

# The Unceasing Significance of Colorism: Skin Tone Stratification in the United States

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*For many decades now, social scientists have documented immense ethnoracial inequalities in the United States. Much of this work is rooted in comparing the life chances, trajectories, and outcomes of African Americans to White Americans. From health to wealth and nearly every measure of well-being, success, and thriving one can find, White Americans remain ahead of Black Americans. What this focus on ethnoracial inequality between “groups” obscures, however, is long-standing skin tone inequality within groups. In this essay, I trace the trajectory of colorism and skin tone stratification in the United States over the past century. Next, I highlight the contemporary persistence of skin tone stratification, not only among African Americans, but among Latinx and Asian Americans as well. I conclude by arguing that future research on colorism will be essential to understand comprehensively the significance of race/ethnicity in a demographically shifting United States (such as immigration and “multiraciality”).*

**O**n a sweltering August day in 1963, barely twenty-four hours after the death of W. E. B. Du Bois, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his legendary “I Have a Dream” speech to a crowd of over 250,000 people participating in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, D.C. Against the backdrop of the towering statue of Abraham Lincoln, King lamented that one hundred years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, “the Negro [was] still not free.” Indeed, denied forty acres and a mule upon their Emancipation, Black Americans witnessed the U.S. government give White Americans hundreds of millions of acres of land virtually for free via the Homestead Act and access to over \$100 billion in New Deal programs through which the U.S. government subsidized education, housing, businesses, and much more, creating the White middle class.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Black Americans were forced to endure decades of legally enforced racial terrorism in the form of Jim Crow after the collapse of Reconstruction. Yes, by any reasonable standard, a century after their Emancipation and despite relatively recent legal victories in the form of civil rights legisla-

tion, the Negro was still not free. Across numerous important indicators, the socioeconomic standing of African Americans grew increasingly worse amidst the prosperity of America's booming post-World War II economy, from median income to poverty rates to infant mortality.<sup>2</sup>

As sociologist Douglas Massey correctly observes, "The history of civil rights in the United States has always been one of two steps forward and one step back. Significant progress toward racial equality has been made and then partially reversed, only to be advanced again at a later date."<sup>3</sup> It was in this context – the incessant ebb and flow of victory, defeat, and backtracking – that King uttered the iconic line that expressed the unrealized hopes of so many millions of Americans: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

The desired meaning here should be clear: King longed for a day when African Americans, as a group, would no longer be held back by systemic and systematic discrimination. Color, in this formulation, is simply a stand-in for their membership in a stigmatized ethnoracial category. King's rhetoric relies on a common linguistic substitution rooted in the alleged equivalence of belonging to a broad, aggregate ethnoracial category and a highly conspicuous *marker* used to ascribe individuals into this broad, superordinate ethnoracial category in everyday life: skin color. This slippage, however, was no bar to the efficacy of this famous line; again, the interchangeability of the terms race and color is so commonplace that the practice continues to this day without drawing much critical attention at all. As legal scholar Trina Jones explains, "The terms race and color have been used interchangeably throughout U.S. history . . . [E]xamples are plentiful, including common phrases like 'colored people' and 'colored folk,' W. E. B. Du Bois's use of 'the color line' and similar references to the 'color barrier.'"<sup>4</sup>

What I would like to emphasize here, however, is that there is significant variation in life chances, trajectories, and outcomes among African Americans (and other ethnoracial minorities) that is obscured by this common (linguistic and analytic) convention. "Though race and color are indeed related concepts, they are not synonymous. While racism may affect an individual regardless of the person's color, two individuals belonging to the same ethnoracial category may face differential treatment due to their varying skin tones."<sup>5</sup> After all, as the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker noted nearly one hundred years ago, "Within the Negro group every possible shade of color between jet Black and creamy white exists; and variations occur even within the same shade."<sup>6</sup> And just as certain ethnoracial categories are associated with biases and stereotypes about warmth and competence, so are gradations of skin color.<sup>7</sup> Research shows that as darkness increases and Afrocentric appearance increases, so does the probability of being perceived as dangerous, incompetent, ugly, and much more.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that these biases are held by both Blacks and non-Blacks, the latter of whom may

have powerful roles as gatekeepers (educators, police, physicians, bankers, real estate agents, and so on), and persist across generations resulting in cumulative advantages and disadvantages associated with skin tone, skin tone stratification can quickly take on a deeply structural character. Put simply, African Americans are not only stratified with respect to their ethnoracial category membership, but also intracategorically by the hue of their skin – the result of a practice referred to as colorism.<sup>9</sup>

**C**olorism is generally defined as a discriminatory practice by which lighter skin tones, straight hair, and relatively more Eurocentric facial features are preferred over darker skin tones, kinky hair, and more stereotypically Afrocentric facial features.<sup>10</sup> As this common definition suggests, it captures more than skin tone alone to note the significance of racialized physical features in general, which is why it is also important to consider skin tone stratification itself as a central aspect of colorism writ large (furthermore, the darkness of skin tends to track alongside Afrocentric appearance as a whole).

Colorism in the United States dates back to slavery when lighter-skinned slaves were favored by slave owners and were predominantly given work as house slaves as opposed to field slaves. These Blacks tended to have direct kinship ties to Whites through the sexual violence by Whites that created this population of lighter-skinned Blacks in the first place. Working in the house as opposed to the fields dramatically increased the chance that lighter-skinned Blacks (or mulattos) would be literate and trained in a trade. Also, the vast majority of the free Black population was composed of lighter-skinned Blacks and mulattos. Despite the fact that after Emancipation, more opportunities opened up for Blacks of all hues, the substantial social, educational, and economic advantages of lighter-skinned Blacks undoubtedly gave these Blacks an immense head start in relation to all other Blacks.<sup>11</sup> In fact, there is evidence that lighter-skinned Black men, given greater access to nutrition and conditions favorable to their health, were markedly taller than other Black men.<sup>12</sup>

While it is often submerged and marginalized relative to inequality between Blacks and Whites (that is, “racial” inequality), scholars have long recognized the significance of color. As early as 1934, sociologist Charles S. Johnson observed, in his ethnographic study of a rural Alabama town, that darker-skinned Black women did not want to marry lighter-skinned Black or mulatto men because the darker-skinned Black women considered lighter-skinned Black and mulatto men untrustworthy and “poor providers for dark women.”<sup>13</sup> In another ethnographic study, this one conducted by Allison Davis, Burleigh Gardner, and Mary Gardner, along with their assistant St. Clair Drake in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1941, the researchers noted that having light skin and “White” types of hair were definite sources of prestige among Blacks, and that while light skin color and “White”

“hair-form” did not guarantee Blacks an upper-class status, social mobility was far easier and proceeded at a faster pace for those of lighter hues.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the authors observed that upper- and middle-class Black men (of all skin shades) privileged light skin and sought to marry only the “fairest”-skinned Black women. Homogamy contributed to a substantial wealth gap between mulatto households and Black households well into the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of skin color among Blacks persisted well into the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, even economist Gunnar Myrdal highlights the importance of skin color among Blacks in his landmark study *An American Dilemma*.<sup>16</sup> Researchers, for instance, found links between skin tone and occupational status such that light skin tone was highly associated with being a Black professional (such as a dentist, doctor, or businessman). Attorney Lawrence Otis Graham observed, in his exposé of Black elite social clubs (like the Jack n’ Jill, the Smart Set, the Boulé), that brown paper bag tests and pencil tests (a test to assess the straightness of hair) were regular institutions at balls and cotillions well into the 1970s. Graham also notes the absolute dominance of Black elite social club membership by lighter-skinned Blacks, running from the creation of these social clubs to the present day.<sup>17</sup>

Even the “Black is Beautiful” movement did little to diminish the significance of skin tone among African Americans. Scholar Claud Anderson and psychologist R. L. Cromwell reported that among Black youth, “of all the questions in the study, the highest consensus was reached in the opinion that most Negroes feel Black to be beautiful (80.2% positive),” yet the authors also found strong associations between light brown skin being associated with

the smartest girl, smartest boy, nicest person, cleanest person, one best liked to marry, one’s future offspring, one’s own preferred color, the best color to be, prettiest skin, handsomest Negro boy, prettiest Negro girls, and children the father likes best.

By contrast, dark brown skin was associated with

the dumbest Negro, dirtiest Negro, person one would not like to marry, what one would like one’s offspring not to have, what one would prefer not to be, Negroes with bad hair, person with the ugliest skin complexion, ugliest Negro boys, ugliest Negro girls, children whom the mother dislikes, and Negroes who have the hardest time making friends in school.<sup>18</sup>

Similar dynamics were even apparent among African American adults in beauty pageants during the Black is Beautiful era that still continued to value lighter phenotypes over all others.<sup>19</sup>

Keeping track of these enduring and pernicious attitudes around skin tone was lost amidst the groundswell of Black nationalist sentiments that rose to the fore among many Blacks disillusioned with what they saw as the unfulfilled promises of the civil rights era. Caught in the tidal wave of Black political activism, which

gave all the appearances of a unified, monadic Black community, social science began to focus more and more of its efforts on analyzing inequality between Blacks and Whites in the “post–civil rights era.” And growing concerns over the extent to which Blacks had reached socioeconomic parity with Whites in the wake of the dismantling of Jim Crow made a good deal of sense, even though many missed the continuing significance of color among African Americans and the rapid rise of intraracial class divisions among Blacks in the post–civil rights era so famously detailed in sociologist William Julius Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race*. With the publication of the Moynihan Report, this shift gained even more steam and social scientists, journalists, and even the government flocked to study the plight of “inner-city Blacks” and “urban poverty.”<sup>20</sup>

Still, the occlusion of color is not only a result of this shift in analytic attention toward quantitative analyses of ethnoracial inequalities between Blacks and Whites that has mostly continued to this very day, but it is also a function of how most social scientists and lay people define race itself. Indeed, the nearly exclusive focus on interracial dynamics and inequality is undoubtedly rooted in the unique, specific, and problematic racial common sense extant in the United States. This racial common sense maintains that there are clearly bounded, mostly homogenous, monadic ethnoracial groups. Instead of developing an analytic concept of race and ethnicity, the vast majority of U.S. scholarship on race simply borrows the folk concepts of race and ethnicity as they exist in the United States. This folk/quasi-academic framework maintains that race implies phenotypic difference, while ethnicity implies cultural difference. Ironically, this folk/academic conception of race and ethnicity is untenable precisely in the country where it was developed and is so unquestioningly utilized. Blacks, undoubtedly the focus of academic and popular analyses of racial inequality, have historically and contemporarily been considered Black *regardless* of their phenotype – that is, after all, the entire point of the “one-drop rule.” Black is a *descent-based* ethnoracial category, where only “one drop” of Black blood is enough to consider one Black both legally (as the infamous case of Susie Phipps demonstrates) and in daily social interactions.

Thus, common definitions of race substitute an interactional marker used in ethnoracial classification and categorization – and only one of many of these markers – with race itself as a phenomenon. The overwhelming reliance upon census and census-style data on race means that the analysis of skin tone stratification is foreclosed in advance in most research. After all, census-style categories obscure the immense phenotypical heterogeneity that exist within them. Indeed, census and census-style categories, which are broad, superordinate nominal categories rooted in self-identification, essentially treat each self-identified member of the category as phenotypically the same. Thus, despite our penchant to see the

world telescoped through the lens of these nearly ubiquitous categories, the fact remains that these categories are only *partially* disclosive of how concepts of ethnoracial difference (such as Blackness and Whiteness) produce and reproduce inequality in the United States.

Fortunately, though rare, there are nationally representative data in specialized surveys with measures of skin tone, typically measured by interviewers using worded scales or palettes, that allow us to determine whether the impact of skin complexion on Blacks' educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and marital status has changed after the civil rights and Black power movements.<sup>21</sup> Sociologists Verna Keith and Cedric Herring have found that skin tone is a significant predictor of personal and family net income, educational attainment, occupation, parental socioeconomic status, region, urbanicity, or even marital status.<sup>22</sup> Darker-skinned Blacks are at a significant empirical disadvantage in comparison to lighter-skinned Blacks and even medium-tone Blacks.

There are, however, pressing questions about whether skin tone still matters in the twenty-first century. Have the empirical consequences of skin complexion diminished since 1980? One study found that the empirical consequences of skin complexion among Blacks (namely, skin tone's effect on socioeconomic status) had diminished by 1988.<sup>23</sup> Economist Arthur Goldsmith and colleagues, however, astutely note that by the third wave of the NSBA, the number of observations of light-skin Blacks had decreased to fifteen and thus dismiss this study's conclusions on methodological grounds.<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, recent studies quite convincingly show the enduring significance of color from 1980 to the present day. For example, according to data drawn from the National Health Interview Survey (2005), White Americans between age twenty-five and forty-four have 10.2 months more education on average than African Americans of the same age range. By contrast, according to data drawn from the National Survey of American Life (2001–2003), the gap in educational attainment between the lightest- and darkest-skinned Black Americans between ages twenty-five and forty-four is 15.4 months.<sup>25</sup> In other words, there appears to be as much educational inequality within the Black population along the color continuum as there is between Whites and Blacks as a whole. There are also persistent gaps in earnings among African Americans. Economists have found, for example, that while Black workers with medium and dark complexions earned 26.5 and 34.5 percent less than Whites, respectively, the wage differential between Whites and Blacks with light skin color was small and insignificant.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, there is evidence that color stratifies occupational status among African Americans in the early twenty-first century as well.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the labor market, there is also compelling evidence of skin tone stratification among African Americans in the criminal justice system. Social psy-

chologist Jennifer Eberhardt and colleagues infamously found that even after controlling for relevant factors, the more stereotypically Black a defendant was perceived to be – that is, darker skin tone and more Afrocentric facial features – the more likely that Black defendant was to be sentenced to death.<sup>28</sup> And across a number of important indicators of contact with and within the criminal justice system, studies report that African Americans with darker skin have significantly higher rates of being stopped and/or arrested by police and longer sentences compared with other African Americans.<sup>29</sup> Some studies even point out that these findings are robust to sibling comparisons and adjustments for educational attainment, earnings, and measures of delinquency.<sup>30</sup> In short, the preponderance of the evidence strongly suggests that the significance of colorism in shaping life chances, trajectories, and outcomes among African Americans continued mostly unabated from slavery to the early twenty-first century.

Evidence also suggests that the role of skin tone in the marital market among African Americans has persisted to the present day. While studies conflict over whether Black women prefer lighter-skinned Black men, *all* of the recent studies find that dark-skinned Black women are consistently passed over for marriage by middle- to high-status Black males.<sup>31</sup> In fact, studies show that darker-skinned Black women tend to marry spouses with a full year less education than lighter-skinned Black women.<sup>32</sup> Taken together, then, there is strong evidence that skin tone–based homogamy and a strong preference for lighter-skinned Black women among Black men has continued from slavery through the Black power movement to the present day.

Studies also reveal skin tone stratification in health among African Americans. On one hand, skin tone is significantly associated with perceived discrimination among African Americans, and given that perceived discrimination is a well-known risk factor for poorer mental and physical health, skin tone plays at least an indirect role in shaping health inequalities among African Americans.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, however, there is also evidence of direct relationships between skin tone and health.<sup>34</sup> Sociologist Ryon Cobb and colleagues found, using data from a study conducted in Nashville, Tennessee, that disparities in allostatic load were largest between the darkest-skinned African Americans and Whites compared with what obtains between the lightest-skinned African Americans and Whites.<sup>35</sup> A recent study even found significant associations between skin tone and hypertension between siblings using a family fixed-effects approach that considered genetic pleiotropy, showing strong evidence of a robust relationship between darker skin and increased risk of hypertension among African Americans.<sup>36</sup> These studies add to prior research, which has also identified significant direct associations between skin tone (machine- or interviewer-rated), systolic blood pressure, hypertension, and cardiometabolic health.

Notably, however, we must also consider that the persistent significance of color is not simply a function of inequalities produced interpersonally in bias-ridden

interactions. Given centuries-long skin tone stratification, there is also an intergenerational structure to present-day skin tone stratification. Put simply, color's association with family background also plays a likely important role in affecting educational achievement, labor market outcomes, criminal justice outcomes, and even health. Capturing the role of intergenerational inequalities in producing and reproducing ethnoracial inequality has garnered significant attention among social scientists. Yet this work has remained underdeveloped, at least quantitatively, in research on skin tone stratification in large part due to a lack of longitudinal data on skin tone stratification.

Still, there are some ways of parsing the extent to which family background is associated with skin tone. Consider the following: *Fragile Families*, a data set designed to sample the most disadvantaged families, and the National Longitudinal Survey of College Freshmen (NLSF), a sample composed of relatively advantaged ethnoracial minorities, both include the same measure of skin color: the Massey-Martin Skin Color Scale, which represents skin colors on an eleven-point scale, ranging from zero to ten, in which zero represents the lightest possible skin tone and ten represents the darkest possible skin tone. While 18 percent of the African American respondents (that is, Black youth) in *Fragile Families* are "light-skinned" (1–4 on the Massey-Martin scale), in the NLSF, close to 45 percent of the African American respondents are "light-skinned." This massive difference in skin tone distributions (using the same measure) across the two data sets suggests that there may indeed be systematic differences in family background among ethnoracial minorities that are associated with skin color. In the NLSF data set, which focuses on relatively advantaged minorities, there are far more light-skinned respondents than in the *Fragile Families* data set, which focuses on explicitly disadvantaged minorities.

To be sure, many analyses of skin tone stratification find substantial inequalities in socioeconomic status, criminal justice outcomes, and more, even after controlling for family background. Still, a more comprehensive view of skin tone stratification consists of considering how a combination of cumulated intergenerational advantages and disadvantages along with intragenerational processes of categorization fraught with skin tone biases produce the inequalities we find at this particular point in time. Certainly, parsing the relative contributions is a worthy goal for researchers, but it is complicated by the dearth of longitudinal data on skin tone and the fact that across a number of generations, parents not only pass down endowments of wealth to their offspring, but also skin tone itself. Thus, individuals in this particular generation may be confronting similar processes of interactional bias and discrimination that their parents faced, in addition to enjoying the advantages or disadvantages related to the socioeconomic endowments passed on to them. Again, the intergenerational structure of skin tone stratification reveals itself as particularly important once one considers the role of con-



tinued skin tone-based homogamy in structuring these “colored” endowments across generations.

Skin tone stratification, however, is not unique to African Americans. For instance, Mexican Americans of lighter skin tones earn substantially more than even medium-tone Mexican Americans; one study reports an earning disparity between light- and medium-tone Mexican Americans of \$4,065 per year.<sup>37</sup> Hourly wage differentials among native-born male and female Mexican Americans were large and robust with dark-skinned, native-born women experiencing a 20 percent wage penalty.<sup>38</sup> Also, similar to what obtains among African Americans, studies report differences in educational attainment among Hispanics and Latinx as well: light skin is associated with better academic outcomes even after adjusting for socioeconomic status, family structure, immigrant status, and more.<sup>39</sup> The same pattern holds with respect to the criminal justice system, too, where darker-skinned Hispanics and Latinx are significantly more likely to be stopped or arrested by police.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with the patterns found among African Americans and Hispanics and Latinx, some studies report evidence of skin tone stratification among Asian Americans.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, once again, skin tone is a key marker of social status in which darker tones are stigmatized; and researchers find robust relationships between skin tone and socioeconomic status: lighter skin among Asian Americans is associated with higher rates of completing a bachelor’s degree or more.<sup>42</sup> In sum, there is reason to believe that skin tone may structure inequalities among Latinx and Asian Americans in the labor market, the education system, the criminal justice system, health, and much more just as it does among African Americans.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly then, evidence shows that immigrants of various backgrounds also experience skin tone stratification. While much evidence shows that most immigrants integrate well into U.S. society, skin tone discrimination and the stratification that results from this is a major barrier to their integration. Indeed, research suggests that stereotypical markers of Hispanic origin such as indigenous features and brown skin are associated with discriminatory treatment and exclusion,<sup>43</sup> which has serious consequences for their integration. Studies show that darker-skinned new immigrants have significantly worse labor market outcomes and lower amounts of wealth than lighter-skinned immigrants.<sup>44</sup> Similar dynamics are thought to obtain among Asian immigrants of darker skin tones, especially immigrants from Southeast Asia.<sup>45</sup>

Colorism may also serve as a barrier to the integration of Black immigrants. This is no minor issue. Since 1960, Black immigrants have gone from making up 1 percent of the African American population to around 10 percent today.<sup>46</sup> To the extent that these immigrants are darker skinned, they may face profound barriers at integrating into society, which may only be (partially) overcome by internecine processes of signaling their differences from native-born Blacks through accent

and other means in order to mitigate experiences of discrimination by important gatekeepers across society.<sup>47</sup> We must also keep in mind that not only do immigrants to the United States experience skin tone stratification, they may also be agents in perpetuating it. Thus, some new immigrants to the United States may face barriers due to skin tone biases, while other new immigrants bring their skin tone biases with them to the United States. And to the extent that these immigrants integrate into the higher echelons of U.S. society and become gatekeepers, they, too, may perpetuate skin tone stratification in the United States, a dynamic similar to practices of colorism among African Americans, Latinx, and Asian Americans.

Colorism is likely to affect life chances in *sending* and *receiving* countries. After all, the significance of color is not unique to the United States: skin tone stratification is best understood as a global phenomenon.<sup>48</sup> Brazil, for example, hews eerily close to the United States with its shared lineage as a former African slave-holding society; in fact, Brazil had more African slaves than any other country that was part of the transatlantic slave trade. Similar to the United States, the terms race and color are used interchangeably in everyday life, and, in this case, even on the census. Nevertheless, despite linguistic conventions that treat race and color as interchangeable, recent work shows that census race-color categories and skin tone are analytically and empirically distinct. In fact, they are so distinct that skin tone is not only a better predictor of inequality than self-identified census race-color categories, but skin tone is significantly associated with socioeconomic status in Brazil even after adjusting for self-identification into official race-color categories.<sup>49</sup>

Though colorism is typically rendered as a Black-White issue, owing to the hegemonic stature of U.S. social science on ethnoracial matters,<sup>50</sup> cases such as Japan and India demonstrate that colorism has existed and continues to exist in various locales, absent an African versus European dynamic. In fact, in the cases of Japan and India, preferences for white skin predated contact with Europeans.<sup>51</sup> Though the roots of these preferences go back hundreds of years in many contexts, these phenotypic preferences persist to this day and are socially consequential, particularly in regard to marriage and interpersonal relationships. The persistent mass media onslaught of a fair-skinned Indian beauty (both in the Indian media and in global media) has led to the explosion of an Indian skin-lightening industry. In fact, India and Indian diasporic communities constitute the world's largest market for skin-lightening cosmetics.<sup>52</sup>

With respect to the United States, at the very least, the implications of skin tone stratification for the study of ethnoracial inequality should be quite clear. While it is true that ethnoracial inequality between broad, superordinate categories has persisted for centuries in the United States, so too has skin tone stratification within and across most of these broad, superordinate categories. The bulk

of the evidence suggests that not only African Americans, but also Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Latinx are all significantly stratified by skin tone. Perhaps even White Americans, too, pending systematic evidence, are stratified at least to some muted degree by skin tone. To this list, we can also add immigrants to the United States, which means that the integration of new members of American society is also hampered and stratified by skin tone. Ultimately, then, skin tone stratification appears to be quite pervasive in the United States, so much so that it seems quite fair to label it a *pigmentocracy*, despite the media's and academia's relative marginalization of skin tone stratification.

**E**ven with all the evidence of its powerful role in shaping life chances, trajectories, and outcomes, the topic of colorism has consistently been placed on the back burner not only by social scientists, but even by African Americans and other ethnoracial minorities suffering from its negative consequences. Considering the case of African Americans, at first blush, it does not make much sense that attention to skin tone stratification is so muted and marginalized among them. After all, across nearly every outcome that social scientists study with respect to ethnoracial inequality between Blacks and Whites, African Americans are also significantly stratified by skin tone, so much so that intraracial inequalities along the color line, across a whole host of outcomes, often rival or exceed ethnoracial inequalities between Blacks and Whites as a whole.<sup>53</sup> It is, then, quite puzzling that most African Americans choose not to protest this form of unfairness and treat it as secondary to ethnoracial inequality. After all, at least in everyday life and in crucial social interactions across a wide array of domains – from the education system to the criminal justice system and even marital markets – their outcomes are not only shaped by their membership in the broad, superordinate category of African American, but also by how light or dark their skin is.

Perhaps the combination of intra- and interracial processes that produce and reproduce skin tone stratification make it a complicated and unpalatable target for conspicuous and sustained political recognition. Perhaps the constant conflation of race and color makes it hard to see color as relevant for life chances and outcomes relative to the gravity of the term race. With so much attention to race, in the sense of belonging to a broad, superordinate category, one can understand how many ethnoracial minorities, even those of dark skin, may come to see their color as secondary to their categorical race – a peculiar form of color-blindness. Even our current policy structure is mostly blind to skin tone stratification even though the terms race and color are found throughout it. The conflation of race and color in our legal system results in cases in which, for instance, defendants in a color lawsuit (the IRS) can successfully argue that there could not be discrimination because “skin color and race are essentially the same characteristic.”<sup>54</sup> Skin tone seems, however, to be not only a blind spot in our civil rights framework, but

also a cognitive blind spot: while evidence shows we are able to suppress ethnoracial biases with conscious effort, skin tone biases seem quite resistant to suppression even with effort.<sup>55</sup>

In a society with increasing intermarriage and “multiracial” children – in which everyone will look mixed – the importance of skin tone should only increase over time as ethnoracial categories become even more heterogeneous with respect to phenotype. Add to this dynamic skin tone stratification experienced by new immigrants (and their future descendants) and it becomes clearer that, if anything, the significance of skin tone should only increase. This should be quite concerning given colorism’s relative lack of media visibility, political attention, and policy responses. Ethnoracial inequality, all too often, is simply envisaged as being primarily a matter of mere membership in this or that ethnoracial category as opposed to what “type” or “kind” of a member of said category we appear to be (such as how prototypical or atypical). We tend to ignore how our bodies signify social difference (like categories and social status), how our bodies operate as a form of capital (that is, bodily capital). In a society in which explicit forms of racism are sometimes seen as so illegitimate that even some avowed White supremacists deny being racist, skin tone stratification and the biases that underlie it are quite likely to persist without much attention at all. If it is the goal of future research to help us understand and inform policy to mitigate ethnoracial inequality, we face at least two crucial challenges. First, to push the boundaries of how we understand ethnoracial inequality today and, second, to radically reimagine ethnoracial *equality* in order to better inform the content of our dreams for the future.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### ENDNOTES

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