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The Dark Skin I Am In

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The Dark Skin I Am In

Abstract

"You know, you're pretty for a dark skinned girl, but I'm sure people tell that all the time"

"Can I honestly tell you, that you are the prettiest dark skinned girl I know?"

Throughout my life I have received comments such as these. I've heard them from my mother's colleagues, strangers, and sometimes my friends. They provoked me to think that somehow I genetically lucked out to be physically attractive even though I was cursed to live within dark skin. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, race, colorism, culture

Disciplines

African American Studies | American Material Culture | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THE DARK SKIN I AM IN

October 22, 2014



“You know, you’re pretty for a dark skinned girl, but I’m sure people tell that all the time”

“Can I honestly tell you, that you are the prettiest dark skinned girl I know?”

Throughout my life I have received comments such as these. I’ve heard them from my mother’s colleagues, strangers, and sometimes my friends. They provoked me to think that somehow I genetically lucked out to be physically attractive even though I was cursed to live within dark skin.

Before the era “selfies” and constant cell phone photography, my parents would develop pictures at the drug store and each time I held a picture of myself, the intensity and the darkness of my skin scared me. I would think, *No, I can’t be that dark. I don’t look that dark in the mirror, do I? Being that dark is a not a good thing. I need to do something about it.*

As a child, I remember bullies as well as my friends called me names that shamed the deep tones in my skin. “Tar baby,” “midnight crow,” “brownie,” “blackie,” or “darkness.” None of them were very clever but they successfully convinced me that my dark skin was a drawback to my physical appearance rather than an advantage.

My friends with lighter skin had no idea how it felt to be trapped inside dark skin. They sunbathed, while I would take refuge in the shade, hoping the sun rays wouldn’t make me even darker. They weren’t paranoid about applying thick layers of sun block to minimize the darkening from the sun. They didn’t worry how their skin would appear in photos taken in dim lighting. Even though I was convinced my skin wasn’t as pretty as theirs, I was still advised to practice a healthy diet, drink lots of water, and moisturize daily; my skin would thank me later. I always responded by rolling my eyes and thinking, *Why bother?*

What is the point? Most black individuals, like my friends and even other dark-skinned individuals, will make fun of the shade I am, regardless of how even or soft it is.

In the summer of 2013 Oprah Winfrey, released a documentary called *Dark Girls* in which discrimination, disapproval and prejudice of skin tones inside the African-American or Black race are analyzed. The documentary centers on the phenomenon and development of “Colorism,” and it defines it as “prejudice or discrimination based on the relative lightness or darkness of the skin.” I hadn’t realized that there was a name for the struggles I was going through. After so many experiences of rejection, disapproval of my dark skin just seemed justified.

Dark Girls resonated with my experience, confirming that there is preference for lighter skin within my own ethnic group and this preference does negatively affect girls like me. After viewing the documentary, I thought, *Thank goodness, someone is finally discussing and addressing it. The hardship of living within dark skin is articulated and people aren’t just covering up my internal issues with a compliment or waving the issue; the problem is being recognized, and addressed.*

I visited Cuernavaca, Mexico in the summer of 2013. I was swimming in compliments from men, women, and children who commented on specialness of my dark skin. They accepted the high levels of melanin in skin while members of my own race found comfort in shaming me. It was shocking to realize that I was more accepted in a foreign place than among my own community. Now, I realize that Colorism is a global phenomenon, influencing people in all places, but this experience was striking and made me wonder what’s stopping the black community from accepting all shades of skin, if individuals outside of my own race can do so.

So the lingering questions are, when and how did Colorism originate? Why does it persist? Some argue that the origin of Colorism in America is as rudimentary as pointing to the eras of slavery in the United States. The periods of slavery certainly reinforced the notion that dark skin is negative and horrific, since slave owners and plantation masters were notably crueler to darker-skinned slaves, but I would argue that the idea is more embedded and profound than that. Ante-slavery, our nation has carried the idea that white skin, light or fair skin represents civility, beauty, and superiority, while dark skin represents savagery, ugliness, and inferiority. Colorism is the result of white supremacist ideology, which is a primordial practice compared to slavery in the United States.

Colorism is just as harmful and divisive as racism, so how do we eradicate it? The question is partly answered in the film by [Dr. Cherly Grills](#). She quotes an African proverb, “Until the lion has a historian the hunter will always be a hero” and explains, “Until we are able to understand and articulate the issue from multiple points of view...we are only going to continue to perpetuate the myths and stereotypes of skin tone.”

Dismantling this oppressive and degrading socially constructed hierarchy will not only help dark skinned girls, it will flatten a pillar of white supremacy by eliminating division, prejudice and discrimination within the black community.

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