

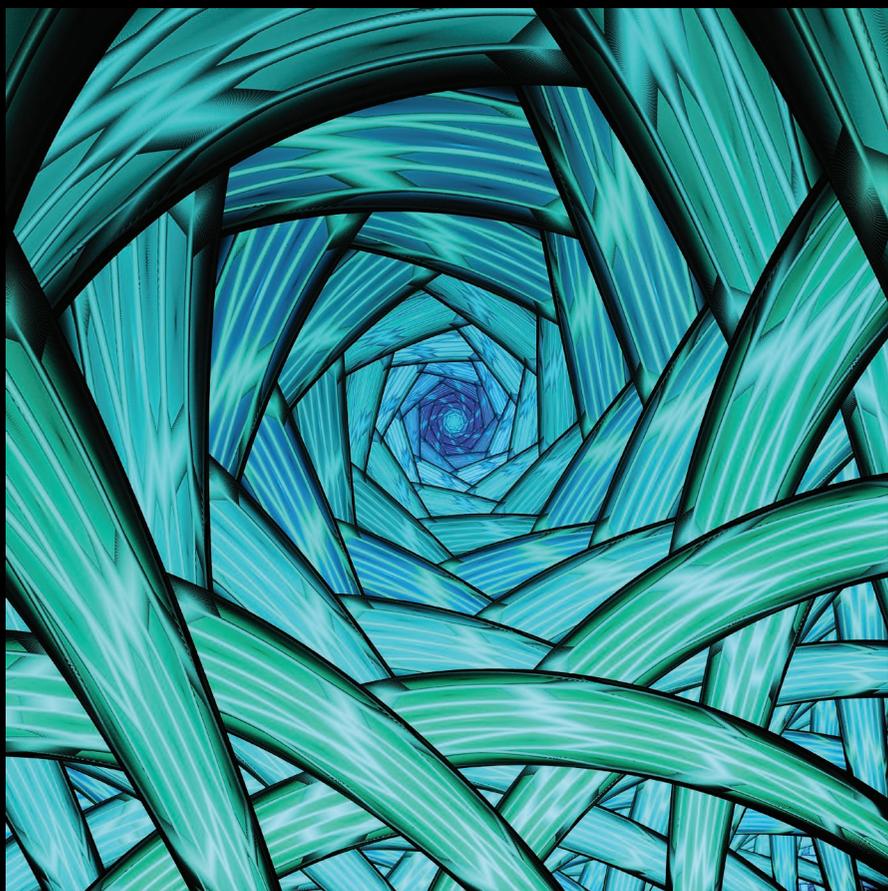
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PERSONAL / PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

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# Privilege Through the Looking-Glass

Patricia Leavy (Ed.)



*SensePublishers*

## **Privilege Through the Looking-Glass**

# PERSONAL/PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

## Volume 2

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# Privilege Through the Looking-Glass

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**Patricia Leavy**



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A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6351-138-4 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-139-1 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-140-7 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,  
P.O. Box 21858,  
3001 AW Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands  
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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**PRAISE FOR  
*PRIVILEGE THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS***

“*Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* offers a varied and profound examination of how privilege functions as the underside of power. This is a powerful and important book about inequality, identity, agency, and the challenge of addressing difference as part of a democratic ethos in a time of growing authoritarianism all over the world. Every educator should read this book.”

– **Henry A. Giroux, Ph.D., Professor of English and Cultural Studies, McMaster University, and author of *America at War with Itself***

“Patricia Leavy has brought together a group interdisciplinary scholars who have taken up the formidable challenge of analyzing how their own lived experiences are understood and measured by manufactured norms produced historically by systems of mediation (institutional, cultural, social, economic) and intelligibility that are often invisible and that position them differentially (politically) in a structured series of dependent hierarchies that privilege whiteness over non-whiteness, capital over labor, maleness over femaleness, etc. While it is often a privilege to live in the world of theory, we need to remember that when we scratch a theory, we discover biographies, we find histories and we find pain. *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* is a courageous volume that blends theory, personal experiences, and reflections on contemporary debates over identity. This is a book that is more about the politics of identity than identity politics. It is a powerful testament to the urgency of understanding privilege and deserves to be read widely.”

– **Peter McLaren, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, Chapman University, and author of *Paulo Freire, Che Guevara and the Pedagogy of Revolution, and Pedagogy of Insurrection***

“Never was a book that critically interrogates privilege so urgently needed. From microaggressions to macroaggressions, Patricia Leavy’s latest book stays true to her commitment to linking the personal and political in public research, and these multiple passionate contributors demand that readers wake up, take action, and do the same in our own work and everyday lives.”

– **Anne M Harris, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Principal Research Fellow, RMIT University**

*“Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* unmasks the casual ‘isms’ that suppress the best aspects of our humanity, by assembling a powerful and honest collection of parables. Poignant and unflinching, the contributors eschew to the cloak of objectivism to give the hard truth about privilege as a social ill, and the collective responsibility of the conscious community to confront all forms of oppression. Stimulating to the highbrow, yet palatable to the lay, this book has lessons for anyone with the spirit to explore better ways to be themselves and relate to others.”

– **Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D., Professor, Counseling Psychology Program, Howard University, and Editor-in-Chief for *The Journal of Negro Education***

*“Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* offers readers a reflective and reflexive response to the confounding and corrosive issues that inform, and sometimes govern, people’s everyday lives and identities. In highly accessible and unique ways, this book shines a light on the complexities of cultural life, and in ways that will entice and challenge readers, compelling them to re-think their ways of being with others, and themselves.”

– **Keith Berry, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Communication, University of South Florida and the National Communication Association Anti-Bullying Task Force Co-Chair**

*“Marshalling the power of storytelling, *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* offers a collection of essays wherein experienced scholars confront, challenge, and explicitly discuss everyday forms of racial, sexual, gendered, and ablest privilege embedded in contemporary social life. In so doing, Leavy and the contributors offer an admirable introduction to the many ways the personal is political, and invisible privileges operating at varied levels of society can be made visible and subject to correction. Well-crafted through combinations of scholarly expertise and personal experience, *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* may be an ideal text for sensitizing students to the myriad of social forces operating within, around, and beyond their own everyday experiences and assumptions.”*

– **J.E. Sumerau, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Sociology, University of Tampa, and author of *Cigarettes & Wine***

“To be included in Patricia Leavy’s world is inspiring but to have the opportunity to read her work on privilege, power, oppression and the expectations or freedoms from persons of diverse backgrounds and statuses, well that’s just exhilarating. As a social policy instructor and clinical social worker, I always find opportunities to use Leavy’s work with my students, whose testimonies include their own exhilaration in exploring privilege and power and perhaps even discovering their own unexposed privilege.”

– **Renita M. Davis, LCSW, PIP, Social Work, Troy University**



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*To Shalen Lowell,  
social justice warrior, treasured friend,  
and endless source of support*



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to the contributors. I'm in awe of your bravery and wisdom. Thank you for your hard work and making yourself vulnerable in service of others. Thank you Peter de Liefde, publisher extraordinaire, for your boundless support of social justice projects. Thank you to the entire team at Sense Publishers and Brill, especially Jolanda Karada for your outstanding production coordination. Appreciation to the editorial advisory board members of the *Personal/Public Scholarship* series for your generosity, and to the early reviewers for your generous endorsements. Thank you to Clear Voice Editing for the phenomenal copyediting services.

My deep gratitude to my colleagues, friends, and family, especially Vanessa Alssid, Melissa Anyiwo, Celine Boyle, Pamela DeSantis, Sandra Faulkner, Ally Field, Anne Harris, Libby Hatlan, Laurel Richardson, Monique Robitaille, Jessica Smartt Gullion, and Adrienne Trier-Bieniek. Mr. Barry Mark Shuman, thank you for being my best English teacher and my first sociology teacher. Tori Amos, thank you for illustrating how to build new structures that combine social justice and creativity. To my Facebook community, virtual hugs for the support and comradery. Madeline Leavy-Rosen, I love you. Mark Robins, I love you too. Finally, Shalen Lowell, this one is for you. Thank you for modeling what it means to be a brave, justice warrior in a world too often in need of change. I'm grateful for your friendship in the good times and bad, and endlessly appreciative of all of your support. I could not do any of this work without your clerical, marketing, and research assistance, not to mention all of the times you've helped me rage or laugh, depending on what is needed.



PATRICIA LEAVY

## **1. INTRODUCTION TO *PRIVILEGE THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS***

*The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.*

(Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 123)

This book seeks to make visible that which is often invisible. It seeks to sensitize us to things we have been taught not to see. Privilege, power, oppression, and domination operate in complex and insidious ways, impacting groups and individuals. And yet, these forces that affect our lives so deeply seem to at once operate in plain sight and lurk in the shadows, making them difficult to discern. There is an expression in sociology that says, “I don’t know who discovered water, but I doubt it was a fish”. In other words, environments are nearly impossible to perceive when we are immersed in them. This book attempts to expose our environments.

*Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* is a collection of essays that explore status characteristics in daily life. The essays seek to illustrate that the personal is public. None of us lives in a vacuum. We live in social, historical contexts that shape our experiences. Status characteristics, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, education, and ableness have a profound impact on the experiences of groups within society as well as individuals’ personal biographies. Through societal institutions (e.g., education, government) as well as the symbolic realm (e.g., images and narratives that circulate via the media), we develop ideas about different groups based on these shared characteristics. This is the essence of socialization, the lifelong process by which we learn the norms and values of our culture as well as how to enact our multiple roles (e.g., student, friend, worker, patriot) in culturally appropriate ways. Through the socialization process we develop taken-for-granted, common sense ideas about the social world and our place within it. These ideas include assumptions and biases that are used to justify social injustice and inequality.

## WHAT IS PRIVILEGE?

Privilege refers to the unearned benefits we receive based on our status characteristics. In her groundbreaking essay, Peggy McIntosh (1989) explored White privilege and male privilege. She observed an “invisible knapsack” of unearned benefits or privileges that Whites carry around with them. A few examples of White privilege include speaking to people in positions of power in education or business and knowing you are likely speaking to a person of your own race, going shopping without being followed or harassed, readily finding books and toys for your children that represent characters who look like them, and being pulled over by the police without worrying your race will work against or endanger you. The greatest privilege of all is not recognizing how you benefit from privilege. The inability to see these unearned benefits is a privilege. People who benefit from unearned privileges are generally oblivious to them, as they have been socialized to be. Privilege and power are invisible to those who have it (Kimmel, 2014; McIntosh, 1989). Drawing on McIntosh, Michael Kimmel writes, “To be white, or straight, or male, or middle-class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You’re everywhere you look, you’re the standard against which everyone else is measured. You’re like water, like air” (2014, p. 3). For example, when we talk about race, we think of people of color, not White people, as if they do not embody race. Or consider how we identify males with Mr., which carries no meaning with regard to age or marital status, in contrast with Miss, Ms., and Mrs. for females, which identifies females in relation to their relationship status (Tannen, 2009).

It’s difficult to sensitize people to their own privilege in part because of the nature of oppression. Marilyn Frye (2007) explains that oppression is a macroscopic phenomenon and cannot be understood when applying only a microscopic perspective, as we are prone to do in daily life. Frye uses a bird cage analogy to explain how oppression operates. If you focus your eyes on only one wire of a bird cage, you will wonder why the bird doesn’t fly freely. One wire alone does not inhibit the bird. You must step back in order to see the *network* of connected wires, which together are as confining as a solid dungeon (Frye, 2007, p. 86). Frye writes this about women’s oppression, “...when you look macroscopically you can see it—a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the immobilization, reduction, and molding of women and the lives we live” (2007, p. 86).

Oppressions are also structurally arranged to operate in concert with each other. For example, sexism and homophobia work together, with each used as a weapon for the other (Pharr, 2007). For instance, consider the use of the word “lesbian” as an insult (a weapon) (Pharr, 2007).

In order to understand how privilege and power operate in complex ways, this book adopts an intersectional approach.

#### WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

*When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.*

(Patricia Hill Collins & Sirma Bilge, 2016, p. 2)

Intersectionality developed in the context of Black feminist activism and thought. During the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Black feminists expounded many principles of intersectionality in both political contexts and groundbreaking texts, although the term was not yet used (Collins & Bilge, 2016). A major development occurred in 1973 with the formation of the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a collective of Black feminists. Their work has been vital to the elaboration of what became known as intersectionality theory. In their famous 1977 statement, they wrote:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Combahee River Collective, 1977)

Influenced by this work, Black and Chicana feminists published numerous landmark texts in the 1980s (see the suggested resources at the end of this chapter for examples). Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989, 1991) is credited with coining the term intersectionality to examine how status characteristics *intersect* or overlap.

Identities are not one dimensional or unitary. One simultaneously inhabits a body that carries race, gender, and class (as well as sexual orientation and ableness). I am not simply a woman. I am a White, middle-upper class,

able-bodied woman. The interconnections of these identities shape my positioning in the social order, and thus my identity and experiences with privilege and oppression. My experiences will differ greatly from those of a woman with different racial and economic statuses, for example. Under intersectionality theory, race, class, and gender (and other social identities) are viewed as “interlocking systems of oppression” that shape domination and subordination (Collins, 1990, 2007). Further, there are three dimensions of oppression: institutional, symbolic, and individual. The latter refers to how our own biographies are shaped by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ableness. It is here that the mission of this book takes shape. How are our individual biographies differently shaped by status characteristics and the structures of inequality they produce? By exploring personal stories, the authors in this volume also shine a light on the institutional and symbolic dimensions of oppression.

#### WHY STORIES?

Personal stories are uniquely powerful. Stories connect us to one another. They reveal people and their circumstances, inviting others to develop new understandings, awareness, and at times, empathy. Whether our experiences are similar or different, authentic stories resonate. We are each an authority on our own story. When I developed the idea for this project, I knew it would center on personal stories.

This book is called *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass*. A looking-glass is a mirror; it reflects back at us. Thanks to Lewis Carroll, a looking-glass also implies that what is seen is different from what is expected. The contributors have been asked to look deeply into a mirror, excavating their experiences and confronting how privilege operates in ways that might be different from what others see on the surface. The looking-glass metaphor ultimately reflects how the essays in this book turn privilege inside out, exposing that which is otherwise concealed.

This book is not about personal stories for the sake of personal sharing. I sought out well-respected interdisciplinary scholars and writers to share their stories as a means of *connecting the personal and the public*. The contributors in this volume could all easily write traditional scholarly pieces about privilege. Instead, I asked them to write personal essays about status characteristics in their own lives, in any form or manner they saw fit. That was a big ask. They would have to be quite courageous. They were. Instead of

relying solely on academic scholarship, these authors agreed to delve deeply into their own lives, exposing personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities. Understanding the goal of this volume, they have either made explicit connections to the institutional and cultural dimensions of privilege and oppression in their essays, through interweaving the personal and public, or via the discussion questions or activities at the end of their chapter. As you will see, there are also threads across the readings. For example, self-acceptance is a theme in many of the essays. I applaud the contributors for bravely and boldly sharing their personal experiences and for situating them within larger cultural processes in order to invite you to engage in meaningful self and social reflection.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.  
 Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.  
 Combahee River Collective Statement. (1977). <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>  
 Combahee River Collective website <http://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/>  
 Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Trumansberg, NY: The Crossing Press.

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P. LEAVY

- Pharr, S. (2007). Homophobia: A weapon of sexism. In S. M. Shaw & J. Lee (Eds.), *Women's voices, feminist visions: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 87–91). Oregon, OR: Oregon State University.
- Tannen, D. (2009). There is no unmarked woman. In S. Maasik & J. Solomon (Eds.), *Signs of life in the U.S.A.: Readings on popular culture for writers* (6th ed., pp. 620–625). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

ROBIN M. BOYLORN

## 2. UNPACKING (UN)PRIVILEGE OR FLESH TONES, RED BONES, AND SEPIA SHADES OF BROWN

### PRIVILEGE/D POSITIONS

In Peggy McIntosh's seminal essay, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, she reckons with the revelation that as a white person she enjoys race privileges to which she, and most other white people, are oblivious. Her lack of awareness of her own privilege exposes the limitations of our personal politics and reinforces the importance of understanding the nuances of identity and privilege. For example, white people will always benefit from white privilege in a white supremacist, capitalist culture. Men will always receive unearned advantages in a patriarchal system designed for their success. Heterosexual people will always be privileged in a heteronormative and trans, bi and homophobic society that is hierarchically designed to render nonheterosexuality invisible and/or abnormal. Able-bodied people will continue to be recognized to the exclusion of others in a system that is both ableist and ageist. By definition, social and cultural privileges are invisible and institutional. We are not socialized to be cognizant of our privileges. Flat-out denial and defiant resistance are the frequent responses of privileged folk when called out about their inherited and unfair advantages. Many times, we exhibit willful ignorance about our personal invisible knapsacks of privilege, while being hyper-aware of the ways other people fail to acknowledge and account for their own. When highlighted, privilege is the hot potato nobody wants to be caught holding in their hand.

Acknowledging privilege jeopardizes our worldview and self-concept. People with privilege generally go their whole lives without ever being forced to reckon with the ways their everyday experiences of normalcy are actually exceptional. If you are a white woman, it is often an afterthought to consider how your race privilege distinguishes you from women of color, thereby offering you opportunities, benefits, and open doors that would be impossible or difficult for black women to walk through. If you are a cisgendered, heterosexual woman of color, you may not recognize that while you experience discrimination due to your race, you also experience privilege

because your gender performance matches the biological sex you were assigned at birth and you are sexually and romantically interested in men. While privilege is often attached to the mythical “normal” representation of a white, heterosexual, educated, financially secure, able-bodied male, we all enjoy some social privileges. As a black woman, I face the double jeopardy of race and sex oppression, but I also enjoy privileges associated with my educational attainment, social class, ability, and sexual orientation.

Identity politics are complicated. It is possible to be simultaneously privileged and marginalized. It is possible to be progressive in one area and shortsighted in another. It is possible to “get it” when it comes to the ways you experience discrimination, and not “get it” when discrimination happens tangentially. The power of privilege can contaminate good intentions. Allies are not immune to it. “Good people” can’t wash it off. Multiple and generational oppressions don’t remove it. It usually exists ubiquitously and without notice, except for those who don’t have it.

Privilege is not something to be ashamed of, however. Social and cultural benefits are structural, so we couldn’t opt out of our positions of privilege even if we wanted to. I could never wake up one day and decide that I’m tired of the ways my heterosexual identity oppresses those who identify as non-heterosexual. I can’t exchange it for something else. While we can’t trade in our social identities or put our ethnicities on layaway, we can be informed about privilege and be proactive about using our privilege to help those who don’t have it. More importantly, we can help others understand how privilege works, and use the platform and legitimacy that comes with our particular privileges to support others. But the first and hardest step is acknowledging that you have privilege(s) in the first place.

#### COLORISM, COLORBLINDNESS, & COLORING BOOKS

People of color, regardless of their other social identity markers, have a peculiar relationship with privilege because of the un-privilege of being un-white (Boylorn, 2006, 2011a, 2011b). Race, or skin color, is a visible marker of identity that is associated with histories and legacies of subordination, discrimination, and disenfranchisement. Despite claims to the contrary, the twenty-first century did not represent a shift in racism (there is no such thing as reverse racism), a black president did not guarantee us post-racialism (there is no such thing as post-racialism), and the existence of Rachel Dolezal does not suddenly make blackness an interchangeable option for curious white folk who want to see what it’s like to be black (there is no such thing as

transracialism). Whiteness is a privilege only afforded to those who are either born white or who can pass for white. Historically, dark-skinned people of color are always and automatically excluded from whiteness (Blay, 2014).

\*\*\*

*In 1985, there were only primary and secondary colors in the eight-count Crayola crayon box, and similar but less splendid versions in the generic brand my mama bought me, alongside a coloring book, as a consolation gift on my sister's ninth birthday. Even though my sister and I were born two years, five months, and two days apart, my mother would give each of us a small present to open when we were celebrating the others' birthday. These gestures were necessary with daughters who were so decidedly different in appearance and demeanor. It was especially important in 1985, the year I learned (from my peers at school) that being dark-skinned with a light-skinned sister meant I was less pretty, less smart, less valued, and therefore less loved.*

*Before starting school, I was jealous of my sister for all the regular reasons. She was older, so she experienced all the firsts first. I shrank in the shadow of her accomplishments, her intelligence, her light skin. Though I didn't have the language at the time, I picked up on the ways she was favored by adults and strangers. They would gush over the built-in beauty of her skin and curly hair. Even school peers regularly recounted my sister's inherent goodness, insisting we didn't have the same daddy because she was "light, bright, and damn near white." I was just black. The contrast was stark and the weight of dark-skinnedness felt like forever.*

\*\*\*

*Colorblindness is the well-intentioned mantra of progressive and liberal white folk who want to announce that they are not racist. "I don't see color," they claim, when talking about racial politics. "I just see people".*

*When this happens in my classroom, I announce that while I appreciate the gesture, claiming to not see color is not only ingenuine, it is offensive.*

*"Of course you see color," I say, holding out my arm in demonstration. "I am a black woman—my race is not something you can NOT see".*

*"Not me, Dr. B!"*

*"Race doesn't matter to me".*

*Discomfort and guilt fill the room as I explain, "Being a black woman colors and shapes my entire existence. To not see my color diminishes me, disappears me. And it is dishonest because my blackness is really all you see, the first thing you see when you look at me. To tell me you don't see my blackness means you don't see me".*

*I understand what my white students mean, but I insist on talking it out. "Colorblindness is not a cure, I promise you," I say, challenging how they have been socialized to think about race. "We can't go around pretending everybody is white. I'm not white and that matters."*

*"My parents taught me not to 'see color'".*

*"Seeing race is not racist," I say.*

\*\*\*

While colorblindness is a well-intentioned effort to deny the existence of race and therefore the possibility of racial preference, it denies the inevitability of racial difference and the existence and impact of white racism. Colorblindness also ignores the fact that people of color are people of color, and that their worth is not and should not be attached to their likeness to whiteness (color or culture). Colorblindness can also lead to colorism denial.

While blackness prevents folk of color from ever experiencing white privilege, there are skin color privileges that exist within the black community, known as colorism. By definition, colorism is skin color stratification that privileges light-skinned people and disadvantages darker-skinned people. This color(ism) hierarchy, not unlike white supremacy, attaches value and beauty to light complexion (Blay, 2010). Darker-skinned people experience prejudice and discrimination, which leads to internalized racism and oftentimes resentment.

The narratives that are most public are the experiences of women of color. For example, in the dual documentaries, *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls*, directed by D. Channsin Berry and Bill Duke (both black men), black women discuss their anxieties and experiences of trauma as "dark" or "light" skinned women of color. Instead of providing a much-needed opportunity for discussion, the narratives became combative and competitive, largely focused on beauty politics and desirability to men. In addition to ignoring the intersectionality of these women's experiences and the myriad of issues that contribute to our colorist culture, the narratives revealed pain and pointed fingers. Discussions about colorism need to be more broad, more inclusive, and focus less on the extremes (of very light or very dark) and more on representation of the in-betweenness of skin hues, which is representative of many black women who are left out of the conversation and who, themselves, feel "not (light or dark) enough".

Dr. Yaba Blay, author of *One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race*, prefers the term, "skin color politics" over "color complex, colorism, or color struck" because it references the larger and systemic issues that are in play when we are discussing how colorism works within the black community. Blay (2010)

states, “Skin color is a very much political construct...there continues to be a certain amount of privilege, both actual and assumed, associated with the tone of one’s skin color” (p. 30). These politics can be attributed to the social advantages afforded to light-skinned people of color (because they can pass for white), and to the low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness that some dark-skinned people of color experience as a result of being teased and demonized because of their skin color (and the lack of mainstream representation).

Robust discussions of colorism or “skin color politics” (Blay, 2016) among people of color are just as important as discussions of racism among white people. An acknowledgment of privilege is not a denial of oppression. We can and often do occupy both spaces at once, so there needs to be space and opportunity for black folk to deconstruct colorism to better understand and articulate what “color” means within the black community, and why. While it is important for white folk to understand white privilege, it is equally important for folk of color to acknowledge and understand the implications of white privilege on blackness, and how it manifests in colorism.

#### VIEWING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Dark Girls* documentary
2. *Light Girls* documentary

#### ACTIVITIES

1. Get a popular magazine and compare images of white women and women of color. What are the implied and implicit messages about what beauty is and who attains it? In other words, what are consistent qualities found in white women in the ads? What are consistent physical qualities found in women of color?
2. Make a list of adjectives or descriptions associated with white and black, light and dark. Discuss the difference between how we are conditioned and socialized to think about blackness/darkness and whiteness/lightness, and how that translates into feelings and perceptions of race and color.
3. Compile a list of at least 10 descriptions for skin colors/tones. With a peer, describe each complexion without naming race. Then, discuss the racial implications of language and how we race and/or (e)rase identity with words.
4. After watching *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls* (full films or excerpts from each) as a class, compare and discuss the narratives offered in each. Identify the

similarities and differences in the shared experiences and create a holistic list of traumas each group experiences, linked to their color. Then, draft (and time permitting, perform) short skits to demonstrate how women of color might begin dialogue with each other, across those differences. Use, when possible, specific language and testimonies from the film in the script.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What might be a better term, other than colorblindness, to represent a commitment to racial equality?
2. What are some privileges and consequences of skin complexion? Consider the difference in this question for white folk versus folk of color.
3. In what ways does colorism, alongside racism, dictate what is constituted as beautiful?
4. What color/shade would you describe yourself and why? Do you believe that others would agree? In what ways has your color translated to how you are treated by others?
5. Do you think light-skinned privilege exists? In what ways?
6. How and why are “skin color politics” gendered?
7. What are some negative names, labels, or slang terms associated with blackness or dark skin that reinforces colorism?
8. What role might colorism play as we move into a progressively biracial and multicultural society?

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