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Colorism in *Genesis Begins Again*

Not too long ago in American history, white psychologists argued that the quantity of white heredity in a person's genetic makeup determined his or her moral, physical, and mental superiority. The phrase "white is right" circulated both white and black social groups. Racism in the U.S. is a well-known system of discrimination and oppression, but colorism—a subset of racism—is equally systemic and dangerous. Alicia Williams's novel, *Genesis Begins Again*, is a contemporary reflection on how colorism is mightily present in the twenty-first century. Like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, this novel's protagonist struggles to accept her dark skin amidst discrimination from peers, adults, and mainstream media. It explores the damaging psychological effects of colorism on thirteen-year-old Genesis and its cyclical nature within her family. The novel makes clear that colorism is a deeply ingrained, systemic social problem that causes self-esteem issues among people of color, especially women.

Among studies of colorism, there is a focus on the intersectionality of colorism and feminism. Dr. Margaret Hunter, Professor of Sociology, writes about colorism's effects on students and how it is associated with social capital for women. Many scholars argue that colorism inequitably affects women of color to this day. Their definitions of colorism and a brief history of the concept follow. Hunter says, "the system of colorism describes the way skin tone, within racial groups, affects the intensity of...discrimination, the frequency and the privileges that the lightest-skinned experience" ("Colorism" 55). She traces its root to the European colonial project, founded on "an ideology of European superiority that included intellectual contributions, language, religion, culture, and even bodily

aesthetics,” elevating the status of white skin, light and straight hair, and light eyes” (55). During the centuries of slavery in the U.S., especially in the American South, women slaves were sexually victimized by white men, creating bi-racial children known as “mulattoes” who inherited lighter skin and straighter hair (Okazawa-Rey et al. 13). Consequently, “social advantages were often granted to these children by their white fathers, who offered them a better quality of life than that available to other blacks” (13). Eventually, after the end of slavery and amidst persecution in the South, free mulattoes ventured North, “bringing lighter skin color and its elitist affectations with them. Many disdained their darker brothers and sisters, preferring instead the supposed gentility and culture of the white race” (13)

By the turn of the twentieth century, the above-mentioned phrase “white is right” became commonplace and referred to skin *tone* stratification, not just race. After World War II, the U.S. witnessed an evolution of the black middle class; “family background and color snobbishness were slowly being supplanted by level of education and occupation as the essential ingredients for social class membership” (Okazawa-Rey et al. 14). Lighter-skinned blacks climbed social ladders much like Genesis’s grandmother’s family did. When describing to Genesis how her grandfather wanted his children to “marry up,” she says “understand that my grandpapa was a forward thinker. Our lineage is full of doctors and professors and successful businessmen. It’s not luck,” (Williams 152). Genesis learns that her family has intentionally married lighter-skinned people not only to continue making the family genes lighter, but also to procure better jobs than dark-skinned people who were commonly laborers. But colorism did not stop in the twentieth century. In fact, twenty-first century technology and social climate has only added new dimensions to the issue, as the reader witnesses with Genesis.

Colorism, like racism, is cyclical and resides even within families, as evidenced in Genesis’s family. Black children are first exposed to the variety of skin tones found within their own families, where they “learn the values attributed to various skin colors...when the child enters the larger social world, she carries these color-conscious attitudes with her, and they are reinforced” by society (Okazawa-Rey et al.

13). According to her grandmother's story, colorism is indeed part of Genesis's family history. Her great-great-grandfather's skin tone expectations are an example of how "men of color often perpetuate colorism by demonstrating it in their choice of partners, or in their descriptions of what they consider attractive in women" (Phoenix 98). Some men—like Genesis's dad, who married a much lighter-skinned woman—may unwittingly play into the "pathological effects of color consciousness" that are deeply ingrained within the black community (13).

Genesis's dad knows the harm of colorism. Blamed by his own mother for his brother's death, he was "never-gon'-amount-to-nothin'-like-[his]-black-nappy-headed-triflin'-daddy" (Williams 356). He was humiliated by his mother-in-law when he failed her paper bag test, and he knew that Sharon was "marrying down" by choosing him for a husband. His self-hatred transposes itself onto Genesis, who is his spitting image. The way her dad looks at her mom is not lost on Genesis; she wishes he could look at her in the same adoring way. The conversation Genesis has with her grandmother about marrying up drives home the point that black is undesirable. She reaffirms that black equals arrests, bad jobs, and trouble; Genesis worries if no one will recognize that she is "one of the *good* [black] ones" (Williams 154). She insists that "being Black like [her] ain't nothing to be proud about" and detests her unlucky skin color (154).

Notably, the protagonist of the novel is female. This is important because colorism largely intersects with feminism and sexism. While colorism certainly affects black men, "racialized beauty norms enhance the importance of physical appearance for girls, making light skin color even more important to their social status" than to boys' (Hunter "Colorism" 55). Hunter considers light skin "a form of social capital for women...light skin tone is interpreted as beauty, and beauty operates as social capital for women" (Hunter "Skin" 177). Genesis considers herself to be ugly because of her dark skin, even though she does not apply that thinking to people like Troy, who is also dark. She looks upon girls like Yvette, Nia, and even her own mother as the pretty ones. Society continues to insist that skin shade

determines beauty for women. Today, Twitter users write tweets like: 'All dark skin girls aren't ugly, & all light skin girls aren't cute.' This tweet attempts to counter the premise that dark skin is necessarily ugly. Instead, "this kind of tweet reproduces it by using the same terms, rather than rejecting them in favor of something like 'skin shade does not determine beauty'" (Phoenix 97). Phoenix argues that the white woman beauty ideal "remains powerful as a result of the intersection of racism, colorism (inter- and intra-ethnic prejudice on the basis of skin shade) and patriarchal patterns of desire" (Phoenix 98).

Genesis certainly has been socialized to believe that she needs soft, straight hair and light brown skin to be considered beautiful. She believes that her skin tone is the key to being accepted by her father, grandmother, and kids at school. She fantasizes that she is a pop singer like Rihanna by tying a black shirt on her head so she can "pretend to have good hair...even [her] skin looks lighter against the dark fabric" (Williams 71). She paints her face with her mother's light brown foundation to achieve a more beautiful look. She yearns to look like her light-skinned mother instead of her father. After she learns about her grandmother's brown paper bag test, she holds one up next to her skin to find that she is five shades darker. Disgusted, she scrubs her skin with a wool scouring pad, lemon, and yogurt in an attempt to exfoliate the "blue-black-purple. The bluck. The blurple" (157). She later pours bleach in the tub and lies in it. Her final attempt is using a bleaching cream that she found online and paid for by stealing her mother's emergency credit card. At what point will Genesis stop trying to lighten her skin tone for the sake of being what society deems beautiful?

It is difficult to blame Genesis for believing that light skin is more beautiful than dark skin. In mainstream media, especially magazines, women of color are routinely photoshopped to look lighter or to have more Anglo-centric features. They frequently sport hair relaxers and extensions. Icons like Beyonce are idolized as the epitome of beautiful and are featured on as cover girls for their creamy skin, long flowy locks, and thin noses. Genesis is not likely to find someone who looks like her on the cover of a magazine because, "whether or not pictures of women of color are digitally altered or lighting is used

in such a way that it produces an unnatural pallor, the results and the implicit message they convey are the same: women of color, whatever their skin shade, are not light enough for mainstream media because they are not white...evidence suggests that black cover girls don't sell as well as white cover girls" (Phoenix 99). Furthermore, the white-ideal is unachievable for black women: "hair-straightening and skin-lightening, despite the pain involved, achieve little degree of true success in approximating the white ideal of beauty. Femininity is out of reach for the black female; and the despised and debased darker sister is relegated to the status of ugly duckling" (Okazawa-Rey et al. 14). By consuming this culture, Genesis internalizes the notion that skin tone—beauty—is a girl's most important quality for social acceptance.

Hunter describes skin tone hierarchy as the beauty queue: "a theory that describes how skin tone affects a symbolic rank-ordering of women by skin tone, with the lightest women who gain the most privilege near the front of the queue and the darkest women who experience the most discrimination near the back" (Hunter "Colorism" 57). The beauty queue is troubling in that it emphasizes the value of physical beauty for women at the cost of devaluing other parts of their selves. Since birth, Genesis has been confronted with the problem of her dark skin tone. As the daughter of a light-skinned mother and a dark-skinned father, Genesis laments that she was not born lighter-skinned. She understands that her father has issue with the fact that she has his black skin tone. Children develop their self-identity by observing and internalizing what others think about them; "if a dark-skinned young girl is constantly told that she is ugly, and experiences treatment that supports these views, she may begin to take ugliness as a moral or psychological attribute" (Okazawa-Rey et al. 13). Genesis absolutely experiences treatment by her family and peers that supports her belief that she is ugly. In a heartbreaking scene, Genesis's father lashes out at her for being black like him: "here I go marrying a fine thing like Sharon...and she ain't give me no pretty baby. She gives me...nothin' but Chubby Cheeks" (Williams 111). He chastises her for not coming out of the womb looking like her mother. If Genesis

questioned her worth as a black child, this interaction surely cemented her ideas that she is ugly and not worth her father's affection.

From the start of the book, Genesis is confronted by peers about the ugliness of her skin. 'Charcoal,' 'eggplant,' and 'blackie' are just a few of the slurs she endures from so-called friends and enemies alike. Her fifth-grade peers started a list, "100 Reasons Why We Hate Genesis," which Genesis keeps in her drawer. She adds items to the list whenever she feels down on herself for being too black or desperate. In the most heartbreaking scene near the start of the novel, readers witness Genesis's poor self-esteem as she looks at herself in the mirror:

Look at you, with that wide nose, my reflection says.

I pinch my nostrils down.

And those big lips.

I smash my lips tight.

And that nappy head.

I finger the tangles loose.

Don't get me started on how black you are.

I want to say something, but what? That I think I'm cute? 'Cause I'm not. That I have good hair?

'Cause I don't. That I'm not dark? 'Cause I am.

Who do you think's gonna love you with the way you look? Cackling echoes through the mirror so loud it could shatter.

"I can't stand you," I say to my reflection. (Williams 10)

The self-loathing found in these lines is difficult to read. Genesis spends the length of the book trying to change herself to be more beautiful, hoping this will get her friends and family to love her. She succumbs to harmful and painful treatments to lighten her skin—with no results. She allows girls from

school to put a burning relaxer in her hair, which does work. For some fleeting moments, Genesis feels beautiful. With her hair relaxed, smooth, and swinging around her face, Genesis feels “so freaking cute” she does not even recognize herself (Williams 307). She thinks, “at last I have friends—pretty and popular friends...and I really do, finally, ridiculously, love my hair” (308). However, even with her smooth hair, those girls do not like her and do not intend to be her friends. Rather, they are manipulating her in order to win a talent contest. As Troy tells Genesis later in the library, “do you even know what’s pretty to you? I mean, not what people tell you is pretty...what you’re doing, that’s not a solution. You’re still gonna be Black. You’ll still be called names. And you’ll still have to be twice as good” as people with light skin (311,323). Genesis stops here to consider what Troy means about “chasing the hype” and begins to wonder if she can start to be herself.

The last few pages of the book feel rushed as Genesis decides to break her punishment and perform a new piece at the talent show. It is difficult to believe that in the span of a few pages, she has become comfortable with herself. One of the last actions she takes is to tear up her “List,” deciding that she needs to come up with her own type of list on her own terms when she is ready. Will Genesis move past the self-hatred that is pressing down on her from her sense of beauty and her family issues? It is difficult to say. The book ends on a happy note like most other young adult novels do. It is critical to remember the systemic and pervasive nature of colorism and how Genesis, at thirteen, has much to encounter through adolescence and into adulthood. Even in a world that may be at a crossroads of rejecting racism, “because colorism is a subsystem of structural racism, it operates in many institutions and does not require the actual presence of racist individuals” (Hunter “Colorism” 57). This system-within-an-institution dynamic almost makes colorism harder to identify and reject.

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