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# Colorism in the Music Industry and the Women It Privileges

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COLORISM IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY AND THE WOMEN IT PRIVILEGES

by

aja witt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the African American Studies

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Thesis Mentor

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
African American Studies have been completed.

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## Colorism in the Music Industry and the Women It Privileges

When 20-year-old Florida rapper, Kodak Black, stated his “preference” for light skinned women to dark skinned women during an interview in the summer of 2017, he reintroduced hip hop’s colorism problem. Black was the most recent, on a lengthy list of music artists, who have used their platform to one-dimensionalize Black women — dehumanizing dark skin, while praising light skin. Describing dark skinned women as “too gutter” and light skinned women as “more sensitive” (used in this context as an affirming characteristic), Black commented, “I love African American women, but I just don’t like my skin complexion,” (*Complex*, 2017). On Instagram the following day he said, “It’s just not my forte to deal with a dark skin woman,” and he later admitted that he, “[doesn’t] really like Black girls like that” (*The Grapevine*, 2017). It would be easy to write Black’s comments off as self-hatred, or as an isolated incident in the music industry, but unfortunately, they aren’t. As Olivia Zimmerman noted in her 2017 article over Kodak Black and colorism, singer Chris Brown rapped about his “yellow model chick” in “Look At Me Now” (2011). Rapper Gucci Mane proclaimed, “yellow everything” including “yellow bones” on “Lemonade” (2009), and rapper Lil Boosie boasted about “redbones, [and] caramels” on “Wipe Me Down” (2007). With abusive histories, it’s not essential any woman care about Kodak Black, Chris Brown, Gucci Mane, or Lil Boosie admiring them, but colorism operates on multiple levels outside of just physical admiration. It affects courtship, marriage, incarceration, housing, income, education and mental health. These men are a few of the artists who reinforce the skin color hierarchy in their lyrics, primarily to reference sexual interaction. In the American contemporary music industry, I would argue that the normalization of colorism, specifically gendered colorism, both lyrically and visually, has produced overtime a “big three”<sup>1</sup> with singers Beyoncé and Rihanna, and rapper Nicki Minaj being positioned at the forefront of

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<sup>1</sup> These women are commonly referenced collectively as “the Holy Trinity” by their fanbases.

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Black female artists. These women, all talented, represent the accepted and ideal physical depiction of the Black woman, a “preference” that is often restated, and of which they, however unwittingly, oblige in their music videos.

### **Colorism and Gender**

The term colorism was coined in 1983 by activist writer and poet, Alice Walker. In her essay, “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” Walker defined the system of colorism as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-raced people based solely on the color of their skin” (pg. 290). During the essay, she addressed two women — the “Black Black woman” and the “high yellow” Black woman — using the binary paradigm I adopted for my research<sup>2</sup>. Walker stated her concern for “the hatred the Black Black woman encounters within Black society” (pg. 291) and asked that the “light Black woman” be aware of the “pain” they “often quite unconsciously” inflict on the “Black Black woman” (pg. 289-90). From this perspective, I looked at multiple music videos — deciding to deeply analyze just three — for Beyoncé (“Formation” 2016), Rihanna (“Man Down” 2010), and Nicki Minaj (“Pound The Alarm” 2012) — all “high yellow” or “light Black” women — and took note of any colorist scripts. This included lyrics, lighting, and skin color relativity, or one person’s skin tone in relation to another person’s, among other things. The purpose of my study was to examine whether these women exhibit the colorist behavior that is regularly present in the videos of male music artists. I chose these women because they are the most visible Black women within their respective genres of R&B/Pop and Rap/Pop, with all three being internationally known. I looked at online *Ebony* Magazine covers and features from 2000 to 2008 to gauge the women’s growth

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<sup>2</sup> Researchers Charles Parrish (1946) and JeffriAnne Wilder (2010) have acknowledged a three-tiered structure, including medium or brown skin tones.

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in popularity in Black media and witnessed the emergence of Beyoncé and Rihanna<sup>3</sup>. I also looked at *Billboard's* Top 100 year end lists from 2000 to 2017 and noticed two things: the decline of mainstream Black female artists<sup>4</sup>, and the overwhelming presence of these three women<sup>5</sup>.

Earlier research on colorism in the music industry has largely focused on the portrayal of women by male rap artists<sup>6</sup>, but it's important to analyze how autonomous women navigate within this system. In (male) music videos, colorism is privileging lighter women. But what role, if any, do light skinned Black female artists play in the perpetuation of the colorist "preference" in the music industry? I found that, through the use of color names, physical presentation (hair, makeup, lighting) and casting, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj's "Formation", "Man Down" and "Pound The Alarm" music videos contain examples of colorism. Additionally, I found what researcher Mark E. Hill described as gendered colorism (2002), or the differential experiences of colorism for Black males and women. The association of lighter skin with beauty and femininity, which applies more rigidly, and is judged more harshly, for women within the system of patriarchy, has led several researchers to posit that skin color appears more central to the lives of women<sup>7</sup> than it does to men. This has been examined historically, as well as, within contemporary U.S. society. For women in a music industry that is dominated by men and

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<sup>3</sup> Beyoncé was on the cover of *Ebony* five times from 2000-2003. Rihanna had six features from 2007-2008 of varying lengths.

<sup>4</sup> In 2000, there were 11 mainstream Black female artists who made the year end list. In 2017, there were 4.

<sup>5</sup> Beyoncé made the year end list 13 times (4 times as a member of Destiny's Child), Rihanna made the list every year since 2005 (13 times), and Nicki Minaj made the list every year since 2010 (8 times).

<sup>6</sup> Kate Conrad, Travis L. Dixon, Yuanyuan Zhang "Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A Content Analysis of Rap Music Videos" (2009), Morgan L. Maxwell, Jasmine A. Abrams, Faye Z. Belgrave "Redbones and earth mothers: The influence of rap music on African American girls' perceptions of skin color" (2013).

<sup>7</sup> T. Joel Wade, Sara Bielitz "The Differential Effect of Skin Color on Attractiveness, Personality Evaluations, and Perceived Life Success of African Americans" (2005), Verna M. Keith "A Colorstruck World: Skin Tone, Achievement, and Self-Esteem Among African American Women" (2009).

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predicated on physical appearance, skin color plays a part. Music manager, producer, and executive, Jermaine Dupri acknowledged this in mid-January of 2018 on *The Breakfast Club* [39:40] stating, “dark skinned female singers still [are] having a hard time in the music business.” Dupri said, people don’t “jump across the table immediately when they see a dark skinned girl,” meaning, they don’t get as excited to see a dark skinned female artist as they would a lighter skinned female artist.

### **A History of Colorism**

The system of colorism, as it exists in the United States, can be traced back to enslavement with skin color bias originating from slave masters and later being fostered within slave communities (Parrish, 1946). Lighter complexioned slaves, or “mulattoes”, who were the product of white slave owner’s rape of Black slave women, were considered genetically superior to darker skinned slaves because of their white ancestry and were assigned to “house servant, artisan, crafts[person], and skilled laborer” positions (Wade, Bielitz, 2005). Subsequently, as Walker addressed in her essay, better jobs and more education would continue to benefit lighter skinned Black people following enslavement’s abolition. “Morticians, colored doctors, and insurance [persons]” enjoyed “gainful employment” (pg. 305) and lighter skinned Black people were regularly given priority at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Writing for *HuffPost* in 2013, Jarrett L. Carter stated, “light complexion was once an admission qualification for college enrollment and fraternity and sorority membership... The best candidates were as light as... a brown paper bag.” The “[brown] paper bag test”, as it was called, had previously been used in the music industry during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by white club owners. This test would largely affect dark skinned Black women. Gabriela Mernin for the *NY Daily News* wrote that “the owners of the Cotton Club had a strict rule for young female

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performers hoping to join the chorus line: their skin had to be lighter than a brown paper bag,” (2016). The “paper bag test” is not as overtly used in modern American society, but ideas around skin color acceptability, particularly for Black women, remain.

### **Colorism and the First Black First Lady**

November 4, 2008 marks the day when Senator Barack Obama broke “the glass ceiling of race in the White House” (*People*, 2017), becoming the first Black president of the United States. This election was monumental in a country that was built on enslavement, and which continues to operate on white supremacy. But Obama was tokenized as a representation of a “post-racial society” (Bobo, Dawson, 2009). He affirmed the privileged belief that white Americans have held, “for well over a decade” (pg. 247), that Black people will achieve or will soon achieve despite glaring systemic inequality. This belief overlooks the racism Black Americans, Obama, and First Lady Michelle, faced during his term, and the importance of biraciality to Barack’s campaign. The son of a Black Kenyan father and white American mother (*NPR*, 2008), Obama represents a comfortable level of Blackness that is accepted in ways darker skinned Black people cannot achieve in racist white America. Michelle, being a dark complexioned, highly visible Black woman, is indicative of that. Having been described as a “new model, a type that has not historically been pictured” (*Washington Post*, 2009), she signifies one example of 21<sup>st</sup> century Black womanhood and has faced contemporary modes of colorism. Michelle was called “not the classically... beautiful woman” (*Dallas News*, 2016) by CNN political commentator, Van Jones, because of her dark skin. Beauty in white America has always centered white skin and European features, making Jones’ comment all the more ignorant, but he is correct in his assertion that dark skinned women are not valued in the same ways lighter women are. For this reason, and those aforementioned, I want to examine colorism in the ever-present music industry, and the women it

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privileges, looking at Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj in the chronological order of their discovery and signings. I want to analyze the “Formation”, “Man Down” and “Pound The Alarm” music videos for colorism and note how the existence of a Black president and dark skinned First Lady does not obscure ideas around the “classically beautiful woman”, but rather reinforces them. This means, that in addition to race, Black Americans must address colorism in conversations around liberation. Music, being a roadmap for historical occurrences within Black society, can help to do that.

### **Beyoncé: Creation and “Formation”**

In the world of contemporary pop culture and R&B music, few artists have been more successful, and are better known, than Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. Currently the world’s “highest paid musician,” (*Quartz*, 2017) Beyoncé is one of only three singers who have scored at least 10 no. 1 singles on Billboard’s Hot 100<sup>8</sup> (*Forbes*, 2017). She was named musician of the year in 2016 (*USA Today*) — a year in which she was nominated for nine Grammy Awards — and has performed at the Super Bowl on two occasions (*CBS Sports*, 2018). Her most recent Super Bowl performance, with singer/songwriter Bruno Mars, involved a mash-up of Mars’ “Uptown Funk” (2014) and Beyoncé’s “Formation” (2016). Both musicians wore all black, with Beyoncé paying homage to the Black Panther Party (BPP) (*The Guardian*, 2016). Though this display was deemed “controversial” (*USA Today*, 2016) by some media outlets, the tribute seemed to resonate with the Bey Hive<sup>9</sup>. But, as pointed out by Black culture and identity blogs like *BlackandBlewish* and *BougieBlackGirl*, Beyoncé’s praise for the Black Panther Party was also problematic. The Panthers are recognized for their “pro-Black”, Black nationalist politic, but

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<sup>8</sup> Stevie Wonder and Janet Jackson have 10 to their credit.

<sup>9</sup> Also, BeyHive, or Beyhive, this is the name given to Beyoncé’s collection of fans.



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they are also known for elevating the lightest and brightest women among us. Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Ericka Huggins were all very prominent in the party. One of the BPP's earliest leaders, Eldridge Cleaver, professed in *Soul On Ice* (1968) that he worshipped white women (pg. 188) and would not feel "free" until he could have one in his bed (pg. 189). It's very likely Beyoncé's tribute came from a place of unawareness, but the singer donning her signature loose-wave, Blonde curls, while her backup dancers wore black afros, only exacerbates the issue. Colorism operates on a spectrum of skin color relativity in combination with societal beliefs around attractiveness, worth and desirability. For Beyoncé, this relativity has been present throughout her career — of which began when she was eight years old (Taraborrelli, 2015).

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter was born September 4, 1981 in Houston, Texas to then Tina and Mathew Knowles (pg. 33). Tina, a beautician at the time of Beyoncé's birth, was born to "French-speaking Creoles" (pg. 13-14), and Mathew, a medical equipment salesman, to Black Americans (pg. 19). When addressing how he and Tina met, in a 2018 *Ebony* Magazine interview, Mathew would admit he first thought she was white, stating internalized colorism led him to Tina. "My mother used to say, 'don't ever bring no nappy-head Black girl to my house'," (*Ebony*, 2018). He continued, "[back then] the shade of your Blackness was considered important." Knowles cited the 50s, 60s, and 70s as "back then", but colorism, and the ways it gets passed on generationally, are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago. In fact, researcher Louie E. Ross examined generational colorism and mate selection preferences among Black American college students in 1997. He found that men were more likely than women to report a "preference" for dating or marrying a light skinned woman in heterosexual relationships<sup>10</sup>, and

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<sup>10</sup> 33 and 38 percent of Black men stated a "preference" to date or marry light skinned women, respectively. 16 and 17 percent of Black women stated a "preference" to date or marry light skinned men, respectively (Ross, 1997).

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that family, media, and peers were primary “socializing agents” for preferences in mate selection (pg. 556). This makes an analysis of colorism in the music industry, or universal media, essential. Knowles concluded his interview by stating that it’s no accident all the top, Black female artists in the music industry, “who get their music played on pop radio”, are lighter skinned. He doesn’t elaborate on colorism in the music industry, however, or explicitly state his part in putting over lighter skinned women, having owned a record label and been a talent manager.

The story of Beyoncé’s musical discovery ends with Mathew Knowles taking over as her manager but begins at the age of six. This was when she came home from school one afternoon and didn’t just sing a nursery rhyme she had learned to her mother but *performed* it (pg. 36). Witnessing her daughter’s ability and joy for entertaining, Tina entered Beyoncé in talent contests and enrolled her in beauty pageants where she was able to express herself through music (pg. 38). After two years of successfully competing, Beyoncé impressed Denise Seals and Deborah Laday at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center and joined a group, Girls Tyme, that was envisioned as “something along the lines of En Vogue or The Supremes, but much younger,” (pg. 43-45). It was in Girls Tyme that Beyoncé would be introduced to LaTavia Roberson who eventually performed with her [Beyoncé] in Destiny’s Child. In a 2018 interview for *Dazed* Magazine, Roberson and Mathew Knowles told the story behind Destiny’s Child’s creation. According to Mathew, he quit his job of 20 years to prepare himself as a manager and prepare Beyoncé as an artist. “I made sure we built a very good team — from entertainment attorney, booking agent, road manager, I wanted to surround her with a really great team,” (Knowles, 2018). That “team” included Kelly Rowland, a friend of LaTavia’s, and LeToya Luckett, who performed with Beyoncé in a school play. Roberson recalled that the group got

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their name from Tina Knowles one day when she was looking through the Bible. "... she just opened it up and our picture fell out, she saw the word 'destiny' and it just spoke to her, so we were called Destiny for a while." 'Child' was added when they signed with Sony Music in 1996. In 1998, Rapper Wyclef Jean produced the highly successful song, "No, No, No (Part 2)", on which the girls sang double-time. This song, along with their second album *The Writing's on the Wall* (1999) garnered Destiny's Child more recognition the following year (*Dazed Magazine*, 2018)<sup>11</sup>.

Undeniably, as a member of Destiny's Child, there was nepotism working for Beyoncé, not only because her father was their manager and she was a gifted singer, but because she was fair skinned. Members LeToya and LaTavia were replaced by Michelle Williams after the release of their second album, and in the years that followed, Beyoncé would adopt her light colored hair and be positioned between her two darker skin toned groupmates. On their *Survivor* (2001) album cover, Beyoncé is pictured lying down while the other two women sit. Her face is foremost on their *Destiny Fulfilled* (2004) album, where she is not presented in the shadows like Kelly Rowland. Beyoncé is front and center on a majority of Destiny's Child's albums with one exception being their debut studio album, *Destiny's Child* (1998). The change from Beyoncé being introduced on the far-right side with the group's first album cover, to the center on every succeeding album, may signify an aesthetic change in direction for A&R<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps Jermaine Dupri's comment of music industry executives fawning over light skinned women was as true in the early 2000s as it is today. Certainly, the "preference" for light skinned women existed for male music artists of the time. During the mid-90s, for example, Xscape, a female R&B quartet

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<sup>11</sup> The record peaked at number 3 on the Billboard Hot 100. The *Destiny's Child* album itself was not as well received being more successful outside the U.S.

<sup>12</sup> Artists and repertoire.

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with three dark skinned members, who were discovered and signed by Dupri, were called “ugly ass... bitches” by rapper Biggie Smalls on his r\*pe infused track, “Just Playing (Dreams)” (1994). According to Dupri, the group was, “called ugly for ten years,” (*The Breakfast Club*, 2018). Biggie would self-describe as, “Black and ugly as ever” on “One More Chance/Stay With Me (Remix)” (1995) further revealing his internalized views about Black skin. The heavy association of Black (**read**: dark) skin, with “ugly”, and the constant focus on physical appearance for female artists, is unquestionably significant in the rise of Beyoncé.

After roughly six years, Beyoncé would go solo in 2003 (*Vox*, 2015) releasing her *Dangerously in Love* album. This would precede five additional studio albums, including her most recent, *Lemonade* (2016). Having been in the spotlight most of her life, Beyoncé is generally quite reserved. Jerome Whitley, who attended the fourth grade with her, recalled she had always been that way. “What I most remember of Beyoncé as a kid...” he said. “Was the mystery of her,” (pg. 41-42). So, when *Lemonade* came out in 2016 and Beyoncé shared intimate details about her love life, spousal infidelity, and community, it was unexpected, but welcome. The album showed vulnerability and had a message that seemed to reverberate for a lot of people, particularly Black women. Every track from the album would debut on Billboard’s Hot 100, with Beyoncé becoming the first woman to chart 12 songs (*Billboard*, 2016). One of the most popular songs from the album is “Formation” which currently has 107 million views on YouTube and was Google’s most searched song in 2016 (*TIME*, 2016). I initially chose to analyze the video for this song for themes of colorism because of its lyrics. “I stunt, yellow bone it,” and “mix that negro with that Creole,” reinforce the skin color hierarchy through color names and draws a problematic distinction between Black people, or negroes, and Creoles, who are also Black. The history of the term Creole is interesting in that it originated in Louisiana to describe

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those born in the state during the 1720s. Sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham explained in his book, *Authentic New Orleans* (2007), that “Creole” meant “indigenous to Louisiana” until as late as the late 1800s. It then became a word used to describe white, non-mixed race, Louisianians, and eventually mixed-race and Black Louisianians during the 1960s — not becoming widely circulated until the 1990s.

Writing about the term “Creole”, and “Formation”’s negro/Creole distinction for *Colorlines*, New Orleans professor, Dr. Yaba Blay, who explores skin color politics and racial identity, explained how, having grown up dark-skinned in “colorstruck ‘New Awlins’,” hearing someone, particularly a woman, participate in this ‘othering’ was “deeply triggering”:

For generations, Creoles — people descended from a cultural/racial mixture of African, French, Spanish and/or Native American people — have distinguished themselves racially from ‘regular negroes.’ In New Orleans, phenotype — namely ‘pretty color and good hair’ — translates to (relative) power (Blay, 2016).

Because *Lemonade* has been praised as “a Black album,” (*The AV Club*, 2016) and “a revolutionary work of Black feminism,” (*Billboard*, 2016) this differentiation is even more troubling. Truthfully, *Lemonade* should not have to carry the weight of every Black woman and does not, “[expose] the inner lives of Black women” (*Rolling Stone*, 2016) monolithically, but the album seems to echo, at least in part, the spirit of Black women. It acknowledges the struggle, the hurt, and the joy of Black women, but adheres to colorist notions that harm us. Color names like “yellow bone” and “red bone” have been used to glorify light skin and demonize dark skin, particularly in music. To present light skin as feminine, desirable, and worthy, which has everything to do with European standards of beauty. Researcher Charles Parrish examined common skin color nicknames among Black Americans in “*Color Names and*

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*Color Notions*” (1946), and Sociologist, Dr. JeffriAnne Wilder revisited his work in 2010.

Wilder’s study found that there are 40 color names that remain in our contemporary vocabulary. 20 of these names relate to light skin [women] — “yellow”, “red (bone)”, “pretty skin”, — and 9 were present in Parrish’s original study — “tar [baby],” “bright”, “brown (skin)” etc. (Parrish, 1946; Wilder, 2010)<sup>13</sup>. Wilder and Parrish wanted to know how color names and color notions operate alongside stereotypes of Black women in the Black community. After interviewing 58 Black women, ages 18-25, Wilder found “the most commonly held view was that light skin was synonymous with beauty,” (Wilder, pg. 192). It was also thought that light skin women were “trustworthy, amiable, nonthreatening, and comfortable,” (pg. 192) which meant that more positive terms were used in relation to a light skin tone. Additionally, when a woman is being described as the object of romantic affection in music, particularly by a Black man, or someone within the Black community, she is “yellow”, “red (bone)”, or light skinned.

The implications of Beyoncé’s “yellow bone” are then important when positioned within the context of the *Lemonade* album. Ironically, because the album is released audially and visually (through HBO), the audience gets situated within the very system that defines colorism for Black Americas, enslavement. Many of *Lemonade*’s music videos incorporate the history of the city of New Orleans, and are shot in or around Fort Macomb<sup>14</sup>, Bourbon Street, Destrehan Plantation<sup>15</sup>, Madewood Plantation House<sup>16</sup> and the Mercedes Benz Superdome (*Curbed NOLA*, 2016). The “Formation” video was filmed at the Fenyes Estate in Pasadena, California, but

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<sup>13</sup> The color names associated with dark skin [women] were generally derogatory — “burnt”, “darky”, “Black (ie)”, “jigaboo” — and related a negative connotation to the “Black” identity (pgs. 184-190).

<sup>14</sup> Built in 1822, Fort Macomb was just one of 42 forts constructed at the time. It was later occupied by Confederate forces during the Civil War. (*Atlas Obscura*, n.d.)

<sup>15</sup> Established in 1787, Destrehan Plantation is the oldest documented plantation home in the Lower Mississippi Valley. (*New Orleans Plantation Country*, n.d.)

<sup>16</sup> Madewood was a premier sugarcane plantation in Louisiana built in 1846 on Bayou Lafourche (*NOLA*, 1993).

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includes footage from the short film *THAT B.E.A.T.* (Curbed, 2016), and has an Antebellum motif. One of the first scenes in the video [1:33] is of Beyoncé performing a dance routine with eight Black women in an empty swimming pool. Immediately, I am drawn to the singer's aesthetic, not because she is light skinned, but because she is light skinned and wears long, Blonde braids instead of an afro like the other women. This differentiation, while expected, seeing as Beyoncé is the artist and not a background dancer, exposes the interaction of skin tone *and* hair [texture] for Black women in the system of colorism. Likewise, Beyoncé's Blonde hair, in contrast to the other women's dark colored hair, reinforces the binary present in prevailing standards of beauty. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000, 2009), social theorist Patricia Hill Collins states, "... within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, Blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other — Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair," (pg. 98). While Beyoncé is also a Black woman, and wears a braided style, her presentation of long, Blonde hair in the face of "kinky" afros contributes to the "othering" of the rest of the women. There already exists a demonization of the afro as "unprofessional" (BBC, 2016) and "radical" (Quartz, 2017), and, because she is Beyoncé, because she has light skin and long hair, notions of the ideal beauty remain intact.

Additionally, the singer's choice in hair *color* reveals a continued "beauty" trend for Black women in Hollywood and the music industry, often referred to as "Black and Blonde" (Arogundade, 2016). *Ebony* Magazine did a four-page spread over the "latest styling craze in Black hair" (pg. 117) in December of 2001, and British author, Ben Arogundade, addressed it in *Black Beauty* (2000). Arogundade states, "1950s Hollywood was the era in which the Blonde came to epitomize Western beauty standards, through... Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe."

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Later in the decade, a Clairol hair lightening ad would ask, “Is it true Blondes have more fun,” (1963). Singers Etta James, Joyce Bryant, and Dinah Washington would all, at some point in their careers, wear their hair Blonde. This preceded women (and men/people) of the 90s and early 2000s who would do the same. The *Ebony* article highlighted Willie T. Barrow, Serena Williams, Beyoncé, Lil’ Kim, and Alfre Woodard for their Blonde hair. It also interviewed Jazz performer, and platinum Blonde, Cynthia Holiday, who said, “I’m blessed with a good voice, but in order to make it in this business, you’ve got to have something that stands out from the crowd,” (pg. 120). Certainly, a Black woman with honey Blonde hair is going to stand out. While there’s nothing inherently wrong with Beyoncé’s Blonde style, as hair is nothing more than an adornment, the look does add to her ambiguity. It may seem obvious that the singer is Black, but, according to Google’s statistics, “two thousand users per month” ask the question “is Beyoncé Black”, two hundred wonder, “is Beyoncé full Black,” and yet another two hundred ask, “is Beyoncé white,” (Taraborrelli, pg. 76). So, Beyoncé’s choice in hair color is important, as is her positionality to the other women in the empty swimming pool. As the group dances, majority dark skinned women squat down in front of the singer, and light-brown, or medium women are to her direct sides. The diversity in skin tones for this scene is commendable, but the dark skinned women in front are initially dancing with their backs turned to the camera, unable to see their faces. Then, as the camera does a tight shot, only Beyoncé and the light-brown, or medium woman to her right, remain. This is a scene in skin color relativity.

There are several scenes in skin color relativity throughout the “Formation” video. One features Beyoncé and a group of Black men, and another features Baby Blue Ivy and two dark skinned Black girls. In the scene with Blue Ivy, the three girls playfully chase each other in a circle around the room [0:36] — looking as carefree as any child should. Beyoncé then sings, “I



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like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros,” and the video cuts to a scene with the girls standing still [0:49]. Blue is positioned in the center, slightly more forward, with her hands on her waist and a smile. The girl to her left stands with her arms to her sides, and the girl on the right has her hands clenched together in front of her body. As Blue smiles, the other girls look on with serious faces. They are no longer playful and seem to lack the overt confidence and motion that Blue has. Generally, hands-on-hips is employed to make someone look bigger. You are more noticeable because you take up more space. Being the child of Beyoncé, Blue is already going to stand out amongst the other girls, but her body language, together with her relatively lighter skin, is significant. It’s well-documented that dark skinned girls are regularly overlooked on television and in the media. For example, when *BET* posted an article in November of 2015 entitled, “10 Enchanting Young Black Actresses to Watch,” 7/10 were of light and medium skin tones<sup>17</sup>. Popular Black television shows — *Empire*, *Star*, *Black-ish*, and *Grown-ish* — feature light or brown skinned families and very few dark skinned girls or women. This erasure is echoed in a scene from the *Lemonade* film [53:00] where Beyoncé sits on a porch surrounded by young Black actresses and singers who are all light complexioned<sup>18</sup>. In the scene with Blue, the two girls are merely used as backup dancers. They are of similar skin tone because they are meant to look the same and to make Blue appear different. Beyoncé has utilized this frame herself multiple times in her career.

In an extended scene, which gets returned to throughout the video, Beyoncé stands with a group of Black men outside the Fenyés Estate [1:14]. On the porch there are four men and herself, and one man sits in a chair to the left. Uncommon for women in a majority of music

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<sup>17</sup> Aja Naomi King, Shanice Williams, and Keke Palmer were among the other actors listen.

<sup>18</sup> Brentin Mock writes for *CityLab* that the women are “of various skin complexions,” (2016) which couldn’t be further from the truth.

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videos, there are four dark skinned Black men, and one who is of a light brown to medium skin tone. None of the men seem to be of interest to the singer as they stand with their hands to their sides, clenched in front, or behind, in the style of Parade Rest. Whereas rapper Kanye West held a casting call for “multi-racial women only,” (Impose Magazine) in 2016, Beyoncé must have had one seeking dark skinned men. Cloaked in all black, with two Blonde braids falling from her wide brimmed hat, this scene allows Beyoncé to appear lighter by comparison. This is presumed intentional. In 2014, *Super Selected*, a Black fashion magazine, wrote an article addressing the gendering of skin tones, and colorism as a gendered issue. Like other physical characteristics — height, hair length, body size/type — skin tone is gendered. Lighter [whiter] is deemed feminine. Darker [Blacker] is seen as masculine. So, when Beyoncé is presented as the only light complexioned person (woman) in a group of Black men, it’s indicative of these gendered notions around skin color.

When *Lemonade* was released in 2016, President Obama was finishing the final year of his second term. The presence of Obama, a Black man in the most powerful and visible position in the U.S., has hardly warranted conversations about race. Instead, it has fostered racial color-blindness, and contributed to the myth of a “post-racial” America. This makes it very difficult to talk about colorism. His achievements, however great, have obscured the reality of many Black Americans, and because he was positioned to represent the entirety of Black people, discussions of his skin tone offering comfortability to white America are nonexistent. Likewise, Beyoncé’s pro-Black aesthetic, recognition of New Orleans a decade post-Katrina, and inclusion of dark skinned women in “Formation” makes it difficult to question her use of harmful color names, division of the Creole identity from the Black identity, and use of dark skinned Black girls as backup to her lighter daughter — but critique is necessary. The Black female experience is not

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fully realized when the skin color hierarchy, which has been used to demonize dark skin, is needlessly implemented. There has never been a reason for light skinned Black women to proudly claim their light skin because they face no disadvantage for having it. Their identity is affirmed repeatedly and often in the media and by dark, medium, and light skin toned Black men. They are allowed visibility where darker Black women are not and can ignore colorism if acknowledgement doesn't suit them.

Beyoncé wouldn't again be accused of colorism until 2018 where some fans took issue with she and husband Jay Z's, "Family Feud" music video (*Grass-fields*, 2018). The song comes from Jay's *4:44* album which includes his 'we all Black' anthem, "The Story Of O.J." (*4:44*). In the "Family Feud" video, there is a scene where a group of women, the 'Founding Mothers', sit around a table in the year 2050; they are discussing the second amendment. There are women of all races, but aside from [arguably] Niecy Nash, none of the women are dark skinned. The scene aims to be progressive and possibly feminist, and nails that in other respects<sup>19</sup>, but once again, dark skinned Black women are absent. This song is about "the family", how "the whole family should be free", and "... nobody wins when the family feuds," ("Family Feud", 2017) but the representation of the family is colorist. It shows that even in the fictional future, colorism will continue to help forge a path of recognition and privilege for light skinned women and largely exclude dark skinned women. Likewise, the use of racially ambiguous Black women — Rosario Dawson, Thandie Newton, Rashida Jones — reflects the light skin demographic that has been present in rap videos since the 1990s<sup>20</sup> (*Ebony*, 2014). Although my focus is on colorist scripts present in the work of contemporary female artists, music videos from men like Jay Z offer

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<sup>19</sup> Trans rights activist, Janet Mock is one of the women included at the table.

<sup>20</sup> This was when blonde-haired Puerto Rican model, Gloria Velez, began appearing in Rap videos in contrast to darker skinned women.

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insight into colorism in the music industry and who has primary control over how it is executed. Because the industry is still largely male dominant, centered, and occupied, the careers of female artists are influenced heavily by men. Conducting a six-year analysis over gender diversity in the [pop] music industry from 2012-2017, that culminated in 2018, Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Dr. Katherine Pieper (University of Southern California) found that only 22.4 percent of performers were women<sup>21</sup>. These numbers were much lower for producers and songwriters, wherein just 12.3 percent of songwriters credited on 600 songs were women<sup>22</sup>. For Beyoncé, her proximity to men in the industry, particularly her father and husband, has “absolutely” helped her, as stated by Beyoncé herself and later recalled by rapper Foxy Brown in a 2005 interview with *New York Magazine*. The reason being, Beyoncé’s father was there to “take all the shots” and let her know “which men to allow in next to her.” It’s not uncommon for women (and men/people) in the music industry to have a [male] mentor, to introduce them, brand them, and collaborate with them on songs. Lil’ Kim had Biggie, Beyoncé, her father Mathew, and Jay Z would act as mentor to Rihanna. But when beauty is seen as a commodity to be marketed alongside talent, and beauty standards are widely influenced by what is pleasing to the male gaze, the male mentor becomes an issue. It gives (heterosexual) men too much power to define who or what will “sell” and limits the mobility of large groups of women in the music industry. This includes women who don’t mirror Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, or Rihanna in more ways than skin tone.

### **Rihanna: Rebelle (Fleur) Without a Pause**

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<sup>21</sup> There was a decline from 28 percent in 2016 to just 17 percent in the 2017 (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper 2018).

<sup>22</sup> This number increased in 2015 to 13.7 percent from 12.7 percent (2014), but dropped to 11.4 percent in 2017 (pg. 4)

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Born Robyn Rihanna Fenty, February 20, 1988, in Saint Michael Parish, Barbados, Rihanna is the eldest child of then warehouse supervisor, Ronald Fenty, and accountant, Monica Braithwaite (White, 2013). In 2015, she became the first artist to cross 100 million song certifications (*RIAA*<sup>23</sup>, 2015) — making her the “best selling digital artist of all time,” (*RihannaNow*, n.d.). She was included on *TIME* Magazine’s “Best Inventions of 2017” list for her Fenty Beauty makeup line (*TeenVogue*, 2017), and she currently has 9 Grammy Awards, having been nominated for 33 (*InStyle*, 2018). Her nickname, Rebelle Fleur, of which she named her first fragrance (Reb’l Fleur), was given to her by her maternal grandmother, Clara ‘Dolly’ Braithwaite. The name has been said to perfectly sum up the R&B popstar’s personality, and childhood. Being born to a Guyanese mother and Irish-Barbadian father, Rihanna began singing when she was just three years old. Whitney Houston’s “Saving All My Love For You” was one of her favorites, and by the time she was six, she started forming the ambition to become a professional singer (pg. 20). Rihanna would sing because she loved it, citing Bob Marley, Luther Vandross, and Mariah Carey as some of her earliest influences, and she would also sing to cope with her father’s abuse (pg. 23). Rihanna’s father, who was once addicted to crack cocaine (*Mirror*, 2012), and had been beaten by his stepfather as a child (pg. 11), became violently abusive towards Rihanna’s mother when she was growing up. Music offered a way out. A way out of poverty and away from abuse. Rihanna gained a desperation for this in her teen years.

It was at the age of 15, in 2003, that Rihanna auditioned for record producers, Evan Rogers and Carl Sturken, in Barbados (*Business Insider*, 2016). The singer had formed a trio when she was in high school (Heatley, Betts, 2012), and a good friend of hers set up a meeting

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<sup>23</sup> Recording Industry Association of America.

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with Rogers. Rogers later claimed he *knew* Rihanna was a superstar the minute she walked into his hotel room and completely overshadowed her two bandmates (pg. 13):

I said to myself, ‘if that girl can sing,’ then — holy shit! She had such a presence. Her makeup was perfect, and she had these capri pants and matching sneakers with her green eyes and long supermodel neck... the whole time I’m thinking, ‘OK I have to follow-up a meeting with *this* one (Rogers, 2016).

Within months of their first meeting, Rihanna left Barbados and moved in with Rogers and his wife in Connecticut (*Mic*, 2015). She and Rogers recorded a demo featuring a version of “Pon de Replay” that eventually landed on the desk of newly appointed Def Jam president, Jay Z. After auditioning for Jay Z in 2005, performing Whitney Houston’s “For the Love of You,” a 17-year-old Rihanna was signed on the spot<sup>24</sup>. “I signed her in one day,” Jay later told *Rolling Stone* (2005). “It took me two minutes to see she was a star.”

Jay Z’s influence on Rihanna’s signing is important when examining colorism in the music industry, as is, then Island Def Jam CEO, LA Reid’s. Reid recalled, in 2016, that when he first “laid eyes on” Rihanna, he thought she was “just a pretty girl standing outside somebody’s office,” (*Billboard*). He later said, after he and Rihanna were formally introduced by Jay Z, that she was a “startlingly beautiful 17-year-old from Barbados.” The significance placed on Rihanna’s physical appearance, addressed by Reid and Rogers upon introduction, offers insight into what music industry CEOs and producers look for when they’re wanting to sign an artist, specifically a female artist. Both men remember being drawn to the singer because she was “beautiful”, with Rogers saying, “If that girl can sing... she probably can’t sing, because usually

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<sup>24</sup> Some writers list the singer as “16”, but Epic Records CEO L.A. Reid recalled she was 17 (*Billboard*, 2016).

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it's the pretty one who can't," (*Business Insider*, 2016). In the music industry, and society, there's an importance placed on the physical attractiveness of women — undeniably, when you're trying to market that woman as an international superstar. Those who'd readily be defined as "ugly", by the standards of Eurocentric society, are rarely given a visible platform. Fatness is considered ugly, dark skin is considered ugly, kinky hair, wide noses, those who are "non-abled-bodied", and these identities and characteristics are heavily lacking in the media. So, when Rihanna's "green eyes" and "long supermodel neck" make it into an interview, some ten years later, over the singer's signing, it's significant. Likewise, Rihanna is signed by Jay Z, who in 2001, casted only one dark skinned Black woman, out of fifteen love interests, for his "Girls, Girls, Girls" music video. This was his "African chick" who he treated "like [an] animal"<sup>25</sup>. Additionally, just two years prior to Rihanna's signing, Jay rapped on "December 4<sup>th</sup>", "... all the wavy light-skinned girls is lovin' me now," (2003). Because this song chronicled the rapper's life, him having been born on December 4<sup>th</sup>, the inclusion of this line is meaningful. Jay *had* been dating Beyoncé at this time, but the line reads as a sort of ascendancy. It is preceded by, "my gear is in and I'm in the in-crowd," meaning Jay has finally made it. Positioning light skinned women as the 'prize' for making it is troubling. It reveals a colorist "preference" far too many rappers feel comfortable sharing. It's also reminiscent of the "long-held belief that Black men of stature [want] white (**read**: light) women... as a trophy — an affirmation that they've 'arrived' at the same level as their white counterparts," (Williams, 2018).

According to LA Reid, Jay Z would go on to head the A&R team for Rihanna's first album, *Music of the Sun*, which featured "Pon de Replay" (*Billboard*, 2016). The singer then

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<sup>25</sup> As acknowledged by Margaret Hunter in "The Persistence of Colorism...", Jay's usage of a dark skinned Black woman for his "African chick" has everything to do with darker skin being regarded as "ethnically authentic" and "legitimate", (2007). This was also true for the casting of *Black Panther* (2018) which takes place in Wakanda, a fictional African nation.

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released an album every year following her debut album, except for 2008, before a four-year hiatus from 2012-2016. With her fifth studio album, *Loud* (2010), Rihanna incorporated Raggamuffin music, a subgenre of Reggae and Dancehall music, on her double-platinum hit, “Man Down”. I became interested in looking at the video for “Man Down” after watching several of Rihanna’s most popular YouTube videos (this one had 562 million views), and because of the condemnation the video received in the media. Most of the disapproval was due to the video’s plot, but expectedly, none of the major music news sites addressed the overt colorism<sup>26</sup>. The video, which addresses r\*pe, was largely criticized by the Parents Television Council, Industry Ears, and Mothers Against Violence for its suggestion that r\*pe victims should murder their attackers as a form of justice. Rihanna later said that the video was about female empowerment:

“Young girls/women all over the world... we are a lot of things! We’re strong innocent fun flirtatious vulnerable, and sometimes our innocence can cause us to be naïve! We always think it could NEVER be us, but in reality, it can happen to ANY of us! So ladies be careful,” (Rihanna, 2011).

The video, which was filmed in Jamaica, is actually very powerful and does an excellent job of highlighting sexual assault — something of which many people suffer through silently — but the casting follows several of the colorist scripts seen in Beyoncé’s “Formation”. Rihanna’s attacker is a dark skinned Black man who, after being overly aggressive while dancing with her at a party, follows her outside and r\*pes her in an alleyway. This is not to suggest that dark skinned Black men can’t be r\*pists, or that they can’t attack light skinned women, but rather, this

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<sup>26</sup> The feminist blog, *NotAnotherWave*, and Renee of *Womanist Musings*, spoke about the significance of a dark skinned r\*pist in 2011.



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casting decision feeds into stereotypes about Black brutes targeting helpless light [read: white] women. Rihanna appears to be the only light skinned *person* in the entire video, of which spans 5 minutes and involves the singer encountering numerous people as she explores the island. Whether this particular area was predominately dark skinned or not, which I doubt, Rihanna's positionality within it, and her interactions with the city's residents, made her appear different. Due to lighting, and possibly makeup, she is the exceedingly light skinned, red haired woman among a dark skinned population. In the scene of the attack, the man follows Rihanna for some time, with the camera positioned over his left shoulder [4:23] signifying dramatic irony. As he grabs her, she attempts to fight back, but he covers her mouth [4:45] to prevent her from screaming. Here, the contrast of his dark hand over her face is striking. When George T. Winston, a racist educator and writer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote about the Black brute in 1901 he said, "the [Black] brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust," (pg. 109). That is the Black man in this dark alley, however unintentionally, creeping up behind Rihanna.

The criminal stereotype, which generally extends to *all* Black men, has been found to affect light skinned and dark skinned Black men differently because of colorism, making the choice of perpetrator in this video even more significant. Research on skin tone discrimination and incarceration is relatively new, but researchers have noticed interracial, as well as, intraracial differences in sentencing length. In 2015, Traci Burch, author and assistant professor of political science at Northwestern University, analyzed sentencing outcomes for Black and white men in Georgia. Burch found that on average Black men received sentences that were "4.25 percent higher than those of whites", (Burch, 2015) even after controlling for the type of crime committed. But Burch also pointed out how this statistic hides important intraracial differences

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in sentencing. “While medium and dark-skinned Blacks receive sentences that are about 4.8 percent higher than those of whites, lighter-skinned Blacks receive sentences that are not statistically significantly different from those of whites<sup>27</sup>,” (pg. 395) In this study, intraracial differences were found to be more relevant to sentencing than interracial ones<sup>28</sup>. Likewise, professor of sociology at Ohio State University, Ryan D. King, and professor of criminology at the University of Maryland, Brian D. Johnson found examples of skin tone discrimination in their 2016 study of 850 booking photos for Black and white male offenders in Minnesota. Their results indicated that, “darker skin tone and Afrocentric facial features are associated with harsher sanctions,” (King, Johnson, 2016). These “sanctions” might include the death penalty of which darker skinned Black defendants are twice as likely to receive, particularly for crimes involving white victims (Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, Johnson, 2006). It can then be said that darker skin, which has historically and repeatedly been vilified for men, women, and people, is viewed as more threatening than lighter skin (*American Psychological Association*, 2017), making the portrayal in the “Man Down” video dangerous.

Under President Barack Obama, we witness the expansion and further militarization of the police state during the year that “Man Down” is released. The value of military weapons, gear, and equipment went from \$25 million in 2009 to \$91 million in 2010 (Department of Defense, 2015). By 2014, more than \$787 million a year in “battlefield weaponry”<sup>29</sup> (Ford, 2016)

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<sup>27</sup> The same is true for women. Villanova researchers studied more than 12,000 cases of African-American women imprisoned in North Carolina and found that “women with lighter skin tones received more lenient sentences and served less time than women with darker skin tones,” (Serwer, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> In quick, “low-information” decisions, however, such as arrest, Black men’s probability remains constant across the spectrum of skin color while white men’s probability of arrest decreases with lighter skin (Branigan, Wildeman, Freese, Kiefe, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> The practice of donating unused military equipment to local governments began in 1997, under the 1033 program (Filkins, 2016). In 2014, Congress unanimously rejected a bill that would have shut down the 1033 program (Ford, 2016) — 32 members of the Congressional Black Caucus voted in support.

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was going to local police departments. Militarization means that anything deemed “resistance” to police will kill you. It means that Black and brown people domestically and globally, involved in “life-threatening” interactions with police, are viewed as the enemy. Plainly put, expansion has contributed to increased police murder of Black people in contemporary society. Though little research has been conducted over the intraracial differences in police murders since 2015 — the year news publications and the FBI began keeping count of how many people were shot and killed by law enforcement every year in the U.S. (*The Guardian*) — skin tone bias in these shootings should not be discounted. Dr. Yaba Blay, commenting on police shootings after the murder of Michael Brown in 2014, stated, “the unquestionable state of their blackness invokes fear in others... We haven’t seen racially ambiguous men gunned down by police,” (*WHYY*). This too is worthy of further examination.

While Rihanna’s “Man Down” video presents colorist notions around Black men, it also reinforces ideas of mate selection in the skin tone hierarchy. Seen with Beyoncé’s “Formation”, dark skinned Black men are not rendered invisible in the system of colorism in the same ways that dark skinned Black women are. These gendered experiences are significant. Before the attack, Rihanna and the man dance together at a party, and in that moment, they are both the object of each other’s affection. As evidenced in music videos by Black female artists, it’s regularly assumed that Black men are the partner of choice for Black women in heterosexual relationships. The same is not true for Black men who have a racial variety of women in their music videos who serve as the leading lady. On *Billboard*’s year end charts for 2011, the year in which “Man Down” peaked on the Hot 100 list<sup>30</sup>, there were 44 songs by, or featuring, Black artists. Just ten of these songs were by female artists, with Rihanna making the list 5 times. 6 of

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<sup>30</sup> It was number 59, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (*Billboard*, n.d.)

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the 10 videos by female artists had a love interest, and 6/6 times that love interest was a Black man; Nicki Minaj's "Super Bass", Kelly Rowland's "Motivation", and Beyoncé's "Best Thing I Never Had" featured medium to dark skin toned Black men. In the videos where the love interest was a light skinned Black man — Rihanna's "What's My Name", Nicki Minaj's "Moment 4 Life", and Rihanna's "We Found Love" — he too was famous<sup>31</sup>. Of the 34 videos by male artists, 18 featured a love interest, and 9 out of 18 of these love interests were women of various races, or racially ambiguous women<sup>32</sup>. None of the videos featured a dark skinned woman as the lead.

It can then be seen how male and female experiences with colorism in music videos differ, and how the presence of dark skinned Black men in spaces where dark skinned Black women seldom occupy is meaningful — this being the case for the "Man Down" video. Because of the cultural association of dark skin with masculinity, or dark skin with virility, dark skinned Black men are more often cast in situations of romance. Dr. Stephanie Irby Coard (New York University), Dr. Alfiee M. Breland (Michigan State University), and Dr. Patricia Raskin (Columbia University) examined this in their 2001 study over skin tone desirability and mate selection. Looking specifically at 113 Black men and women's personal perceptions of attraction, the researchers found that, "men indicated more often that opposite-gender peers... prefer darker skin than did women," (pg. 2265). Conversely, "women indicated more often that same-gender peers preferred darker skin than did men." In other words, the men and women interviewed for this study most often believed that women preferred darker skin, and that men

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<sup>31</sup> "What's My Name" and "Moment 4 Life" featured rapper, Drake as the love interest. "We Found Love" featured actor, model, and boxing champion, Dudley O'Shaughnessy.

<sup>32</sup> CoonYe West's "All of the Lights", Usher's "More", and Lil Wayne's "She Will" were categorized as "inconclusive" for lack of a video, or for my inability to properly see the woman to determine her race or skin color.

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preferred lighter skin. This often plays out in situations of courtship for movies, television and in music videos. Coard, Breland, and Raskin did not elaborate on why darker skin was favored for men and not for women, and did not ask this question of their participants, but gendered colorism can be assumed. In his 2002 study over skin color and the perception of attractiveness, researcher Mark E. Hill tested the theory of gendered colorism and found that skin tone is more closely linked to Black women's perceived attractiveness than it is to Black men's, and that fair skin tones are viewed as "particularly feminine" (pg. 77).

Hill's study revealed a contemporary way of thinking about skin tone that mirrors the ideology set forth during enslavement. In an article for *This Is Africa*, writer Siji Jabbar said:

To build a European empire, whiteness had to be defined in contrast to everyone else. Europeans placed themselves at the pinnacle of the human race and dark skinned Africans [were] at the very bottom... To be Black was to be primitive, backward, inferior, dirty, ugly, evil, devilish, deviant, corrupt and unappealing... To be white was to be virtuous, beautiful, refined, humane, intelligent and godly (Jabbar, 2014).

Ideas of beauty and civility, sexuality and intelligence, remain today, and continue to be used racially, and to rigidly categorize 'male' and 'female'. Within this system, white women are "beautiful", and Black men are "deviant". These are set forth as societal extremes. Moreover, darker skin is "deviant", with deviance more readily aligning with cultural beliefs around masculinity, and lighter skin is "beautiful", a characteristic of which is generally applied to women because women are judged in terms of physical desirability more often than men. Levels of physical attractiveness for women does not rest on their skin tone alone, but rather, on their hair/hair texture, body shape/size, facial features, height, non-disabled-bodied-ness, and so on. In

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the contemporary music industry, light skinned, or racially ambiguous, long-haired, ‘thick’ Black women are “preferred”.

### **Nicki Minaj: Barbie’s World**

If Rihanna and Beyoncé represent the most visible, most successful Black female artists of the contemporary pop and R&B genres, then Nicki Minaj is easily identified as the most recognizable Black female rapper of the past decade. Since 2010, and for 7 years, Minaj has been the only Black female rap artist to place on *Billboard’s* Top 100 Year End list<sup>33</sup>. She is the most awarded solo female rapper in the history of the genre, with 191 wins out of 277 nominations (*Ben’s Big Blog*, 2017)<sup>34</sup>. She holds the title of “best-selling female rapper” with 85 million in sales (*RIAA*), and has more Hot 100 hits than any other musical woman — surpassing Aretha Franklin in March of 2017 (*Entertainment Weekly*). The success of Nicki Minaj, just 11 years into her career, is even more impressive within the context of the historically male-dominant rap industry. According to film director, Ava DuVernay, who directed the 2010 documentary *My Mic Sounds Nice: The Truth About Women in Hip Hop*, “...in the late 1980s and early 1990s there were more than 40 women signed to major [record] labels, in 2010 there were just three,” (*NPR*, 2014). In 2017, Sheldon Pearce, a contributing writer for *Pitchfork*, found that not much has changed in the hiring of female talent for rap-focused labels since DuVernay’s film. Maybach Music Group (Rick Ross), Cash Money/Young Money (Birdman), 300 Entertainment, Def Jam (Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin), G.O.O.D. Music (Kanye West), Top Dawg Entertainment, OVO Sound (Drake, 40, El-Khatib), Cinematic Music Group (Jonny Shipes),

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<sup>33</sup> Cardi B would place in 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Many of the awards and categories Minaj has won did not exist during the 1980s and 90s, and the BET awards were not established until 2001 (*BET*, n.d.)

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Mass Appeal (Nas), Rhymesayers, Roc Nation (Jay Z), Dreamville (J. Cole), Stones Throw Records, Fat Beats (DJ Jab), and Mello Music Group were all founded by and are currently headed by men. Combined, only 39 out of 292 (14 percent) artists signed to these labels are women and just 4 of these women are classified as rappers<sup>35</sup>. When asked about the current state of women in hip hop, rapper MC Lyte<sup>36</sup> explained that it's riskier to sign female artists today because of the costs associated with their physical appearance; "Hair, make-up and wardrobe all add up," (*Smithsonian*, 2014). While I disagree with appearance costs being the primary reason behind the lack of female artists in the contemporary rap industry, Lyte draws attention to an interesting assumption which was addressed by University of Richmond associate professor Erik Nielsen in his 2014 article: "Where Did All The Female Rappers Go?". For women in the music industry, what they look like is just as important as their talent. For Nicki Minaj, her campy aesthetic has played a leading role in her career thus far.

Onika Tanya Maraj was born December 8, 1982 in Saint James, Trinidad and Tobago to Robert<sup>37</sup>, a financial executive, and Carol Maraj, who worked "several jobs" and later attended Monroe College in the Bronx (Mitchell, 2015)<sup>38</sup>. When Nicki was just a toddler, her mother left for New York in search of a new home to move the family out of the islands. This move was prompted by Robert Maraj who, after abusing drugs and alcohol, attempted to burn the family house down with Carol inside it (Theorem, 2015). Nicki and her brother lived with their grandmother during their mother's extended absence. When she was 5, the family moved to South Jamaica, Queens, New York, where Nicki became interested in music — she authored her

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<sup>35</sup> Nicki Minaj (YMCMB), Chanel West Coast (YMCMB), Iggy Azalea (Def Jam), Sa-Roc (Rhymesayers).

<sup>36</sup> In 1988, MC Lyte became the first woman to release a solo rap album with a major record label, Atlantic Records.

<sup>37</sup> Also referenced as "Omar".

<sup>38</sup> Both of Minaj's parents would dabble in gospel music, with Robert working part-time as a gospel singer.

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first rap at the age of 12 (*Biography*, n.d.) and played the clarinet for several years. As a teenager, Nicki successfully auditioned for Fiorello H. La Guardia High School<sup>39</sup> for music, art, and performing arts (*Biography*, n.d.), and gained an interest in becoming an actress (though she would not be largely successful). Upon graduation, she worked various jobs, and in 2006<sup>40</sup>, was discovered on Myspace by Dirty Money CEO, Big Fendi (*Hip Hop DX*, 2014). After much persuasion, Fendi eventually got ‘Nicki Maraj’ to change her name to ‘Minaj’, cosigned by rappers Jadakiss and Busta Rhymes, “for marketing purposes” (Fendi, 2014). Following the distribution of her mixtape, Fendi orchestrated the Young Money/Dirty Money deal that led to Minaj collaborating with rapper Lil Wayne in 2007 (*Biography*, n.d.), and Nicki’s signing with Young Money in 2009<sup>41</sup>.

Lil Wayne, like Jay Z and Mathew Knowles, operated as Minaj’s male mentor in the earliest parts of her career which further demonstrates how, despite the assumed artistic autonomy of these women, the fate of their careers are initially in the hands of men. Likewise, Minaj is entering the rap industry with an overtly color struck guide. Wayne opened “Every Girl In The World” by stating, “I like a long haired, thick redbone” (2009) and on “Right Above It” he rapped, “beautiful Black woman, I bet that bitch look better red,” (2010). This not only reiterates the color names present in Beyoncé’s “Formation” but draws a clear and problematic distinction between being “Black” and being “red”. Minaj herself utilized color names when she rapped about being “slim, trim, [and] also light skin” on “Whip It” (2012) before stating on “Wamables”, “put your hand up, now it’s time to make a pledge, you’ll never catch me, in a light

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<sup>39</sup> Laurence Fishburne, Omar Epps, and Donald Faison are also alumnus.

<sup>40</sup> In an interview with *The Breakfast Club*, Fendi states it was either 2006 or 2007 that he discovered Minaj (*Hip Hop DX*, 2014).

<sup>41</sup>Minaj became the label’s first ever female artist (*Biography*, n.d.)



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skin nigga bed,” (2014). The latter quote is not an example of colorism, but rather, a reinforcing of the partnership between light skinned Black women and dark skinned Black men that is very common in the music industry and music videos. Here, Minaj recites a literal, lyrical pledge. The former quote, rapped in a verse physically describing Minaj, reifies the music industry’s ideal Black woman, as shown repeatedly.

When rappers Mike Jones and the Ying Yang Twins released “Badd” in 2005, they described “a dyme”, or a woman who is a perfect 10/10, as having a “cute face, slim waist, with a big behind”. There is no mention of skin tone, but the music video for this song is dominated by medium and light skin toned Black and racially ambiguous women. Nicki Minaj might easily be defined as a “dyme” with her backside being a major focus throughout her career. Additionally, Minaj’s *derrière* has directly aided in her appeal to Blackness, while her clothing and everchanging hair color and style have allowed for partial control over the ways she is racialized by the mainstream media. Because of the European fascination with Black women’s bodies, most recognized in the history of Saartje Baartman<sup>42</sup>, big butts have come to be heavily associated with Black women. This association is not always positive but is largely viewed as such in the Black community especially. For example, rapper Sir Mix-a-Lot released “Baby Got Back” in 1992 as a declaration of attraction to Black women’s “big butts” — challenging mainstream notions of female beauty. This preceded numerous songs about big butts<sup>43</sup>, establishing a new feminine ideal. The mainstream media’s then newfound acceptance for historically Black female associated features, seen with Kylie Jenner’s big lips and Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez’s big butts, reduces the likelihood of Minaj being seen as a total

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<sup>42</sup> Stage-named the “Hottentot Venus”.

<sup>43</sup> “Bootylicious” (2001), “Ms. New Booty” (2006), “Donk” (2008), “Dance (A\$\$) featuring Minaj (2011), etc.

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anomaly in this way. Additionally, Minaj's hair color and texture, light skin, and overall eccentric presentation helps to explain her movement and domination in the music industry. She is a crossover artist who effortlessly moves between the rap and pop genres, sometimes within the same song. Crossover appeal is important for any artist, but it is most essential for rappers who occupy a genre that is negatively coded as "Black". Likewise, pop music gets positively coded as "white" because it is mainstream. But Nicki's physical appearance allows for an appeasement to both Blackness and whiteness. She obscures those racial signifiers centered on hair with her multi-colored, uniquely styled wigs, simultaneously adhering to societal and Black communal standards of hair and body beauty.

This duality of presentation is most evident in Minaj's "Pound The Alarm" (2012) as Nicki raps and sings wearing a loose afro-textured, frizzy blonde wig. I chose to look at the "Pound The Alarm" video for themes of colorism because the song is featured on the *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* album. This was Minaj's second studio album and represented her transition to platinum blonde hair which is seen on the album's cover. Although she wore blonde hair before the release of this album, Minaj most frequently wore a long, blonde lace-front wig that year. Blonde hair has acted as somewhat of a rite of passage for Black women in the music industry with Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj all having worn blonde or platinum blonde hair during their careers<sup>44</sup>. Additionally, I chose to look at this video because Minaj is presented as extremely light skin, almost pale, through set lighting, hair, makeup, and natural sunlight. In a 2015 article over the commodification of race in rap music, German writer Sören Schoppmeier studied the use of hair and makeup in Minaj's music videos. Examining a majority of her videos, Schoppmeier concluded that, "Minaj generally appears to wear light makeup, which, together

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<sup>44</sup> Most recently, mainstream rap newcomer Cardi B has began wearing her hair blonde in a transition from black.

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with favorable lighting and editing, emphasizes her comparatively light skin” (pg. 59). This reflects the favorability of the mainstream music industry to lighter skinned women, a glorification of these women, and, as was seen with Beyoncé and Rihanna, demonstrates skin color relativity in contexts where Minaj is shown with medium or dark skin toned women.

The video, which was filmed in Port of Spain, Trinidad and is Carnival themed, begins with Minaj looking out over the city [0:24]. With her pink lipstick and blonde hair, she resembles a real-life Barbie doll. In this scene, lighting, makeup, and hair are deliberately used to emphasize Minaj’s light skin (Schoppmeier, pg. 59). This fuels existing notions around female beauty which centers whiteness and a European aesthetic. The use of the Barbie character itself is significant. One of Minaj’s longest lasting and most well-known alter egos is The Harajuku Barbie, and Nicki often presents herself looking like a Barbie through hair, makeup, and a snatched waist. She’s released several songs mentioning Barbie, or proclaiming herself the Black Barbie, including “Black Barbies”<sup>45</sup> (2016) and “Barbie Tingz” (2018). In “Black Barbies”, Minaj raps about the physical appearance of a Black Barbie with lyrics, “Black Barbies in the city, fat ass and pretty titties” and “I’m a fuckin’ Black Barbie, pretty face, perfect body.” Minaj, like many Black female artists, has used the “Barbie” moniker to challenge beauty norms while simultaneously adhering to them<sup>46</sup>. Barbie herself, introduced in 1959, was blonde (or brunette) with light eyes, white skin, and a small waist. She represented white beauty standards. Black Barbies are then simply created in her image. Pearl Boshomane Tsotetsi, writing for *Sunday Times*, commented that Barbie diversity is nothing more than, “whiteness dipped in darker paint” (2018), and Schoppmeier said, “all that seems to differentiate the ethnic Barbies from their white

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<sup>45</sup> This song was a remix of hip hop duo, Rae Sremmurd’s “Black Beatles” (2016).

<sup>46</sup> Lil Kim “The Jump Off” (2003), Azealia Banks “Barbie Shit” (2011), DreamDoll “Barbie Girl” (2017).

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model is skin and hair color” (pg. 60). Minaj’s usage of the Barbie aesthetic, is then, nondeviant, and contributes to the existing beauty myth<sup>47</sup>.

Additionally, Minaj’s blonde hair, similar to Beyoncé’s and Rihanna’s red hair, allows her to stand out amongst the assumed locals. Minaj parades down the street [0:42] with women of a variety of skin tones joining her to dance. Most of these women are racially ambiguous and they all possess darker hair. Only when the song reaches its chorus, and the women enter the Carnival celebration, are there discernibly dark skinned women present. Many of them are shown from a low angle with their faces out of focus — the shot being meant to emphasize their behinds and their dancing [1:31, 1:36] — or from eye level with their backs turned to the camera [1:36]. In a behind the scenes video for “Pound The Alarm”, it’s revealed that the darker women are the *actual* locals [0:59] and the racially ambiguous women are video women. Minaj also used this video to state that women in Trinidad “don’t hate... like that” [1:42] after a fan complimented her appearance. “Women out here are quick to be like ‘you’re so sexy’” she continued, to which, her then boyfriend and fellow hype man, Safaree stated, “It’s so messed up that other places... they’re messing up your mind frame” (OfficialNickiMinaj, 2012). The idolization of Western beauty in foreign countries, particularly by young women, is not praiseworthy. As Minaj donned her blonde wig, pink lipstick, and light face powder, she undoubtedly fit the Eurocentric standard. Kinesha Goldson, a Miss Jamaica Universe contestant and dark skinned Black woman, wrote a letter in 2015 taking issue with how the competition approaches “beauty” (*The Gleaner*, 2015). Goldson stated, “It’s crucial... we let girls know that the fairness of your skin and the curl in your hair aren’t prerequisites for success or beauty.” It

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<sup>47</sup> Naomi Wolf published *The Beauty Myth... How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* in 1990 and again in 2002. It addressed the unrealistic expectations applied to women’s bodies, particularly as they gain more social power and prominence.

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becomes increasingly difficult to teach this when, aside from Michelle Obama, fair skin is practically the only form of representation Black girls see regularly in the media.

When “Pound The Alarm” (2012) was released, President Obama was in his second term. The respectability politics which he and Michelle undeniably represent, was presented alongside Nicki’s vocal, sexual expression, spectacle, and representation. Everything about Minaj’s name, clothing, and performance explicitly label her a sexual being. Likewise, I believe Nicki Minaj is viewed sexually, or as someone *worthy* of sexual expression, partly due to her light skin. In “Pound The Alarm”, she wore a red and white jeweled bra, and later, a red feathered headdress and bralette body chain. Both outfits perfectly complimented her breasts and showed off her hourglass figure. I respect Nicki’s sexual expression because Black women are denied sexual identity, policed, and shamed. But, because sex and sexuality are often associated with physical appearance, Nicki, Beyoncé, and Rihanna are allowed sexual exploration in music and performance that is validated in ways uncommon for dark skinned Black women. Historically, dark skinned women have been stereotyped as asexual, and lighter skinned women, hypersexual. Through the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, we’ve come to associate a certain physical appearance with “sex symbol” or “selling sex”. Today, these dehumanizing stereotypes persist, with the most relevant example of Mammy-fication being the de-sexualization of Missy Elliott, a dark skinned female rapper. Missy’s “Can I put my booty, booty up in your spaghetti, daddy?” (“Pussycat”, 2002) references anal sex like Nicki’s “... flow tighter than a dick in the butt,” (“Roger That”, 2010). Missy’s “Go downtown and eat it like a vulture,” (“Work It”, 2002) is as much about cunnilingus as Nicki’s “You can eat it like a treat, you can squirt it, you can skeet,” (“Freaky Gurl (Wanna Minaj?)”, 2008). But Missy is not viewed sexually. Her lyrics are interpreted comedically, which they are, but they are also sex-positive and joyfully vulgar. In her

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2016 article, “Don’t Take Missy’s Sexuality Away From Her”, author Veronica Wells stated, “people don’t often associate women like Missy with sex. Heavysset, dark skinned, covered up.” This is true. Women who don’t fit the societal standard of slim thick, lighter skin, and Eurocentric features are not acknowledged as sexual beings in the same ways that women who do fit these characteristics are, or at all. To deny someone their sexual identity, particularly when it’s used as a part of their overall identity, further demonstrates a lack of respect for dark skinned and plus sized women’s humanity.

### **Conclusion**

In 1959, sociologist C. Wright Mills documented the relationship between the individual experience and the wider society in *The Sociological Imagination*. He explained the influence and interaction between what is, in this case, contemporary American society and the music industry. But is society driving messages in music, or are messages in music driving society? Realistically, society is the chicken which hatches the music industry egg, but the modern-day connection between the two is built and sustained, at least in part, on reciprocity where society reflects the music and music reflects society. With colorism, the individual experience is one dark skinned woman feeling dehumanized by rap lyrics that praise “white... redbone... and yellowbone”<sup>48</sup> women while conveniently excluding any woman darker than a brown paper bag. It is the feeling of unworthiness when your experience is not represented. Truthfully, no woman should feel that their humanity rests on the appreciation of their beauty, or attraction alone, but the comfortability to degrade dark skinned Black women goes much deeper than that. What other forms of respect is she not given when the most basic, in human recognition, is not afforded?

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<sup>48</sup> French Montana’s “When I Want” (2013).

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The bigger issue is that dark skinned women, and dark skinned people as a group, and globally, are systemically disadvantaged and harmed by unchecked colorism making the perpetuation of the skin tone hierarchy in music significant to the wider society. Instances of this significance, aside from colorism in incarceration and mate selection, is the effect of skin tone biases on education, employment, and mental health.

Colorism in education begins at an early age and was examined by researcher Margaret Hunter in “The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality” (2007). Hunter cited the “groundbreaking” 1990 study by Michael Hughes and Bradley R. Hertel which found that, “the education gap between whites and Blacks was nearly identical to the education gap between light skinned Blacks and dark skinned Blacks,” (pg. 243). This again shows how skin tone biases and colorism play a significant role in the lives of Black people, like race/racism. But how is the intraracial education gap explained? According to Hunter, the skin color hierarchy reflects “deeply held cultural beliefs about civility, modernity, sophistication, backwardness, beauty, and virtue,” (pg. 243). When teachers, of any race, who internalize ideas around white supremacy, view lighter skinned students as “smarter, [or] more academically prepared”, they tend to expect more and push these students further in their education. These expectations and academic encouragement have a powerful influence on student achievement. Likewise, when teachers assume that lighter skinned students come from better families and are better behaved, punishments for bad behavior change. In “The Relationship Between Skin Tone and School Suspension for African Americans” (2013), Lance Hannon, Robert DeFina, and Sarah Bruch found that Black students with darker skin were significantly more likely to be suspended from school than those with lighter skin. The probability of suspension was even more statistically significant when looking at dark skinned and light skinned Black girls than it

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was for dark skinned and light skinned Black boys<sup>49</sup>. “The odds of suspension were about 3 times greater for young African American [girls] with the darkest skin tone compared to those with the lightest,” (pg. 281). In a more recent study, researchers had similar findings: “African American female adolescents with darker complexions were almost twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspension as their white female peers. This... was not found for African American female students with lighter skin complexions,” (Blake, Keith, Luo, Le, Salter, 2017). Exploration of the school-to-prison pipeline has already shown that, over the past 15 years, “Black girls have been increasingly subjected to harsh disciplinary policies<sup>50</sup>,” (Black Girls Matter report, 2015). Colorism in education ensures that this is even more true for dark skinned Black girls.

Additionally, to the extent that educational achievement is associated with better job placement and a greater income for Black Americans, the impact of colorism on employment is also worthy of investigation. Earlier research has primarily focused on employment and income disparities interracially, specifically between whites and Blacks<sup>51</sup>, but an intraracial analysis reveals colorist hiring practices and a significant in-group pay gap. In 2003, social science researchers found that “Latinos who identified as white earned about \$5000 more per year than Latinos who identified as Black,” (Hunter, pg. 241). Likewise, later findings suggest that lighter skinned Black Americans tend to earn more than their darker skinned counterparts “even when researchers account for differences in family background, occupation, and education,” (pg. 241).

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<sup>49</sup> Black boys were more likely to be suspended at *every* skin tone than were Black girls.

<sup>50</sup> In 2013-14, Black girls made up 16 percent of the female student population in U.S. public schools but were 43 percent of girls who were referred to law enforcement and 38 percent of those arrested (Inniss-Thompson, 2017).

<sup>51</sup> Dennis J. Aigner, Glen G. Cain “Statistical Theories of Discrimination in Labor Markets” (1977). Cordelia W. Reimers “Labor Market Discrimination Against Hispanic and Black Men” (1983). Lincoln Quillian, Devah Pager, Ole Hexel, Arnfinn H. Midtboen “Meta-analysis of field experiments shows no change in racial discrimination in hiring over time” (2017).



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In other words, class and family history are not enough to explain the pay gap between light and dark skinned Black Americans. In 2007, Arthur H. Goldsmith, Darrick Hamilton, and William Darity Jr. examined the pay gap for dark and light skinned Black Americans through interviews with 948 respondents. The average age of the sample was 37 and 15 percent of those interviewed had a bachelor's degree. They found that mean hourly wages quite literally rise as skin tone lightens, "moving from \$11.72 for dark skinned Blacks to \$13.23 for Blacks with medium skin shade. Light skinned Blacks report hourly pay of \$14.72 and the average white respondent reports earning \$15.94 per hour," (pg. 707). Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity concluded that higher wages earned by light skinned Black Americans "may be due to greater schooling and hence better productivity", but education also does not explain the pay gap. Looking at colorism in hiring practices, researcher's Matthew S. Harrison and Kecia M. Thomas found that "skin color is... regarded more highly than... educational background and prior work experience," (Harrison, Thomas, 2009). Studying the mock hiring practices of 240 undergraduate students from a southeastern university, Harrison and Thomas manipulated six photos with dark, medium, or light skin tones, and gave students two possible résumés. Unexpectedly, lighter and medium skin toned applicants were rated similarly, but both skin tones were rated *significantly* higher than darker skin toned Blacks (pg. 147). The regular association of colorist language with "preference" in the contemporary music industry is then highly problematic. It ignores how these types of preferences are influenced by social norms and cultural standards that have historically devalued dark skin and women, and excuses abusive and discriminatory behavior.

In "If The Present Looks Like The Past..." Alice Walker stated, "we cannot, as a people, progress" (pg. 290) without addressing colorism. It impedes us like "colonialism, sexism, and racism". I fully agree with this statement. Colorism is "directly related to the larger system of

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racism in the United States and around the world,” (Hunter, pg. 237). It operates interracial and intraracially through overt and hidden action. In the music industry, it thrives openly. We see and hear the skin tone hierarchy being reinforced when Waka Flocka Flame proudly states, “brown skin or a yellow-bone” (“No Hands”, 2010), but it’s become so normalized that we ignore or affirm it, never thinking of the harm colorism is doing and has done. There is no denying how racism, systemic inequality, and discrimination “continue to impact the mental health of Black/African Americans” (Mental Health America, 2018), yet colorism, following the same dehumanizing language and actions, is not viewed similarly. White supremacy has taught Black people to hate the color of our skin (Malcolm X, 1962), and today, we shamelessly carry out the hatred against people of our own race. In the future, I hope to see greater research over the effects of colorism on the mental health of dark skinned Black people, specifically women and girls, and when messages associating dark skin with “bad” begin to surface for Black children. Currently, it’s important to critique the things we enjoy. To steer artists in a more inclusive, less destructive and hateful, direction<sup>52</sup>. As some of the most visible and influential Black voices in America, more musicians must use their platform to uplift the race in its entirety. “Preferences” don’t do that.

There is an epidemic of skin bleaching around the world which, undeniably, is connected to the constant glorification of light skinned women in the media. Bleaching products contain chemicals like mercury and steroids, and according to writer Ogo Maduewesi, citing the World Health Organization, can cause kidney damage, rashes, discoloration, scarring, and psychosis (2017). The desire to achieve “beauty” through bleaching poses a real danger to, particularly

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<sup>52</sup> Rapper 2 Chainz purposefully used dark skinned Black models in his “Feds Watching” (2013) music video (*MadameNoire*, 2013). Rapper Remy Ma told HuffPost that her single “Melanin Magic (Pretty Brown)” (2018) was meant to celebrate dark skinned Black women — it does, however, reference brown instead of Black skin, suggests her body is “lookin’ like cinnamon”, and features Chris Brown who has used colorist lyrics in the past.

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women, that should make skin lightening a global, public health concern. But according to Kovie Biakolo, writing for *Quartz*, only three African countries have regulated skin lightening products<sup>53</sup> (2016). In the U.S. skin bleaching is not discussed openly or in the context of colorism. In Lagos, Nigeria, one survey found that, “up to 77 percent of all residents use skin lightening creams” (2011), and in 2012, “India... used 258 tons of lightening creams” — and saw an increase in men using these products as well. Skin bleaching has become a \$10 billion a year industry, “popular [in] many African countries, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, India, the Philippines, [and] Japan,” (Hunter, 2015). Under capitalism, where money is more important than humans or health, these numbers are projected to double by 2020 (GIA, 2009). In the U.S., where abstract language of “even tone” and “smooth texture” is used, there aren’t too many products blatantly selling lighter skin. But Western companies like Unilever (based in London, Rotterdam) and L’Oréal (based New York, Paris) profit from their “Fair & Lovely” and “White Perfect” products, respectively<sup>54</sup> (Rehman, 2017). I was surprised to see that *Ebony* Magazine advertised Vantex skin bleaching cream, for “clear radiant skin”, well into 2005. Messages like these perpetuate colorism and idealize white beauty in contemporary America. I believe the resurgence of Black pride movements<sup>55</sup>, which tried to instill a respect and appreciation for dark skin and Black features in all Black people, is necessary post-Obama<sup>56</sup>, as well as, greater research over colorism in Black media.

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<sup>53</sup>Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, and South Africa.

<sup>54</sup> Other Western brands include Neutrogena’s “Fine Fairness” (parent company Johnson & Johnson), Garnier’s “White Complete” (parent company L’Oréal), and Dove (parent company Unilever).

<sup>55</sup> The civil rights and Black pride movements of the 1960s coined the phrase “Black is Beautiful” which later spread beyond the U.S.

<sup>56</sup> Currently, Divine Dark Skin (DDS Magazine) and the Dark Is Beautiful campaign promote dark skinned women’s beauty and raise awareness to the effects of skin color bias in the U.S., India and worldwide.

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