This may affect how Black women see themselves as professionals. In fact, “one of the most central decisions in managing perceptions involves how to style one’s hair” (Rosette & Dumas, 2007, p. 408). Although not widely discussed in academia, this preference for straight mindset may be evident even in the higher education professional contexts. Holmes (2003) interviewed Black women in higher education. Holmes found that one participant attributed negative experiences to her skin tone and explained, “I spend half my time trying to make myself [appear] non-threatening, even though I’m not really threatening, so the Caucasians can deal with me” (pp. 47, 48). A non-threatening appearance can speak to Black women’s hairstyles as some hairstyles are commonly associated with aggressive political agendas (Prince, 2009). The decision to wear a natural curl pattern or locks can be perceived as defiant.

Natural hairstyles are still an unwanted sight in professional work settings and lacks widespread social affirmation (Thompson, 2007). As stated on a recent blog, “Straight hair is superior to curly or natural hair in the workplace. Women with straight hair are taken more seriously and are noted as “intelligent”, “clean”, and “professional”; whereas women with curly or natural hair are attributed as “unruly”, “unprofessional”, “carefree”, “unapproachable”, and “risk-takers” (Jorgenson, 2013, para.4). These stereotypes greatly affect Black women and their right to wear natural hairstyles to work. Recently, the US Army imposed a new rule that prohibits natural hairstyles. Army Regulation 670-1, bans locs, twists, braids, and afros (Henderson & Butler, 2014), making it difficult for women of color who serve and have natural hair. According to Mintel, a research consumer group, “the September 2013 report… found that in the past 12 months, nearly three-fourths (70 percent) of Black women say they currently wear or have worn their hair natural (no relaxer or perm), more than half (53 percent) have worn
braids, and four out of 10 (41 percent) have worn locks” (Henderson & Butler, 2014, para 5). The current views on natural hair is concerning given the increase in Black women who have opted for natural hairstyles.

White women on the other hand, “…with the exception of choosing to ‘go blonde,’ the choice of hairstyle for White women is typically free from stereotypes or biases associated with incompetence or other negative characteristics” (Rosette and Dumas, 2007, p. 410) perhaps, some resistance will arise if they choose to wear their hair in a short style. The dilemma of hair in the workplace is a common conversation typically only impacting minority women and can have serious implications. In fact, ethnic styles at work have resulted in terminations. In the *McManus v. MCI Communications Corp.* case, McManus claimed she was fired for wearing braids and dreadlocks, in the *Hollins v Atlantis Co.* case, Hollins wore finger waves, and in the *Rogers v. American Airlines case*, Rogers wore braids (Rosette and Dumas, 2007). In Baltimore, Maryland Farryn Johnson, a Hooters employee was terminated due to “improper image” because she wore blonde highlights. The restaurant’s rationale, “Black women don't have blonde in their hair, so you need to take it out” (Wilson, 2013, para 4). Johnson’s lawyer responded to the discrimination by stating, "The law is clear that employers can't have two separate unequal sets of rules—one for African-American employees and one for everybody else, and yet that's exactly what Hooters did here in firing Miss Johnson, an African-American employee solely because she's African-American. They targeted her because of her hair solely because of her race” (Wilson, 2013, para 7).

In Louisiana, meteorologist Rhonda Lee was released from her position with the KTBS 3 News television station because she responded to rude comments about her short natural hair via Facebook. In response to an inappropriate post requesting her to either wear a wig or grow her
hair longer, Lee stated, "I’m sorry you don’t like my ethnic hair. And no I don’t have cancer…I am very proud of my African-American ancestry which includes my hair. For your edification: traditionally our hair doesn’t grow downward. It grows upward" (Wilson, 2012, para 2).

However, KTBS 3 defended their stance on the termination and communicated Lee was released because she violated policy, not because of her appearance. These are but a few notable examples of Black hair presenting challenges for Black women in professional settings.

The politics associated with Black hair has not only professional implications, but also consequences in educational environments. Hair texture and style preference has caused a young seven-year-old Black girl to be removed from her school in Oklahoma because her hair was styled in locks. According to Deborah Brown Community School, having locks violates school policy. The Horizon Science Academy in Ohio recently apologized for their lack of appreciation for Black hair as their policy once stated, "afro-puffs and small twisted braids, with or without rubber bands are NOT permitted,” (Klein, 2013, para 2). At the collegiate level, students enrolled in the MBA program at Hampton University, an HBCU, are not allowed to wear locks or cornrows. Dean Sid Credle at Hampton proclaimed, “The hairstyles are not businesslike and will not land students employment in Corporate America” (Gaynor, 2012, para, 2). As Weitz proclaimed, “no matter what a woman does or doesn’t do with her hair-dyeing or not dyeing, curling or not curling, covering with a bandana or leaving uncovered—her hair will affect how others respond to her, and her power will increase or decrease accordingly” (p. 683). It serves as no surprise that Black women have to not only be aware of their race and gender, but they have to be cognizant of their skin tone, hairstyle, and texture in professional and social settings. It is unfair, unethical, and unjust that Black women have to be cognizant of these things.
The results of contemporary studies suggest colorism and hair texture preference is still salient today (Bryant, 2013; Harrison, 2010, Snider, 2011). Physical features such as skin tone and hair texture continue to shape how individuals perceive themselves as well as how others perceive them. So while skin tone (for the most part) will not change, the “issue” with hair texture has resurfaced and can definitely be altered. The relationship between skin tone and hair texture are key elements of the Black woman’s appearance. Her appearance is important when considering how she views herself, how she is perceived and how these perceptions may conflict. In general, Black women’s hair does not fit the White aesthetic and at times has been considered unprofessional for the workplace and undesirable in mating selection. Black hair and skin complexion are so intertwined in race and gender complexities within the Black community which presents challenges for dark women with natural hair because beauty standards are so embedded in White supremacy (Robinson, 2011b). With an increasing number of Black women displaying their natural hair texture sans chemicals, hair texture coupled with skin complexion can present challenges for Black women in professional and social settings. However, “there is little to no research documented about the implications of hair texture within the African American population, although common knowledge and subjective evidence suggest it influences perceptions” (Snider, 2011, p. 201). The following section will discuss the relationship and negotiations that occur between Black hair and Black skin.

The Interaction of Skin and Hair

Hair played a significant role in the Black slave woman’s experience, however; equally important is the relationship between skin and hair and how the relationship between these characteristics was visually expressed in American slave culture. The combination of softened textured hair and light skin added pressure to slaves who did not meet these standards. However,
Even though some slaves...had skin as light as many Whites, the rule of thumb was that if their hair showed just a little bit of kinkiness, a person would be unable to pass as White. Essentially, the hair acted as the true test of blackness, which is why some male slaves opted to shave their heads to try to get rid of the genetic evidence of their ancestry when attempting to escape to freedom. (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 18).

This same negotiation of skin and hair complicates the rigid and inflexible racial boxes that suffocate so many Americans who do not fit the phenotypic mold for race. Not only is the skin and hair negotiation still present, it is also seen in the Caribbean. Tate (2007) narrated,

As black women we grow up surrounded by comments such as, ‘she is dark but she has good/long/loose curls/Indian hair’ and, as this is the case, her hair saves her from the ‘ugliness’ of dark skin. Or, we can also hear ‘she is light-skinned but her hair is tough/afro/natty/kinky/peppercorn’, here her skin saves her from the ugliness of non-straight hair. A racialized hierarchy is embedded in this language of skin and hair and it must be negotiated by black women who claim the space of black beauty. (p. 302).

Snider's (2011) sought to determine the relationship between skin color and hair texture and perceived beauty. While there is minimal research "documented about the implications of hair texture within the African American population...common knowledge and subjective evidence suggest it influences perceptions" (Snider, 2011, p. 203). Snider surveyed 42 African American students in a residence hall at The University of Alabama and found 83% of the residents reported experiencing a situation where their skin color helped or harmed them. These situations involved their "career, professional/job promotions, educational experiences, and opportunities" (Snider, 2011, p. 206). Also discussed was the 62% that reported feeling their hair texture influenced how others perceived them. The data communicated, "whether [they] had curly, straight, braided, twisted, or dreaded hair, they realized that they were being judged and viewed in different ways due to that element" (Snider, 2011, p. 206). Interestingly enough, these same participants reported that hair texture heavily impacted whom they chose to date and marry. This implied that Black people understand they are being judged by their physically
characteristics, specifically skin complexion and hair texture, but that they also judge others on these same characteristics.

Ispa-Landa (2013) conducted a study to understand gender politics with a group of adolescents enrolled in an urban-to-suburban racial integration program called Diversify. Ispa-Landa found that Black boys did not have as many issues interacting with White students because they had more opportunities to interact with White students during sports and other extracurricular activities. In addition, Black boys were seen as athletic and cool and were able to use these stereotypes to their advantage, while Black girls were seen as aggressive, loud, and ghetto. While it was popular for the White females to date the Diversify males, neither the White males nor the Diversify Black males were interested in dating the Black Diversify females because they did not have the “Barbie look” (Ispa-Landa, 2013, p. 229). Unfortunately, it is difficult for Black people to expect people outside of their culture to no longer concentrate on superficialities such as skin tone and hair texture when they themselves are active participants in perpetuating these archaic ideals of beauty, attractiveness, and worth.

These ideals are common among Black people and are illustrated in the media, song lyrics, social club acceptance and the like. These notions demonstrate that skin color and hair texture play a significant role in how Black people are viewed. The implications of skin color and hair has been documented when refereeing to ‘light skinned with good hair’ but hair texture has apparently not yet been researched academically (Snider, 2011, p. 204). Tate (1983) stated, “Sisters, tell me. . . that when they go out for jobs they straighten their hair because if they go in with their hair natural or braided, they probably won’t get the job” (Tate, 1983, p. 141 cited in Collins, 2000, p. 91). This sentiment illustrated over twenty years ago, still saturates the thoughts of many Black women. Given the increasing number of Black women that are opting for natural
hairstyles, it is important to examine the extent to which hair texture may be related to assumptions of perceived professionalism and advancement based on attraction. As a result of beauty ideologies, Black women may experience discrimination in professional and social settings depending on their skin tone and hair texture.

To further explore the current literature and provide depth to an under-studied entity within colorism, this researcher will discuss how colorism and hair texture influence Black women’s social and professional experiences, including their work in Student Affairs Administration. In an earlier study, Keith and Herring (1991) examined the relationships between skin tone and educational attainment, occupational status and income. Their study found that skin tone and educational attainment had a direct relationship in that educational attainment increased as skin tone became lighter. In addition, “very light respondents are substantially more likely to be employed as professional and technical workers than are those with darker complexions” (p. 768). Finally, income increased significantly for those with lighter skin tones. This study also examined these relationships with gender and found that “skin color acts as a significant stratifying agent in determining education, occupation, and family income for women only” (p. 773). Moreover, skin tone is more important for women as it relates to relationships with men. “Successful Negro men. . . put a premium on marrying a woman who is not black or very dark brown….Males partiality to [fair skin] color constitutes a social handicap for the very dark woman” (Dark & Cayton, 1945, p. 498 cited in Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 773). The study also reported that darker-skinned respondents were twice as likely to report being victims of discrimination as compared to their lighter-skinned counterparts. Hunter (2002) conducted a similar study using the National Survey of Black Americans and found that lighter skinned Black women had over a year more of education than their darker skinned counterparts with similar
backgrounds. Using a multivariate regression analysis, Hunter (2002) also found that lighter skinned Black women earned more money than darker skinned women. In fact, “a woman described as very light brown earns more than $2,600 more per year than a woman of similar background who is described as very dark brown. Unfortunately, “the effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 777). While Snider (2011) argues that “dark-skinned women are seen as occupying the bottom rung of the social ladder, being least marriageable, and having the fewest options for higher education and career advancement” (p. 203), further research will explore if similar trends are still present.

**Colorism and the American Social Landscape**

Skin tone bias continues to have an effect on the way Black people perceive themselves as well as how other races perceive Black people. Black people are compared to White ideations of beauty; having European features are the norm and deemed the most beautiful while African features are simply considered ugly and unpopular. These implications can influence Black self-esteem, efficacy, and confidence. Research shows that, “the privileged treatment given to African Americans who had light skin and other Caucasoid features suggested to many Blacks that ‘the more they physically conformed to the White, majority standard of beauty, the more rewarding their lives would be’”(Gatewood, 1988, p. 15 cited in Snider, 2011, p. 202). This binary automatically positions Black features in comparison to White features, leaving those with Black features at a disadvantage. For women, physical appearance is positively correlated with social capital; the prettier she is the better off she is. This notion is described as the “beauty queue.” Hunter (2005) coined the term to describe a “rank ordering of women from lightest to darkest where the lightest get the most perks and rewards…and the darkest women get the least”
In a superficial society, women’s worth is indicated by their bodies and perceived beauty as opposed to their intellect. What is deemed beautiful is a “cultural construction, it is informed by other kinds of societal status characteristics, most significantly race” (Hunter, 2005, p. 69). For these reasons, Black women are without a doubt, displaced socially, academically and professionally.

Following the abolition of slavery, skin color has impacted the status and achievement of Black people (Snider, 2011). Interestingly, it has also worked to influence attitudes about self, with common messages implying skin color influences attitudes about one’s self, more than achievement. Snider (2011) discussed the "halo effect" as defined, "regardless of their deeds and actions they are viewed as good just because of how they look" (p. 203). The halo effect can be applied to Black people with light skin and signaling to those with dark skin that they are automatically viewed as wrong. Ideals associated with colorism inform society that attractive and intelligent Black people possess physical features closely resembling the White race, including hair texture and other physical features (Fears, 1998). For women, the value of lightness in skin tone and other physical characteristics are often used in exchange for gaining social capital.

As defined by Hunter (2002), social capital is a “form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks” (p. 177). Because lighter skin tone is undeniably admired more than dark skin, this naturally limits darker skinned women’s access to social capital profits. In fact, Thompson and Keith (2000) noted that darker skinned women are less successful in their dating and love lives than women with lighter skin and Caucasian features. Moreover, "dark-skinned women are seen as occupying the bottom rung of the social ladder, being least marriageable, and having the fewest options for higher education and career
advancement” (Snider, 2011, p. 203). For these reasons, it is important to push forward this type of research to bring awareness to societal roadblocks for Black women.

Fair skin and European features are a form of social capital for women and “women who possess this form of capital (beauty) are able to convert it into economic capital, educational capital, or another form of social capital” (Hunter, 2002, p. 177). Perceived beauty then functions as a gatekeeper, allowing women access to positive images of self and the awards that accompany confidence. Research shows, “colorism can influence several aspects of human life: mate selection, life changes, perceived self-worth, and attractiveness, among others”…colorism also shows “black women, rather than men, are most often affected by the complex” (Fears, 1998, p. 30). Understanding that performing acts of colorism is a learned behavior often introduced at home, media images continuously work to reinforce notions of a skin tone and hair texture biased definition of beauty.

Content presented in media including commercials, music videos, lyrics, movies, television shows, and magazines may influence whether women will view themselves in a positive or negative way. Therefore, unwelcomed messages are then sent to darker-skinned girls and women by way of media’s unapologetic approval of only light-skinned Black females with non-Afrocentric features. In a study examining Black women in news editorial photos, Fears (1998) sampled 702 photos from 120 issues of Jet, The New Times, and Newsweek magazines in 1965, 1975, 1985, and 1995. This scholar found the majority of attractive descriptors used in the photos were reserved for Black women with European facial features, which could cause Black females who do not share this aesthetic to question the descriptions associated with their “beauty.” Essentially, the elevation of one form of beauty and denigration of another may very well explain why Black women are oftentimes victims of internalized racism.
Negative images associated with darker skin may create difficult barriers for Black women socially, as well. As a result of stereotypical images, “based on the belief that there are certain appearances, behaviors, or attributes shared by all members of a certain group” (Wallace et al., 2011), longstanding images associated with dark-skinned women unfairly disadvantage Black women. Images of the Black woman created by mainstream work to compartmentalize Black women in negative shadows, especially those who do not measure up to White America’s standard of beauty. Images rooted in historical context include the “promiscuous ‘mulatto’ Jezebel; the asexual, dark-skinned Mammy; the emasculating matriarch; the disagreeable sapphire; and the “breeding welfare mother” more recent images include,

The diva; her beauty is characterized by western standards (long, straight hair, slim build, light skinned). She appears independent but chooses to target men who can raise her social status (trades sex for social status). The gold digger barters with her sexuality for economic and material gains. The freak seeks to satisfy her sexual desires. Considered a bad girl who gains male attention by being overly sexual, she is sexually liberated and empowered and seeks out sex for physical satisfaction not for a relationship. (Stephens & Phillips, 2003 cited in Wallace et al., 2011, p. 1316).

Historical images share the narrative of the promiscuous biracial slave girl, while current depictions inform society that light skin and long haired women are also hypersexual beings that would do anything to further raise her status, even if it meant using her body. Although light skin and long hair are typically advantageous, the jezebel identity can also work to unfairly stereotype these women, placing them at a disadvantage socially and professionally. Not only do these images work to serve as roadblocks to success for women, Black girls also internalize these images.

**Internal(ized) Effects: Self-Objectification Theory**

When discussing the professional and social implications of colorism for Black women, a deeper question must be addressed to fully engage in critical discourse about the Black woman’s
experiences in a White supremacist, patriarchal society that continuously works to diminish her worth by devaluing her physical characteristics. An underlying question then becomes, so what does this really mean? The self-objectification theory can help discuss some of the tangible and harmful effects women encounter as it relates to their physical characteristics.

Coined in 1997 by Fredrickson and Roberts, objectification theory suggested, “that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves” (p. 173). The American culture is fixated on appearance, as it is encouraged to judge others by their physical characteristics and create biases to support these judgments; women on the other end are more likely to become victims of these biases. Unfortunately, “…living in a culture that emphasizes beauty and ultimately objectifies women can lead to negative psychological consequences for women” (Grippo & Hill, 2007, p. 173). As women continue to assume an observer’s perspective of their own bodies, they constantly monitor and compare their bodies to others. This internalized process then becomes “’self-objectification,’ and its corollary habitual monitoring of the body’s outward appearance, are theorized to account for many of the negative psychological consequences women experience including body dissatisfaction, body shame, and disordered eating” (Grippo & Hill, 2007, p. 173), in addition to depression, sexual dysfunctions (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and low self-esteem (Grippo & Hill, 2007). Self-objectification can present serious psychological and emotional complications for Black women who subscribe to American beauty norms whether consciously or subconsciously.

The objectification theory also suggests the harmful effects these images have on Black youth. When “adolescent girls become aware that their bodies are examined and evaluated by others [they] consequently internalize the observer’s perspective to evaluate their own bodies”
Colorism and hair texture bias can disrupt the psychological well-being of young Black girls and work to enforce internalized self-hatred (Bryant, 2013). In addition, Bryant (2013) suggested,

Because black women, especially dark-skinned black women, deviate furthest from European beauty standards, they are more likely to experience self-hate, distorted body image, depression, and eating disorders (Hall, 1995). They are also likely to suffer feelings of inadequacy and report emotions of anger, pain, and confusion toward traits such as skin color and hair. Many black women carry this internalized shame and self-hatred of their appearance from adolescence into adulthood. Ultimately, these internalized feelings can be significant risk factors for depression in black women (Hall, 1995 cited in Bryant, 2013. p. 85).

These institutionalized structures of Black images can quickly corrupt a young girl’s mind and influence depressing thoughts of self. In addition, research contends that “girls who identified more with stereotypical images of black women in music videos were more likely to emphasize the importance of appearance in their own lives” and girls who ascribed to these images were also more likely to report higher levels of substance abuse (Wallace et al., 2011). In addition, Klonoff and Landrine (2000) found that darker skin is associated with hypertension. These images illicit harmful consequences for young Black girls and may continue for Black women when these images are forced upon them by the mainstream culture in addition to a host of other social and professional stressors. Objectification and self-objectification theories really help to contextualize the importance of this research. Discussing the internal and internalized effects of body objectification can help further explain the practical implications of patriarchy. While Black women tend to express healthier body images relating to weight than their White female counterparts, the self-objectification theory can apply to Black and other women of color by incorporating ideals about self-image as it relates to skin tone. Buchanan et al. (2008), tested the self-objectification theory on Black women to account for other factors unique to women of color, such as “skin tone, hair texture, and facial features in addition to body size” (Buchanan et
Buchanan et al., 2008, p. 699). Buchanan et al, found that among 117 Black female college students, Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) objectification theory can extend to Black females, especially when discussing skin tone, as “skin-tone-specific monitoring were associated with general body shame as well as targeted skin tone dissatisfaction” (2000, pp. 711-712). Although body shape and size has different meanings for Black females, skin tone, however, is an additional factor Black females have to consider.

Black women’s habitual body monitoring is similar to White women’s however; skin tone is an added characteristics that White women typically do not have to contend with. In fact, Black women will ask “themselves habitually (as ‘first surveyors’) how attractive and light or dark the shade of their skin is” (Buchanan et al., 2008). Although this provides inferences for the Black woman’s professional experiences, these behaviors are learned much earlier. Body shame and surveillance can influence the Black woman’s confidence which has implications for how she may be perceived by colleagues in addition to her self perceptions, ability to take professional and social risks, feel competent, and perform at her peak.

Influence of Appearance in Professional Settings

Colorism continues to resurface in the workplace as it relates to Black Americans. To further complicate race and gender differences, skin complexion has been found to influence career attainment and job satisfaction in positions seen in the workforce and corporate America (Hunter, 2005). Research suggests the dual minority status presents challenges for Black women in terms of career advancement, accessing networking opportunities, as well as obtaining mentors (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). This study focuses on physical characteristics as factors that contribute to the overall work experience for Black women. Rosette and Dumas expressed “conventionally attractive women fare better professionally than less attractive women, as
attractive women tend to make more money and receive more job offers and promotions” (Rosette & Dumas, 2007, p. 408). However, attractive is typically defined by European standards, completely opposite of Black standards of beauty. This presents challenges for Black women at work, and even more so for Black women that are denied access to professional positions because of their skin tone or hair texture. The Racial Contract (Mills, 1997) illustrated a possible cause for this,

…for studies have confirmed that a ‘pleasing’ physical appearance gives one an edge in job competition. It is no accident that blacks of mixed race are those who are differentially represented in employment in the ‘white’ world. They will, because of their background, often tend to be better educated also, but an additional factor is that whites are less physically uncomfortable with them. ‘If we have to hire any of them,’ it may be thought, ‘at least this one looks a bit like us’” (p. 62).

Looks a bit like us, only refers to Black people who have the option to showcase European roots. For Black women, this will include light skin, long straight hair, thin lips and nose, with a slim build. Black women then have to consider how their physical appearance influences their work and professional networks. “Minority women have to negotiate the presentation of their racial identities…they must compensate for both their gender and race in attempting to present a professional image that will render them credible to their co-workers” (Rosette & Dumas, 2007, p. 408). This is primarily unique to Black women, especially given that the various complexions present among members of this group can extend to the darkest tone on the color spectrum and can have the tightest natural hair curl pattern.

Lightness correlates to power in the Black community and has been used to oppress others both directly and indirectly (Sims, 2009). Not only does skin tone dictate who is hired, skin tone also has implications for financial gain. Lighter-skinned Black people earn more money than darker-skinned Black people and are almost comparable to the earnings of White vs. Black people (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Thompson & Keith, 2001). In a later study using data
from the Multi City Study of Urban Inequality and the National Survey of Black Americans, Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity (2007) examined skin color and wages among African-Americans and found that hourly wages vary depending on skin tone. “Mean hourly wages…rise as skin tone lightens, moving from $11.72 for dark-skinned blacks to $13.23 for blacks with medium skin shade. Light-skinned blacks report hourly pay of $14.72 and the average white respondent reports earning $15.94 per hour” (p. 707). Indication of color-based discrimination is evident in White versus Black work relations but also in Black-versus-Black work relations.

In 2003, a darker skinned former restaurant employee won a claim of $40,000 after being taunted and harassed due to his dark skin (Hunter, 2005). An increasing number of studies have substantiated intra-racial discrimination to be prominent in the workplace (Harrison, 2010). Sims (2009) interviewed 10 Black male and female professionals from the Chicago chapter of the Black Data Processing Associates (BDPA), a national organization for African Americans in the information technology field to understand the impact of skin tone bias in the workplace. The study found that many darker-skinned Blacks were rarely given the benefit of the doubt, received biased supervision, and less room for error whereas there was a tendency to make certain allowances and accommodations for light-skinned Blacks (Sims, 2009).

In a study exploring preference in hiring practices, Harrison and Thomas (2009) asked 240 undergraduate students to judge applicants first by their resume followed by their pictures. The undergraduate students were majority White (85.7%) and ranged from ages 18-27. Harrison and Thomas found that dark-skinned Black men with higher levels of education and more work experience were significantly less preferred than lighter-skinned Black men who had less education and less work experience. As it relates to hiring practices, a salient factor in the study for women was skin tone as prospective employers used skin tone was a defining criteria when
selecting candidates for a position. For many companies, the recruitment process intentionally places Blacks at a disadvantage. The neighborhoods targeted and recruitment by word of mouth helps to limit Black access to jobs (Harrison, 2010). Harrison (2010) also found that after the interviewing process, “…many people of color who may have been top contenders for a position are denied once their race is known” (p. 61). For these reasons, this study seeks to explore if similar practices are seen in higher education work environments for Black women professionals.

Meet a Need to Serve a Need: Student Affairs in Higher Education

Historically, filling an institutional gap to meet students’ needs introduced the development of student affairs administration and helped outline the profession’s goals and purpose today. President Woodrow Wilson explained, “the work of the college, the work of its classrooms and laboratories, has become the merely formal and compulsory side of its life, and . . . a score of other things, lumped under the term ‘undergraduate activities,’ have become the vital, spontaneous, absorbing realities for nine out of every ten men who go to college” (Veysey, p. 338). This declaration presented the upsurge in student affairs administration in higher education. Personal relationships were just as important to students then as they are today.

In 1909, Professor Edwin Slosson admitted “almost every educator, if asked what was the main fault of our large colleges, would. . . [reply] that it was the loss of the personal relationship between instructor and student” (Veysey, p. 338). Student affairs professionals filled this void to help further develop and stimulate students outside of the classroom. Although the students were scholarly, those who willingly immersed themselves in the “excruciatingly stern” academic world were a minority to the “dominate collegiate culture” whose sole focus was not centered on academia (Thelin, 2004, p. 163). The idea that one should not overwhelmingly consume oneself
with classroom learning, as learning, growing, developing and “college life” also takes place outside of the classroom is illustrated in an 1890’s banner found in a dormitory titled, “Don’t Let Your Studies Interfere with Your Education” (Thelin, 2004, p. 163)! Students understood the importance of academics and the personal development that takes place via social interaction. The faculty-student relationship revolved primarily around academics, forcing students to seek social relationships among their peers and guidance and mentorship from student affairs professionals.

Students began to form extracurricular activities to satisfy their social and community needs. According to Thelin (2004) getting involved in campus life became the norm for students at Yale. The “Yale System” rewarded merit for students who participated in campus activities. This system “harnessed individual ambition and effort into team efforts for the greater good and honor of one’s academic class and the college” (Thelin, 2004, pp. 166-67). This system declared Yale “famous as a training ground for future leaders” (Thelin, 2004, p. 167). Harvard’s “finals clubs,” on the other hand, “based their self-perpetuating membership on sociability, with no pretense at rewarding merit” (p. 167). Involvement became crucial to one’s status and social class at the collegiate level. Students went through a series of activities to gain a certain level of prestige and respect as seen in Thelin (2004):

First, one had to demonstrate the talent to make the football squad, to be selected for the editorial board of the literary magazine, or to pass the audition for the glee club. Second, leadership could be demonstrated within each formal activity—for example, as captain of the squad or as editor-in-chief of the newspaper. A third level that usually escaped the notice of outside observers was that high prestige within the campus often went to those who served as managers of student organizations. They came to be known as the “Big Men,” the astute decision-makers who, “ran things”- identified by their hats, topcoats, and air of serious resolve as they mulled strategies. (p. 167).

The increase in student activities, need for personal interactions, and steadily multiplying numbers of students who attended college, especially with the approval of the G.I. Bill (Thelin,
introduced a new wave of administration. The rise of student affairs administration emerged to satisfy institution’s student needs. Meeting the personal and social needs of students and aiding to lessen the faculty load of controlling large enrollment numbers, helped later contribute to student retention, affinity, and personal commitment to the institution today.

While serving in different capacities, faculty and Student Affairs Administrators both contribute to the holistic development and overall student success and satisfaction in higher education. Although, student affairs administrators help to fill a gap in higher education, administrators alone cannot fill this gap. The onset of student affairs administrators did not diminish the fact that students still need and value faculty relationships and personal interactions with them. Yet, student affairs administrators often provide the personal connection and mentorship students need. Kobrak (1992) suggested, “the education of any student ultimately rises and falls on the teacher-student relationship inside and sometimes outside the classroom” (p. 515). Student affairs administrators’ role was and still functions to assume the learning relationship independent of the classroom boundaries.

Both roles enhance the students’ experiences and are integral in shaping their perceptions of an institution (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson & Cantwell, 2011). Students who have a positive reflection of the university typically have a salutary relationship with administrators. Student affairs professionals have a very unique, and often stressful, deposition in higher education as their place in general is often questioned with needs for validation. Black women in student affairs roles often assume additional pressures in their work environment and can be attributed to assumptions based on their physical characteristics.

Higher education hiring practices mirror those of the corporate sector as men continue to occupy the majority of upper level administration positions in colleges and universities (Cook &
Glass, 2011). According to Ely, Insead, and Kolb (2011), “women currently constitute only 2.2% of Fortune-500 CEO positions and about 15% of these hold company and corporate office positions” (p. 474). Women of color make up 12% and Black women make up 3%. Similar disparities exist within the higher education context. In fact, Blackhurst (2000a) found that senior level women administrators make up only 26% of top positions in student affairs and according to Jackson (2003), Black professionals hold about 8.4% of student affairs positions. Unfortunately, “among administrative professionals in American higher education, African American women perceive the least social support on campus and are least likely to advance beyond mid-level positions” (Miles, 2013, para 1). Reflective of the general undergraduate student body population, Black women professionals outnumber Black professional men in higher education (Jackson, 2003), and yet Black men outnumber Black women in top leadership positions.

Many reasons suggest the cause of this disparity. Some research points to the historical implications related to women’s late entry into the larger higher education enterprise. Harvard and essentially higher education in America was founded in 1636 for young White men. White women were not allowed entry to the university until 1823 and it was not until 1837 that Black women were allowed access to formal educational systems designed specifically for Black women (Thelin, 2004). Given this framework, it is not surprising that while women account for a small number of upper level administration positions in higher education, Black women hold significantly fewer of those positions (Henry, 2010). Belk’s (2006) study on African American women in student affairs found that Black women are “…exposed to unique barriers to career advancement, including lack of a supportive professional environment, lack of professional networking support, and gender discrimination” (p. 12). The study also found that Black
women’s leadership experiences are pigeonholed, as they are more likely to hold leadership positions at small institutions with a large minority or primarily female population.

In the 1980’s and 1990’s, research suggested “women were less satisfied with the student affairs profession than men and left the profession at higher rates than their male counterparts” (Blackhurst, 2000b, p. 399). It was suggested that the profession is not true to its values of equity and diversity as it relates to gender, thus causing poor job satisfaction for women (Blackhurst, 2000b). In a later study, Blackhurst (2000b) surveyed 500 women student affairs professionals and found that almost 60% of the women in the study reported being paid less than their male counterparts for equal work. In addition, women of color perceived more sex discrimination than White women. While job satisfaction increased for women within recent years, the study proved the highest levels of satisfaction were found among White women and those with senior administrative positions, whereas the lowest levels were seen among Black and Hispanic women.

Holmes (2003) conducted a qualitative study investigating the experiences of Black women administrators in leadership positions in higher education. Holmes’ research advised that although the amount of Black female faculty and administrators has increased, “the gains of Black female administrators and faculty, particularly at predominately White institutions, have remained relatively minuscule” (p. 48). Holmes (2003) also noted, “while Black women do not share a homogeneous existence, they do share a common struggle that is not shared by White women and Black men, which is to rise above the ideological hegemony that has silenced their voices and prevented their full participation in all facets of society and education in the United States” (p. 49). The narratives in the study found that Black women’s experiences in higher education are not favorable and are often mentally and emotionally draining. In a later study, Miles (2013) surveyed 671 student affairs professionals at predominately white institutions in the
South and Midwest regions (2013) about their experiences working in student affairs and stereotypes associated with Black women in the field.

Miles’ (2013) research presented negative comments about Black women including “images of incompetence (uneducated, lazy, affirmative action hires) showed up in 14% of responses; loud or opinionated, 12%; bossy, pushy, unfriendly or a bitch, 11%. Compliments [such as] (strong, hard-working) were only 9.5%” (Miles, 2013, para 9). One of the respondents in Miles (2013) study explained, “On one occasion I was told by the person who would have been my supervisor that I was too competent and therefore threatened her. On another occasion I was told by other employees that if I were a pretty woman who smiled a lot I would have gotten the job. In that instance each direct report to the supervisor was a young, pretty woman…” (para 14). Black women in this study also reported having to consistently defy negative stereotypes placed on them, lack of professional and social support, and feeling unappreciated.

The long term effects of slavery can provide some of the reasons Black women are marginalized in careers and have different experiences than White women and men in professional work settings. Flowers (2003) used the theory of representative bureaucracy to determine the disparity in the representation of Black student affairs professionals. The theory of representative bureaucracy “explains the importance of having leaders or policymakers who represent the demographic composition of a constituency group” (p. 36); the leaders should mirror the demographic. Flowers (2003) found Black students made up 12% of the total undergraduate enrollment and therefore more Black administrators are needed. The representation quotient is at a 0.70 and the research presents a call to action by bringing the quotient closer to 1.00. Institutions are now charged with hiring more Black professionals, yet
their salaries are not equitable to their White colleagues, which raise concerns regarding retaining Black staff.

Reason’s (2003) gender-based salary research concluded gender differences in relation to salary exist for Black women in higher education careers. Specifically, this research revealed Black women earn considerably less than men in the field. Men in the study earned a mean salary of $128,650 while women earned $96,672. Reason (2003) also found that women of color are expected to perform more and “reach across racial and gender boundaries” (Johnson, 1988, as cited in Reason, 2003, p. 67) and “to serve as mentors to all women including people of color” (Reason, 2003, p. 67). These expectations are interesting given that Black women are paid less, expected to carry out more tasks, and serve as mentors while they lack the opportunities to serve as mentees. In addition, Black women are expected to perform in unwelcoming, White dominated work environments. While racial and gender inequalities present challenges in professional and social settings for Black women in student affairs, little research has discussed the influence of skin tone and hair texture as physical characteristics that may contribute to an oppressive work climate and disadvantaged social atmosphere.

Discussion of Preliminary Findings: Social Milieu

In November 2012, I conducted a preliminary study with Student Affairs professionals to explore issues of skin tone and hair texture preference. Using Qualtrics, an online survey design instrument, participants signed an informed consent and answered four demographic questions, nine questions regarding their encounters with skin tone bias, and nine questions regarding their experiences with hair texture preference. Using a snowball sampling approach, 29 Black women Student Affairs administrators were surveyed. A snowball sample was used to obtain a diverse pool of Black women administrators from higher education institutions around the United States.
Snowball sampling procedures, “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell 2013, p. 158). With this technique, 21 universities and one community college were represented. A prompt was included at the end of each survey asking the participants to send the link to other Black women who may contribute to the study. In addition, I emailed multiple colleagues asking for their assistance in sharing the survey link to possible respondents. A thematic analysis was used to extract the most rich and encompassing quotes and themes. Although the interview questions were designed to discuss issues relating to colorism in professional settings, an overwhelming amount of participants discussed how colorism influenced their relationships with men. From those narratives, two themes emerged “Black Men’s Preference for Light Skin” and a “Notion of Safeness.”

Men’s Preference for Light Skin

Researchers have found that lighter skinned women are considered more attractive and more likely to advance socially than their darker skinned counterparts (Hunter, 2008). The participants in this study discussed their encounters with this theory and suggested that Black men tend to have a preference for lighter skinned Black women as compared to dark skinned women. When asked to recall memories of ever wanting to have a different skin shade/tone, one respondent shared that, “I remember the fairer skinned girls in the class getting more attention from the boys, so I associated fair skin with being attractive and desirable.” Learned colorism as a child was common amongst all of the participants. It is not unusual to be exposed to the meaning of skin tone at home or in elementary school (Hunter, 2005). As a teenager, another respondent recalled, “I may have heard a comment about someone picking the lighter girl to go to prom over me because she would look better in the pictures or maybe I didn’t get selected to be in this pageant in Louisiana because I was too dark.” Preference for lightness displayed by
males is evident in the following responses, “I know there have been times, particularly as a teenager and young adult, when men would consider me more attractive simply because of my light skin.” Regardless of any other physical characteristic, young Black girls are taught that they may not measure up to lighter skinned girls simply because their skin is darker. The preference for light is harmful and unfair for darker skinned Black women.

One may ask what shade is light enough? Two self-described light skinned respondents discuss the possibilities of being even lighter. For example, one respondent replied, “…some of the attention I get from men is because my skin is still lighter and a lot of Black men like that. I can’t help but wonder if this would be even better if I was lighter.” In addition, “I’ve had countless experiences when guys have commented or complimented on my [light] skin as a reason to why I am attractive to them. Some guys only like light skin girls.” However, when referring to men outside of her race, she goes on to say that, “I think they are intimidated by the stereotypes that are associated with black women so they don’t approach us often. Maybe they would if I was lighter (and had straight hair).” This contagious preference extends to clear connections with dating.

Many respondents recalled how their complexion influenced their dating relationships. A few of their narratives were examined to further illustrate the preference for lightness theme. When asked to discuss instances where skin color has either helped or harmed them in any way, rarely were the experiences work related. Instead, many women referenced their interactions with men. For example, “I have been in some dating situations where some men only date lighter skinned women-this technically didn’t harm me because I didn’t have a chance.” Another respondent took this idea further by stating that, “It seems that more Black men prefer light skin women so a lot of dark skin women have resentment toward light skin women…Black men
preferring light skin girls but it’s also because generally, light skin Black people are more accepted than dark skin Black people.” This statement references some intracultural discrimination that takes place not only within the Black community but also within the same gender. The harmful preference for light has worked to further divide the community today as it did historically. Especially since, some men only date lighter skinned Black women, as evident in a respondent’s response, “I also feel that African American males seem to put lighter skinned women on a pedestal” and “the men I date, especially if they are of darker skin tone usually see it as a plus, and they only prefer lighter skin toned women.”

The cold and uneasy preference for light skin positions medium tones and darker tones at an automatic social disadvantage. It is common throughout research that darker skin is the less appreciated skin tone but there is rare reference to the medium or in-between-tones. However after coding the results in the interviews, the notion of safeness emerged, which speaks specifically to the medium tones that are often overlooked in the research.

Safeness in skin tone refers to a complexion being “safe” from discrimination. These tones are neither light nor dark, but rather fall right in the middle. This skin tone is safe and serves as a neutral tone as Black women with this tone are typically not teased for being dark skinned, in fact, their discrimination may be more rooted in race than it is color. On the other hand, they are not as privy to the wealth of social capital associated with light skinned Black women. This is illustrated in various responses. For example, when asked to discuss experiences with skin tone discrimination one participant responded, “… I would say that I’m not dark enough for the color-Nazi’s to harass and not light enough for the color-struck to envy”. Referring to the same prompt, a responded stated, “…not really [as in not being discriminated
against because of her color]. But I think it mostly because I am brown skinned and not lighter or
darker.” As it relates to medium tones being ignored, one responded stated that, “I think my skin
tone goes unnoticed within my culture. We tend to be fixated on the extremes (very fair/very
dark)).” Another participant added to the idea of extremes by stating that, “I think because my
skin tone somewhat in the middle it doesn’t stand out as it would if I were exceptionally fair
skinned or dark [compl ected].” This fact is very evident in the research, when discussing race
related issues; research tends to focus on dichotomies, Black vs. White, while color research
focuses on light vs. dark.

Another participant spoke to the neutral state of brown tones, “I’m medium brown so I’m
not favorably or unfavorably on either end of the spectrum. I almost think that being brown is
neutral. As if my skin tone is not noticeable enough to be a deciding factor so people typically
move on to my other physical attributes.” In contrast, this was the only evidence of the safe tone
not being so safe, “I’m not considered light-skinned and I’m not dark-skinned and so it leaves
me ‘stuck’ in the middle of sometimes our own insecurities and self-hatred. I’ve not been
accepted from time to time from either side.” The term stuck, in my opinion is such a negative
way to describe something that is a part of you. For many, “brown skin privilege” is a good
position to be in because of the lack of experiences related specifically to skin tone. The safe skin
tones may only experience issues related to race as opposed to race and color. However, for this
person, being stuck in the middle is not as attractive as it seems. These responses illustrate the
many ways in which colorism and the systematic preference for light skin has influenced Black
women’s social experiences.
Chapter Summary

“In a racist society, race is a complex issue. Since this is also a sexist society, the problems incurred by those who are Black and female are made even more complex” (Neal & Wilson, 1989, p. 328). This section outlined the history that promoted skin tone discrimination based on colorism. Issues related to colorism have culturally invaded the Black experience in America and have attached to modes of structural racism presented in multiple forms. This research is focused primarily on how colorism and hair texture preference is presented in the employment spaces of Black female administrators in higher education. Skin tone bias continues to invade the modern workplace and affect Black Americans’ work experiences and lived social encounters. The purpose of this research is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Administrators. The following section will focus on the methods for exploring this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this research is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Professionals. Chapter III is organized as follows: (a) research design and methodological approach; (b) site selection; (c) sample selection; (d) data collection; (e) data management and analysis; and (f) trustworthiness of data.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

To develop a “complex, detailed understanding” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48) of colorism in the lives of Black professional women and “empower [Black women] to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants,” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48) a qualitative approach would serve as most appropriate. Because the research questions influence the methods chosen, the qualitative tradition is best suited for exploring an individual’s encounters with a particular issue. Merriam and Associates (2002) recognized eight approaches within qualitative research. Of these eight, this study will employ a basic interpretive approach through the critical lens of Black Feminist Thought.

In basic interpretive research, the researcher seeks to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives, and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). The researcher is interested in understanding the process of understanding colorism and how colorism has shaped the worldviews of Black women who experience either side of preference for light skin through interviews. Merriam (2009) explained that the basic interpretive study is useful in research specifically interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (p. 23). This research is very interpretive, descriptive,
and exploratory in nature, and thus, a basic interpretive inquiry is most useful for the purposes of this research study (Robinson, 2011). As a result, a basic interpretive approach best aligns with the goals of this research in that, “…capturing interpretations and meanings individuals attribute to experiences…” (Robinson, 2011, p. 81) with colorism are essential to this study.

Site Selection

The site selection for qualitative data is crucial to the data collection process. It is important for participants to feel comfortable in their environment to freely express their encounters with issues related to colorism. The interviews took place in a mode most convenient for each participant (in-person, phone, or Skype). Hanna (2012) suggested that Skype serves as the most feasible alternative to in-person interviews. Skype is an online vehicle that facilitates face-to-face communication, allowing the researcher to record both the visual and audio interviews. This method encouraged participants to select the most relaxed environment to allow for candid conversations to emerge in addition to removing possible power issues related to the location of the interview chosen by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Given the nature of the topic, it was important that the participants maintained a “degree of control over the research process, encouraging a more equal relationship between the researcher and the researched” (Hanna, 2012). Using multiple formats during this process was equally beneficial to the researcher and participants.

Sample Selection

To explore how colorism influences the professional and social experiences of Black women Student Affairs professionals in higher education, it was necessary to select an intentional pool of participants that added the most value and depth to the focus of this research. Two types of sampling techniques were used to select the participants including, snowball and
criterion sampling. This allowed the opportunity to interview the most information-rich participants. Snowball sampling procedures, “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell 2013, p. 158). During the initial communication with pre-selected participants, I asked the participants to refer someone they know who may add to the research. All participants were made fully aware of the purpose of the research prior to gaining the approval to participate. To participate in this study, participants had to meet certain criteria: (1) identify as a Black woman (2) serve in a full-time administrative position at a predominately White institution in Louisiana (3) willing to participate in the recorded interview process (4) available for follow up interviews. The goal was to interview between six to 10 women, with a range of light, medium, and dark skin tones, according to my interpretation of skin tone. These women also had varied hair textures, hairstyles, and different professional positions at the institution. A total of 10 women were interviewed for this study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the data collection strategy. Pre-determined questions were asked with flexibility to allow for further conversation when warranted (Appendix 2). To fully understand their professional and social encounters with colorism, two interviews took place with each participant. The first interview helped to gain a general understanding of their experiences. The follow up interview aided in further understanding their experiences by asking questions that developed after the transcribing process and also to confirm a thorough analysis of the emerging themes. Interviewing Black women with various skin tones, hair textures, and professional positions served as multiple sources of data and helped in the triangulation process, thus adding authenticity and credibility to the study (MacGregor, 1985). Prior to the interview process, I obtained approval from the university’s Institutional Review
Board and asked each participant to sign and agree to the informed consent (Appendix 1).

**Data Management and Analysis**

“Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2013, p. 180). While self-transcribing the interviews, I began the analysis process. Agar (1980) suggested immersing “yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (p. 103).

The following will detail the thematic analysis process I used to understand the data.

After self-transcribing the interviews, I read the transcriptions multiple times and listened to each interview in full at least four times. While reading, I incorporated reflective notes and ideas that came to mind in the margins of the transcriptions. Providing memos of the reflective notes helped capture meaningful thoughts that may be used later, or at the end of the data analysis phase. These notes will be used later to develop and auto ethnography of my own experiences with colorism. Following reading and providing memos of the reflective notes, I underlined and made note of important sentences and phrases that captured the essence of the response for each question. From this, I began the coding process with color-coded highlighters, highlighting similar phrases by color. Once this was complete, I categorized like-phrases to determine the underlying message in each color-coded section. These messages became the major themes.

To identify the themes that emerged from the interviews, the interviews were content analyzed using an open-coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), where words and phrases were the units of analysis. I used tally marks to keep score of how
many times an experience was discussed in each interview. I then grouped similar experiences together again and used the most popular experiences among the women. In keeping with open-coding techniques, no a priori categories were imposed on the narrative data, as themes were identified from the narratives. In establishing inter-rater agreement, I asked five peers to evaluate and code sections of the narratives based on the themes identified. I also sought feedback from a committee member and asked the participants for feedback regarding the five established themes.

Once the themes we created, I conducted the second interview with each participant. These questions were derived from the coded responses to double check the validity of each code. Follow up questions were also asked to gain a deeper understanding of concepts as well as to ask the participants about new ideas that may have emerged from other interviews. A final analysis and explanation of the codes was generated following all of the second interviews.

In addition to conducting interviews, each participant was asked to electronically submit at one photograph of a woman. The picture was submitted following the initial interview and was of a woman whose skin tone and hair texture resembles her own. Because it may be hard to get an exact match, participants had the option to submit two separate pictures, one with a similar skin tone and the other with a similar hair texture. These pictures were used to help describe each of the participants without having to disclose their identity, as well as aid in analyzing their responses.

**Use of Black Feminist Thought in Data Analysis**

Black Feminist Thought provides a general lens to situate the interaction of race, gender, color, and class in this study. The use of Black Feminist Thought as a critical framework serves as an “advocacy perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are
collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (Creswell, 2009, p. 62). Using this lens will help articulate how White supremacist and patriarchal notions of beauty and professionalism enforce oppressive constraints on Black female administrators. While coding and interpreting the themes, I constantly compared the knowledge gained from Black Feminist Thought to the participant narratives and note similarities and/or contradicting information. To push the analysis further, I not only discuss the synthesized themes, but also apply the information gathered back to the scholarship by correlating the historical, political, and social ramifications of colorism and hair texture bias using the perspective of Black Feminist Thought. For example, if preference for straight hair in the workplace became a common conversation, Black Feminist Thought was used to help articulate where this notion comes from, why straight hair is considered professional, and why this may be problematic for the Black professional female. Black Feminist Thought can also address reasons why other Black women may support the homogenous notion of straight hair preference in the workplace, if intracultural discrimination is representative of the participant’s experiences. This theoretical framework will also aid in developing an agenda for cultural change.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

Using the Qualitative Research: Standards of Validation Guide (MacGregor, 2013), I took the following steps to ensure the trustworthiness of my data. To begin with, I confirmed validation through my data collection activities that also served as validation strategies. Validation refers to the truthfulness of the findings (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Engaging with the participants for extended periods of time and follow up interview sessions constitute prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2013). Having multiple sources of data, including various Black female student affairs professionals in different professional positions with
varying skin tones and hair textures, and connecting the research to the Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework met triangulation. With triangulation strategies, “researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Peer debriefing took place by receiving feedback from colleagues and committee members as discussed previously. The peer debriefing process is critical in that it helps to “keep the researcher honest; [the members will] ask hard questions about the methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 250). To obtain referential adequacy, I compared my findings with the results from my preliminary study (MacGregor, 1985). Lastly, I completed member checks. Member checks involve, “the researcher solicit[ing] participants’ views of the credibility of the findings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Following each interview, I discussed a summary to the participants to ensure I captured their narratives adequately and offered the opportunity to add any additional information.

To ensure transferability, I purposely selected Black women participants. Transferability suggests an “adequate and sufficiently varied sample [to] consider whom and what the findings concern” (Malterud, 2001). The sample of Black women used will suffice in that multiple skin tones, hair textures, and professional positions will be considered with respective to the geographical location desired to study. I then outlined all of the details in the data collection section to provide a thick description of the research context. Thick description contributes to the credibility of the research, as it aids in transferability. The reader can assume the findings from the research are transferable to another situation with adequate sampling techniques and an accurate description of all the characteristics of the participants in the study (Creswell, 2013).
As a result of thick descriptions, transparency throughout the process will also be ensured. Conducting an inquiry audit will also help with transparency as it involves, “making process notes, field notes, or examples of notes or evidence of data reduction strategies” (Adapted, 1985). The reflective journal will also show evidence of reduction strategies and process notes. Lastly, confirmability is met by connecting the raw data to the literature (Adapted, 1985).

**Researcher’s Role**

Prior to discussing the participant’s experiences in Chapter IV, it is important to discuss my own experiences with colorism and hair texture bias and how my personal biases and encounters may influence my interpretation of the participants’ experiences. Colorism, aesthetics, and hair are very personal topics for me, all of which are concepts that I have to consider and contend with on a daily basis. I can recall the first memory of when I realized my skin differed from my mother’s fair skin. At about four or five years old, I asked my mother why my skin was darker than hers. She explained that while she was pregnant with me, she ate a lot of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups and the chocolate fell on me and stayed. For years I was happy to have received my complexion from our favorite candy! But, as I grew older and began to experience the world around me, I realized that having my candy complexioned skin was not as enjoyable as I once thought. As a “safe-toned” Black woman, safe referring to having skin that is neither *too* dark nor *too* light, I realize the privilege that comes with that, especially if I am with a group of Black women whose complexion is darker than mine. But I also realize how unnoticed I am, once in a group of lighter-skinned Black or biracial women.

Growing up in Arizona, I was thinking about how I looked, how my skin was not light enough, my hair not pretty enough, and how my body was not thick enough for boys to compliment. While I have never felt I was ugly, I often felt inadequate because my physical
characteristics never matched the characteristics that were praised in my favorite songs. When I first learned of sororities at Arizona State University, I was determined to become an Alpha Kappa Alpha woman, until I heard they only accepted pretty girls and pretty equated to light skin. Nonetheless, I decided to join this organization, but I still remember having second thoughts because of this notion alone. Nearing the end of my undergraduate career, I decided to enroll in a master’s program at Florida International University because I wanted to live in Miami. Having never lived in Florida prior, I had stereotypical ideas of how Miami women looked. Second-guessing my ability to measure up to standards again, I hesitated to apply because I felt that if I were not good enough for Phoenix, I surely would not be a fit in Miami. I mustered up the confidence to apply anyhow, got accepted, and went on to enjoy the best two years of my life.

While in Miami, I was considered “light-skinned” for the first time. Initially confused because I have never been seen this way nor have I ever described myself as being “light,” I could tell there was a sense of heightened confidence because of this single descriptor. Little did I know, this was the onset of my critical curiosity related to colorism. I began to question, why that word made me feel good? Why was there so much power in the nickname “Red” when I walked down Ocean Drive? Why was lighter prettier? The most memorable question and conversation I’ve had with myself relating to colorism, was if to be temporarily considered light gave me a boost in confidence, what then does this mean for my darker skinned counterparts who would never be considered light? Moreover, if I consider my skin tone to be “safe” does this mean that those who do not share my same complexion are unsafe? I had no idea these thoughts would then lead me on an academic journey, exploring colorism in an academic arena while simultaneously serving as therapy for myself.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influences the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Professionals. Two research questions guided the study: (1) How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence Black female administrator’s experiences in Student Affairs Administration? (2) How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the social lives of Black female Student Affairs professionals? This chapter begins with a profile of the participants that provides background information on the women interviewed. Participant-selected pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants. Following the profiles, major themes from the interviews are discussed. The five themes include: (a) Light and Pretty, (b) Dark and Natural, (c) Self-Destruction: A Communal Effort, (d) #TeamLightSkin: The Creole Influence, and (e) Hair Affairs vs. Student Affairs: Politics in the Workplace. Each theme is supported by multiple subthemes. A summary of the themes concludes this chapter.

Participant Profiles

This section presents an overall descriptive profile of the participants to provide the reader with additional information on the women interviewed in alphabetical order. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the participants in alphabetical order as well.

Anne

Anne can be described as a medium-toned Black woman with natural hair. She is a quiet and reserved Student Affairs professional and has served in her position for 8 years. Although she seemed somewhat content in her professional position, she seemed uncertain about the views of leadership in her department. As race, in her opinion, has played a role in her uneasy work environment. Unfortunately, none of the Black people in her office have been promoted compared to their White counterparts who have been with less experience. She has not
experienced blatant encounters with colorism or hair texture bias and discussed being unbothered by mainstream views of natural hair. Anne mentioned that she is, “too old to care about what others have to say.” Although she is aware of the perceptions of natural hair, she enjoys her hair and makes sure that her hairstyle is suitable for professional environments. Neither her natural hair nor medium tone has had an impact on her dating life. Her husband loves her appearance and embraces her natural hair.

_Arianne_

Arianne is a very confident woman and passionate professional who cares about the success of diverse student populations. Arianne is a coordinator at her institution and also enrolled in a graduate program. Born and raised in New Orleans, LA, she is no stranger to skin tone discrimination and the stereotypes associated with skin tones. Arianne described her skin tone as caramel and was the only participant to acknowledge the displacement of brown tones in the color conversation. Many of her experiences indicated a “notion of skin tone safeness” resulting from her brown skin. Because she is neither “too light” or “too dark” but rather right in the middle, she experienced the privilege of not being teased or harassed as a child, but also experienced an ignored or forgotten feeling because her tone does not fall on either extreme of the skin spectrum. As someone who also identifies as having brown skin, I completely understand her story as it helped me to make sense of a lot of the feelings I experienced about both skin and hair.

At the time of the interview, Arianne’s hair was in a transitional state, as she was transitioning from having a relaxer to natural hair. Although her parents do not agree with the natural hair movement, she has made a conscious decision to move forward learning her natural hair curl pattern. Also at the time of the interview, she was in a relationship where her skin tone
and hair texture are appreciated, as this has not always been the case. He has joked that he does not date light skinned women because they are “too much.” However, a previous boyfriend told her that he preferred Puerto Rican women because of their skin and hair. Needless to say, that relationship did not last, but may also reflect many Black men’s preference for skin complexion and hair texture.

*Daisy*

Daisy is a dark skinned woman with natural hair who loves her appearance and physical features. She received a lot of affirmation at home, which helped build confidence and affinity for her dark skin. Like many other dark skinned women with slightly European features, she has heard the comment, “you’re pretty for a dark skinned girl” because her dark skin is coupled with loose, curly natural hair and smooth skin. While colorism and hair texture bias has not influenced her professional life in terms of job mobility or social life in terms of finding a partner, she is aware that colorism is an issue and has friends who have experienced traumatic experiences relating to skin and hair.

Daisy talked a lot about the role of media and how it continued to divide the Black community by favoring certain physical features over the others. With a counseling background, she provided advice for Black women with daughters, including suggestions on hairstyles and affirming conversations. In addition to being solution-oriented in that regard, she also discussed ways in which institutions can work better to attract and retain Black women professionals, including paying them financially what they are worth and acknowledging their accomplishments. She has been employed at the institution for 3 years and decided to accept another opportunity after realizing professional growth was capped at her department.
Elizabeth

Elizabeth is an energetic professional with seven years of work experience in Student Affairs administration. She had been employed at her current institution for five years where she also completed her doctoral degree. She is a self-described “chocolate” woman with natural hair. She is proud of her skin tone but that has not always been the case. She was teased as a child for having dark skin, wearing glasses, and for being thin. However, with time, she grew comfortable in her skin and now loves her physical appearance. As this was the case for many of the darker skinned participants, with time, they grew comfortable in their skin. Although she primarily wore her hair braided, she wore her hair flat-ironed straight when worn out. She desired to lock her hair, but only after successfully obtaining a new position, as she joked, has “signed on the dotted line.” This thought process is congruent with popular beliefs that natural hair is unprofessional, especially for interviews. As well as the popular notion that locks and other natural hairstyles symbolize aggressive and militant behaviors.

She has obtained a doctoral degree and has been employed as a coordinator for five years. Elizabeth has seven years of experience in Student Affairs and has obtained all of her professional experience and degrees from universities in the Southern region of the US. Although she has not experienced many issues related specifically to colorism in her professional environment, she did however experience racially biased encounters at work. Though, it is hard to detect if these biases are attributed to her dark skin alone. Yet, skin tone preference was more prevalent in her dating relationships. Men shared their preference for lighter skinned women and also discussed their family’s biases as well. While comfortable in her skin, it has been a bit of a process for her to navigate both White and Black cultures’ ideas of beauty.
Jackie Jasper

Jackie Jasper described herself as a light skinned African American woman with a softened, easy to manage hair texture. Although she is aware of her skin tone, as her family provided constant reminders of her light skin, she has not noticed a time when her complexion has afforded her privileges over any other tone. From her perspective, she experienced racism and discrimination like any other Black person. Generally speaking, she does not acknowledge any significant differences between lighter skinned and darker skinned Black people but did make mention to the influence of social media, particularly via the use of memes and how different skin tones are portrayed. She also mentioned noticing the type of women a particular male friend dated, as he noticeably only dated lighter skinned women and then eventually married a White woman.

While “advantages” of her skin tone were not discussed in detail, Jackie Jasper did acknowledge when with a group of people, people typically will speak to her first because they may feel less threatened by her because of her skin tone. However, these were all superficial and insignificant differences to her. Jackie is not oblivious to the fact that people have various thought process about Black skin tones, as she discussed having several conversations with her darker skinned friends who claimed Jackie had it easier in life because of her skin tone. However, she does not believe her skin tone plays a major role.

Lola

Lola is an energetic and sassy professional! She self-described as having a caramel skin tone and had natural hair for a few years. Because of her features, she explained not having many issues with colorism but understands the unfair position of her darker skinned counterparts. She felt that men placed light-skinned women on a pedestal and preferred to date them. In terms of
hair, now that she is comfortable with the texture and length of her hair, she does not feel that it has negatively influenced her dating relationships but rather has a more positive effect. Her boyfriend at the time of the interview, loved her hair in any style that she preferred. However, she admitted to wondering if he has dated anyone else with natural hair. Professionally, she has also internalized feelings of her hair, acceptance, and what is considered “professional.” Primarily because she was employed in the department when she had relaxed hair, left the department temporarily, and then returned with natural hair. She questioned whether she would be accepted or taken seriously because of her hair decision.

Growing up, she was aware she had a lighter complexion with light colored eyes, because her sister desired to look like her. Like many of the other participants, she was aware of the stereotypes associated with light and dark skin, but did not feel she had been favored or negatively impacted because of her features. However, she is aware of the dangers of colorism and European ideals of beauty. As a result, she dedicated a year to understanding, uncovering, and appreciating her true beauty by deciding to go natural and not wear makeup.

Marie

Although Marie was not the only woman of color in her department, she is the only woman of color in a senior level position. She is not a Louisiana native and had a bit of culture shock upon her arrival. Marie clearly saw the influence of Louisiana’s history played out in Louisiana’s present, as traces of the color complex were vividly in front of her, particularly in the dating scene. As a child, she always wanted light skin, not because she disliked her appearance but because she wanted to closely resemble her mother and the Latina women she lived near. Now as an adult, she and her husband love her dark skin and he particularly loves her long, thick hair. In fact, he has asked her to grow it longer. She is an example of another participant with
dark skin coupled with a European feature (her long hair), and is considered to be “pretty for a dark girl.”

Marie was a nurturing professional, full of energy, life, and sound advice. She has experienced microaggressive behaviors and comments at work but uses that as strength and to mentor other young professionals of color. Now that she has “grown into her looks” she encourages other Black women to embrace their natural beauty as well, in whatever form feels good to them. She was really an inspiring individual and pillar of strength.

Suzie

Suzie was a highly intellectual individual, a Louisiana native and self-described militant during her childhood. Her grandmother in New Orleans where she learned about her Creole heritage raised her. She has been aware of colorism and hair texture bias since she was a child and recalled having family members who could legally pass as White. As a result, they choose to disassociate with family members who could not. Her experiences were unique given that she was fair-skinned and was affectionately called, “Red” as a child, but she also had tightly coiled natural hair. The interaction of her light skin, Afro, and conscious thought process helped her contextualize the meaning of appearance for Black women in Louisiana.

While in college, she recalled various experiences with racism. She narrated that when she was at the top of her class and a particular professor did not feel she deserved a merit-based scholarship. Instead, the department offered the historically solo scholarship to her and another White female student, as it was unreal for a Black girl to receive this prestigious award. Now as an employee of the same institution, she is aware of her place as a Black, educated, female professional that may advance in some ways because of her light skin, but aware of how “aggressive” her Afro might appear.
Tracy

Tracy has been a professional in Student Affairs for about seven and a half years and has worked at various institutions in the south, including two in Louisiana. She was born and raised in a small town in Louisiana where she and her family experienced racism and discrimination. Often, she was the only Black person in her classes and during extracurricular activities. Although she is fair skinned with a softened, easy to manage hair texture, she was not afforded any privileges because she was still Black. In her small town, there were no skin tone variations within the Black community. As a result, she could not contribute any of her experiences to her being light skinned, rather all of her encounters with color were more closely related to her race. In fact, Tracy has always known she was Black but did not realize how “different” her skin tone and hair texture were from other Black people until she went to college. Other students did not hesitate to ask her, “What are you?” and to not believe that she was not “mixed” with any other race because of her skin and hair.

As a result of her late introduction to her difference in skin tone and hair texture, Tracy did not notice many instances where she was given preferential treatment because of her appearance. She discussed an encounter with a Black woman professional who took a chance and hired her as a Resident Assistant in college. However, she correlated this opportunity with the woman wanting to help young Black girls and not necessarily a young, light skinned girl.

Vera

Vera was a sweet, calm professional who has served her current institution for three years where she also obtained her doctoral degree. As a coordinator, she assisted with student services and happened to be the only woman of color in her office. While she is very aware of colorism and hair texture bias, she has not had any traumatic experiences with these issues, but has
witnessed friends’ experiences. She described her skin tone as medium brown but noticed that she viewed her skin slightly darker than how others view her tone. She also often bought makeup darker than her complexion on accident. Because of her medium tone, she viewed this as an advantage. She stated, “I’m kind of average, I’m not light, I’m not dark, I’m right in the middle… Kind of like I’m non descript, like I’m an average African American person.” She first learned of her skin tone in elementary school where kids would tease her for being Black. During that time, she began checking and comparing her skin tone to her mother’s and other family members. As an adolescent, she briefly wished her skin tone were lighter, but eventually grew into her beauty and gained self-confidence. She was also natural and wore her hair in natural hairstyles. While she has been natural for a few years, it has taken her some time to get used to wearing her natural hair texture and understanding how to style it in ways that complement her features and are also professionally acceptable.

Although Vera attributed her medium brown skin tone to being socially advantageous, she did not view her specific tone as professionally advantageous. She did not think her skin tone has helped hinder or advance her career more than her race has. But she did realize that being the only African American in her office, other African American students or other students of color feel more comfortable seeking her out for services, which may cause additional stress because she is the only visible source of support for them in her office.
Table 1
Demographic Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Number of Years in Position</th>
<th>Self-Described Skin Color</th>
<th>Self-Described Hair Texture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Brown, dark brown</td>
<td>Curly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arianne</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Caramel, brown</td>
<td>Transitioning to natural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Dark skin</td>
<td>Natural, curly, softer texture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Medium to dark to chocolate</td>
<td>Kinky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie Jasper</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Light skin</td>
<td>Curly but easy to manage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>2 ½ years</td>
<td>Caramel</td>
<td>Tighter coiled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Associate Director</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Dark skinned</td>
<td>Long and straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzie</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Fair skinned</td>
<td>4B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>Associate Director</td>
<td>3 ½ years</td>
<td>Light skin</td>
<td>Soft, naturally curly, but wears it straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera</td>
<td>Programming Support</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Medium brown</td>
<td>Very, very kinky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presentation of Findings

The following sections represent an overview of the interview data in which participants’ discussed their meanings, experiences, and thoughts regarding colorism and hair texture bias in their professional and social settings. Five salient themes emerged from the interviews and are discussed in detail which included: (1) Light and Pretty, (2) Dark and Natural, (3) Self Destruction: A Communal Effort, (4) #TeamLightSkin: The Creole Influence, and (5) Hair Affairs vs. Student Affairs: Politics in the Workplace. Although the researcher was interested in
both professional and social encounters, the social experiences are discussed throughout each theme. Each theme is supported by sub-themes.

The first theme discussed is Light and Pretty. The experiences discussed in this theme can be organized by the following sub-themes: a) If You’re Light, You’re Right and b) Impact on Dating.

**Light and Pretty**

Colorism, or the preference for light skin and European features, such as straightened or softened textured hair is commonly revered as advantageous in the Black community, may be perpetuated by both Black and non-Black people. Historical stereotypes attached to perceptions of skin tone and hair texture has yet to diminish but instead remains prevalent and highly visible. From the conversations with participants in this study, it was made evident that light skin is synonymously linked to pretty. Symbolically, white represents life and elicits positive, happy reactions. Whereas, black conjures notions of death, gloom, and despair. Transferring these examples to skin tones, similar notions reflect ideas engulfing light and dark hues. A review of the interview data indicates clear advantages for Black women with these features.

*If You’re Light, You’re Right*

Participants discussed many advantages afforded to Black women with light skin and straight hair, denoting a sense of “rightness” with light skin. The participants may not personally believe these statements to be true, as many discussed society’s idea of what it means to have light skin.

Elizabeth suggested, “Light is always something that’s viewed as good or clean…the lighter you are the prettier, smarter, and better you are.” Agreeing with light closely linked to pretty, Suzie added, “some people feel like just because a person has a lighter complexion, that
they’re prettier than people who have a darker complexion.” Vera noted, “they may look at you as not as harmful or hurtful or less scary, less intimidating if you’re lighter skin” as an advantage of having light skin. Marie confessed,

I will say that there is an advantage more to blend when you are of a lighter tone to the Caucasian race. I guess the advantage is people befriending you…and I think they kind of see it as a sign of beauty.

She went on to discuss societal advantages including, “they get to get in the door for things, you’re noticed. You don’t have to work the crowd as much, or work the ranks as much.

Their kind of brought in the room, rather.”

Agreeing with Marie’s comment, Daisy added,

lighter skin is less intimidating, unfortunately a symbol of beauty, I think that having a lighter skin tone aligns with Western standard of beauty…its closer to Whiter skin and that’s something that’s accepted as a standard. That’s what’s in magazines and I think that’s why African American models have been fighting so hard because our skin is not that standard of beauty… lighter skin is perceived as beautiful.

From a personal perspective, Suzie shared,

But I can say there was things I was able to do, because of they shade of my skin tone, like I think they accepted me easier…they find lighter skin Blacks to be less threatening, they’re not as intimidated by whatever crazy reason, has been my experience. And if you couple that with being articulate, you can go very far.

Similarly, Jackie Jasper shared,

People are more likely to open up to me or feel like they can connect to me, because…they feel less threatened by my complexion… I feel like if I’m in a group, and I’ve watched this happen, people of another race, they’re more likely to talk to me than the darker complected person of the group. So I’ve seen that happen. I’ve seen that happen several times.

We can gather from these quotes that lighter skinned, Black women are seen as pretty and not intimidating as the lightness of their skin denotes a sense of safety for others. On the other hand, we might assume darker skin is considered threatening. Closest to White is the standard of beauty and this “beauty queue” (Hunter, 2005) is seen in multiple outlets. Privileging what
society would deem pretty and placing pretty people in visible positions. An example of this is described by Ann who mentioned that lighter skinned women are more likely to get certain jobs and went on to describe her thoughts on a particular dance team.

Ann noticed color discrimination as she recalled her thoughts on a university’s dance team at a Historically Black College in the south. She remembered watching the dance team perform with the band and recalling how they were always, “light skinned with softer hair… you never saw a dark skin[ded] girl as a [dancer], and if you did, it was maybe one.” Arianne added, “I think often we will think that an African American who is fair skinned has better access to jobs or to opportunities because maybe they appear more White.” She noted her personal beliefs and stated, “I don’t know if I believe that, but I think that’s something that’s out there” and went on to mention the assumption that, “someone who is African American or I guess a fairer skinned African American has a different level of intelligence or a different level of prestige.”

In harmony with Arianne’s comment, Suzie explained, “If there was a disagreement between someone who was light skinned and someone who was darker complect[ed], or had a different hair texture, the light skin person would not be seen as the aggressor as much.”

However, Jackie Jasper provided a different perspective,

I have friends who are dark complected who say that because I’m light skinned that I have more privileges than they do…but I feel like people assume that because my skin tone is lighter, that I don’t experience the same biases as any other Black person. But I’ve had racist experiences just like any other Black person…maybe because I’m light skinned, maybe I do have more advantages in terms of a predominately White setting that maybe I’m unaware of or just don’t associate with being light skin. Maybe because a darker skinned person can see that or they look around their surrounding and see more of an advantage for people who are lighter skin, I think that they feel the impact of that more than I would because I’m possibly at the advantage. So I think when I say I don’t really see anything, its because maybe I’m not affected the way that they are. I can see how it can be very possible and I’ve heard stories about it, but I can’t recall it every happening to me personally.
Jackie Jasper’s self reflection is somewhat similar to Peggy McIntosh’s inspiration for “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack” (1988), in that she doesn’t have to notice any advantages afforded to her because her skin tone is the social tone of choice. This may be an advantage of the light effect.

The narratives provided indicate a strong preference for light skinned Black women. As they are automatically viewed as pretty, less intimidating, and having more options. With the exception of Jackie Jasper stating, “When I get my hair washed and flat ironed professionally, people don’t charge me as much money as they do with a different texture because it’s easier, its faster,” there were surprisingly not as many comments about differences in hair texture as there were about differences in skin tone. Perhaps, when you talk about light skin, its assumed the person has a softened hair texture so the comments discussed may also suggest the same advantages for hair. This preference for light skin and softer hair also extends to the Black dating scene.

**Impact on Dating**

The participants in this study unanimously indicated there are clear advantages given to lighter-skinned Black women with softened textured hair, particularly on the dating scene. These privileges came from the male’s parents as well as their own personal preferences. Instances where the parental influences were exposed are indicated in Elizabeth’s and Tracy’s responses.

Elizabeth discussed her interest in a Creole man in Louisiana with whom she had gone on a few dates with. However, she quickly learned that dating would not progress when he explained, “his mother would not be very accepting of people who are darker complected or did not have straight hair.” Because Elizabeth had neither, their relationship ended. Tracy on the
other end stated, “I’ve even had guys tell me, I was the best thing, their momma wouldn’t let them bring home a White girl so I was the next best thing.”

Other women noted men’s preference in the following quotes. When discussing dating, Lola suggested, “there is a very pedestal that lighter complected women are on opposed to darker complected women because I have a lighter complexion, I don’t think that I deal with as much when it comes to the dating piece.” Jackie Jasper expressed, “I always felt like people are less likely to want or date a dark skin woman than a light skin woman.” Similarly, Ann agreed, “brighter skin[ded] females were sought after as far as girlfriend material versus a dark skin[ded] girl.” These statements indicate a preference for light skin and lightly textured hair within the Black community and dating.

Arianne expressed her discontent when her boyfriend confessed that he prefers “Puerto Rican women because they have the most beautiful hair and skin tone” over Black women. Although these women are generally not as fair as White women, their tone and hair is similar to a mixed-race Black person. Arianne on the other hand, is not and in fact, self describes as caramel brown with natural/transitioning hair. She added, because “there’s a lot of mixed race people and you know, that’s like the standard of beauty and so if you didn’t have a certain shade, you were considered Black and just good luck to you.”

When expressing concern for her boyfriend’s preference for Puerto Rican women’s hair, Arianne shared,

And thinking about that, her hair is still curly; it’s just a different texture. Then maybe you think mind should be a softer, sleeker, texture of a curl. I think that’s pretty offensive to think of someone who says they’re interested in dating you, but still has a preference for how you think they should look. It’s almost like trying to meet an expectation that you never can, or how people go out and do things to themselves to fit these expectations, like, bleaching their skin to wearing their hair in a relaxer because they want to be like someone who has another race’s texture of hair.
Although Vera, who wears her hair natural hasn’t experienced hair texture bias in her personal dating relationships, she has witnessed someone else’s experience. Vera told the story of her friend’s relationship; she is light skinned with curly hair and was dating a Black man of 6 years. She shared,

…she has her curly hair, and its cute but when she straightens it, he goes on and on and on about how gorgeous it is, but the days that its curly, he’ll complement her on her shoes. You know, it will be about something else, and it’s like what’s this expectation from? It’s very interesting how it seeps into relationships and dating more than we probably even realize and recognize.

Lola, who has been natural for a few years and was natural when she met her current boyfriend, mentioned that her boyfriend likes her hair in any style she wears, but that she may have noticed a slight preference for her straight hair. Although he advises her to wear her hair however she wants to, she mentioned,

I think that he likes when I get my hair straightened. I think I’ve gotten it flat ironed a total of three times since we’ve been dating for almost two years. And so it makes me wonder is there a preference, and he says no, but for me it’s always in the back of my mind. Is there a preference? How did his exes wear their hair? Am I the first natural girl he’s dated?

While these may be internalized questions of concerns, her concerns stem from somewhere that is very much valid. As explained by Arianne,

To have someone tell you in a negative way that and devalue you based on your skin tone, that can kind of stick with you longer to know that someone would be picked suitable for dating or marrying versus another friend because she’s a different or another shade is very unfair. Its leaves you in a place of almost hopelessness, like what do you do?

The second theme discussed is Dark and Curly. The experiences discussed in this theme can be organized by the following subthemes: a) Stereotypes of Dark and Curly, and b) The Ultimate Disqualifier.
Dark and Curly

Unfortunately, Black women are socially disadvantaged when considering larger societal beauty norms. White women occupy the top of the ladder, mainly because beauty norms are racially and gendered beliefs grounded in White supremacy. Black beauty then, is placed beneath, downgraded and typically not considered a solo concept of beauty. In fact, when discussing Black women and beauty, identifying labels precede the term beauty. For example, Black beauty, Afrocentric Beauty, Brown Beauty, and the like. Keep in mind that this illustration represents the Black/White dichotomy and intentionally omitted other minoritized groups of women. This hierarchy perpetuates feelings of inadequacy but also recycles negative stereotypes linked to darker skin and tightly coiled hair. The interview data shows straightforward disadvantages.

Stereotypes of Dark and Curly

There was an overwhelming unified message that darker skinned women are viewed as “less than” in comparison to brown or lighter tones. Whether the participants personally feel these stereotypes to be true was not asked and assumedly not taken as a personal truth. However, these are the meanings society has conjured up regarding dark skin and thus brought to a forefront in the interviews.

To begin with, Jackie Jasper explained that people associate darker complexions with the, “inability to be articulate, or be refined, or regal. And you assume that those people are in more domestic positions.” She also mentioned, “I think when people look at dark skinned women, they assume they are the loud, outspoken person in the group.” Elizabeth bluntly stated, “…the darker you are, you are less than”… viewed as “too critical…” and in the work environment, seen as, “just complaining” when voicing concerns. She discussed the misunderstanding in perceptions
when she noted dark, “Black women can be seen as very standoffish or attitudinal when it’s just a Black woman may not feel as comfortable in those circles to like really let her guard down.”

Vera suggested, people might only see their color and nothing else they have to offer. For example, she discussed a scenario involving a male friend of hers and his comments after seeing a Beauty Queen pass by on a pageant float. “Damn! She’s Black!” exclaimed Vera’s male friend. Her immediate reaction was to punch him, she admitted, “I’ve never been violent but right then I just punched him. And was like, that is so degrading, like you just saw color. You didn’t even give her a chance.” This could potentially result from “dark skinned women were thought of as being ugly black” according to Ann. Arianne explained, “I guess appearing to be less educated because of your skin tone or appearing less attractive according to your skin tone” are disadvantages associated with darker complexions.

Arianne also raised a valid concern that darker skinned women may struggle with, she reflected,

…it makes you question, again, am I suitable? Am I a shade that someone will find this is attractive? I can definitely see how women will question who they are and question what they know about beauty and true beauty because of what a man or a partner who is interested in dating them has to say about their skin tone. While not a very popular topic when discussing light skin, hair became a more prevalent topic when discussing darker skin tones. The following quotes represent some of the thoughts regarding hair and skin tone.

DJ shared, “The kinkier the texture is, its not considered, ‘good hair.’ Its not hair that is accepted as beautiful.” Marie continued the hair dialogue by adding,

When they see you with a different type of hair texture, they see you as defiant, against the norm. I think that even if you’re dark skin standing next to a person with natural hair and you have straight hair, it’s a difference. People are like, ‘oh your hair is so pretty,’ [referring to the straight hair] if they’re trying to be discriminatory. I think it’s more frowned upon then accepted.
In the same vain, Suzie, who is fair skinned, explained the interaction of her skin and hair texture. As seen in the literature, skin complexion is at the top of the hierarchy when coupled with softened textured hair. However, when coarse hair or a more tightly coiled hair texture is paired with light skin, the light skin may move a few spaces lower on the chart. Suzie shared, when she wears her afro, people automatically assume she’s this militant Black person until they get to know her… “You know I get the looks, like that awkward look.” She continued on to say, “Caucasian people would look at my hair like ‘oh I like your hair, I wish my hair could do that’ and I’m like really? Do you really like my hair? Or you just think that’s what you should say?

Even when considering hair, “stylists do look at hair texture and how coarse it is, how long it takes. It could be more expensive for someone else to get their hair done,” as expressed by Jackie Jasper and witnessed by Marie.

As discussed in the interviews, darker skinned women occupy the bottom of the beauty hierarchy and are also unfairly associated with being intimidating, outspoken, attitudinal, and sometimes militant, depending on their hairstyle. This definitely complicates the professional and social landscapes for darker skinned Black women when negative stereotypes are forced upon them prior to them even speaking. Darker skinned women with European features, however, are at a disadvantage, because darker skin is not as easily associated with being pretty or beautiful. Yet, when paired with European features, such as softened textured hair, their level of attractiveness is elevated and celebrated. This is explored as the women shared their thoughts on the “ultimate qualifier.”

*The Ultimate Qualifier*

The ultimate qualifier showed up in every interview. Although it’s a one-liner, I had to make mention of it because it was such an apparent statement that was either experienced or
witnessed. “You’re pretty for a dark girl!” danced throughout the interviews. No one ever says, “you’re pretty for a light skinned girl” or “you’re pretty for a White girl.” As it is already assumed these two groups would be pretty, but for dark girls, it is treated as the rarest occasion to see a dark skinned pretty girl. After recalling this statement, Vera added,

you know they compare them to lighter skin people, they’re not just kind of complimented for who they are. Right now, they’re always kind of compared, you know, ‘you’re pretty for a dark skin person’ or ‘he’s a nice chocolate’ like their color is always added to the fact of whatever comment or compliment that comes up.

DJ noted,

I think first off with darker skin, that’s not seen as beautiful as lighter skin. I think that even if you are considered a beautiful woman, you’re still considered beautiful for a dark skin woman. I’ve heard that a lot.

Lola explained,

I think that it’s unfortunate that these women have to deal with that and that it’s not their job to fix the social stigma of darker skinned women...Why can’t dark skin women just be pretty because they are pretty?

These statements reflect many of the interviews as they discussed thoughts on dark skin.

To be told that you are pretty for a dark skinned woman is a very degrading comment, yet others seem to think it is a compliment. Having softened features on dark skin is viewed as rare, exotic, and often times qualify as pretty but only because of the softened features.

The third theme discussed is Intracultural Relations. The experiences discussed in this theme can be organized by the following subthemes: a) Early Encounters, b) Poison in the Community and c) Wanting Something Different.

**Self Destruction: A Communal Effort**

Discrimination is often seen as an isolated Black versus White issue, but as discussed in literature and expressed in these interviews, discrimination within the Black community exists and lives within complex concepts of colorism. In addition to light skin versus dark skin
dilemmas, even more complications arise when hair texture is introduced, especially considering the popularity of the natural hair movement. The interaction of these two physical characteristics is a very relevant, yet still slightly taboo topic of discussion. Yet, the impact is felt and often, the Black community is its own enemy. The separatist mindset introduced in American chattel slavery is as poisonous then as it is today. These concepts are still infiltrating the minds of youth who carry these learned ideas in childhood into action in their adulthood. When asked to discuss experiences related to skin tone and hair texture bias, the majority involved interactions with other Black people. The experiences discussed in the interviews portray a glaring image of intracultural discrimination.

Early Encounters

For many of the participants, learning about their skin tone took place as a child and in the home or at school with other children. However, learning that something could possibly be wrong with their skin tone also occurred in early stages of childhood and often times taught by family members or other Black people. Elizabeth mentioned,

The experiences I have range from when I was a child being told that I had to come inside because I would get black by being in the sun. Or being told when I was in high school that I would have to marry or date someone that was much lighter than me so my children or future children could be seen.

These commonly expressed comments send unfair messages that dark skin is not desired. Vera remembered being called “Black” by her White classmates in elementary school. She took that comment as a reference to her dark skin. Ann also mentioned,

My experience is pretty much as a child where I’m of a darker complexion and has always been of a darker complexion. I was shy but also insecure about my color. Didn’t like to go outside and be in the sun, I just couldn’t stand being in the sun because it makes you darker. And also, you know, kids are cruel, and this is family members you know, they would call me names because I was a darker color.
Arianne recalled her encounters in the 2nd or 3rd grade at an all Black catholic elementary school in New Orleans. “I can remember most is there being a distinctive way that people would point out being light skin versus brown or caramel versus being dark skinned among kids.”

Lola first realized her skin tone at an early age during encounters with her sister. She explained, …But I guess she started making me notice more because she would speak about how she wished she looked more like me, my mom, and my brother from skin tone to eye color, things like that. So I think that was when I kind of noticed a difference between how people felt. I didn’t know what that feeling was back then.

She also added that in middle school, “Especially running track and being athletic, the shorts are short you know, and girls and guys speaking to your so yellow…” made her realize that her skin was light.

Susie discussed learning about her history and skin tone as a Creole woman at a young age from her grandmother who raised her. She also noticed the difference in tones because of the comments boys would make in her neighborhood. She narrated, I grew up in the hood in New Orleans and so you know the guys, they use the terminology of ‘Red,’ you know if you’re light complect[ed], well not like to the point where you’re almost White, that’s high yellow, that’s what they would call someone of that shade. But if you’re kind of like slightly darker than that, you would be considered red…but I could recall them calling me like, ‘say Red!’

Unfortunately, these experiences about learning color did not end in childhood. The dangerous recycling of negative assumptions linked to skin tones filters back into the learned and practiced behaviors in adulthood. This poisonous cycle continues to teach the Black community harmful messages about our appearance.

Poison in the Community

Although colorism originated with White people, Black people have perpetuated these ideals, making skin tone and hair texture bias common problems in the Black community. These are issues that are unfortunately hard to remove because we perpetuate these thwarted views of
ourselves. Colorism and hair texture biases are poisonous in the Black community and the effects contagious spread like a cancer in the body. When asked about her experiences with colorism, Jackie Jasper stated, “the most disadvantages have been with people of my own race. With people who have darker skin, they automatically have something against light skin people.”

Arianne’s boyfriend also has something against light skinned women. He stated, “I can’t date a light skinned woman because they’re too much, they’re too uppity.” Suzie also experienced this stereotyping behavior. She stated, 

It was weird because the Black students, whenever I did encounter that, they would think, ‘oh she think she’s all that’ because you’re an attractive light skin person, ‘you just think you’re too much.’ I had friends but they would just assume that until they met me…and then on the other hand, you know, as far as the White race, you still Black. In color contrast, Marie who has darker skin, but, has really long and straight hair shared, But I do think people judge you when you’re Black before they see you. They’re like ‘oh here she come, she thinks she’s all that, I’m not going to talk to her or associate with her.’ But that’s what makes me even more responsive. Even when they don’t say anything to me, I will go up to them and say ‘hey, how you doing?’ I’m like we have to stop this, I can’t keep letting you do this. You are going to cause yourself to miss out on an opportunity. You can’t do that, especially to ourselves. You know better.

Regarding Intracultural relations, DJ mentioned colorism is 

…expressed more so within [the Black community] more so than outside. I think it’s still expressed outside. You hear about companies with policies that you know you can’t have dreads or you can’t have natural hair, you know your hair has to be straightened, things like that so I think that it contributes to colorism. But inside the race of African Americans, its much more concentrated there. Especially with hair texture. And you know everyone’s going natural so are you going to type your hair, you know the hair typing system, its always ‘what type are you?’… I think that with light skin versus dark skin, its still an issue. 

Marie explained, 

we’re so discriminatory amongst ourselves because of the different shades that we are. I think that’s probably the harshest because it’s coming from another person of color. Whether its dating, working together, or even just critiquing each other before you even know the person. I think outside, you can kind of expect that because that it what’s going on, that’s the social norm and you know people are going to do that you. You kind of brace yourself. But when you are on the inside, with other people of color, you’re kind of
like, ‘I know you’re not trippin on me.’ As far as which on is worst, I would have to say, it would be inside of the Black community.

Not only do we as Black people judge each other by our skin tones, we also incorporate hair. The politics associated with Black hair are centered on acceptance and is an on-going battle that both Black men and women contribute to. When interviewing candidates for professional positions, Jackie Jasper informed,

…when another African American woman sits in front of me, I’m conscious of what her hair looks like. I really determined this last year that I think we are more critical of hair, the people who don’t have naturally straight hair, who hair could be braided or twisted. I think we are more critical of our hair.

Anne mentioned, “I really and truly think that it’s within the Black community” when asked about how colorism is practiced. She added,

“Growing up, it was thought that we had to have straight hair. And no one really taught us about the beauty of being African American and the beauty of having curly hair and we just adapted to what society thought our hair should like look. And so now when you see a lot of Black women going natural, I think the older generation…thinks ‘you should tame that,’ I’ve actually heard naturals talk about their family members or husbands not wanting them to have natural hair. So I think its more within our race than it is outside our race.

Arianne is currently transitioning to natural hair. Prior to making the decision to go natural, she mentioned, “I’m sure I’ve been in middle school since my first relaxer and its been relaxed ever since then.” It is not uncommon for Black girls to get their first relaxer at an early age and maintain it throughout adulthood, with the inability to recall their original hair texture. She also discussed conversations she’s had with her close friends about Black hair.

Conversations about how you should wear your hair, who should go natural, who shouldn’t because of what your hair’s going to look like when it grows out. Again, all among people who identify as Black women and look differently because of skin tone or hair texture and these like in depth conversations about who should do what, based on society telling us about our hair or skin tone.
She also shared that her mother, “is definitely not on board with the natural hair movement.” Perhaps because, “when she grew up, you got a relaxer, that’s what you did and so, for her, she’s like, ‘so, your hair is going to be like this all the time?’” in response to Arianne’s recent decision to go natural. She continued,

“…you’ll find that among Black women, we even have these expectations of you know, if you’re going natural, what should this look like? It should still be this really soft texture, that maybe your hair just isn’t, and then maybe you find yourself in this situation, well maybe I should go back to relaxed hair which may not be the healthiest option for your hair because of older generations or people you work with who has these expectations about how your should be worn.

Suzie, who wears her natural and often times in an afro, has received comments from other Black people, “oooh you have some bad hair” and when she would go to the salon, other Black women would ask, “well why don’t you put a perm in that?” These suggestions all stem from a broader conception of what beauty for Black women should look like.

On the other hand, because of Tracy’s “wet and go” hair texture, she has received comments from other Black women who discredit her “hair struggles.” She explained her Black friends would often comment, “girl you don’t know what this is like, you don’t have anything to worry about.” She explained, “But I really do have worries and I really do have sometimes struggles with my hair.” Regardless of the skin tone or hair texture, there are perceived struggles, causing all of the participants to recall “wanting something different” at some point in time.

*Wanting Something Different*

As a result of all the negativity associated with being and looking Black, it is no wonder that many of the participants either wanted to change their skin color, hair texture, or both at some point. When asked if you ever wished your hair texture were different, Elizabeth responded, “Yes!” She explained, “I wish it was just curlier, like defined curls because I feel like in my opinion it would be more manageable for me and maybe I would like wear it out.”
Manageability was a very common factor that seemed to be important for Black women when discussing hair. Jackie Jasper confessed, “Oh yeah!” in response to the same question. “When I was growing up, I used to hate my hair curly and always wanted straight hair.” Vera also responded with an excited, “yes!” She went on to state,

I think it comes to play that you always want what someone else has. Because someone else can look at me and say, ‘oh your hair is so thick and nice’ and its like even before I switched to or becoming natural, its always think and hard to manage and so, not even the look of it, just in the time and attention you need to take care of it, has been the part that I wish I had someone else’s.

Ann, who now describes her hair as curly, “wished [she] had a different hair texture. [She] wished [she] had curly hair” when she had a perm.

Lola would have preferred a

looser texture just because the managing piece. It’s like oh my gosh, to be able to wet your hair and go to work out in the mornings and to have your weekends. Like ok, I have to twist my hair tonight, I got to do a protein treatment, I gotta do a deep conditioner just to make sure that my hair is somewhat manageable when it comes to me wearing it out or going to work. So I think the ease of having something more manageable is when she would prefer a different hair texture.

Suzie mentioned, she “was one of those kids with the towel on [her] head walking around the house wishing [her] hair was long and flowy” but “I quickly got over that” she added.

The hair conversation flowed with ease and the participants seemed more comfortable discussing their thoughts about hair. However, when asked if they ever wished they had a different skin tone, the responses were not as immediate or open. However, Marie shared,

My mom is very fair skinned, and so we have different hair textures and so I would be like wow my mom is so pretty. But what I wasn’t think about was everything that you see on TV, I mean everything back then, everything was White, and what is right, and pretty, and soft, and my mom’s skin tone was like that. ‘Man I wish I was that color’ and my mom would always tell me, ‘you are beautiful, I wish I was your color’ and she would always tell me those things which was great. But I had no idea why I wanted to be light skinned, that’s so weird, even to this day. I would be like to my mom, ‘wow I wish I looked like you.’ And we had a lot of Latino people in our area and they were fair.
skinned, I used to just wish my hair texture were different, my complexion were different, so I could be like them. Vera wished she were a different tone, but only when she was younger. “But when you’re an adolescent” she explained, “you’re impressionable anyway. I probably wished I was lighter.” Ann explained, “I used to get called names being of a darker skin color,” and wished she had a different appearance. Ann shared, “when I was young, I remember I may have been seven or eight years old, if that. But I remember distinctly telling my mom that I wish I was White.”

Surprisingly, Suzie who is fair skinned “wanted to be a darker tone to fit in more with the kids at school.” She also included that she has “always been attracted to people that were darker complected.” Tracy also at one point wished she were “a little darker to easily cover [her] blemishes.” But Jackie Jasper, has never wished her light skin were a different skin tone.

The fourth theme discussed is #TeamLightSkin: The Creole Influence. The experiences discussed in this theme can be organized by the following subthemes, a) The Influence of Media and b) The Influence of Louisiana.

#TeamLightSkin: The Creole Influence

Many of the participants’ reasons for changing their skin tone or hair texture were influenced by family members. However, there are other key influences that are responsible for Black women wanting to change an aspect of their physical being. Media and the use of social media developed a theme throughout the interviews, as its influence cannot be ignored when discussing the Black image. Similarly, given the unique context of Louisiana, being in Louisiana provided an interesting perspective.

Influence of Media

Louisiana definitely plays a role in perpetuating notions of colorism and hair texture bias. But on a more global scale, media and social media also has its fair share of generating
denigrating messages about skin tone and Black hair. The influence of media was an undeniable theme throughout the interviews.

When asked if you ever wished your skin tone were a different shade, Elizabeth explained that when she was five or six years old because, “every White doll didn’t come in the African American doll” and

…most of the shows I watched, Mama’s Family, Full House, Step by Step, most of those shows only had White people in them so I think it’s hard to not wish that you could be on TV as a very young child and never see anybody that looks like you.

She also mentioned that her “Facebook friends have made comments about straight hair being more attractive” even though she doesn’t “really pay them too much attention because it’s just Facebook.” However, this may influence other women’s decision to go natural, thoughts about their hair, or how they view other Black women’s hair. Vera also commented on the influence of television and asserted, “culture and TV played into lighter skin and fairer skin ladies.”

Arianne discussed how rap groups play into the color complex,

…groups like Cash Money will say things like that on interviews [referring to their preference for lighter skinned women], and its kind of scary because none of their moms are the same shade as them which is not the same shade they are seeking out to date or you know, impregnate, because sometimes they’re not even dating. Just to produce another lighter child.

DJ also discussed the music industry,

I remember when Pharell had his new album and he had an African American woman on there but she was light skinned. People were like, ‘well why don’t you have any Black women?’ and he’s like, ‘well I do, but she’s light skin.’ So you know, it’s not truly Black if you’re light skin. Or you know, dark skin women don’t deserve to be on the cover of magazines or album covers or anything. So I think within the race it’s more concentrated. According to DJ, “there are not a lot of positive images outside of Oprah or Michelle Obama” for African American women. She also made a reference to commercials and how they may,
…cast Black children, but they’ll always look mixed and have curly hair and the mom will always have curly hair, like a looser texture of hair. Like that’s what Black looks like to them. When I see African Americans, that’s what I see in commercials. While not all African Americans look like this…I think its more of a marketing thing, like a typecasting. Again it looks less intimidating for you to be of a lighter skin and for you to have curly hair versus kinky hair. Like you don’t really see that.

Jackie Jasper talked about how the “light skin vs. dark skin memes seemed to be flooding my [instagram] timeline, like within the African American community.” In addition, although we say things as a joke, we don’t always take the time to understand the ramifications of those jokes. In reality I think it does kind of perpetuate a divide without us even being aware of it at the moment. I think we look kind of stupid when you associate the issues we have with colorism and racism that we particularly within the African American community and then for us to turn around and create memes about it, its like you’re mocking the issues or the disadvantages. Like we have so many things that we could still be working toward collectively and while we choose to create a meme about being light skin or being dark skin, I don’t really get it. And I guess when I’m seeing it, I’m guilty of laughing or thinking its funny, its not until I have these conversations that I realize the ramifications of what that looks like.

Marie took a different spin on her reflections about media and its influence on the Black image. She discussed the positive influence of social media,

all the images that are flying by lately, a lot of people are wanting to be natural, are wanting to be proud of their Blackness. Especially with the ‘My Black is Beautiful Campaign, I think that’s very neat, I like that. And it actually makes you check yourself and say, ‘well why isn’t that ok?’ or ‘why would I tell a child, or a friend, or just anybody, ‘oh you should wear your hair like this’ no, you should be who you are and love yourself. I think social media is doing a good job on that end.

Media and the use of social media can be used in favor of the Black image, but often times it exploits us and allows avenues for Black people to exploit each other. In similar fashion, the influence of Louisiana’s history can work to shape how Black people are viewed but more importantly, how we view each other.
Influence of Louisiana

Due to Louisiana’s unique history, it is not surprising that Louisiana culture plays a role in perpetuating issues of colorism and hair texture bias, as evidenced in the interviews. Arianne believed Louisiana has a significant role in continuing these notions. She added,

I think just living in a place like Baton Rouge, I’m from New Orleans, so it’s very diverse there. There’s still racism and colorism everywhere but I think here in Baton Rouge, I’ve found that its more, I don’t want to say accepted, but I think its more blunt, like a little more open where people are. It’s very clear that people will judge based on how someone looks or appear.

She went on to say, “…when they would find out I’m from New Orleans they would automatically think I’m Creole because ‘oh, you’re not too dark.’” Having a safe complexion in Louisiana opens up more doors for racial ambiguity because of the heavy Creole influence and the various shades of brown that make up this cultural group. When recalling childhood experiences, Arianne talked about the types of things children at her school would say,

Well my mom said, ‘that you know, my hair is curly because of this’ or ‘I get to wear this type of clothing because we are Creole and so we have this money’ or ‘we have these things’ in a way among kids that’s still very innocent but I think still being pointed out to some people…And so having it pointed out makes you think, ‘well does my skin tone mean something? Do I feel I am the wrong shade?’

DJ also “most definitely” believes Louisiana has an influence on the perceptions of the Black appearance. She stated, “some people only claim Creole because it sounds better than being African American…I think everybody likes to claim that in Louisiana because it means you’re not Black…you’re mixed with something.” She went on to say,

…with the whole Creole thing, that’s something that I’ve always heard as a kid, ‘oh I’m not Black, I’m Creole.’ Creole is a mixture of Spanish, French, African American, Haitian, White, you name it, whatever. So I think because we have that cultural identity and we have Cajun and we have Creole, I think it definitely attributes to it. You see, maybe we should go to Lafayette, a lot of girls in Lafayette are light skin. That’s where the Cajun or ‘I’m Creole’ girls who have nice hair’ are. I even know some dark skin women that identify as a Creole but they have a very loose curly hair texture so even
being distinguished in that nature, the whole Creole thing is very big in Louisiana and it divides.

She also talked about her experience with helping facilitate a multicultural student conference and a student was upset that there were no sessions specifically for Creole people. The student felt the Creole culture was ignored and left out of the conference and student experience.

Being from New Orleans, Suzie discussed freely about the influence of Louisiana. She explored the historical slave mindset that privileged lighter skin tones and admitted,

it continued because we ended up adopting and buying into that and then when you look at, particularly in Louisiana, you see a lot of that, with the Creoles, the Quadroons, the Octaroons, the balls and stuff they used to have. I’ve heard stories about that from my family. I would be considered ‘Creole’ but doesn’t have ‘good hair’.

She added,

Being in Louisiana, pretty much the people who are lighter complexioned, they just have that complex here you know? There are some things that you can do I guess as a light skin person that I guess someone that’s darker complexioned may not be able to do. And its said, but I’ve seen that, I’ve definitely seen that.

Tracy discussed her experiences being from Louisiana with racially mixed features. Because of her demographic location, she felt that people were used to or comfortable with her appearance and understand that she is Black. She recalled,

I get a lot of people that think, just because of my name, that I’m either Hispanic. Not so much here in the Deep South, because they understand and live in the world of Creole and know that um, even though I’m light skin, I’m still African American. Even when I went up north, even though I’m from Louisiana, I would get a lot of people that would say, ‘What are you?’ and sit and try to figure out what my heritage is or think I’m not even African American or that I’m Hispanic or something of that sense.

Marie noticed the difference in culture after having moved from up north to Louisiana. When asked about her experiences with colorism, she responded,

I’ve never seen so many people say, ‘oh, she’s yellow,’ or ‘he’s red, she’s dark, she light, she’s light brown.’ I don’t really get it and even within our culture. In the south people identify with shades of colors...all this stuff started back in the day, but when my mom was a young girl, the dark skinned people that were in her town would not let the light
skin people go to school with them. So they all had to go to a catholic school or something. But then the light skin people called themselves Creole, they didn’t call themselves Black. So I think that self-identification is very important…I think that has a very big impact on how people see themselves. As far as what parents are telling them, what the community is telling them. And instead of saying we are all the same, we different shades, but we are all the same, they were actually making them feel different. I think it really stems back from Louisiana history culture and how they did things. Just like they had Black people who were free, but most of them were light skinned and they blended in a lot.

Jackie Jasper, who had only been in Louisiana for a year agreed that Louisiana plays a role in perpetuating these beliefs. She stated,

the Creole people or the three-tiered caste system, I think when you think historically, those things still show up. We haven’t completely moved passed those issues. So I think that within the community, in Louisiana, we separate ourselves. Sometimes more than individuals outside the community. In terms of Louisiana and colorism, it’s a lot more prevalent here.

The fifth theme discussed is Hair Affairs vs. Student Affairs: Politics in the Workplace and is supported by the following subthemes: a) What is Professional? b) Showing Face: Surface Level Diversity and c) Microaggressions as Commonplace.

Hair Affairs vs. Student Affairs: Politics in the Workplace

Although there were not many experiences with overt discrimination relating specifically to skin tone and hair texture in the professional setting, there were notions of professionalism and how the Black woman’s appearance may or may not fit this mold. For many of the women, they were the only Black woman in their department or office. As a result, their experiences involved race rather than color making it was difficult to detect and attribute outcomes to skin tone or hair texture alone. Nonetheless, hair was a salient topic when asked about their professional experiences. More often than not, the participants discussed feeling they had to monitor their natural hairstyles for their work environments and fear of their hair disqualifying them for professional advancement. Their stories reflect the contrast of Blackness and professionalism.
What is Professional?

Hair and professionalism was a common conversation with the women. Skin tone was not mentioned much outside of race, however hair definitely stirred up healthy dialogue. It is disheartening to feel that the way your hair naturally grows is considered unprofessional, something unique to the Black community. When asked to discuss any pressure experienced with hair in the professional setting, the women’s experiences were pretty synonymous or at least have witnessed other women feeling the same sort of pressures. Particularly, she pressure felt when interviewing or attending important meetings.

DJ shared,

With softer hair, you probably can achieve more professional or what people consider more professional looking styles, you can do more with your hair. It won’t be as intimidating I would say, as some of the kinkier styles you can wear in a fro, so I think its more intimidating especially in the workplace.

Elizabeth explained,

I think definitely in terms of just job interviewing and taking my career to the next step. Typically most of the places that I’ve applied, the organizations have been largely White and largely male and so when people describe professional, braids, locs, etcetera, are not part of what people deem, sometimes as attractive or professional.

Jackie Jasper admitted to once feeling, “like straight hair was more of a reflection of professionalism for some reason. And professionalism equals your hair looking a certain way.”

When considering the interview process, Jackie talked about a male friend who left a lasting impression on her.

I have a friend who is always like, when we’re getting ready to job interview, and we’re really good friends, he’s always like, you need to straighten your hair, and like now. I don’t know, like that is embedded in my brain. I’ve never gone to a job interview with curly hair or with my hair pulled up in like a little bun it’s just like, it’s so weird because I don’t even think people care that much.
She went on to confess,

I always thought that I should never wear my hair a certain way when I’m going on a job interview or when I’m trying to be promoted or move into a certain position or evaluated for something new, I feel like I have to look a certain way.

Susie shared a story of wearing her hair a certain way for an interview when asked if she ever felt her hair would disqualify her for professional advancement, she replied,

…so when I interviewed for this job, I was growing it out to go natural and I had a weave in my head. That was the first I ever had a weave. And it was a straight, mid back length and it was on its last leg. But I had this interview and I remember making a conscious decision to keep it in and just make it work for this interview because I didn’t want to be judged and I wanted them to look at me and not hair, you know I wanted them to give me a fair shot. I remember specifically leaving it in for that reason. Just keeping it real.

Similarly, Lola who now wears her hair natural discussed some internalized feelings about how her qualifications would be perceived based on her natural look.

I was wearing my hair relaxed so when I went to my interview, it was very like layers, whipped, hair blowing in the wind. And when I got there, [after being hired] I was going through a phase where I really didn’t want to wear makeup, I didn’t want to have to conform to society’s view of what beautiful was, so I went natural….

She then accepted another position shortly after with professionals who were used to her permed straight hair. She disclosed her feelings regarding this experience,

I was very hesitant as far as my hair. I’ve been natural, for well I’d only been fully natural for a few months when I came back. I hadn’t had a relaxer for over a year, but I had just cut my ends off so my hair was a lot shorter, completely different texture than having a relaxer. So I didn’t know…are they getting what they paying for, are they getting what they think they should have? Are they going to be accepting of it? Like are they going to be able to perform in the same role without them feeling like I’m up for the part. Especially because a lot of times because natural hair, it’s not a tamed look, people assume it’s not as professional.

When I asked Arianne if she ever felt her hair would disqualify her for professional advancement, she explained,

I think in some ways it could. I think at least working here, I think when I look at women of color who are in a lot of the very upward level positions, which there aren’t many, a lot of them are leaving, very few of them ascribe to a more natural look. A lot of them wear
their hair very, very, pressed [straight] and in the same way every day. And nothing’s wrong with that, but it makes me wonder if I wear my hair curly all the time, does that scare people? Or make people question my level of seriousness or how serious I take my job? I think it’s fun to have curly hair or to wear braids. I wonder if people think it’s childish. It’s really ridiculous the things we have to think about. When I do look on campus, there’s a mold that’s been kind of preset and I do wonder if that’s something I can break into.

She also discussed the great internalized debate that is common for many Black professional women, “It’s hard to figure out which standard to go by. Do you do your own, or do you try to do what’s best for maybe your career. It’s really difficult.”

In conversations with peers, I have noticed that Black women often have to contend with not only, “is my hair professional enough?” but also, “who should I resemble?” In that, many Black women want to go natural, but unsure of how they will look with their natural texture and a bit afraid of how they will be perceived after having made such a huge life decision and transition. On the other hand, wearing weaves and extensions are convenient, glamorized, and may provide a sense of confidence for women who want to achieve a softer, more polished look. It is definitely an internal dueling battle that myself and many other Black women face. Ann referenced a situation involving a Black woman with locked hair. She noted, “discrimination in the workplace can definitely happen with women with tighter and coily textured hair”. She discussed an article she read, “…about a lady who had dreads and at the time she had the job, and they did something to their policy that caused her to lose her job. They added some type of policy about her hair.”

Susie discussed a more covert encounter with her supervisor,

I was told we had to do a presentation to the deans about our program. And my supervisor, she is like Asian and Black, she was like, ‘now for this meeting, what are you wearing?’ which I told her, I mean I have sense, I know when to turn stuff on and off. So she’s like ‘what are you wearing’ so I told her, and then she’s like, ‘well how are you gonna wear your hair?’ Because I wear a big afro sometimes, and always have like a flower or butterfly in it, you know, its professional and its well-kept, and she was like,
'well for this meeting, you may not want to wear your big afro.’ She was like, ‘I’m just telling you’ you know she didn’t say in a mean way, but I knew what she was saying. And you know, it’s true, she was like, ‘cause you gon be in there with a bunch of White males and that’s something to think about. You don’t want them to be so focused on your hair and the way you look, you want them to be focused on your message.’ And so, you know, I didn’t have plans on doing my afro anyway, but by her saying that, that just lets you know what the culture is and kinda what we face here on campus.

Suzie eluded to a culture that is not quite ready for Black women’s many hairstyles that we may have or want to wear. Something so simple as our appearance can overshadow our work ethic, the value we bring to the team, our strengths and potential. Granted, anyone with brightly pink dyed hair, multiple facial piercings and tattoos, or even scantily clad attire can have their work and potential overlooked. But when you consider skin tone and hair texture, features that are natural, muddies the professional and social landscape for Black women. Another theme that emerged was the university’s superficial push for diversity. The limited number of Black and Brown faces in professional positions can also make it difficult to fully understand and embrace Black women’s physical appearance.

**Showing Face: Surface Level Diversity**

Throughout the interviews, many women made references to them being the only, if not, one of few Black women or people of color in their office and the need to diversify their staff. However, as congruent with current literature, the growing need to diversify stems from a very surface level visual representation of diversity. Hiring people of color is one factor, yet retaining them is key. It can be quite difficult to keep people of color employed if departments only recognize their tanned skin and nothing beyond what truly makes them diverse. The unique intricacies of recognizing the person, professional, and the culture that amalgamates their being. Many of the women discussed their experiences relating to “showing face” in their office.
Elizabeth discussed her experience with being the only Black woman in the office and how the department used her image to their advantage.

When I first started, I was one of the few people of color and so I was definitely in the front of all the pictures, on the brochures, going on recruiting trips, and it made it seem as if the department was at least more diverse racially than it really was. And so I had to kind of be very careful letting people know that this is it! Like Michael Jackson, this is it!

As a Black woman, Jackie Jasper admitted, “I do realize that when people are looking for visible diversity that there’s an advantage there for me.” Similarly, Ann noted, “I’m sure though some of the African Americans that have come before, have been hired because they’re African American and it looks good as far as diversity is concerned.” Like Marie stated, “hey, I think everyone is used, sometimes, as a token.” It looks good for a department to say, “we have a Black woman here, or we have a woman here, I have a Latina here” shows an indication of departments wanting to become diverse, at least visually.

Ann and Daisy mentioned that their departments have hired Black women; however, none of the Black women have received a promotion. In fact, Ann stated,

it’s just weird that we don’t have that many African Americans in my department and each one of us have asked for a promotion and have been turned down. In the meantime, three or four of my Caucasian counterparts with less experience have been promoted.

This example is on par with current research that suggests Black women are hired at entry to mid-level positions and are least likely to be considered for upper level administration positions or promotions. Visually, they make the office or department appear welcoming, inclusive, and diverse, yet their full potential and talents are not being tapped, if capped at an entry-level position. Although I do not have personal experience with this situation, as I have never applied for a mid-level position in my department, I do however know what it feels like to be a piece of a seemingly “diverse” puzzle. When I started my first professional position, there were pictures of people of color plastered on the recruitment materials. It initially made me feel
like I could potentially belong, however, once I actually arrived, I noticed that of the people of color displayed, many were random students unaffiliated with the department, the same professional staff faces were used, and the rest were pictures of the custodian staff which of course is overwhelmingly Black. The Associate Director at the time told me, “I’m really glad we hired you. I was really looking out for (said Black woman’s name) so that she could have a friend and someone to relate to.” As a brand new professional without much of a critical mind, I was unsure how to really process and perceive that information. But this statement has always stood out to me. He assumed that just because we are both Black that we would be friends, again reinforcing superficial notions of what diversity really means.

Being superficially diverse also extends to social encounters as explained by Tracy. She gave an example of the response her White friends would say if someone called them racist. “My best friend Tracy is Black” making mention that she is very fair skinned with a softened hair texture and often times their only Black friend.

**Microaggressions as Commonplace**

Although this section focuses more so on race than color, I had to include it because it was such a common experience for Black women. Microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicie, 2012, p. 186).

While many women could not recall microaggressive comments directed toward them that relate specifically to skin tone or hair texture in the professional setting, many did recall experiencing microaggressions at work related to race. Quite a few participants had experiences with microaggressions in their work and social environments.
Marie gave an example of a reoccurring microaggressive situation that she faces. Regardless of the intent, this can be seen as a microagression targeted at an educated, well-qualified and experienced Black woman.

I’ve had people and I could just be wearing regular clothes or something, and you know, I guess, they’ll be like, aren’t you a coordinator? And I’m lookin like, noo, I’m not a coordinator, there’s nothing wrong with a coordinator, I started as a coordinator, but I’ve been here almost 15 years, and you still think I’m a coordinator? And I’ve been in a meeting with you probably, at least once a month, you know and those are like professional microaggressions. ‘Aren’t you a coordinator?’ ‘Oh, who do you report to, who’s your boss?’ and not asking you know, ‘what do you do?’ and ‘how can we work together?’

She concluded,

That’s microaggressive, because what it is, is people are putting you down because you have your doctorate or at a higher level and they don’t want to acknowledge it. And I would say some microagressions are, are silent, people not, they don’t respect that I have my doctorate, because they don’t have it, they will not acknowledge it, and that is a silent microagression. Because you can feel it. It doesn’t matter, something will come up where you have expertise in that, but you’re never included and you’re wondering like ‘man, what else do I have to do to get in the circle?’

When asked if skin color may have hindered professional advancement, Lola explained a situation in which she was applying for a position working with student organizations.

…after I graduated from grad school, I made the conscious decision that I didn’t want to be that Black woman that could only work with Black students, so I purposely applied for [student organization] jobs that advised other [student organizations]. Even when I applied specifically for that job, they automatically assumed I meant to apply for the job that was for students of color, I was like, ‘no, I actually applied for this’ and they’re like, ‘ohhhh well, we’re still processing that one but would you be interested in working with the other job?’ And so I think that for sure has been an issue.

Elizabeth made mention of her interactions with parents when she worked with a primarily White and privilege student group on campus. She mentioned, “if I said something that a parent didn’t want to hear, it was always a, ‘let me talk to your supervisor.’” She compared this to her current role now, still at the same institution but works with a different population of students who are Black, the students and the parents typically take her word as law.
Arianne shared feelings of concern when discussing her experience in her graduate program at the same institution in which she works.

I’ve noticed in choosing people for like programs, either I am selected out and I don’t even have an interest in it and I am just thrown in this group, or if it’s a topic that there’s an assumption that I don’t maybe know about it, even if it is an interest of mine, I can be excluded. So again, you can’t ever prove these things which is hard, but I kind of have to assume it just because of other experiences I’ve had in this program. Which everyone is cordial, and nice, and says nice things but again there’s the little microaggressions that really just hinder you from being able to do the things that are necessary to succeed.

Lola had a similar experience where she is often included or excluded depending on the audience.

There have been times where we may all have the same credentials or all have the same ability to perform a certain task but because of skin tone, either I was selected because of the audience or vice versa. So if we are having a risk management or intervention conversation with a White [student group], [James], who is a White male may be tapped for that, even if someone said, well why doesn’t Lola do it, there may be a conversation about why that may not be the best because they may not relate to me because of my skin color… Even vice versa, there may be times when [Barbara] who has experience working with [Black student groups], may be tapped, but they may say, ‘oh Lola should do this.’”

A more covert example of being excluded took place in a meeting that Marie attended. She recounted,

But I think that because, in addition to my race and skin tone, me having the degrees wasn’t bad, so I think it was easy to be able to move me into a position or to be able to send me to a conference or this committee to represent. But sometimes you do feel like a little Black token because sometimes when you do open your mouth to say something at the committee or wherever you are, you’re looked at like, “would you just shut up? Just stay in your lane. And let us have this meeting.” Probably about 4 years ago, I experienced that, and it was mind blowing.

During a professional retreat, Arianne shared a time when a professional from her campus was invited to present during the retreat. The professional, which was White woman, continued to say phrases like, “because all of you” and “people like ya’ll” to the crowd of people of color. Arianne’s reflection of that moment made me really think about the experiences students may encounter.
The fact that this is someone who works on my campus, so I think of when I’m sending a student, for me particularly a student of color, the students I primarily send will be African American, to know that if she was saying stuff like that with outer professionals in the room, imagine a student having to go to her, get some scores, and she’s like, “well people like you tent to score low… I’m sure she probably didn’t mean it in the way it came out, but I can’t be sure. That’s the hard part…”

Sadly, Jackie Jasper discussed the complimentary nature of a microaggressive experience.

I think that sometimes there are automatic biases that are in place and that you kinda have to work past and when people compliment you, it’s like they’re surprised that you are capable of doing something, it’s not just like, you did a good job, it’s like, ‘oh you did great, I wasn’t expecting that from you.

One comment is very telling of experiences living in the south. While shopping in the mall after having left work, Elizabeth explained, “I told this older White lady I worked at [institution in the south], and she asked me if I worked in the cafeteria or if I cleaned.”

Regarding hair, which may warrant more microaggressive comments rather than specific skin tones were discussed in the interviews. Lola recalls a situation with a White male colleague.

I don’t think they are meant to be microaggressive I think you know. I change my hair quite a bit, so I think that comments even today, I saw someone, a White male and he was like, I mean ‘what happened to your hair?’ and I’m like, ‘I just have a band on it, what do you mean what happened to my hair?’ and he was like, ‘the last time I saw you, you had another kind of hair, what happened?’ and I don’t think it was meant to be that way, I could of easily taken it that way because when you get a haircut, get your hair dyed, or when you got a hat on, I’m not gone say ‘what happened to your hair?’ There’s other ways to say or have that conversation. I’ve had a lot of experiences like that, as far as people saying, ‘oh I like that… I like how you have this’ or they’ll feel the need to touch or feel the need to act like its some foreign object.

On the other end, Marie, whose hair is long, thick, and naturally hers, discussed some of her encounters with non-believers.

I have experienced people making a really big deal over how long my hair is and it’s not extensions. They’re like, “is that your real hair, can I touch it?” different things like that, that becomes a topic, when we shouldn’t even really be commenting on that. I mean people from other cultures and races, “That’s your hair? How did you get it to grow so long, wow? As if to say, ‘you’re black, how does your hair grow that long?’” which is very unfair, you know. You don’t think that my hair should be long and straight.
This is very interesting considering; long hair is what is accepted as normal and professional, yet when Black women fit this profile, it’s treated as a spectacle that raises uncomfortable curiosity.

Lastly, the “notion of safeness” was not a widely discussed theme, however, it did come up in conversation with Arianne. I felt this should be an honorable mention.

**Honorable Mention: Notion of Safeness**

The notion of safeness is one of the guiding motivations behind my interest in researching colorism in the workplace. During a conversation with a colleague, she mentioned that I wouldn’t have experienced said discriminatory acts because my skin color was very safe. While very aware that my tone was neither dark nor light, I never really had much thought of it other than the fact that my tone was never praised or discussed. It is kind of an unforgotten tone. Indeed, I had never thought of my tone as being safe, which automatically signaled an alarming concern for my unsafe counterparts. Hearing the experiences of other “safe toned” Black women helped me to find a place for and make sense of my own experiences with my skin tone. Several women discussed a hierarchy of skin tones and their experiences with being safely in the middle. However, Arianne really spoke to the essence of the “notion of safeness.”

I’m not a light skin person but I’m also not dark, and people I think I kind of got more of a leveled playing field, so I wasn’t put up to this expectation of maybe fairer skin people having to have some level of prestige, money, and then there’s always so much negativity unfortunately associated with being dark skin…and so I feel like I didn’t have to face that either. It’s almost like I just got to be, I didn’t have to really feel like I had to live up to either standard because I was in between.

Arianne’s words really resonated with me. Although, I was always the person who wanted to be lighter, I’m learning to live with the privilege of “just being.”

**Chapter Summary**

When asked a general question about the advantageous and disadvantages associated with skin tones and hair textures, the participants clearly discussed the advantageous nature of
having light skin. Light skinned Black women are seen as prettier, less threatening, and having more options afforded to them, according to the participants. This is consistent with current literature discussing the color complex in the Black community. Hair texture was not a common thread throughout the interviews, however, it was more of a common conversation when discussing the professional environment. The “is my hair professional?” question is a collective question asked by the Black female community. While hair is a hot topic among Black women, it could be assumed that hair texture and skin tone are so closely related that the two are synonymous with each other, as a possible reason for why hair was not as frequently discussed as skin tone. When participants discussed light skin, softened textured hair is assumedly accompanied with this feature. Although, from the following conversations, it would be unsafe to say that hair plays an insignificant role when discussing skin and hair politics.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Presented in chapter five is an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings, and how I address each of the research questions. Implications for theory, policy, and practice are also discussed, in addition to recommendations for future research.

Overview of the Study

The Influence of Colorism and Hair Texture Bias on the Professional and Social Lives of Black Women Student Affairs Professionals is a qualitative research study exploring contemporary issues of colorism and hair texture bias in Louisiana. The purpose of this research is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs professionals. In addition, the goal was to really understand the women’s stories and encounters experienced with issues related to skin tone and hair texture bias. Two research questions guided this study, (a): How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the professional experiences of Black female Student Affairs professionals? (b) How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the social lives of Black female Student Affairs professionals?

Using a basic interpretive approach, two in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the ten participants. The questions for the first-round interviews were predetermined. The analysis from these self-transcribed interviews generated five themes, which formed the second-round interview questions. An analysis of the audio recorded interview transcripts disclosed five themes: (a) Light and Pretty, (b) Dark and Natural, (c) Self-Destruction: A Communal Effort (d) #TeamLightSkin: The Creole Influence (e) Hair Affairs vs. Student Affairs: Politics in the Workplace.
Discussion of the Findings

The interviews with the participants were quite interesting, yet did not yield the type of information I thought I’d find. Once I finally built the courage to discuss my research topic in a non-academic setting, I was sure I’d yield healthy dialogue that allowed for intense deconstructing of such a heavy issue. After receiving excited commentary and shocking stories during brief conversations with women and students in the community about skin tone and hair texture bias, I assumed the responses in the interviews would echo these brief encounters and yield a deeper understanding of this complex issue impacting the Black community, or rather, hear a variety of stories that critically attack this issue. Perhaps, color and the experiences associated with it and the feelings attached to it are too uncomfortable to talk about. It is a rather grey area that many may not know how to contextualize its meaning or recognize its influence.

Colorism then, may be unconscious, causing unconscious bias from multiple parties. For example, people with light skin exercising light privilege, darker skinned people making assumptions about light skinned people, White employers making hiring decisions based on appearance, etc. However, I am now interested in why professionals may feel less inclined to talk about it or dig deep enough to fully allow for vulnerability during the conversations than people in the community. Chances are, it could very well be that my participant pool did not have many life altering or clear obvious cases where the color complex led them to be color conscious.

On one end, learning that skin color and hair texture bias in the professional and social settings for Black women higher education professionals is not as big of an issue as I initially thought is actually a good finding. However, this revelation disrupted my initial plans for using this as a basis in which to roll my sleeves and get involved in some deep participatory, advocacy, in the community’s face type of activism. Nonetheless, the responses yielded from the interviews
helped me to contextualize how I feel about these issues from both a personal and budding researcher perspective and will still use this as a base for future research. This section will discuss the research findings as it relates to the five themes derived from the interviews.

Light and Pretty

Participants were asked to discuss general advantages associated with skin tones and hair textures. All of the participants associated advantages with lighter skin tones and a softer or straighter hair texture. While discussing advantages of light skin, it was as if a softened hair texture was synonymously linked to light skin. Although, hair was not a vivid point of discussion, at least not as compared to conversations about darker skin and the professional setting, which I will discuss in the following sections. Nevertheless, lighter skin was assumed to be perceived as pretty, less intimidating, and having more options for advancement, on par with Hunter’s (2002) research. These women may have more access to professional and social advancement, including more options for career mobility and dating partners, since men tend to think lighter skin equates to pretty as well. According to the participants, society has placed light skin on a pedestal and reveres them as superior to other skin tones on the Black color chart.

Dark and Curly

Conversely, the participants unanimously agreed that darker tones were associated with negative stereotypes, which correlates with past and current literature. The participants correlated being intimidating, appearing unrefined, loud, viewed negatively in the work setting, and less attractive with darker tones. While these are not views that are particularly personal truths, they are however, societal views that have infiltrated many minds to believe they are societal truths. All of the women discussed the hurtful “compliment,” “you’re pretty for a dark girl.” This mindset creates identity issues for lighter skinned Black females and self-esteem issues for
darker skinned females. If these images and ideals are passed down, what then does this do for younger dark skinned girls grappling with their identity in a society that masks a females worth in her appearance? To ask a general question about advantages of skin tones and to have a unanimous group of women agree that negative stereotypes are associated with darker tones and tightly coiled hair is a call for action. Hundreds of years later and we are still fighting for our mental, physical, and aesthetic freedom. This is disheartening and really sad to unravel but even more disheartening is finding a solution to a problem that has both outsiders and insiders as the oppressor. There is no us against them to even rally the troops to a resounding unified voice, because many times, we are doing the attacking.

*Self-Destruction: A Communal Effort*

Although colorism stemmed from chattel slavery and initially practiced by White slave owners, the Black community continuously practices colorism. Intracultural relations became a common theme throughout the interviews. The conversation started with learning how participants first realized their skin color and flowed through adulthood with dating, social, and professional relationships. Other members of their family making comments about their dark skin introduced the majority of the women to their skin tone, in harmony with Hunter (2005). Some were fortunate to have relatives talk about their beauty despite their skin tone although many were not. Classmates in elementary school also provided constant reminders of differences in skin tones. However, these are learned comments and behaviors. Children teasing other children about skin tone or hair texture is evidence of these ideals being taught first at home. As early encounters with image damaging experiences can have lasting effects. Most of the participants agreed that colorism and hair texture bias is practiced more within the Black community than outside. Initiating this study with participants at a predominately White
institution in the south, I was sure to get more narratives displaying Black and White color
discrimination. Although this dichotomy was discussed, intracultural discrimination remained
prevalent and the most hurtful.

#TeamLightSkin: The Creole Influence

Although relatives and peers played a large role in carrying out stereotypes associated
with skin tone and hair texture, there are two other key influences that were prevalent in the
interviews. Media outlets and living in Louisiana seemed to play significant roles in the lives of
the women. Those who discussed media, talked about the negative images and song lyrics that
leave damaging imprints on people. There was only one person who actually discussed the use of
media in a positive light. Highlighting the fact that media is now used as a vehicle to empower
Black women to embrace their skin and hair with outlets such as the My Black is Beautiful
campaign and YouTube channels that educate Black women on how to properly care for their
natural hair. On the other hand, there are still song lyrics, music videos, commercials, television
shows, etc. that promote one type of Black beauty- alienating darker tones and coarser natural
textures on a large scale.

Listening to the stories about living in Louisiana was a clear sign that Louisiana’s rich
history is still felt today. These narratives confirmed my reason for wanting to pursue this study
first in Louisiana. The women who are born and raised in Louisiana understood the three-tiered
caste system from childhood and those who moved to Louisiana felt its impact immediately. The
role of Louisiana and dating was a constant conversation in the interviews. From men and their
families not wanting to date darker women and noticing that the same colors only date each
other, it was evident that colorism exists and may even be amplified and simultaneously
normalized in Louisiana.
Hair Affairs vs. Student Affairs: Politics in the Workplace

Hair politics was a common conversation when considered professionalism and the Black woman’s appearance. Skin tone, however, was not a salient topic as many of the participants were one of very few if not the only person of color in their office. Making it difficult to attribute experiences to color rather than race. Nonetheless, natural hair was discussed consistently. As many participants felt their hairstyle would disqualify them from professional advancement. There seems to be a single story illustrating that professional hair is straight, not curly, coiled, or course. As a result, Black women with natural hair have to take extra precaution when considering their hairstyles as not to bring unwanted, negative attention to them. These women understood that if people are more comfortable with your appearance, they are less likely to ostracize, echoing Mills (1997). It was also common for women to discuss professional experiences that other Black women with natural hair have had in other offices across their campus, but they may not have personally experienced it because of the style of their hair.

There were two additional themes that were not as consistent across the participants, but should be given some consideration. The Notion of Safeness is one theme that I thought would receive more commentary than not. This “notion” is the very reason I pursued this topic from an academic lens. As the comment, “you wouldn’t have experienced this because your skin tone is very safe” from a former co-worker still feels unsettling. While very aware that my tone was neither “too” dark nor “too” light, I never really had much thought of it other than the fact that my tone was never praised or discussed. It is kind of an unforgotten tone. Indeed, I had never thought of my tone as being safe, which automatically signaled an alarming concern for my unsafe counterparts, causing me to want to explore and expose this issue. Hearing the experiences of other “safe toned” Black women helped me to find a place for and make sense of
my own experiences with my skin tone. Several women discussed a hierarchy of skin tones and their experiences with being safely in the middle. Arianne summed up this sentiment,

I’m not a light skin person but I’m also not dark… I think I kind of got more of a leveled playing field. So I wasn’t put up to this expectation of maybe fairer skin people having to have some level of prestige, money, and then there’s always so much negativity unfortunately associated with being dark skin…and so I feel like I didn’t have to face that either. It’s almost like I just got to be, I didn’t have to really feel like I had to live up to either standard because I was in between.

“I Just got to be” really hit home for me. Although, I was always the person who wanted to be lighter, I’m learning to live with the privilege of “just being.” But I still feel a sense of responsibility to shed light on both ends of the color spectrum so that skin tone does not have to be a part of the category when leveling the playing field.

The other notable mention is titled, “I Haven’t, but They Have.” This particular subtheme was interesting to me because so many stories involved events happening to other women relating to skin tone and hair texture bias. Though these topics are common knowledge, suggesting common occurrences, many women could only provide third-party encounters. However, these women were able to acknowledge that these biases occur without actually experiencing it, especially if their skin tone was lighter or their hair had a softened or straightened texture. For example, when asked about feeling pressure to wear her hair in a certain style in the professional setting, Tracy explained, “I can’t say that personally, but I have had coworkers who wanted to wear their hair natural but felt like they had to wear their hair straight on the interview until they got the job when they want their hair to be in a natural way.” This was a common occurrence in some of the interviews.
Addressing the Research Questions

Question One

How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the professional experiences of Black female Student Affairs professionals?

Fortunately, skin tone does not play a major role in the professional environment for the Black female Student Affairs professionals interviewed in this study. None of the women attributed skin tone to professional advancement, glass ceilings, negative, or positive experiences. Many reasons can account for why Black women Student Affairs professionals may not experience skin tone issues in their work environment as compared to Black women professionals in a non higher education setting. To begin with, there are not many Black women represented in the Student Affairs division at this particular institution. In fact, not all offices were represented because some offices simply did not have a Black woman employed. Similarly, this tokenism had lasting impacts on the results of the data. Because numbers were limited, naturally skin tones were limited within each office, making it difficult to build a case of color complexities in the workplace. The lack of promotion and choosing White candidates over Black candidates, were negative encounters experienced by some of the participants. However these encounters cannot be solely attributed to color, or at least attributed to color over race. If there were more Black women in these settings, perhaps the outcomes would be slightly different.

Student Affairs departments and offices are supposed to be very inclusive, diversity friendly environments (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, Harper & Quaye, 2009). Students should feel comfortable and supported, as should the employees who provide this service. Student Affairs professionals are inundated with professional development conferences, workshops, webinars, articles, books, and other resources to build cultural competence,
understand inclusive language, and guide students through diverse dialogue. This could potentially be why the environment in these offices are more welcoming than those of corporate cubicles.

However, another reason for this could simply be that White people in this context may just see Black and may not pay any attention to color gradations among their Black peers, if they happen to have more than one. I remember being mistaken for the only other Black female coordinator in my office and we are completely different shades, sizes, height, and wore our hair distinctly different. Yet, we continued to receive email met for the other one, yelled down the hall by the other person’s name, have students referred to the “wrong Black girl,” and at times, we would both just get copied on an email, clearly only meant for one of us. As I was scrolling down my Instagram timeline, I came across this meme in Figure 1, which explains this reason simply:

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**Figure 1: Social Media Meme**

Hair texture however, was a more fluid conversation with diverse responses. When considering the professional position of Black women, our physical appearance does not lend itself to initially think of “professional.” When natural hair is added, it further complicates the fine line between Black and professional. With so many women “going natural” the question, “Is
my hair professional?” has definitely crept into our mental psyche. How our hair natural grows should not even be a topic of discussion when thinking about professionalism, yet, it is at the peak. With a new-found loud and boisterous applause for Black women’s natural hair texture, the Black female community has largely embraced natural hair and encourages Black women to rid themselves of chemicals, straighteners, and attempting to achieve a European standard of beauty. Yet, natural Black hair goes against European standards and creates tension when both ideals of beauty collide.

Some of the participants with natural hair commented on taking extra precautions with their hair, as natural hair is not widely accepted…yet. Stories included supervisors double checking to see how their supervisee were going to wear their hair to an important meeting, from women feeling like their natural hair may not get them passed their interview. Many women told stories of other women at the same institution who are reluctant to wear their natural hair at work because of stereotypes and how they may be perceived with it. Its as if these women have to one person at work and another at home. Of course many of us can “code switch” on wear a professional hat when needed. But it must be emotionally draining to have to code switch appearances. Its as if there is a need to “pass for professional” as opposed to the traditional tone of “passing for White.” I know I am guilty of it. In fact, none of my coworkers have ever seen my natural hair and I have been natural for two years.

Question Two

How does skin tone and hair texture bias influence the social lives of Black female Student Affairs professionals?

From the interviews, it can be assumed that skin tone and hair texture bias both play a role in the women’s lives. While there were no life threatening or drastic image damaging
experiences discussed, there were subtle impacts that can be easily translated to many other Black women. Most of the women discussed learning about their color at home or from classmates at a young age. Some of the women were either introduced to their color by teasing and name-calling, others received verbal affirmation about the beauty of their skin tone. Either way, this began shaping how they viewed themselves, later impacting self-esteem. Once the women were aware of their skin tone, many began to do image comparisons and body monitoring as discussed in Grippo and Hill’s (2007) research, comparing how they looked with the appearance of family members, classmates, and images on television. Understanding that your skin tone elicits different responses from others and feelings about the self at such an early age can influence how a female views herself as an adult. For one participant, confidence was instilled at an early age because she consistently received compliments for her dark skin. While another had to “grow into her complexion” because she was always talked about negatively because of her appearance.

Skin and hair also played a slight role when considering dating relationships. Some of the women were married and talked about how their skin tone did not have an impact on their marriage or their past dating experiences. Yet, many of the women discussed men’s preference for light skin women. Many of the women agreed that men tend to find lighter skinned women more attractive, however only one person discussed having to personally experience skin tone discrimination in a dating context. One participant relationship with a Creole man dwindled shortly after he disclosed that his mother was not accepting of darker skinned women or women without straight hair. Apart from this story, hair seemed to be a trivial concern when dating as well. In fact, the women did not feel their hair had any impact on their dating lives. This is another example of my findings showing inconsistencies with community narratives as men tend
to prefer women with straight hair or a looser curl pattern. Typically when Black men that I have communicated with express their preference for natural hair, it is a very specific curl pattern, one of a biracial Black person’s texture. Rarely is there an appreciation for coarse and tightly curled hair. However, this was not discussed in the interviews. As it relates to skin tone and hair texture bias in the social setting, these features may not be as much of an influence for this particular group of women.

Implications and Recommendations

Studying the influence of colorism and hair texture bias has many implications for the field of higher education. These characteristics have been explored in many scholarly arenas including work with Black families (Burton, et al, 2010), social capital for women of color (Hunter, 2002), and workforce development (Harrison, 2010). However, as it relates to higher education, these issues have not moved beyond the undergraduate experience. Studying colorism and hair texture bias from the perspective of Black women Student Affairs professionals and their work environments fills a gap in colorism conscious literature. While for this particular sample, studying colorism may not yield insightful implications, especially for the work setting. However, the following implications should be considered, assuming more Black women are able to assume professional roles in Student Affairs administration. Increasing the number of Black women in departments will also increase the need for the action steps suggested in the following implications sections. Specifically, this perspective has implications for higher education theory, policy, and practice.

Implications for Theory

Studying issues related to colorism and hair texture bias provides ample opportunities for theory development. Currently there are no theories that tackle the interaction of these two
characteristics for Black females, or that focus solely on either of these features. This allows room for a new theory to emerge. However, there is also room to discuss these issues within the Self-Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), which details the importance of healthy body image by uncovering body monitoring issues and the factors that contribute to this for females. Understanding how appearance with respect to skin tone and hair texture impacts identity development is an important contribution to color conscious, identity development literature, and the Self-Objectification Theory. This addition can address colorism and hair texture bias from multiple angles. To begin with, it can provide women with a thorough understanding of the historical underpinnings of colorism and its related biases. Understanding the fundamentals of why Black women currently face these issues is the first step to eliminating the issue. This addition can also provide key information to help Black women struggling with self-esteem or identity issues due to their skin or hair, on a journey to self-love, acceptance, and appreciation. Black girls may not always receive compliments on their appearance, causing them to question their features into adulthood. This literature can begin to chip away at this self-hurt and shift the way Black women view themselves.

After addressing self-love, care, and appreciation for the Black appearance, Black women can then translate this love to the interactions with other Black women. While this was not widely discussed in the interviews, I know intracultural discrimination occurs among Black women as Monique shared. Black women have the power to end many issues related to colorism and hair texture bias, simply by altering how we treat each other and choosing to speak positively about our counterparts. Black women can also educate and encourage Black men to do the same, by appreciating all skin tones and hair textures. Because issues related to skin tone and hair texture are usually introduced at a really young age, Black women can consider the way in
which we raise our Black sons and daughters. Informing children on the color complex from an educational and positive perspective can instill an advocacy mindset that teaches confidence and anti-bullying behaviors at their schools. The theory can also address using positive, inclusive language in the homes, especially if the siblings vary in shades, which many do. A colorism theory that incorporates hair texture is definitely beneficial on a personal level but can also be helpful in addressing issues in the workplace from a human resources perspective.

Not only can the further development of this theory help to restructure the Black mindset, it also has relevance for professional environments and work practices. Introducing multiple layers of discrimination can help prevent some of the negative microaggressions that may occur, attract a diverse applicant pool, and retain professionals of color. In addition, this theory can also provide insight for supervisors. Regardless of race or color, this theory can provide practical suggestions for recognizing workplace bullying and a self-check to ensure biased supervision is not occurring. While this theory can address colorism and skin tone bias from a multidimensional perspective, it is still important to consider an advocacy participatory approach (Creswell, 2013) to truly engage the audience who is affected by these issues. Having a well-written and developed theory may not be as useful if it is not accessible to the people who need it. Not only should this theory aim to provide a voice for Black women, educate others on these issues, and add to a gap in scholarly research, but it also should also aid as an empowerment tool to encourage Black women to take back their Queen identities, embrace and praise their Afrocentric features, uplift each other, and encourage solidarity among Black women.

Implications for Policy

Exploring colorism and hair texture bias with Black women Student Affairs professionals also provides implications for policy in higher education. To better inform staff of the nuances
associated with intracultural discrimination, diversity training should be created, updated, and implemented for Student Affairs professionals. So often, diversity training is suggested for students with little accountability for staff (Owen, 2009). In addition, diversity training when implemented is typically limited to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability, overlooking intricacies within diverse cultures that affect all people of color and should be acknowledged by White people or those representing the majority group. For example, White co-workers should be aware that colorism and hair texture bias exists and they may play a role in perpetuating these ideals. Likewise, heterosexual professionals should be aware that the label “gay” typically refers to men and should not be used as an all-encompassing term to reflect the spectrum of sexual orientation and identity labels.

Current diversity training reflects general understanding of cultures, contributions of racial and ethnic groups, and how to support members of marginalized communities (Sims, 2006). This “current narrow view of diversity limits the type of diversity work that is done within colleges and universities, which may impact hiring and retention of diverse faculty” (Sims, 2006, p. 1199) as well as Student Affairs staff. Sims (2006) charges human resource development scholars and practitioners to “begin to consider intragroup diversity issues a major factor worth consideration when researching, designing, and assessing diversity training, recruitment, hiring, and retention practices, organizational climate, and performance” (p. 1204). I propose a similar challenge for Student Affairs administrators.

Implications for Practice

Lastly, this research will provide implications for higher education and Student Affairs as it relates to practice. To support theory, policy should be created to reflect the theory. However, it should also be implemented to inform practice. Having a revamped and innovative diversity
training will help better educate staff, but putting the training into practice will serve to hold staff accountable. Recruiting, hiring, and retention practices should support the goal to hire professionals that reflect students as well as challenge surface level diversity trends. Retaining Student Affairs professionals of color is essential when considering how to put diversity training in practice. Microaggressions about skin color and hair, heteronormative language disqualifying queer professionals from conversations, jokes about religion and spirituality and other culturally insensitive actions can contribute to an unwelcoming and non-inclusive work environment for minoritized professionals. This may then lead to high turnover of marginalized staff causing majority groups to not question their own actions as contributors. In fact, "The workplace climate can become hostile, creating strained employee relations, low employee morale and confidence, and poor job performance, all of which can trigger turnover” (Sims, 2006, p. 1199).

For these reasons, holding staff accountable to the diversity training implemented is imperative when considering how to retain staff of color, which is extremely important for students of color and other marginalized student groups.

Sims (2006) summarizes these sentiments perfectly, Literature shows racial minorities use this form of intragroup discrimination on college campuses and in the workplace to the detriment of relationships and communication. Examples include Asian American college students who marginalize Asian immigrants for ‘clinging to their ethnic heritage’ (OCA-Seattle, 2005) or light-skinned African Americans who disassociate themselves from darker-skinned African Americans in the workplace. (p. 2).

These intragroup diversity issues are not considered during diversity work on college campuses. Colleges must begin to extend their view of diversity to include homogeneous group diversity issues because increased campus diversity means the range of diversity issues increases, which may have implications for hiring and retaining minority faculty [and staff]. It should not be assumed that increased hiring and training among different racial and ethnic groups is sufficient.
Diversity work that educates college personnel to communicate effectively with Latinos and Asians, for example, is pertinent. However, training that addresses the communication problems within the Latino culture (Puerto Ricans versus Mexicans) or Asian culture (Japanese versus Koreans) is just as important. In order to be inclusive of various homogeneous diversity issues within institutions of higher education, there is a need to broaden the scope of diversity and diversity work.

For these reasons, holding staff accountable to the diversity training implemented is imperative when considering how to retain staff of color, which is extremely important for students of color or other marginalized groups.

While this study has implications for student affairs professionals as it relates to theory, policy, and practice, this research also has implications for the social lives of Black women. Black women who are victims of intracultural discrimination relating to skin tone and hair texture may lack self confidence and self efficacy that can affect their work performance as well as interactions in their everyday social lives. Not feeling confident because of Eurocentric notions of beauty can weigh heavily on the mental well being of Black women, hindering their holistic development of self. This lack of confidence may spill over in their dating lives or family interactions, and can unintentionally recreate the cycle of internalized racism to their children based on their beliefs of self. In addition, hegemonic Eurocentric beauty ideals can further create a divide among Black women. Buying into the notion that light is right, complicates the empowerment relationship between Black women while encouraging negative stereotypes associated with certain physical features.
Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings, there are several areas to further explore this research. First, using the same interview questions but adding additional questions to ask how their negative or positive experiences related to skin tone and hair texture bias made them feel could potentially allow for deeper dialogue with the women. Asking about the feelings associated with these experiences could yield a more meaningful conversation. This study can easily translate to various participant and institutional types. I would like to interview Black women professionals at a Historically Black College or University. Because the majority of people who work at these institutions are Black, it would be easier to attribute experiences to skin tone and hair texture due to the wide variety of skin tones and hair textures as compared to at a PWI where the experiences are more often than not attributed to race. Completing this study with both Black female Student Affairs professionals and faculty may also yield interesting findings, as a comparison between work environments would offer another dimension to studying these issues in higher education.

In addition, I would also like to complete a similar study with Black female and male college students at an HBCU to gage their understanding, perceptions, and experiences with colorism and hair texture bias in their academic, social, and dating relationships. Lastly, I would be interested to interview women in the community regardless of professional position or level of education. Simply because the responses I get when discussing my research to people in the community yield intriguing responses. Interviewing these women either one on one or in focus group setting can really allow for more exploration of the topic.

Concluding Thoughts

My research illustrates that issues related to skin tone and hair texture bias are multilayered with varying effects on the professional and social lives of Black women Student
Affairs professionals. Placing emphasis on intellectual activism to continue producing scholarship relating to these concepts is equally important as developing a comprehensive educational outreach program with the community to provide education, an outlet, and support for Black females experiencing internalized impacts.
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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Project: *The Influence of Colorism and Hair Texture Bias on the Professional and Social Lives of Black Women Student Affairs Professionals*

Principal Investigator: Rhea Perkins
Rhea.Perkins@gmail.com
602.628.2996

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to understand how colorism and hair texture bias influence the professional and social lives of Black women Student Affairs Professionals. This study will gather information during interviews with Black women Higher Education Professionals at Louisiana State University.

2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to participate in two interviews and to submit two photographs of Black women. The interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour with just the participant and researcher. Both interviews will be recorded using an audio tape recorder and will be conducted online via Skype.

3. **Duration/Time:** You will be asked to participate in two 45 minutes to hour-long interviews. The participant and researcher will determine both interview times.

4. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. However, given the topic of the conversations, some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort. Participants have the option to skip questions or discontinue the interview at any given time.

5. **Benefits:** The benefits to you include helping explore and understand an issue that is present among Black women.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured and the researcher is the only one who will have access to these files. The Louisiana State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. This research is in partial fulfillment of my dissertation. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Pseudonyms will be used to protect each participant.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Rhea Perkins at 602.628.2996 or Rhea.Perkins@gmail.com or Dr. Cassandra Chaney at cchaney@lsu.edu with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact Louisiana State University’s Office of Research and Economic Development at 225.578.8692. However, this department cannot answer questions about this research’s procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by Rhea Perkins.

8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be a part of this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.
9. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Participant Signature ____________________________ Date

Researcher Consent ____________________________ Date
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1st Round Interview Questions- General Understanding

Demographic Information
- Preferred Pseudonym
- Race or ethnicity
- Martial or relationship status
- Age
- Position title
- Number of years in current position
- Number of years at institution
- Highest level of education completed

Conceptualizing Colorism
1. How would you define colorism?
2. How would you trace the history of colorism in the US?
3. What experiences do you have with colorism?
4. What kinds of advantages are associated with skin tone?
5. What kinds of disadvantages are associated with skin tone?
6. How would you describe your skin tone?
7. How would others describe your skin tone?
8. Can you discuss any advantages that have been afforded to you because of your skin tone?
9. Can you discuss any disadvantages experienced because of your skin tone?

Professional Skin Tone Preference
1. Can you discuss and discrimination you may have experienced in your professional position because of your skin tone?
2. How might the experiences of your co-workers differ from yours because of skin tone?
3. Microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group.” What are your experiences, if any, with microaggressive behaviors or comments directed toward skin tone?
4. Please discuss a time where your skin tone has helped advance you professionally.
5. Please discuss a time where your skin tone may have hindered your professionally.

Social Skin Tone Preference
6. Please discuss your earliest memory of discovering your skin tone.
7. Have you ever wished your skin tone were a different shade? If so, please discuss why you felt this way.
8. Please discuss any influence your skin tone has had on your dating relationships.
9. Please discuss any encounters you have had with men’s preference for skin tones.
10. How has your skin tone influenced your social interactions and relationships?
11. Please discuss a time when you have benefited from skin tone preference.
12. Please discuss a time when you have been harmed by skin tone preference.
Hair Texture Preference

1. Please describe your hair texture.
2. Have you ever wished your hair were a different texture? If so, explain why you felt this way.
3. Can you discuss any pressure you may have felt to wear your hair a certain way in professional settings?
4. Have you ever felt your hair would disqualify you for professional advancement? If so, please explain why you felt this way.
5. How has hair texture bias influenced your social interactions?
6. How has hair texture bias influenced your dating interactions?
7. Please discuss a time when you have benefited from hair texture bias.
8. Please discuss a time when you were harmed by hair texture bias?
9. Can you discuss experiences of benefitting from your hair texture with other Black women?
10. Can you discuss experiences of being discriminated against based on your hair texture from non-Black women?

2nd Round Interview Questions- Thematic Comparison

- Questions centered on the derived themes to confirm a thorough analysis.
VITA

Rhea M. Perkins, a native of Phoenix, Arizona, received her bachelor’s degree at Arizona State University in 2008. Thereafter, she attended graduate school at Florida International University and received her master’s degree in 2010 in Higher Education Administration. While at FIU, she worked as a Graduate Assistant in Career Services. She then moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to work for the Department of Housing and Residential Life at Louisiana State University. While in this position, she began the Educational Leadership and Research doctoral program at LSU with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration. She plans to continue working in higher education administration in either an administrative or faculty role.