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Counting Color: Biracial Activism in the Black Lives Matter Era



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Introduction

On March 2, 1955 Claudette Colvin would find a seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama and send the Montgomery bus boycott into motion. A 10th grader at Booker T. Washington High School, Claudette felt empowered by her class history lessons on Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, and was disillusioned by the “bleak racial conditions in Montgomery.”¹ Per the segregation laws at the time, Claudette sat in the rear of the bus, which was designated for “colored” passengers. Because the bus was nearly full, a White couple sat directly across from Claudette. As far as bus driver Robert W. Cleere was concerned, the color line had been crossed.¹ Despite city laws requiring “passengers to move only if another seat was available,”² he called police officers, who then pulled a sobbing Claudette off of the bus, and took her to jail. Martin Luther King, Jr., described Claudette’s detainment as “an ‘atrocious’ that ‘seemed to arouse the Negro community.’”³ Ultimately the judge found her guilty of “assault and battery, assessed a small fine, and declared [her] a juvenile delinquent.”⁴

Jo Ann Robinson, a prominent leader in Montgomery, and the Women’s Political Council had been floating the idea of a bus boycott around for about a year prior to Colvin’s arrest.³ Believing that they, Robinson and Mary Fair Burks (another activist in Montgomery) “had found a ‘victim’ around whom they could rally community support for a general protest,”⁵ brought their idea to E. D. Nixon who was another prominent leader in Montgomery. Nixon “hesitated to endorse a general boycott before meeting with Colvin and her parents,”⁶ but ensured Robinson that he would make a decision after doing so.

Upon his arrival, Nixon quickly realized that Colvin would be unsuitable for the community use as the face of the movement. The Colvin household was located in King Hill, an area of Montgomery that was known for being a “lower-class black enclave with tumbledown houses, unpaved streets, and outdoor privies.”⁶ Claudette’s parents were working-class; her mother worked as a maid and her father did yard work. In addition, Claudette had a dark complexion

and was pregnant. Nixon knew that Colvin would be a “political liability in certain parts of the black community”⁶ and would certainly fuel stereotypes from the White community.⁷

Colorism explains why Claudette Colvin was not used as the face of the Montgomery bus boycott. Color classism, or colorism, is defined as “a social, economic, and political societal framework that follows skin-color differences, such as those along a continuum of possible shades, those with the lightest skin color enjoy the highest social standing, and those with the darkest skin color are among the poorest.”⁸ While colorism can be found in many different racial groups, for the purposes of this research, the term will be speaking to colorism within the Black community. Because of colorism, the Black leaders would have to make a case against segregation without Colvin.

For Nixon, and the sake of the bus boycott, it was imperative that they find an individual “whose class background, moral reputation and public record could withstand the withering White Scrutiny and inspire African-American unity.”⁹ Because she was already well versed in activism, had a spotless record, was of a lighter complexion and knew Nixon, Rosa Parks knew that when she chose not to give up her seat on December 1, 1955 that she would become exactly who Nixon had been searching for.¹⁰

Claudette Colvin’s story, and her exemption from being the face of the Montgomery bus boycott, emphasizes that there is reasoning behind who is placed at the forefront of Black freedom movements. To be accepted and well received in the White community, during the civil rights struggle, some Black leaders embraced colorism and the politics of respectability. Despite the necessity, the use of lighter faces did not come without contention. From Marcus Garvey to W. E. B. Du Bois, and then Du Bois’ critique of Walter White, it is clear that discrediting one another on the basis of skin tone was prevalent during this period of Black activism. With the excommunication of Shaun King, a biracial man from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) organization in 2015, and celebrity activists such as actor Jesse Williams and actress Zendaya having their

place in the movement questioned by the Black community, it leads one to wonder if these issues of colorism persist in 2017.

This paper will examine this 100-year history of colorism. Through the primary texts of Marcus Garvey, Du Bois, White and others I will demonstrate that colorism experienced in 2017 is rooted in history and will begin to un-package the implications of colorism within the Black community. Ultimately, I will explore this idea of being biracial in the Black Lives Matter era, thus creating a further understanding of the role that biracial individuals play in Black social justice movements, today, and to understand the effects of colorism on bi-racial activists.

METHODS

Both primary and secondary sources were used for this research. Primary sources include the Black newspaper *The Negro World* and the magazine *The Crisis*. Black newspapers are a key source to any study on black life in America and give insight on the Black community in the past. In these weeklies – most could not afford to print a daily paper – Black Americans articulated a sense of self that helped define blackness, including debates on colorism. Through Grand Valley State University's databases, "Black Studies" and "African American Newspapers," these primary sources can be accessed. The two databases give insight to 190 years of Black history.

Because I argue that colorism has remained an issue for over 100 years, it is necessary to use the words of civil rights leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Walter White to historicize the issue. To gain a better understanding of what these great thinkers said about colorism, I am researching their autobiographies, and their writings in contemporary journals. Both Du Bois and White wrote for the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis*, and Garvey articulated his thoughts in his newspaper the *Negro World*.

To get a better understanding of colorism in the BLM era, I use books such as *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in the New Millennium* and *Light, Bright and Damn Near White: Black Leaders Created by the One-Drop Rule*, authored by Kathy Russell and Michelle Gordon Jackson respectively. In addition, I look at various Internet articles. While these might not be peer-reviewed sources, many of the authors like Russell and Jackson are academics. Scholars such as Ibram X. Kendi use social

media to impart their academic expertise and to teach the public in a more accessible way. In addition, online articles including "Can Biracial Activists Speak to Black Issues?" and "Race, Love, Hate, and Me: A Distinctly American Story (AKA: Yes, I'm Black)" speak to the sentiment on colorism during the Black Lives Matter era.

ONE-DROP RULE | PARTUS LAW | COLORISM

The One-Drop Rule (hypodescent), a term originating in the 1900's, "was a determinant racial marker exclusive to the United States by which racial identity was defined, and a person was considered 'black' if he or she had any African ancestry."¹¹ The groundwork was laid for the One-Drop rule in 1662 when Virginia adopted the rule *partus sequitur ventrem*: the child follows the condition of the mother.¹² Partus law was originally "the legal rule that applied to livestock and other domestic animals: that the offspring of a domestic animal belonged to the owner of the female who gave birth."¹³ With laws such as the child follows the condition of the mother, white men were free to rape indiscriminately without fear of a child ever being able to claim property or wealth. Variation in skin color among African Americans began with enslaved women being forced into sexual relations with white men. The one-drop rule meant "no matter how white-looking or white-acting someone of mixed ancestry was, or how little blackness was actually in the person's genetic makeup, that individual was to be considered black."¹⁴ Partus law and the one-drop rule gave absolute certainty to slave masters and White society; biracial African Americans, despite their paternity, would continue to be seen legally and socially as Black and enslaved.

Race mixing, or miscegenation, was so prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries that the term "white slaves" became common on U.S. plantations as European features such as light skin, blonde hair and blue eyes occurred more often among slaves.¹⁵ White slave owners paid no mind to the fact that some of their own slaves, who were likely related, were of equal or lighter complexion than themselves because regardless of their skin tone, they were Black and thus slaves.

Despite fervent belief in the one-drop rule in the Deep South, a three-tiered social system came to be. While they were still considered black mixed-race individuals, mulattoes became a buffer for Blacks and Whites alike. Positions such

as working in the "big house" were meant for light skinned individuals while darker complexioned individuals worked in the fields. While the progeny of a slave master and enslaved mother could not inherit any of their father's wealth, they often were given these more *coveted* positions on the plantation. While it is understandable why some would conclude that the life of a mixed-race slave was better, often they were subjected to abuse at their master's whims and passions because they were in such close proximity. This was especially true for slaves born from their mother's forced relations with the slave master; the wives of slave masters were particularly cruel to the enslaved progeny of their husband's.¹⁶ Ultimately, miscegenation between White slave owners and enslaved women created a dichotomy within the enslaved people that would last for centuries.

Because some slave owners "openly or surreptitiously accepted responsibility for the paternity of mulattoes..." they chose to educate and free them, thus leading to future light skin families having more access to education than dark skinned African Americans.¹⁷ Even if White fathers did not claim their biracial children, these light-skinned individuals "often asserted freedom based on their color, suing to end their servitude."¹⁸ As a result of this, mixed race and light African Americans were in a unique position to step into the forefront and assume leadership roles in the Black community. Post-emancipation, for those who had "light-enough skin and fine-enough European features,"¹⁹ could pass as White because they recognized the privilege that their light complexion gave them. In an attempt to maintain their perceived social status, these individuals created exclusive societies and clubs. Mixed and light skinned persons created organizations such as the Blue Vein Society, where entrance into the club was determined whether one's veins were visible through their skin.²⁰ Because of the high social status and the exclusionary nature of groups, such as the Blue Vein Society, a dichotomy emerged within the Black community on the basis of color.

Because of the one-drop rule and Partus law there was a rise in individuals who would be referred to as Quadroons and Octoroons, individuals who had 1/4 and 1/8 African ancestry, and who would also try to pass as White. Post emancipation "found that centuries of race-mixing had produced a large population of mulattoes who appeared white, and who passed

whenever they wanted to.”²¹ Passing refers to those who “crossed the color line” and were able to present themselves, because of their light complexion, as White individuals, thus allowing them social mobility that they would not otherwise have if they continued to lead their lives as African Americans during Jim Crow (1876-1965).²² For those who chose this life, it often came with being ostracized from their Black family and friends as passing was not and is not viewed favorably within the Black community.

Colorism can be “traced back thousands of years, to the time when humans first began to transition from being nomadic to being agrarian.”²³ With this newfound lifestyle of domesticating animals and harvesting crops, land also became personal property. Those who acquired the most land were also enabled to outsource farming on their properties. It is here that skin color and perceptions of status began. Wealthier individuals remained indoors, and therefore did not have a tan from working. Those who had to labor outdoors and worked for the wealthy were exposed to the sun. A light and tan free face became a “sign of their greater wealth” while those who were “more suntanned and thus of darker skin came to be stigmatized for their lack of resources.”²⁴ The authors of *The Color Complex* define colorism as a “social, economic, and political societal framework that follows skin-color differences... those with the lightest skin color enjoy the highest social standing, and those with the darkest skin color are among the poorest.”²⁵

MARCUS GARVEY | W. E. B. Du BOIS

Professor Ibram X. Kendi, in his piece *Colorism as Racism: Garvey, Du Bois and the Other Color Line*, argues that “colorism is racism” and that there is an “other color line” within the black community.²⁶ This can be seen in the Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois’ debates on leadership and skin color.

In 1916, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican, came to the United States to raise funds for a school modeled after Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute. Initially, wanting the help of Du Bois of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Garvey went to the New York office. Upon his arrival, Garvey was taken aback to find so many light and white faces working in the NAACP’s office and said that he was “unable to tell whether he was in a white office or that of the NAACP.”²⁷ A turning

point for him, he decided to remain in the U.S. and in 1917 created the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

Garvey and his ideals aligned with those of separatists. His slogans of “Black is beautiful” and “Africa for Africans” resonated with his followers (Garveyites) who had grown weary of occupying the lowest levels of society. Garvey believed that Blacks should maintain their own spaces and not mix with other races. His back to Africa movement, which he proposed to be in Liberia, was meant to be exclusively for individuals of African descent. Marcus Garvey wanted Blacks to be separate and equal. Ibram X. Kendi argues that Garvey “believed wholeheartedly in the fallacy of biological racial distinctions—in there being such a thing as Black blood and White blood.” As a result of his beliefs, Garvey looked down upon mixed race and light skin African Americans “holding dark-skins as the standard of Blackness...”²⁸

The UNIA published a weekly newspaper, *The Negro World*, where there was often critique of W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP, as well as explanations as to why the UNIA was better for the Black masses. It was in this newspaper that Garvey could share his separatist views, reinforcing his beliefs that Blacks were capable of many great things, so long as they had the space to do it in without interference and influence of White individuals:

The world knows that the Negro is imitative. The world knows that the Negro has shown, remarkable aptitude in absorbing and assimilating Anglo-Saxon civilization. But the UNIA is teaching Black men and the White world that the Negro also possesses the creative and constructive ability, the imagination to conceive and the will to execute vast plans. That is why the UNIA has thrilled Black men everywhere and impressed White men everywhere as no other Negro movement has.²⁹

Explanations in *The Negro World* as to why the UNIA was the better movement for those of African descent regularly used the NAACP and W.E.B. Du Bois as a point of reference. Because of Garvey’s anti-miscegenation stance, and Du Bois light complexion, it is no wonder that he took issue with Du Bois. Garvey and his followers wholeheartedly believed that Du Bois was unable to “mobilize the masses of his race” and that until the UNIA came to be, with Marcus Garvey at the helm, there had been “no Negro king.”³⁰

With a critique of the NAACP and Du Bois commonplace in *The Negro World*, it was not long before both Du Bois and Garvey would enter into a disagreement on skin color and leadership in Black movements. Editor of *The Crisis*, the NAACP’s magazine, W.E.B. Du Bois, like Garvey, used his publication to get his message out. Once the two entered this back and forth conversation, Du Bois responded through *The Crisis*. A light-skinned African American, Du Bois took issue with Garvey’s calling attention to its inherent privilege and “was threatened by discussions of colorism and color equality.”³¹ Du Bois and his talented tenth, most of whom were light-skinned African Americans, surely understood the position they were in because of their skin color; however, Du Bois resented Garvey for bringing his “Caribbean color politics to the United States.”³² In the January 1921 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois wrote:

There is no doubt but what Garvey has sought to import to America and capitalize the antagonism between Blacks and mulattoes in the West Indies... Garvey imports it into a land where it has never had any substantial footing and where today, of all days, it is absolutely repudiated by every thinking Negro; Garvey capitalizes it... and has aroused more bitter color enmity inside the race than has ever before existed... American Negroes recognize no color line in or out of the race, and they will in the end punish the man who attempts to establish it.³³

While both Du Bois and Garvey were critical of one another, Garvey’s beliefs and critique of Du Bois’ leadership is what catapulted their disagreements to the realm of colorism. In his looking down on light-skinned Blacks, “Garvey fashioned the other less acknowledged ideological side of colorism.”³⁴ In claiming that there had been “no Negro king” and that Du Bois was unable to “mobilize the masses of his race,”³⁵ Garvey was making it clear that his opinion was that W.E.B. Du Bois was neither Black enough to be a leader of the movement nor a leader of the people.

WALTER WHITE

“I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blonde. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me.”³⁶ Colorism and passing played a significant role in the life of Walter White (1893-1955). By law, because of the legacy of the one-drop rule, Walter White was by all intents and purposes an African American

coming of age in Atlanta, Georgia. It was during the Atlanta Race Riot (1906) that Walter came to realize that he was African American coming from a family whose complexions would have allowed them to pass.

Not long after beginning his work with the NAACP, White would “pass” to investigate lynchings and riots in the South. Infiltrating the White mobs that carried out these heinous acts had the potential to be incredibly dangerous for Walter, as he understood that he would be “subjected to an even greater fury for the sin of “passing” as a white man,” which he had to do “to induce the lynchers to talk freely.”³⁷ On his first assignment in Estill Springs, Tennessee, White was nearly successful in passing but was discovered and narrowly escaped with his life. As he boarded the train, his conversation with the conductor gives insight towards the sentiments of passing among White southerners at the time:

“But you’re leaving, mister, just when the fun is going to start,” he told me. In answer to my question as to the nature of the “fun,” he replied, “There’s a dammed yellow nigger down here passing for white and the boys are going to get him.” “What’ll they do with him?” I asked. Shifting his cud of tobacco, he shook his head grimly and assured me, “When they get through with him he won’t pass for white no more!”³⁸

While passing was certainly not looked upon favorably within the Black community, Walter White found himself in a unique position where he was able to “become the nation’s leading spokesman for African Americans, confounding, profiting, and saving lives with his unexpected identity.”³⁹

Despite his efforts towards uplifting the African American community, for some, Walter White was not enough, or Black enough, to speak on such issues. In his ascent to becoming the secretary of the NAACP, White clashed with then former Secretary, and editor of *The Crisis Magazine*, W.E.B. Du Bois. The two entered into a “constant competition that became philosophical and personal.”⁴⁰ Du Bois felt that White was ill-equipped to manage the NAACP and that he would do a better job at being the secretary, and along with other members of the NAACP, Du Bois “led a campaign to topple him.”⁴¹ The two clashed on various issues such as the Scottsboro Boys and segregation. While the two had their downfalls, the

falling out would take a turn when Du Bois claimed that White had “no relation to or knowledge of the problems of black Americans.”⁴² Taking it a step further and catapulting the two into conversations on skin color and leadership, Du Bois, in the April 1934 issue of *The Crisis* claimed, “in the first place, Walter White is white.”⁴³ In this instance, Du Bois was claiming that Walter White was not Black enough to be neither the leader of the NAACP nor a leader within the Black community leading one to the “unsettling question of what, exactly, makes a person white or black in America,” and is there a place for light skinned African Americans in Black social justice movements.⁴⁴

BLACK LIVES MATTER | 2000 U. S. CENSUS

Black Lives Matter (BLM) was formed in 2012, after Trayvon Martin was shot and Killed by George Zimmerman. The organization’s founders, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza sought to re-center various marginalized groups within the Black community and address the various ways in which Black lives matter. On their website, the organization states that they want to affirm “the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.”⁴⁵ While BLM centers marginalized people, it does not go un-noticed that it is an organization and movement centering Black individuals. Knowing this, one must then question what role can a biracial individual play in the BLM movement, and is there a place for them at all.

BLM developed in an era in which Americans and the government looked to redefine blackness and race both socially and legally. For the first time since 1920, the 2000 U.S. census allowed for an individual to choose more than one race. This was a direct result of a growing lighter skinned bi-racial population dissatisfied with rigid racial terms that reflected a Jim Crow society; “6.8 million people, or 2.4 percent, reported more than one race”⁴⁶ in the 2000 census. This information and the proportions change slightly depending on what is being used to define multiracial. The 2000 census used self-reported race and could not take into account parents or grandparents. The Pew Research Center “took into account the racial backgrounds of parents and grandparents. This approach led to the estimate that multiracial adults

currently make up 6.9% of the adult American population.”⁴⁷

Regardless of the slight disparity in numbers, it is expected that the proportion of multiracial peoples in the United States will continue to grow in the years and decades to come. The 2000 census moves in the direction of encouraging individuals of multiracial descent to embrace their background. This is a stark difference from the era of the one-drop rule and the child follows the condition of the mother (Partus law), where now one is legally able to claim whichever components of their background that they choose. Despite the legal movement for embracing multiracial peoples, socially it remains a different case as 12 years later BLM was created that seemed to exclusively embrace Black individuals. One could argue that because of the legacy of the one-drop rule and Partus law, that ‘Black’ is an all-encompassing term. However, if this were the case there would not be such a vast divide within the Black community; biracial individuals would not feel that they are overstepping when advocating social justice, and dark-skinned individuals would not feel pushed aside. These sentiments, that many light and dark-skinned African Americans express, can be seen across social media, TV, blog posts and articles. While the opinions and stances taken on these platforms differ, it gives insight into this century old problem of colorism that affects all within the Black community.

COLORISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Through an examination of social media including blogs, articles and twitter posts, one can look into the current conversations about skin color and leadership in this BLM era. While they are not scholarly, these platforms are telling of the general public’s perception of colorism and highlights how it is discussed in everyday Black spheres. This 21st century glimpse into colorism allows one to see how individuals such as Jesse Williams, Shaun King, Alicia Keys and other biracial activists are viewed as light-skinned activists. In addition, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Black Lives Matter the organization are often referenced on social media platforms. Both the BLM movement and organization have a large social media presence, allowing for opinions regarding race to be readily available. While social media is informal, it allows for a telling insight into the everyday conversations on skin color and activism

and emphasizes that colorism is indeed a century old problem.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The choice to lead my life as a biracial woman has subsequently led to a life of conflict, where I am neither White nor Black and where the two are constantly competing amongst one-another. Because I had no exposure to Black culture growing up, I felt a sense of loss and disconnect in my identity. A desire to understand both my ancestry and myself led to my undergraduate studies, where for the first time I learned of individuals who looked and felt in similar ways to myself. My studies began to fill the void that had for so long been unattended to.

While I gradually entered into the Black community, there remained no doubt that I would best honor my life through identifying as biracial. I did not have the Black experience growing up, and as a result, I later felt as though I was an imposter when I entered into Black spaces. An introductory course in African American Studies was the first class that I took as an undergraduate, and it was the first time where I was ashamed of claiming my African American ancestry. I was certain that my peers were questioning why I was there, and that they knew I was an imposter. I felt that I was viewed as a “half-as, half-ass appropriator of Blackness.”⁴⁸ Persevering through these moments allowed me to continue with my studies in African American Studies, and I began to find my place in the Black community.

In time, I would join organizations, such as our university chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and participate in events that are centered on the Black experience. While I have certainly become more comfortable in who I am as a biracial woman, I continue to find myself questioning what right I have to be involved and whether I am Black enough to speak on issues that afflict the Black community. There is privilege in being biracial that my African American peers are not able to enjoy. But instead of being ashamed of this, I feel that it allows for an opportunity to act as a mediator between communities. Identifying as biracial, for me, means not condemning one half of me over the other and instead accepting the inherent conflict that comes with being biracial. An article used for this paper spoke to the conflict and the essence of what it means to be a Black biracial

individual, and what it ultimately allows for one to do:

Blackness cannot be taken away from us. Biraciality cannot be taken away from us. They exist as tangibly as our skin, made from Europe and Africa. We are the colonizer and the colonized. We are the oppressor and the oppressed. We bleed for our brothers and sisters. We carry on our backs the weight of what one half of us did to the other. We slip easily into white spheres, taking notes and taking names while nodding our European heads.⁴⁹

ARTICLES | TWITTER

What does Black mean in America, and who defines it? In the 21st century does the one-drop rule continue to prevail or do we live in an era where identity is not imposed by outside groups? Sil Lai Abrams argues that based upon her experience as a “light-skinned Black woman of biracial descent” that “racists don’t really care if you are as light as Angela Davis or as dark as Miles Davis. In their minds, “A n*gger, is a n*gger, is a n*gger.”⁵⁰ If this truly is the racist mentality, where one-drop prevails, why then does there continue to be a divide within the Black community based upon the hue of one’s skin? In her article, *Your Blackness Isn’t Like Mine: Colorism and Oppression Olympics*, Abrams discusses the backlash Jesse Williams faced after receiving the Humanitarian Award at the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards. She suggests that anger over White supremacy should not be directed towards light-skinned individuals and should instead “focus our rage on dismantling the systems of oppression that enable those who are lighter to continue to be the face of what it means to be free in America.”⁵¹

In this “dismantling” of the “systems of oppression” many agree that an aspect of this is recognizing that there is privilege in being light-skinned, thus acknowledging that the experiences of dark-skinned African Americans has potential to be vastly different and much more daunting. What comes with this acknowledgment, is allowing light-skinned individuals to “speak up about the injustices that we all face as Black people” as they “should not have their message minimized while being vilified for their appearance.”⁵²

Accepting light-skinned individuals into the movement has the potential to be strategic, as some “movement groups implement ways to use varying levels of skin privilege to their advantage. For example, lighter skinned Black people have been able to use the perceived stereotypes that they are less dangerous in order to be received more kindly by police during rallies.”⁵³ Often times, light-skinned biracial individuals serve “as chameleons, walking back and forth along difficult racial lines...”⁵⁴ This is certainly the stance of Jesse Williams an actor on *Grey’s Anatomy*, and an activist. Despite the perception of biracial individuals as “half-as, half-ass appropriators of Blackness,” who are “deceitful, dangerous, and damaging to Black solidarity,”⁵⁵ Williams stands by his belief that he can be a sort of intermediary between the Black and White communities. The first to admit that his looks that subscribe more to “European beauty standards” give him “access to things,”⁵⁶ Jesse can speak to both sides because he is both White and Black. While some argue “amongst themselves whether he [Jesse Williams] has—or should—claim Blackness over mixedness or mixedness of

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Harry Thotter
@_CJGetsNoPlay

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If you're light skin, don't tell me "black lives matter...you're light skin. You're half struggle, half good credit, and all yellow

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Blackness” they fail “to consider a third option—that Blackness and biraciality can exist simultaneously.”⁵⁷

This imposition of identity and back and forth arguing within the community detracts from the overall goals of the movement and keeps the Black community divided. Gone are the days of Garvey, White and DuBois, where the only people who seemed to be interested in entering into conversation on skin color and leadership were the leaders themselves. Today, in the BLM era, any individual can share their thoughts through social media platforms and criticize those who are at the forefront of this movement. Twitter is overwhelmingly used in the BLM era for leaders, such as Williams, to spread their message and for critics to go after not just the movement but also leaders. It is not uncommon for many of these tweets to revolve around race, and they come from both Black and White individuals. By typing “light skin” and “Black Lives Matter” into the search bar, tweets stating “If you’re light skin, don’t tell me ‘Black lives matter’ . . . you’re light skin. You’re half struggle, half good credit, and all yellow.”⁵⁸ This is only one example of what comes up on social media and is only just the beginning. In the BLM era, anyone and everyone can comment on skin color and leadership; for some, when they go after a particular individual, they leave no rock unturned.

SHAUN KING

Shaun King is no stranger to backlash and criticism through social media. An ex-communicated member of the BLM organization, King is a rather controversial individual. However, for the purposes of this paper, his racial background, his critics and the lengths he has had to go to in an attempt to prove his Blackness are all that will be discussed. His light complexion, his mother being White, and a man who is not his biological father listed on his birth certificate, many have claimed that Shaun King was not Black enough to be a leader in BLM. Despite his many attempts, and explaining his family history at length, King continues to be attacked on social media for not being Black. Besides denying that he is a Black man, some have gone so far as claiming he has lied about significant life events, such as racial disputes in high school, car accidents, and police reports. Despite making it known that he does not want to go into detail about his family history, in his article *Race, Love, Hate, and*

Me, King does address all of these issues, though it seems to continue to be in vain.

In his piece, King discusses that his White mother had an affair with a light-skinned African American who is his father and that this is not the man listed as his father on his birth certificate. He speaks at length about his racial identity as a youth, stating that by the time he was in middle school he “fully identified. . . not even as biracial, but just Black.”⁶⁰ Shaun felt that he was leading an authentic life by claiming his Blackness and that the people he was surrounded by in his everyday life were Black. In high school, he “endured constant overt racism as a young Black teenager,” and in March of 1995 a “racist mob of nearly a dozen students beat” him “severely.”⁶¹ Despite his experiences and having people from his past such as police officers and teachers speak on his behalf, many still discredit him because they believe that he is not Black or at least Black enough to be a leader in BLM:

It is horrifying to me that my most personal information, for the most nefarious reasons, has been forced out into the open and that my private past and pain have been used as jokes and fodder to discredit me and the greater movement for justice in America. I resent that lies have been reported as truth and that the obviously racist intentions of these attacks have been consistently downplayed at my expense and that of my family.⁶²

CONCLUSION

Claudette Colvin, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White allow for one to see that colorism rears its head in many ways along the color spectrum encompassing African Americans. Colorism is a century old problem that persists in the BLM era. This legacy can be traced through sources such as Black newspapers like *The Negro World* and Black magazines such as *The Crisis*. Using the words of Garvey, Du Bois and White one can begin to see that colorism certainly was an issue during their time and gives insight into the ways in which they navigated the problem.

Who is questioning Blackness has changed in some ways, with regard to the past. Garvey and Du Bois’ as well as Du Bois and Whites’ debates on skin color and leadership were between just them. It does not seem that others, besides some who would write into either *The Crisis* or *The Negro World*, took much notice. These were disputes among the upper echelons;

just among the leaders. This differs from the discussions in the BLM era because of social media. Those whom I would consider leaders now are individuals such as Shaun King and Jesse Williams because of either their notoriety or their large media following. Disputes today come from within the community and not only from the leaders. Social media has allowed for any individual with an opinion to become a part of the conversation. Critics of Williams and King tend to be everyday individuals with a bone to pick.

While the type of naysayer may have changed over 100-years, their arguments have essentially remained the same. From 1917-2017, there continues to be a concern on who can speak for Black social justice movements. With individuals such as Du Bois, White and Williams, we know that there is a long history of light-skinned African Americans at the forefront of Black organizations and movements. However, in the BLM era, there is now beginning to be an acknowledgement that this is what is happening; that the legacy of partus law, the one-drop rule and colorism has led us to this moment where we are now ready to say that light skin privilege is wrong.

While it is a hard pill to swallow, that light skin privilege and colorism exists within the Black community, it is also good to acknowledge that there is some benefit to this as well. As some noted in their blogs and articles, those who are biracial are in a unique position to act as a go-between for the Black and White communities. There is power in knowing that, at the moment, this is the way that things are, and use it to the advantage of Black social justice movements. Collectively deciding that these movements should work towards ending the systems and beliefs that make it easier and possible for light skinned and biracial activists to move to the forefront of the movement would be significantly more beneficial than letting this divide continue. Going against one another takes away from the overall goals and tenants of the Black Lives Matter movement and is ultimately what oppressors want. For this reason alone, biracial African Americans should not be vilified for speaking their truths on their Black experience, and their efforts in Black social justice movements should not be negated on the basis of their skin.

Notes

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3. Ibid., 87.
4. Ibid., 89.
5. Ibid., 90.
6. Ibid., 91.
7. Ibid., 93.
8. Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, Revised (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2013), 27.
9. McGuire, *At The Dark End of The Street*, 95.
10. Ibid., 96.
11. Michelle Gordon Jackson, *Light, Bright And Damn Near White: Black Leaders Created by the One-Drop Rule* (Atlanta, Georgia: Jacksonscribe Publishing Company, 2013), 1.
12. Kimberly Jade Norwood, *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 34.
13. Ibid., 33.
14. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, 17.
15. Gordon Jackson, *Light, Bright And Damn Near White: Black Leaders Created by the One-Drop Rule*, 2.
16. Ibid., 7.
17. Ibid., 22.
18. Norwood, *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*, 37.
19. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, 19.
20. Ibid., 58.
21. Gordon Jackson, *Light, Bright And Damn Near White: Black Leaders Created by the One-Drop Rule*, 18.
22. Ibid., 18.
23. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, 26.
24. Ibid., 26.
25. Ibid., 27.
26. Ibram X. Kendi, "Colorism as Racism: Garvey, Du Bois and the Other Color Line – AAIHS," accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.aaihs.org/colorism-as-racism-garvey-du-bois-and-the-other-color-line/>.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. "The NAACP and the UNIA," *The Negro World*, October 20, 1921.
30. "Negro Leadership," *The Negro World*, December 24, 1921.

31. Kendi, "Colorism as Racism."
32. Ibid.
33. W.E.B. DuBois, "Marcus Garvey," *The Crisis*, January 1921.
34. Kendi, "Colorism as Racism."
35. "Negro Leadership."
36. Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Athens, Georgia: University Press of Georgia, 1995), 3.
37. Ibid., 40.
38. Ibid., 51.
39. Thomas Dyja, *Walter White: The Dilemma of Black Identity in America* (Chicago, Illinois: The Library of African-American Biography, 2008), 10.
40. Ibid., 101.
41. Ibid., 101.
42. Ibid., 115.
43. W.E.B. DuBois, "Segregation in the North," *Crisis*, April 1934 (1934).
44. Dyja, *Walter White: The Dilemma of Black Identity in America*, 10.
45. "Black Lives Matter | Freedom & Justice for All Black Lives," accessed May 23, 2017, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>.
46. Nicholas A. Jones and Amy Symens Smith, "The Two or More Races Population: 2000" (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, November 2001).
47. 1615 L. Street et al., "Multiracial in America," *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/>.
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49. Ibid.
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59. *Ibid.*

60. Shaun King, "Race, Love, Hate, and Me: A Distinctly American Story (AKA: Yes, I'm Black)," *Medium*, June 16, 2017, <https://medium.com/@ShaunKing/race-love-hate-and-me-a-distinctly-american-story-aka-yes-im-black-97d19e2362e4>.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

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