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The Implications of Colorism on Black Women From the Early 20th Century to the Present

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The Implications of Colorism on Black Women From the Early 20th Century to the
Present

by

Allaija Briann Williams

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

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ABSTRACT

Colorism, a term first coined by novelist Alice Walker in 1983, is a systemic issue plaguing the black community because it demonstrates unequal treatment of people with different skin tones and hair. Although colorism is present among people of other races and black men, this thesis explores black prejudice towards dark-skinned black women in the 21st century as compared to the 20th. This study illustrates the historical continuity of the colorist narrative of dark-skinned women as ugly, angry, and incompetent. As a dark-skinned woman, I was inspired to write this thesis from my own experiences and observations. This study explores how, historically, dark-skinned women have been treated and portrayed in media. Until more recent years, dark-skinned women received substantially different attention than light-skinned women. I also conducted several interviews with black female college students with various skin tones. These interviews revealed many of the same historic patterns of colorism—equating dark skin and natural hair with brashness, sinfulness, ugliness, and incompetence. However, there are some positive changes as well. The interviews and other recent media attention to colorism illustrate a possible shift to more acknowledgement of colorism not only in scholarship but also on social media. It is important to study and acknowledge the effects of colorism on black women in order to stop it from passing on to future generations

Keywords: colorism, media, stereotype, representation

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the black women who have experienced colorism. As written in this thesis, colorism is an affliction that affects girls very young, so this research is for all the women who are struggling with deep-seated insecurities rooted in this issue.

This also goes to all of my younger cousins who are growing in this world and handling each obstacle with grace.

I dedicate this research to my mother and older sister for showing me how amazing black women are and what we are truly capable of.

This is also dedicated to my paternal grandmother, Barbara Brown, for her constant and unconditional love throughout the years.

I love you all.

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I would finally like to take a moment to appreciate myself for persevering through these past few years, especially in this last semester of college. This journey has been long and rough, but I want to acknowledge this accomplishment and how I conquered it as myself. This thesis serves as a symbol of relentless effort, my resilience, and the completion of my undergraduate career.

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Introduction

“When I think of a black woman, if someone were to tell me to picture or visualize a black woman, it would take me a minute to really just visualize her because we just come in so many shades and different hues.” (K. Cartwright, interview with author, March 18, 2022)

When pondering what it means to be a black woman in her 2022 interview, University of Southern Mississippi undergraduate Katelyn Cartwright offered the affirming imagery above. However, this positive assessment belies the problem of internal racism within the black community, better known as “colorism.” In her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker—important novelist, best known as the author of *The Color Purple*—first offered this term of “colorism” and defined it as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (Walker, 2004, p. 290). Although rooted in the history of white racism against black people, colorism has been prevalent in black culture, especially as it relates to black women’s experiences (Goering 1972). Historically, light-skinned women have been more empowered and desired, especially by men, in comparison to dark-skinned women. This thesis explores how colorism has developed from its origins in Atlantic slavery to the present. Colorism has proven to be a dangerous factor in media and entertainment, in hair and beauty culture, in women’s clubs and associations, and work and school. There have been several studies on variations of this topic, including Natalye Pearson-Trammell’s *Colorism, Self-Esteem, and Resiliency: A Qualitative Study of Dark Skinned African American Women*, an exploration of how

colorism impacts the positive self-image of dark-skinned African American women. Another dissertation that inspired this research is *The Influence of Colorism and Hair Texture Bias on The Professional and Social Lives of Black Women Student Affairs Professionals* by Rhea Monet Perkins. Perkins shows how colorism, as related to skin color and hair texture, affects the professional and social environments of black women. In *Don't Touch My Crown: Texturism as an Extension of Colorism in the Natural Hair Community*, Jené Shepherd discusses how texturism, or the discrimination against Black women for wearing their hair natural, is rooted in colorism. In *The Impact of 21st Century Television Representation on Women of Color: Colorism Myth or Reality*, Alisha Renae Erves has also discussed the portrayal of stereotypical black women characters on television. In *Annie Malone and Poro College: Building an Empire of Beauty in St. Louis, Missouri From 1915 To 1930*, Chajuana V. Trawick explores early beauty industry practices and division between black women as they sought success.

While other scholars have focused on areas of colorism among African Americans, few have explored its manifestation from its origins through to the present. Yet this comprehensive study must be conducted to better understand colorism's full meaning so that it can be addressed and fixed. This Honors thesis asks, "What are the social implications of colorism on modern black women as compared to the past, especially in the 20th century?" To answer this research question, this thesis investigates the historical social and cultural behavior and experiences of black women, especially as related to skin complexion and hair. A culture can be defined as "the learned patterns of behavior and thought that assist a group in adapting to its environment and include ritual, language, memory and evolution" (Byrd & Tharps, 2014, p. xiii). This Honors thesis

argues that dark-skinned women, historically, have been labeled as unattractive, angry, and inferior when compared to the light-skinned women who are labeled as desirable, intelligent, and as having higher value. Colorism has negatively impacted dark-skinned women by promoting these ideas from slavery to the present.

This study will hopefully begin to encourage, within the black community, more studies and discussion about colorism. Just like racism, the topic of colorism is an uncomfortable one, but the goal of this research is to address the issue by first examining where it began and how it is exhibited in today's culture. The more discussion around this negative phenomenon, the less difficult it will be to discuss and eliminate.

Methodology

As a historically based study, most of the sources for this study were secondary scholarly historical books, journal articles, theses, and dissertations. Given that this thesis also considers colorism in media, television, movies, newspapers, and magazines were examined. Scholarly books and journal articles from sociology and media studies also were consulted, especially to analyze the representation of black women. I also conducted oral history interviews with five African American undergraduate sorority women. I chose five test subjects whose skin color represented a range of brown tones. Subjects were consulted about the purpose, process, and outcome of these interviews before they were conducted. All interviewees also signed a release form to be interviewed, recorded, and have their data shared in this thesis. Each interviewee was asked to describe her life holistically. However, I also asked the interviewees to describe their unique experiences with colorism. The questions from these interviews included how the young women had heard of the term "colorism" and what it meant to them as individuals; what they and

others understood their complexion to be; how they defined beauty, especially as related to skin tone and hair; and how colorism has shaped their past and present. I used these interviews to determine whether past trends in colorism are still present for young African American women today.

Given how significant of an issue colorism is in the black community, it can affect the behavior, self-esteem, and self-awareness of black women. This study seeks to begin a conversation about the misrepresentation of black women in history and media. A famous mantra of Dr. Carl Sagan was “you have to know the past to understand the present” (Sagan, 1980). The intent of this research is not necessarily to solve the issue, but to bring awareness to the problem of colorism in the past and present.

HISTORY BEFORE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Origins in Slavery

To understand colorism in modern times, its origins must first be examined. Social scientists have studied the value society places on light- and dark-skinned women and men. They have also emphasized that race, at its root, is a social construction rather than a biological reality. According to Deborah Gabriel’s *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora*, blackness, dating back to 16th century, was judged negatively in most European accounts. European medieval paintings and early literature depicted blackness as “dirty, ugly, deadly, evil, [and] devilish” (14) with whiteness being seen as pure. In early Christian and Jewish Biblical references, blackness was considered a curse of the night and associated with sin especially in the Talmudic version which states that

Noah's son Ham (who laughed at him) would be cursed when Ham's “grandchildren’s hair [would] be twisted into kinks and their eyes red; again, because [Ham's] lips jested at [Noah's] misfortune, third [they would] swell... Men of this race are called Negros...” (Gabriel, 2007, p. 14). Such Biblically based distinctions became useful for white slaveowners to justify enslaving people of African descent.

Though historians have debated the relationship between the origins of slavery and race, all do agree that European slaveowners still viewed African captives as distinct from themselves (Vaughan, 1989). Once slavery had been deeply entrenched in the Americas, white supremacists used religious teachings that stressed blackness as sinful and inferior to whiteness to justify enslavement. Over time, even the enslaved internalized this concept of race and began to divide themselves according to their complexions. The idea of lightness as superior was shared through teachings of European slave masters and resulted in division between enslaved people with different skin tones. The degree of whiteness of an African American’s skin color correlated to the difference in treatment. According to Rhea Perkins, “historically, skin tone was a factor for determining job placement. Light-skinned enslaved people were assigned intelligent tasks in the home, while dark-skinned enslaved people were relegated to heavy laborious chores primarily in the fields (Goering, 1972; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2002; Keith & Herring, 1991)” (Perkins, 2014, p. 2). Often, there were certain privileges granted to the enslaved women who were light-skinned that were not granted to the dark-skinned enslaved women. The dark-skinned women were considered “better laborers while lighter-skinned blacks were better suited for intelligent tasks, such as craftsmanship, or lighter labor” (Kerr, 2005, p. 273).

Enslaved people suffered from this internal battle over complexion. In her chapter “Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting” in *Southern History Across the Color Line*, historian Nell Painter evaluates the psychological warfare of the constant physical, sexual and mental abuse that black women endured during slavery. Painter discusses the process of slaves adapting emotionally to survive. The premise of colonization was to ultimately inculcate a sense of white superiority into the conquered captives. European and American slaveowners tried to change an entire culture of an enslaved people by destroying their identification of themselves through “sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, and physical and mental torture [which] can lead to soul murder, and soul-murdered children’s identity is compromised. They cannot register what it is they want and what is that they feel” often identifying with the ideas of their abuser (Painter, 2002, p. 128).

Hair in Theory

In addition to skin tone, a large area of significant interest in relation to colorism pertains to hair texture. Within the black community, hair has been used to express identity. The relationship between hair and skin have intertwined to define beauty. Since ancient Egypt, hair has represented power, status, and expression. In *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*, Tanisha C. Ford discusses how ancient Egyptian pharaohs wore hair pieces and garments to symbolize their status, while their slaves were required by law to wear their hair naturally, reinforcing the value in this symbol of hierarchy as it traveled through to colonization (Ford, 2015). During slavery, shaving enslaved people's hair was a way for slave traders and owners to assert their

superiority. According to Whitney Bellinger, author of *Why African American Women Try to Obtain 'Good Hair,'* the first tactic to strip slaves of their identity was shaving their heads. This was done for sanitary purposes, but this was done also to lower their status and sense of self (2007). Upon arrival to the Americas, masters would often encourage younger slaves to not like their hair “made of wool.” During and after slavery, “good hair,” which, according to Bellinger, was straighter and softer than the average enslaved African's hair, and was usually found in people who had light skin tones or were of mixed races (2007). Women with "good hair" were also seen as having greater beauty and higher social value.

In *The Influence of Colorism and Hair Texture Bias on the Professional and Social Lives of Black Women Student Affairs Professionals*, Rhea Monet Perkins explains that according to

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. (Perkins, 2014, p. 4)

Bellinger discusses how many black women began straightening their hair at a young age, between six and eight years old, because the idea that afro-textured or nappy hair was unattractive has been internalized and passed down from generation to

generation as society has taught black women that afro-textured hair is shameful. (2007). Black women, especially, were taught and learned that the kinkier texture of hair was undesirable, and other people stereotyped these women as less intelligent, lazy, and less self-aware. A slave's hair was an identifying trait that would indicate their social status and the lower the status, the tighter the hair texture. (Patton, 2006)

Hair Post-Civil War

After emancipation, black women began to seek opportunities for paid employment, yet colorism often blocked their way to success. Some black women entrepreneurs created products to help black women straighten their hair. Sarah Breedlove, or more commonly known as Madame C.J. Walker, became a multimillion-dollar hair product designer and businesswoman who recognized “the prejudicial or preferential treatment of people with afro-textured hair based solely on the texture of their curls” as explained in Jené Shepherd’s *Don’t Touch My Crown: Texturism as an Extension of Colorism in the Natural Hair Community* (2018, p. 3). Cookie Lommel writes in *Madame C. J. Walker*, “many black women did not have the tools available to make a good impression on their employers or on the world at large” (1993, p. 56). Sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton in 1945 discussed in their *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City, Volume 1*, that “these admonitions [about hair and complexion] were directed to all Black women, but they were particularly relevant to those who were looking for secretarial or white-collar jobs, for Black women needed straight hair and light skin to have any chance of obtaining such work” (Drake and Cayton, p. 163-164) As Walker's great-great-granddaughter and biographer A'Lelia

Bundles has written, white companies even advertised hair straighteners as “hair growers” because the undesirable tightly curled hair would appear much longer after being straightened (2001).

White franchises understood the division within the black community and used this against black women in the hair industry and were able to exploit the divide for capital gain. Walker herself was a dark skinned woman so her struggle to gain recognition in the beauty industry may have been due to her skin tone. Her former employer and competitor, Annie Malone, was a fairer skinned, soft-curved woman. Although both women fought to promote their haircare products to black women in the early twentieth century, complexion may have played a role in the higher rate of success for Malone early on. Bundles recalls how “even as a child, Sarah noticed the value that was placed on hair texture and skin color. As a woman with African features, she frequently was reminded that white skin and shiny, straight hair were more prized than

black skin....” Walker understood from the very beginning that she would have to work extra hard to succeed in her industry (Bundles, 2001, p. 62).

Both texturism and colorism prioritize a Eurocentric standard of beauty. Dark-skinned women often naturally have a tighter, kinkier texture of hair which pushes them



Figure 1 "Marva Revis begins reign as Miss Beaux Arts 1963"

further away from the Eurocentric beauty ideal. Under colorism, African Americans have prioritized light-skinned women with straight hair. Historian Tanisha Ford illustrates this in her book *Liberated Threads* with the example of the 1963 Miss Beaux Arts Beauty pageant in New York City. The pageant was sponsored by the F. and M. Schaefer Brewing Co., in cooperation with the National

Urban League, which was one of the most prominent black club organizations of the day.

The *Baltimore Afro American* newspaper article about the contest stated that "the girl who received the most votes from public balloting" would win \$5,000 and a modeling

contract (Beers, 1963). In the above image from an October 1963 *Ebony*, newly crowned Marva Revis Nutley of New Jersey is joined by Dee Simmons, Miss Beaux Arts '62, on her left, and Doris Chambers, Miss Beaux Arts '61, on the right. The image shows the three women, who all have a light skin tone with hair wig units or a flat-iron-pressed hair. Further in *Liberated Threads*, Ford states that “the Miss Beaux Arts Pageant sponsors were invested in a vision of Africa and African beauty that was not linked to darker skin tones and kinky hair” (Ford, 2015, p. 46). Such a vision equated beauty with light skin and straight hair, and dark-skinned women with natural hair were seen as less beautiful.

Skin Bleaching

Under colorism, there is an explicit standard of shade preference, and this has translated to the cosmetic industry as well. While the industry contains products for dark spot treatments and tone brightening, others permanently alter skin tone. According to A'Lelia Bundles's study as found in Chajuana Trawick's *Annie Malone and Poro College: Building an empire of beauty in St. Louis, Missouri from 1915 to 1930*, “Crane and Company's white-owned business advertisement in the St. Louis Palladium...promoted ‘Wonderful Face Bleach’ which promised to turn to —‘turn the skin of a black or brown person four to five shades lighter and a mulatto perfectly white (Bundles, 2001).’” (Trawick 2011 p. 23). Trawick also highlighted an advertisement that promoted “Now You Can Have a Soft, Clear, Lighter Skin!” and “A Wonderful Light Complexion for Every Woman” as the messages on black beauty in the early 20th century (Argus, 1924, Trawick, 2011). The ideology in these advertisements illustrates the

association of light skin being better. Large companies began to capitalize from the promise that products would physically lighten skin tone.

Women in Power

In addition to employment, black women began to join women's club organizations as a means to gain power for themselves and the race, but colorism impeded women's solidarity. In her book *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994*, historian Deborah Gray White shows how middle- and upper-class women who were often much lighter than the working and lower class joined these organizations. Sometimes the women were so light that they could pass for white. This book discusses the tension between the light- and dark-skinned sisters. Oftentimes, the work of many was only represented by light-skinned leaders as seen in photographs of executive boards and officers. Historian Joyce Hanson also describes the life of Mary McLeod Bethune, one of the only dark-skinned executive women in the early twentieth century black club women's movement. Hanson points out that Bethune differed from most club women “such as Mary Church Terrell, Margaret Murray Washington, and Josephine Silone Yates [who] belonged to the social elite” and were differentiated based on their light skin color. This particular group of women “frequently portrayed themselves as the true representatives of black womanhood” (Hanson, 2003, p. 102). Hanson tells the story of Bethune’s prominent leadership and her efforts for racial justice, but her “family background, financial position, and dark skin prevented her complete acceptance and entry into the ranks of [these other women's] class” (2003, p. 104). The hypocrisy created in these black spaces is highlighted in the ideology that it was

acceptable to be black and to be a woman as long as the conversation did not offend, and the skin was light. (Hanson, 2003, p. 104)

Some light-skinned women gained further power in society by passing. Dark-skinned women could not adopt this same strategy. As defined by Harvard Law School professor Kennedy Randall (originally derived from a Law forum lecture given at Ohio State University College of Law), passing was “a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards...” Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel entitled *Passing* explores the peculiar racial practice of skin blending into these white spaces during pre- and post-Civil War eras as she recounts her personal experience of both of her grandmothers using their fair skin to pass as white. The controversy in this matter was not only the further distance of the light woman from her African American heritage, but also that a passing woman purposefully concealed her race to completely reinvent her identity. The Netflix film, *Passing*, written, directed, and produced by Rebecca Hall (but based on Larsen's novel) is about a woman who visits an old friend who seems to have almost lost her identity in the desire to blend her black skin into the white social and cultural life on the other side of town. Her friend is married to a white man, experiments with skin bleaching and powder makeup, and could not have offspring as it would expose her true race. The movie illustrates the navigation of light- and dark-skinned women's femininity and their movement through communities. The characters understand that their benefits began with their complexion and that their skin tone must have been lightened in order to be desired.

Randall also describes the “White Negro,” which is the classic 20th century trope of an African American who uses their light skin to maneuver in white spaces. Black

women who had skin light enough to pass the "brown paper bag test," or when an individual had to be lighter than a brown paper bag to gain access to certain environments (Maddox & Gray 2002). This was a privilege for only light-skinned women. Dark-skinned women could not obtain this privilege, even if they desired it.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy

While evidence identifies that colorism originated from slavery and the racism that followed, media in the 20th century has reflected its patterns. While black actors were able to find acting roles in the late 19th and early 20th, they were often circumscribed by racism and Jim Crow. Sociologist Philip Kretsedmas argues that "media stereotypes of black women are often embedded in [narrative] themes that have been used to send messages about the 'dangers' of racial integration and black social mobility." (Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 151) These stereotypical black womanhood characters, with roots in slavery, became media depictions that stigmatized black women. The mammy, sapphire, and jezebel were some of the most common tropes depicting black women. These stereotypes traveled throughout media, and each trope developed its own a specific look. In "Making Mammy: A Caricature of Black Womanhood, 1840-1940," a museum exhibit highlights the history of the perverse stereotypes constructed during enslavement, which continued long afterwards. The mammy stereotype was used in film and media and portrayed a dark-skinned woman as "good-natured, overweight, and loud" and usually lacking education and eloquence (Boyd-Pates, Bythewood-Porter, and Stevenson). Although this character did serve as comedic relief in most programming, there was nothing funny about her role in real life. Most black women in the United States worked in domestic service after slavery. These were low-paying and emotionally and physically difficult positions.

The famous movie *Gone with the Wind* premiered in 1939 with characters that reflected racial tropes in America at the time. The Mammy character, who was played by

actress Hattie McDaniel, was a heavy dark-skinned woman. According to Stephanie Thompson in *The Thorny Problem of Mammy*, McDaniel was “domineering, bossy, loving, fiercely loyal, and far too comfortable within (and accepting of) her role in life for many modern audiences. Her use of vernacular is, to many critics, reminiscent of a minstrel archetype, albeit this one portrayed by an African American rather than a white performer in blackface” (Thompson, 2015). These roles were often portrayed by dark-skinned women and ultimately related back to the stereotypes about low education and eloquence. As some may argue that this past representation is unacceptable in the current climate of society, this character of the overly acceptive, often overweight elderly woman translates into modern media caricatures such as “Big Momma,” “Medea,” and the Aunt Jemima pancake brand. These characters reinforce this stereotype of the mammy throughout modern movies, black television, and businesses as they all are characterized by the older black women who often babysits and guides the youth while being a helping hand around the house and community.

While the mammy was believed to be asexual, the “jezebel” stereotype depicted a light-skinned and highly sexualized black woman. The jezebel was also assertive (Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 151). The jezebel stereotype was associated especially with mulatto prostitution and enslavement. While enslaved light-skinned women often were sought after for sex, free women of color in places like New Orleans “sometimes became the willing concubines of wealthy white southerners. This system, called placage, involved a formal arrangement for the white suitor/customer to financially support the black woman and her children in exchange for her long-term sexual services” (Pilgrim, 2002). Though this was an exploitative system, light-skinned women did have a privilege

not afforded to dark-skinned women. The jezebel role was reinforced in media with light-skinned actresses cast in these types of roles. According to Pilgrim, “Most of the black actresses in mainstream movies who play Jezebel roles -- especially those with interracial sex scenes -- are light skinned or brown skinned women...” (2008) These women were also perceived as inferior and reduced to their sexuality, especially with their light skin tones being portrayed as more desirable by men.

The sapphire caricature is the most fluid in complexion of the three. The sapphire, according to Sociologist David Pilgrim, “portrays black women as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing” (Pilgrim, 2008). In recent culture the mammy has transformed into the sapphire with the shift of the woman from overly submissive to dominant and aggressive. This character became a hybrid as “angry ‘whores’ fighting injustice” during the emergence of the blaxploitation film era in the 1970s which featured action movies with black protagonists. During this time of the film industry, dark-skinned actresses such as Pam Grier made their debut in this genre as the fighting temptresses who were the female versions of their black, male, testosterone-driven counterparts. These films featured women with Afrocentric features including wide noses, large lips, and kinky textured afros (Pilgrim, 2002). While spotlighting dark-skinned women was a positive advancement of these films, their protagonists were also angry, and this fortified the association between dark-skinned women and anger.

Modern Movie and Television Representation

The mammy, jezebel, and sapphire tropes both reflected and shaped patterns of colorism, and can be found in movies and television in the 20th century. Stuart Hall

argues “that the process of representation itself constitutes the very world it aims to represent, and explores how the shared language of a culture, its signs, and images, provides a conceptual roadmap that gives meaning to the world rather than simply reflecting it” (Hall, 2022). Human behavior is what gives meaning to how different objects and things are viewed over time. For instance, the swastika in Asian cultures and religions was originally a symbol associated with good fortune; however, today it is commonly associated with the hatred, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy of the Nazis as explained in Malcolm Quinn’s *The Swastika: Constructing the Symbol* (Quinn, 1994). Society gives meaning and representation which is usually adopted and passed throughout generations.

In the early 1940s, when black actors were beginning to be cast in mainstream, white-dominated movies, black actresses played roles that “closely mirrored the image of all of the black women” in white households as domestic workers. (Darlington, 2017, p. 129). These stereotypes of mammy, sapphire, and the jezebel, were also now portrayed on television, after Americans adopted the media genre around this same time. Once there was a significant presence of black actors and actresses in movies and television, light-skinned women were given more prominent roles. According to Kye Farrow and Robert Smith’s *How the Camera Sees Color: Exploring Colorism and Identity in Early Hollywood Films*, “roles for darker skinned individuals generally played on or amplified racist stereotypes. This placed both lighter and darker skinned African Americans in a situation where many felt as though they could not simply be black without being categorized” (Farrow and Smith, 2019). Black actresses were being cast as stereotypical caricatures both in film and television.

These stereotypes continued into the 1990s. In Spike Lee's *School Daze*, he explores a world of diversity and political activism on an HBCU campus, while illustrating the representation of black Greek life. In the Madame Re-Res dance scene, two rival sororities exchange colorist insults to highlight their differences. The scene plays on the stereotype of the light-skinned women with blue contact lenses and pressed extensions while the opposing sorority was filled with dark skin women with textured, coarse hair. In this "Good and Bad Hair" routine, these women referred to each other as "jiggaboos," "wannabe whites" and other insults related to hair and skin color (Lubiano, 1991, p. 16). In this illustration, there is not only the divide of appearance, but the opposing groups detest one another, despite the fact that such emotions may not have originated from personal experiences.

Likewise, in John Landin's 1988 movie, *Coming to America*, there is a clear dichotomy between the two sisters, Lisa and Patrice McDowell that is rooted in colorism. Lisa, the light-skinned McDowell sister is seen as the classy, soft spoken, refined sister. While Patrice, the dark-skinned sister, is depicted as being boisterous and promiscuous. (Johnson & Chan 2018). Lisa, as the light sister, is more desirable to her male counterparts. Patrice always ends up with the leftover, less desirable man or attracting men with large sexual appetites for any type of woman. Even in the discussion of what role the dark-skinned woman plays in media representation, Patrice still plays the undesired woman who must overcompensate just to compete in the pool of dating. As this may seem as a bit of a narrative shift since the jezebel was often associated with the lighter toned woman, this imagery still shows the negative connotation toward dark skin women at the time.

This pattern existed in several other areas of black television especially in the sitcom world in examples such as the popular 90's show *Martin*. In a recent *RaceBaitr* article, journalist Kennedy Christine states that “in media, light-skinned Black women are usually depicted as sexually desirable without having any expectation for humor. Dark-skinned Black women, however, are expected to be this caricature of comedy using humor that is often self-deprecating and/or sex-obsessed, forever-wanting-but-not-getting-a-man, stereotypical outlandishness.” (Christine, 2018). Martin Lawrence himself dressed up as a woman to become the popular character Sheneneh Jenkins as a twentieth century sapphire. She was the rude, ignorant, loud neighbor that had a bickering feud with Martin's light-skinned co-star, Gina. Although Sheneneh was a fictional character, these offensive characteristics are only seen in the dark-skinned female characters in the show. Ironically Gina and Pam's characters were similar in that both were working at a top PR firm and successful in doing so. The comedic relief, however, fell to Sheneneh Jenkins. Her abrasive mannerisms paired with Martin's comments about her as a beast created a space of colorist comedy as it contrasts to how gentle Gina's character was treated throughout the series. The role of dark-skinned women in *Martin* and other television shows at the time was to simply be the joke or the problem.

The other side of the dark-skinned stereotype is being perceived as “difficult.” In 1990, the first episode of the popular sitcom, *the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, aired on the NBC network (Jones, Borowitz, & Borowitz, 1990). The show starred Will Smith as the quick-witted delinquent from West Philadelphia sent to live with his Uncle Phil and Aunt Vivian and his sheltered, high society cousins. The premise of the show was that Will became a meaningful addition to the family while trying not to sabotage his opportunity.

Meanwhile, he taught his relatives a unique side of his culture as he and his extended family all grew closer. The show featured a lead black actress, Janet Hubert, who played a dominant black role model as Aunt Viv for the first three seasons. In the fourth season, there was a sudden change in casting when the dark-skinned Janet Hubert was drastically replaced by Daphne Reid, a light-skinned actress. Years later, Hubert spoke out that her leaving the show was because of a contract deal gone awry, but journalists have wondered if it was because of the lack of value she, as a dark-skinned black woman, had on the show. She was also noticeably a much more assertive, outspoken character on the show versus the replacement actress who arguably played a much more submissive character role. Hubert also spoke of the abuse she faced on set before several tapings. Will Smith would make her the brunt of his “Yo mamma so dark” jokes. This was not the first occurrence of this happening in television as the same event can be seen in on *My Wife and Kids* (Reo, Wayans, & Himelfarb, 2001) when a change occurred in the series when the smart, dark-complexioned daughter Claire was switched to a light-skinned, dimwitted young girl for the remainder of the series matching the other younger, light daughter and dark-skinned son. These examples of television serve as evidence that there was less value placed on dark-skinned women's talent, and the light counterparts were often seen and used as complacent place holders. Hollywood was saying this is what the black woman in television needed to be—not opinionated; not overly educated; and if dark-skinned, definitely not the star.

Production in the Entertainment Industry

Even if black audiences did not support the colorism displayed in movies and television, most casting, producing, and writing was done by non-black people who do not represent the race. In her 2019 Oprah Winfrey interview, dark-skinned movie star Lupita Nyong'o was asked about what was needed to end colorism in media, and she stated, "I think it's about there being a change in the demographic behind the camera as well- and that's how, then, things will truly change" (OWN, 2019, 0:44). Janet Hubert's removal from the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is often credited to her decade's long quarrel with lead actor Will Smith, but the program creators in the early seasons were a white couple, Andy, and Susan Borowitz. The executive producers of *Martin* included white producers Billy Van Zandt, Sandy Frank, and Jane Milmore. While these examples do not represent the entire entertainment industry, they do raise the issue of the role of white production teams making decisions for black audiences and choosing to draw upon the caricatures of jezebel, sapphire, and the mammy.

Casting calls, which are usually generated by white companies, can reflect these colorist stereotypes. For the 2014 film *Straight Outta Compton*, a casting call for women was released by Sande Alessi Casting and found in Danielle Cadet's "The 'Straight Outta Compton' Casting Call Is So Offensive It Will Make Your Jaw Drop," stating the following information regarding their search for leading and secondary actresses:

A GIRLS: These are the hottest of the hottest. Models. MUST have real hair - no extensions, very classy looking, great bodies. You can be black, white, Asian, Hispanic, mid-eastern, or mixed race too. Age 18-30. Please email a current color

photo, your name, Union status, height/weight, age, city in which you live and phone number to: SandeAlessiCasting@gmail.com subject line should read: A GIRLS

B GIRLS: These are fine girls, long natural hair, really nice bodies. Small waists, nice hips. You should be light-skinned. Beyonce is a prototype here. Age 18-30. Please email a current color photo, your name, Union status, height/weight, age, city in which you live and phone number to: SandeAlessiCasting@gmail.com subject line should read:

B GIRLS

C GIRLS: These are African American girls, medium to light skinned with a weave. Age 18-30. Please email a current color photo, your name, Union status, height/weight, age, city in which you live and phone number to:

SandeAlessiCasting@gmail.com subject line should read: C GIRLS

D GIRLS: These are African American girls. Poor, not in good shape. Medium to dark skin tone. Character types. Age 18-30. Please email a current color photo, your name, Union status, height/weight, age, city in which you live and phone number to: SandeAlessiCasting@gmail.com subject line should read: D GIRLS (Cadet, 2014).

This call outraged a lot of fans and spectators, but it also illustrates that colorism within production still exists. In a white- and male-dominated industry, black women are told what the standard of beauty is. This is how black femininity is being defined in Hollywood, so in order to contain and eliminate colorism, the fight must gain allies and push for black women to define how they should be viewed.

TODAY'S MANIFESTATION

Hair Today

African Americans achieved political, economic, and social gains in the twentieth century. The Black Power Movement in the 1960s through 1970s characterized an era in the black community when African Americans were in a fight for self-determination and self-love. Blackness was associated with the most Afrocentric features especially in hair. As Tate writes,

Within this Black anti-racist aesthetic, the beauty that was valorized and recognized was that of “dark skin” and “natural afro-hair” ... the only authentic Black hairstyles would be dreadlocks, afro, cane-row, and plaits. By extension, the only authentic Blackness would be a dark-skinned one. These are the valorized signifiers of the ideal of “natural Black beauty” (Tate, 2007, pp. 302–303).

Unfortunately, while the Black Power movement of the 1960s ushered in great changes, mainstream preference for Eurocentric features has continued despite these gains.

In the turn of the 21st century, there was a rise in the use of relaxers in the black community. Relaxers are simply chemicals used to permanently straighten curly hair. These chemicals are dangerous, as noted by Neal A. Lester, because they “can cause skin and scalp burns, hair breakage and loss, and eye injury” (2000, p. 212). As discussed previously, hair is very important to black women, so much so that there is still a disregard for one's own health and safety to achieve “good hair.” Within the black community, often, big events such as school pictures, church services, etc. call for a press and straightened hair. Relaxer “root touchups” would be given every 2 weeks or so to

ensure the natural, kinky texture was not detectable. This reinforces the ideology that straight hair is better and more presentable.

Around this same time as the height of relaxers, there was a rise in new technologies for “taming” black hair in the cultivation of weave extensions and wigs. According to Simidele Dosekun’s “The Weave as an ‘Unhappy’ Technology of Black Femininity,” there is a “notion that black women in weaves are copying or desiring whiteness – an analysis further called into question by the fact that, these days, black women may be wearing or seeking so-called ‘human hair’ from such non-white places as India and Vietnam. Instead, we are enabled to see the weave as a technology of black femininity...” (2016, p.66). Still, black women continue to embrace the colorist idea of straight, kink-less texture that is used as the identity of beauty for black womanhood.

Continuing Biases in the Workplace

While colorism persists in ideas about beauty, it also continues to affect women in the workforce. Studies have indicated a bias in the American workforce affecting applicants based on phenotypical features. From the historical concept of how dark-skinned women are associated negatively in contrast to their light skin counterparts, evidence shows that there can be a disadvantage in complexion in the workforce as “evidence suggests that Blacks with light skin tones may be disproportionately selected for better job opportunities” as noted in Niambi Maia Childress Powell’s doctorate dissertation entitled *Colorism Bias in Hiring Decisions: Disentangling the Effects of Hair Type and Skin Tone* (2017, p. 32). Laws such as the Crown Act, “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair,” is a law that prohibits race-based hair discrimination,

which is the denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including braids, locks, twists, or bantu knots and must be put in place just to protect the Afrocentric-featured woman from losing her job because of prejudice (Donahoo, 2021). Before this and even now, black women have often had to choose different hairstyles that are deemed more “professional” by employers, to even obtain an interview. Because of historical hinderance, it is assumed and understood that the American workforce operates and runs under white ownership, and the black community will always be catching up to the 400 years of suppression, so these light-skinned women can appear closer to white, leading to more acceptance in these white-dominated spaces.

Black College Women's Voices Today

To supplement the historical and media studies mentioned thus far in this thesis, I conducted five interviews to gauge the extent of colorism that college-aged women face today. The intent of the interviews was to illustrate whether patterns of past colorism continue in modern society. The interviewees were all African American but with complexions that were different shades of brown. All participants are University of Southern of Southern Mississippi graduates or current students, and all are members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. All interviewees self-identified their complexion as well as how others identify them.

The first girl, Rachel, self identified as dark-skinned; the second girl, Kendal; self identified as light-skinned; the third girl, A’Shontee, self identified as light-skinned; the fourth, Katelyn, identified as brown skinned; and the last girl, Fess, identified as dark-

skinned. While conducting these interviews, there were several parallels that aligned with past ideologies including ones rooted in stereotypes of aggression. As discussed previously with the Sapphire stereotype, the dark-skinned woman has historically been associated with being angry or dominant, and this pattern still exists in the perception of these women as illustrated in some interviews, especially Rachel's. As described earlier in this thesis, this stereotype is seen in many historical and media representations and has been a burden to the beholder. In the first interview, Rachel Lafayette states that people often identify her as aggressive, so she purposefully "calms down a bit so people can see [she] is a sweet and nice and all because 'aggressive' can have such a negative connotation." The dark skin woman, in this context, can be seen as the "attacker" or the predator in the sense of always being angry, unkempt, and/or uneducated as illustrated historically (Lafayette 2022).

Participants' sense of their own beauty also remains tied to skin tone. Throughout history, dark skin has been perceived as ugly with light skin as being beautiful, and the interviewees demonstrated this socio-cultural training in various degrees. In A'Shontee's interview, she discussed her experience as a light-skinned woman maneuvering through society and stated that "being light skinned has made [her] life more comfortable." This ideology has existed in many spaces of society as the light skin woman has been perceived as the upper echelon of black womanhood. A'Shontee went on to describe that she has never "felt ugly" based on her complexion, and in fact, has automatically been deemed as attractive based only on her skin tone.

Another interview conducted with Katelyn illustrates a similar pattern. Katelyn told a story of her middle school best friend having a birthday a few years ago. Her

friend, of a dark tone, called her clearly upset on the day of her party. When Katelyn asked why her friend felt this way, her friend explained that she felt ugly because she isn't pretty and light or talented like Katelyn. Katelyn recalled consoling and reassuring her that she is beautiful and an amazing person, but during this conversation, the friend called her boyfriend on a three-way call and asked him who he believes is prettier. The friend's boyfriend then stated that he honestly prefers light-skinned women, implying that Katelyn is prettier. This story serves to illustrate the structural discrimination against black women and subsequent inferiority that dark-skinned black women are often taught to feel about themselves in society's eyes. The beauty standard, for most of America's history and even to this day, says that light is beautiful, and dark is ugly in all contexts. In Rachel's interview, she described her parents teaching in childhood leading her beliefs of herself to be "you are dark skin. That's okay because you're still pretty." Rachel's parents' belief seems to insinuate that beauty typically is associated with light skin but can still exist despite complexion. Society has taught, in many different forms, that light skin is the standard of acceptance. A'Shontee, one of the light interviewees, talked of the luxury of her skin. She said that she is usually always the "pretty person" based only on her skin tone especially in the group of a majority.

Interviewees also commented on how media representation reflects romantic desirability along skin tone lines. Both interviewees, one light and one dark, described that media reflects these principles of light skin preference in the dating selection and power. As discussed before, the light-skinned woman seems to be preferred by successful men, and it is often "rare to see men in power with dark skin women" (Rachel 2022). As this concept does not serve as the fixed principle across the board, it does hold relevance

in this current society where social media tells the same story. Social media platforms also show how even as black women grow in power and representation, as Ashontee states, “most powerful black women in the world are still light skin or mixed” giving examples of Beyonce, Rihanna, and Zendaya. In these results, it is important to recognize that even in this modern exploration and analysis, these trends still exist today.

Colorism lessons even may be rooted in the church, an institution that is sacred to black Americans. Katelyn’s interview expands on this concept in the Biblical depictions. These teachings are given to children and there is an immediate association of color. Katelyn recalls stories in the church saying, “I used to question my Sunday school teacher, you know, ‘why is it always, in the Bible or when we’re talking about Biblical stories, white is good and black is evil?’ That already, from there, from a young age, that put in my mind ‘okay, I always need to choose the light option-the whiter color, the clearer color- because black, brown, those are dirty colors, those are evil colors, and they’re bad’” (Katelyn 2022). Society teaches dark as being bad, scary, and Biblically evil, so it is not surprising that dark skin is also viewed in a negative manner.

Self Esteem

Colorism continues to affect the self-esteem of women to this day. A modern example of this deep-seated trauma is the experience of Academy-award winning, Kenyan-Mexican actress and model Lupita Nyong’o. Born a dark-skinned woman to dark-skinned parents, she was able to find success in the film and beauty industry in American and obtain many lead roles in some of the most epic cinematic productions of this generation. Despite all of these prominent roles, Nyong’o stated in a 2019 interview

special with Oprah Winfrey show, “there’s a part of me that will always identify with being unattractive because I spent the first few years, my formative years, not seeing myself as beautiful, but I don’t think of it as being a burden – I think there is a duality in all of us, and we find balance we were able to identify with both sides of ourselves” (OWN, 2019, 0:07). This seems to be the reality of dark-skinned black women who have to use this insecurity to cultivate other qualities within themselves outside of society’s definition of beauty. Nyong’o and Oprah speak of how, as dark-skinned women, they had to develop other parts of themselves since they were told “you’re not beautiful, so you better be smart, you better focus on your ability to communicate or talk or whatever, so it gives you strength in other places” (Chrissie, 2019, 3:05). Black women are already historically perceived as less valuable in society, so dark-skinned women, in a world where beauty is currency, often must work to cultivate their talent to compensate for the stigma.

This can be seen situationally in instances of dark-skinned women in television like Viola Davis in *How to Get Away with Murder* or Kerry Washington in *Scandal*. Viola Davis plays Annalise Keating, a top bar lawyer with an impressive record of distinction and quality (Johnson, 2017) and Kerry Washington plays Oliva Pope, a public relations management expert who is of service to very high-profile clients especially in the political realm (Varnham, 2021). Neither woman played a character who was valued or loved for just being herself, but they were valued based on their gifts. Not to take away from the grace and elegance of these women actresses, but it is important to see the additional strides that these characters (and the actors who play them) have had to make to find value in society. In an editorial by writer and advocate Khadijah Johnson entitled

“Dark Skin Women are Not Your Scapegoats for Aggression,” she discusses the interesting and exhausting rhetoric of a dark-skinned woman’s character in society speaking on

“The twinkling Black person,” the one who must have something to bring to the table in order to be loved. We do not give Black characters the space to be mediocre, they are deemed as useless and not relatable. So, when we think about [how] black folks are not given the opportunity to be mediocre both in real life and media portrayal, then pair it with the added layer of being dark skin and being perceived to have this sense of super resilience, we fail to give realistic representation and, in the end, hurt our own perception of dark skin people around us. (2017).

This dangerous mentality has resulted in a culture low self-esteem for these women who are still navigating their place in society. Further in the interview, Nyong’o discusses publishing her first picture children’s book, *Sulwe*, which is a semi-autobiographical story about her life growing up as a dark-skinned girl dealing with issues of low self-esteem and colorism. (Nyong’o, 2019) In the discussion, she reads an excerpt of a prayer she used to say as a child that reads,

dear Lord, why do I look like midnight when my mother looks like dawn?
Please make me as fair as the parents I am from. I want to be beautiful, not just to pretend, I want to have daylight, I want to have friends. If you hear me my Lord and would like to comply, may I wake up as bright as the sun in the sky.

This poem can represent the damage and trauma of a dark skin women in this society as she collects her confidence from herself and not the world around her. She

must work a little harder to feel beautiful, and there may be a debate, in some instances, if the portrayal of self-love is a façade for some women.

Behavioral Change and Adaptation

In addition to cultivating extra talent and skill, dark-skinned women have also made behavioral changes to be better accepted in society. This manifests as a change in personality or an overcompensation of personality. In her interview, Katelyn explained other people's perception of her and how she has adapted. She says she strives to beat the stereotypes of being brown skin as "people are not expecting this little bitty black girl to speak properly, to be nice, to be smart, to be one of the top scholars in her class, to be crazy athletic, to have the type of personality to get along with anyone and everyone" (Katelyn 2022). People are taught prejudice through experiences and education, so these women may feel obligated in some instances to adapt their behavior to be accepted in these spaces, whether that is toning a personality down to seem less aggressive or speaking with Ebonics to sound urban. Katelyn goes on to say in middle school, she attended a predominately black school and found herself hating it as she wasn't "black enough" for her peers. She says she found her thinking morphing into thoughts of "okay maybe if I start cussing a little bit more, maybe they'll accept a little bit more—maybe if I, you know, slur my words or act like I'm raised from a different area, they may accept me" (Katelyn 2022). As mentioned earlier, Rachel also tries to calm down to avoid being seen as aggressive (Rachel, 2022). This need for acceptance is present in all people, so it is essential to understand the extra demand of behavioral adaptation as it relates to colorism.

Today's Media

The 21st century has a media culture in which all opinions and thoughts are placed in front of the public, no matter whether they have a negative or positive impact. This means media and pop culture reflect the consensus of society and how colorism exists now. In recent years, there has been a shift in the beauty industry to include dark-skinned women. The rising of entertainers such as Lupita Nyong'o and Viola Davis have shown how the standard of the industry may be changing.

Another positive example of change is the new 2022 spin-off reboot show, *Bel-Air*, which has a dramatic and refreshing twist to the familiar 90's sitcom. The re-imagined series explores a more serious, modern array of topics plaguing the black community and features an almost all dark-skinned cast. Producer Rasheed Newson decided he wanted representation to be accurate and different from the Hollywood norm. In a Yahoo Entertainment interview with Ethan Alter, Newson stated that in this dark-skinned family, "these parents have to look like they – they made these children. So, we had to have a very honest discussion about what complexion are Viv and Phil and how does that manifest itself into the kids? And we chose that we're gonna have a family with a dark complexion." (2022)

This decision can be used to show that the entertainment industry is now not only identifying but also addressing the problem with a much louder conversation. The show also allows these characters to be dynamic and to break the norms of media as the character of Hilary Banks, who was portrayed previously as light skinned, selfish, arrogant, and ditzy, is now played by the dark-skinned talent, Coco Jones. Not only is Jones playing this role of a rich and privileged black girl in one of LA's richest enclaves,

but also she illustrates a young, beautiful dark-skinned woman who is clever and successful in social media. As Hilary's character isn't perfect, this more positive representation of a dark-skinned woman is rare in black media, so such a character has a very positive impact against colorism.

Even prominent light-skinned black women in media are using their current platforms to raise awareness and shift the narrative of beauty. This can be seen in Rihanna's Savage X Fenty lingerie line and the Fenty Beauty by Rihanna cosmetic line as illustrated in this feature from her "#GETTINGHOTTER Summer 2019 Campaign"



photo.

Figure 2: Fenty #GETTINGHOTTER Summer 2019 Campaign

Her brand caters to women who have and features models with many different body types and skin tones. These types of representation are contributing to a new beauty standard as a few companies are featuring dark-skinned models, and others are following suit. In efforts such as these, there is a notable shift in the understanding of black beauty in the industry and society as a whole; however, prejudice against women with dark skin still exists in modern culture.

Popular Culture Today

As we enter third decade of the 21st century, and social media presence is at its highest peak, young people have become more self-conscious and outspoken in their opinions and values. There is still a long way to go as even in popular music, there is a clear distinction in, again, the desirability of black women. The phrases “red” and “yellow bones” are popular in musical references especially in relation to light-skinned women. It is seen in Dani Leigh’s snippet in her 2021 “Yellowbone” lyrics, “yellow bone, that’s what he wants.” It is seen in Lil Boosie’s 2009 “They D*kin” lyrics, “two red bones kissing in the back seat, girl don’t stop keep going that relax me.” It is seen in Lil Wayne and Young Money’s “Every Girl” lyrics of “I like a long-haired, thick redbone.” People have more access to the internet today more than ever, so if these are the trends in lyrics, these are ideas that still have an influence in the bigotry of colorism that afflicts the black community. In 2011, VaNatta Ford wrote a doctoral dissertation entitled *Color Blocked: A Rhetorical Analysis of Colorism and its Impact on Rap Lyrics in Hip Hop Music from 2005 to 2010* where she conducted a survey analysis of 20 popular rap songs. In her findings, she examines several examples of colorism in these songs including “She Got It” by 2Pistols ft T-Pain, “Off That” by Jay Z ft. Drake, and many more. These songs suggest that light-skinned women are still prized most highly.

CONCLUSION

Like racism, it is imperative to understand that colorism may always exist in American culture. Historical and social science research does not serve to cure or solve the problem but to cultivate conversation and understanding to better navigate the future of colorism. Hopefully, more acknowledgement of colorism can stop its life-altering impact from transcending through to the next generation. In this Honors thesis, there is an exploration of colorism amongst black women, especially its origins and how it has manifested both in the past and today. There is a common association of dark-skinned women as ugly, angry, and less desirable. In contrast, light-skinned women have been viewed as possessing the ideal standard of beauty, purity, and high status. The aim of this research is to promote the conversation of colorism to begin in classrooms, churches, private settings, and especially within the home so that black girls will not be influenced by the negative messages found in television, music, or any other external media. The standard of beauty is being redefined for the black woman. As generations continue to educate, conditions will shift as well. There will be a larger social awareness, and hopefully colorism will be diminished or even eradicated.

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