

Skin Tone and Popular Culture: My Story as a Dark Skinned Black Woman

RENATA FERDINAND

“I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin, and my one prayer to God, the miracle worker, was that I would wake up lighter skinned.” These are the words of Lupita Nyong'o, the Oscar winning star of *12 Years a Slave*. She spoke them at an *Essence* Black Women in Hollywood Awards Luncheon, where she was awarded the Best Breakthrough Performance Award in 2014. I listened attentively as she told her story of bargaining with God to make her lighter; of her disappointment of waking each day to find herself in the same dark skin and of the constant ridicule she received as a result of it; of how her mother encouraged her to see her beauty from the inside out; and of how she finally came to accept her skin color after seeing model, Alek Wek, proclaimed and praised as beautiful by an international audience.

And then, I thought about my dark skin. I thought about how it often dictates the clothes I wear, opting for bright to light apparel choices. I dye my hair according to what looks attractive on dark skin. I even polish my nails to complement my dark hue. Clearly, my aesthetic choices were impacted by the awareness of my dark complexion. I often remember the phrases of others who commented on my skin: “You’re cute to be dark,” or “You can’t wear that because you’re dark.” I can even recall the hurtful names my siblings and I called each other as a child: *black dog*. We hurled this insult at each other like grenades. With such a tongue-lashing, these words bore stripes across the attending body, slashing the opponent’s confidence. No physical touching was warranted—once *black dog* was

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used, it could slice the opponent down to size. Yet, now that I think about it, we never used this term towards my lighter skinned sister. In fact, we never had an insult for her. No, *black dog* was reserved for us with darker skin.

This essay is an awakening of sorts. As demonstrated above, it highlights the ways in which I came to understand the complexity of having dark skin in a society that privileges light or white skin. By framing my personal experiences through a discussion of colorism and popular culture, I critically examine larger critical race issues of black beauty, feminism, and white privilege. This is an autoethnographic essay, a way “of connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 739). Through narrative and reflective writing, I use my personal experiences to show the ways in which my identity is influenced by and through popular culture; as Herrmann notes, “our identities and pop culture have a long-term recursive relationship” (7).

From this writing, you will learn of the ways in which I am reminded that my dark complexion is a problem. It exposes intense and terrible—yet important—personal moments as a way of highlighting the ways in which skin tone impacts everyday life experiences. Further, it proceeds by showing how my experiences are entangled with the lives of other dark skinned black women in popular culture, from the fictional to the real. In that sense, the essay examines beauty standards, dark skin, and the representations of African American women in television and film. But this writing does not come without its own challenges, particularly when writing about lived experiences of African American women academic scholars. Griffin writes, “Choosing a contested and subjective method such as autoethnography runs the risk of providing more ammunition for those with a vested interest in silencing our voices” (144). Still, I hope my voice serves as a catalyst for more autoethnographic research written by scholars of color as a way to engage those issues that are often overlooked, unrecognized, and undiscussed.

Within this narrative, you will find reference to the African American musical tradition of the blues, used as a way of connecting the various fragments and sections together. The blues often use narrative to tell of a troubling experience in African American life. My daunting experiences often encourage me to have “the blues.” In fact, if my story was set to an AAB pattern, coupled with a line sung over repetitious bars, it would possess all the qualities of an actual blues song.

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“Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin” (Burke 17).

July 27, 2007, was one of the happiest days in my life. After laboring for 26 hours, I had finally given birth to a beautiful, bouncing baby girl. The joy emanating from my heart could be felt clear across the room. As I coyly pressed her warm body against my moist flesh, I immediately thought of all the wonders of her life, the steps towards learning to walk, the first time I would hold her hand to cross the street, the moment she would experience heartbreak and pain, and her eventual growth into a mature young woman. My anticipation for being a witness to her life consumed my thoughts.

And then, the inevitable discussion occurred between my family members. My mother, peering through the hospital blanket that engulfed my daughter’s tiny body, began the conversation.

“How dark do you think she will get?” She gently asked.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” I responded, hoping to put an end to this conversation.

A moment of silence.

Then chimes from other relatives, so much so that a cacophony of noise ensued. My ears are bombarded with:

“She’s going to be dark—check her ears.”

“She won’t even be noticeable at night.”

“She has the darkest little fingers.”

“She’s already turning colors.”

These comments reference the looming darkness that will inevitably consume my daughter. Audrey Chapman, a Washington D.C. family therapist and radio host, discusses the tendency to inspect the color of black babies with Denene Millner of *Essence*, stating, “We look at the color of the ears and the fingertips and say, ‘Oh, that’s going to be a dark baby,’ with the fear of what life will be like for that dark person with the more Negroid features when they have to deal with White Society” (134). As if given in a poetic, melodic refrain, my ears attuned to the words that described my daughter’s color as ugly. How did I respond to this? I said nothing. But it definitely ruined my mood. Usually the blues is signified by a call and response pattern; unfortunately, I had no response to this. All I had was a musical arrangement in my head of guitar strings and melancholic refrains.

I wish I had some sharp-witted reply that would have put my family in their place. In a defiant tone, I would have showed them my disdain for their conversation by alerting them to how they were reinforcing white privilege and white beauty, of how they subscribed to the view of blackness as ugly and reinforced negative connotations of being black, of how they were merely projecting their own skin color insecurities onto my daughter. But instead, I lay quietly, engulfed in misery and joy.

* * *

“Whiteness is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at themselves, at others, and at society” (Frankenberg 447).

No one was more excited about the hip hop concert in the park than I. When I heard that Outkast and Usher would be playing at Atlanta’s Centennial Olympic Park, I knew I had to be there. Because I lived an hour away, it was easier for me to ride with friends than to attempt to put my old jalopy on the road. As luck would have it, my friend was willing to

drive, as long as I was okay with riding with four other women. No problem!

We were well on our way to the concert. I sat alongside my friend, a lighter skinned black woman. Along the back row of the SUV were three white women. We jammed along to the radio station as we continued our journey to Atlanta, until I'm momentarily interrupted by a voice coming from the backseat.

"Look how much lighter I am than you," she excitedly proclaimed as she put her arm next to mine.

"You're white," I said, thinking that there was a clear and reasonable explanation for the obvious difference in skin tone.

"So. I'm not that much lighter than Tina," pushing her arm next to my friend, the driver, who is clearly lighter than I am.

Again, I am speechless. Looking back, I wish I had some kind of clever retort. Maybe I could ramble her ear off about whiteness and white privilege, of how she is further participating in the denigration of black skin and black women, of how her comment refuses to see me by instead focusing on the contrast of me, of how she is commenting on my beauty and my worth as being descriptive of dark, of how she is working to create a divide between me and the driver by focusing on our differences in skin tone instead of our connection as black women. But no, I didn't say any of this. Instead, I cue the music in my head.

And like before, my silence is deafening and defeating. Put these feelings over a 12 bar beat pattern, coupled with instruments and a hard bass line, and you have the beginning of a first rate blues song.

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"Skin tone discrimination can be either interracial or intraracial"
(Banks 213).

I'm reminded of my darkness in moments when I'm not really thinking about it, and at moments when I am clearly excited about something else.

The timing of the reminder affects my emotional state. Is this on purpose? I often believe that being black, especially dark skinned, ultimately influences how others interact with me, the effects of living in a society that not only privileges Whiteness, but lighter skin. I even hate to admit it, but my experience mirrors those affected by colorism—the benefits and disadvantages received based on skin tone.

In fact, colorism spans many ethnic and racial groups, often at the expense of those with darker skin tone. It assigns meanings and values to different color complexions, with most negative connotations and perceptions given to those with a darker hue. Colorism also upholds white privilege, as manifest through the advantages of having light skin. Hochschild and Weaver find that “with some exceptions, most Americans prefer lighter to darker skin aesthetically, normatively and culturally. Film-makers, novelists, advertisers, modeling agencies, matchmaking websites—all demonstrate how much the power of a fair complexion, along with straight hair and Eurocentric facial features, appeals to Americans” (644). For African Americans, colorism is rooted in the slave system that created a hierarchy of skin tone preference, with lighter skin seen as the most desirable.

Colorism has a gendered component as well. In a society that holds ideal beauty standards for women that are often unattainable and unachievable, colorism fits neatly into a sexist paradigm that both includes and excludes certain women. Millner suggests the dangers of colorism as being fueled by a society that connects women’s beauty to their value and significance. As a result, the ideal beauty standard for women is the adulation for lighter skin. Hill finds that “throughout Europe and the West, fair skin tone has long been perceived as a particularly desirable feminine characteristic” (79). In fact, dark skinned black women are often perceived as less attractive, less intelligent, and less desirable than other women. Stephens and Thomas also note, “Researchers have consistently shown that lighter skinned black women are viewed as more attractive and

successful than darker skinned black women even when economic status is considered” (295).

Some may question the impact of skin tone. Some may believe that we have progressed so far in our racial harmony that skin tone plays no significant part in our lives, that skin tone is irrelevant to our understanding of beauty, that skin tone does not affect our daily existence. Well, tell these beliefs to the thousands of darker skinned people who face obstacles in terms of employment and socioeconomic standing (Hill; Hughes and Hertel; Hunter; Keith and Herring; Seltzer and Smith). Tell these beliefs to the thousands of darker skinned people who face harsher prison sentences (Hochschild and Weaver; Sanders). If a thousand is too many, then tell them to the one little black girl, who like Toni Morrison’s Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, prayed for lighter skin, often wondering, “What made people look at them [little white girls] and say ‘Awwwww,’ but not for me” (22). The same little black girls, like Paula, whose aunt often commented, “She’s so pretty. If only she wasn’t so Black” (Millner 134). The same little black girls that are bombarded with the images of feminine beauty as represented by white princesses. What impact does it have on a black child when Cinderella doesn’t look like her, or Snow White, or Belle, or Rapunzel, or Ariel, or Aurora? Think like a child. In fact, it wasn’t until 2009 that Disney unveiled its first African American Disney princess with the debut of *The Princess and the Frog*. Yet, Griffin reminds us to be cautious in our admiration for this film, for it occurs several decades after the debut of Disney’s first white princess, and it ultimately shows the black princess as a frog for the majority of the film.

Some may argue that with the election of the first black president, Barack Obama, and the prominence of the first lady as a darker skinned black woman, Michelle Obama, that the tide is changing in the way darker skinned is viewed. But even Michelle Obama is not immune from the negativity associated with dark skin. Quinlan, Bates, and Webb examined newspaper and blog commentary about the first lady, and found evidence

that the body of Michelle Obama was often the target of criticism, from her butt to her weight. Although the critics never commented directly on her dark skin, their coded language showed a reference to stereotypical images of black women, all of whom are of darker skin tone. Therefore, a criticism of her butt and weight is a criticism of her dark skin. Michelle Obama's dark skin differs drastically from the skin highlighted in our society, the skin privileged in various circles and shown in the national and international arena as beautiful—the Halle Berrys and Beyonces of the world. Harrison concurs, finding that the media praises and awards light skin as the ultimate beauty component.

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“Stereotypes are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening” (hooks 38).

You know me, even if you have never met me. In fact, you know a lot of black women. You know us because of what you see of us in popular culture, the stereotypical versions at least. Yet, the stereotypes come to represent reality. So, you don't have to picture what I look like. You don't have to wonder about the angles of my facial features, or the contours of my eyes or nose. You don't have to consider the space between my lips and chin, or the shape of my ears. Here I am:

Sapphire: neck rolling angry black bitch

Jezebel: hyper-sexualized black woman

Mammy: always smiling and willing to please servant

Matriarch: superwoman who leads the household

Whether I conform to these stereotypical images or not, an image of me already exists in your psyche, simply due to the popularity of these images. And the common thread that binds these images and me: we are all dark skin. Hill writes, “Unflattering and unfeminine stereotypes of darker-skinned African American women—such as the sexless black mammy or the emasculating black matriarch—have suffused American popular culture” (80). hooks concurs, writing that negative feminine qualities shown in the media are oftentimes depicted by someone with dark skin.

I often wonder how to escape these images when they are so common. How can I redirect or rearticulate these images for myself? I mean, if I apply the tenets of Collins “Black Feminist Theory,” maybe I could get some kind of clarification regarding these images and images of myself. Maybe I could work to improve the standing of darker skinned black women or offer new meanings to raise awareness and public consciousness. Collins encourages us to center ourselves, to use our lived experience to ground theoretical understandings, to rearticulate consciousness as a way to “empower African-American women and stimulate resistance” (32). Of course, this is a worthwhile idea, but sometimes I find these racial tasks to be somewhat daunting. I mean, there are so many pertinent issues affecting the African American community—jobs, access to adequate health care and education, adequate housing—that focusing on colorism loses its thrust. Sometimes I think it is easier to acquiesce, to accept defeat and realize that society will never change. Or maybe put my worries over a syncopated beat and seductively sing.

At least, I would have accepted the situation, and resisted the need to combat any further. There’s a certain realization and acknowledgement in the blues: powerlessness and the inability to control a situation. I consent to this, and comfort in misery is my newfound mood.

* * *

“The gendered nature of colorism stems from the close link between skin tone and perceptions of physical attractiveness, and from a double standard that applies expectations of attractiveness more rigidly to women” (Keith 26).

By the time I learned that Viola Davis was playing the new lead in a primetime show, I was already basking in the glow of the blues. In fact, I had no desire or impetus to concern myself with the plight of anything related to raising awareness or assisting in knowledge production of and about darker skinned women. Even the thought sounds exhausting, and truly, I was defeated. My thoughts changed with Viola Davis.

Davis plays the character of Annalise Keating on the ABC series *How to Get Away with Murder*, which premiered in the fall of 2014. She is a fierce and sexy defense lawyer and law professor who uses her students to help her win cases at all costs. Robert Bianco of *USA Today* describes Davis’ character as “tough, smart, vibrant, sexy, anguished, ambitious, conniving, mature, immature and somehow, underneath it all, admirable” (1D). The show averages almost 15 million viewers each week and is one of ABC’s top new shows. It comes on the heels of Davis’ 2013 taping of *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, where she argued that the image of black actresses in film and television was in “crisis mode” and she questioned the “quality of roles.” In terms of her new role, Davis says, “It is time for people to see us, people of color, for what we really are: complicated.”

So, imagine my fascination with Davis’s character. Here is a woman who is dark skinned. She is not a darker version of someone else. She is not apologetic for her darker hue. She is not the wholesome sidekick of a lighter actress. Instead, she is, as Davis describes herself, “sexualized, messy, mysterious” (Rice 29). Sometimes because of the lack of diversifying roles offered to African American actresses, and largely due to the misrepresentations and distortions displayed by the media, black actresses are doubly tasked with playing roles that are aimed toward uplifting the black race. It creates a double bind when the image of black

women in popular culture has been one that has either been under constant assault or bearing the burden of improving the moral virtues of all black women. Davis' character, however, is not stuck between this binary.

Take, for example, the "Pilot" episode. We are immediately introduced to the physical attributes of Annalise Keating. The distinctive elements of black women are put on display. Her tight black skirt and low-cut burgundy top (with a little cleavage showing) propels viewers to see the dark skin. And this is dark skin with confidence—not the usual portrayal of dark skin as deviant, criminal, uncivilized, threatening, or violent. Instead, here is a dark skinned African American woman, who is 49 years of age, leading a cast in primetime. What else can I say? I'm hooked. My fascination increases with each episode, but admittedly, it is the "Let's Get to Snooping" episode (1.4) that really conjures up images of dark skin and beauty. At the end of the episode, Annalise removes all of her jewelry, piece by piece, and her eye lashes. Then she removes her wig, exposing her braided hair. Lastly, she wipes off the makeup, eye shadow, and lipstick.

What courage this must have taken? To reveal one's true image to almost 15 million viewers. She is not only revealing the typical nightly routine for a lot of women, she is showing her dark skin in its natural state. No makeup. No wig. No false lashes. Nothing. Bare. And knowing how dark skin is perceived in society, she takes a risk at incurring ridicule and shame. This is more than acting: this is life. Breger writes of the explosiveness of this scene, and how it resonated with many audiences, writing, "It's a nightly ritual that had probably never been depicted on network television" (11). Lynette Rice of *Entertainment Weekly* writes how Davis "defied conventions and stoked conversation again by removing her wig and makeup on screen" (31). In this scene alone, Davis challenges current perceptions of black women, and especially the hegemonic discourses surrounding a woman's beauty. I hate to go back to the old phrase, but in this moment, I did believe that "black is beautiful."

But with all my excited moments comes a backlash for being dark. This time, it came with the publication of an article by *New York Times* writer, Alessandra Stanley, who aptly describes Viola Davis' character:

As Annalise, Ms. Davis, 49, is sexual and even sexy, in a slightly menacing way, but the actress doesn't look at all like the typical star of a network drama. Ignoring the narrow beauty standards some African-American women are held to, Ms. Rhimes chose a performer who is older, darker-skinned and less classically beautiful than Ms.

Washington, or for that matter Halle Berry, who played an astronaut on the summer mini-series *Extant*. ("Wrought in Rhimes's Image")

Perfect timing. I knew something would come along to ruin my moment. I considered writing a response piece to Stanley's article. I envisioned myself sitting down at my desk to draft a crafty letter. It would go something like this:

Dear Ms. Stanley,

I am appalled by your rudeness and lack of depth when writing and considering yourself a critic.

A closer reading of your lines revealed several things: that your remarks reflect the denigration of darker skinned black women rampant in society by the focus on the ideal beauty standards of white femininity and contrasting those standards with Viola Davis.

Your use of coded language is not lost on me. You use it to mask the association with beauty and race, opting instead for words like "typical" and "classically beautiful." Your phrasing, Ms. Stanley, is most disturbing, the idea of Viola Davis as being less "classically beautiful" than the lighter skinned black women of other shows. "Less classically beautiful" means non-white features.

In fact, you blame black women for the existence of an ideal beauty standard. You fail to indict Whiteness for this construct. Instead, it is African American women who are held to such rigid beauty standards, not as a result of the prevalence of Whiteness, not as a result of a systemic racial color caste order established with the founding of this country, not due to the overwhelming emphasis and preference for lighter skin in almost every facet of our daily life. According to you, Ms. Stanley, African American women are held to this unattainable beauty ideal at the hands of a mysterious puppet master.

You are not progressive in your thinking. You are not offering a new way of thinking about beauty and race; rather, you are the messenger to the “good-ol-boy” network of thinking. You are so infused with white power, it’s pathetic.

Consider using your platform with *The New York Times* in a better way.

Until then,

Fuck off!

I was tempted to send this letter. But instead, I did nothing. I was, however, pleased with Davis’ response. In an interview with Jada Yuan, Davis commented on Stanley’s article, saying, “There is no one who could compare Glenn Close to Julianna Margulies, Zoey Deschanel to Lena Dunham. They just wouldn’t. They do that with me and Kerry because we’re both African Americans and we’re both in Shonda Rhimes shows. But they wouldn’t compare me to [Grey’s Anatomy’s] Ellen Pompeo . . . because Ellen Pompeo is white” (110). Davis is referring to the executive producer of the show, Shonda Rhimes, and Kerry Washington, the lead African American woman who plays Olivia Pope in *Scandal*, another

highly rated ABC primetime show created by Shonda Rhimes. Ironically, with the show *Scandal* preceding *How to Get Away with Murder* the variation in black skin tone is evident.

Kerry Washington even found herself in the midst of a skin tone firestorm with the publication of *InStyle* magazine's March 2015 cover. When Washington appeared on the front of the issue, her skin tone was clearly several shades lighter. Fans took to Twitter to lambast the magazine, accusing the editors of photo-shopping her image. Some even compared her complexion to Halle Berry and Vanessa Williams. Maria Puente of *USA Today* asked the question: "Does her skin tone look lighter than she really is?" The controversy encouraged the magazine to issue an immediate statement, blaming the cover lighting as the reason for the change in skin tone. My response: Yeah right! It eerily reminds me of the *Time* magazine cover of O.J. Simpson during his murder trial, where his image is presented several shades darker than his actual skin tone, linking darkness with criminality. These controversies are distractions at a time when I'm supposed to be happy with the new identification with dark skin. Davis words eased my concerns, and this time, the thrill was not gone!

I continued to watch the show and learn more about this character. I was especially intrigued by her sexual endeavors. Previous images of African American middle-class women on television presented them as chaste and pious. But here, I watched a woman embrace her sexuality. With each episode, I learn more and more about her white husband, a psychology professor who has and continues to cheat on her, and her black lover who is a detective. There is a sexual allure to her character. Her steamy sexual encounters subvert the prescribed sexual scripts from the past and establish a sense of agency in her sexuality, especially given that most networks steer clear of showing a woman engaging in satisfying sexual activity. In an interview with Cori Murray of *Essence*, Shonda Rhimes discusses challenging the way that sex scenes are shown on primetime television. She states, "If a woman was being attacked or

brutalized or raped, you could discuss it in any graphic terms you wanted. You could show thrusting. But if you were talking about anything that pleased the woman, you certainly couldn't discuss it" (89). Davis's explosive sex scenes are a clear indication that the show intends to push all sorts of boundaries, from skin tone to age, race, and gender.

Some may say that Viola Davis conforms to the stereotypical images of black women on television given that "producers and writers built roles around the common stereotypes associated with her [black women] in hopes to not only fulfill the fantasy of whites but also maintain the status quo in America at large" (Sewell 324). They may say that her sexual promiscuity alone lands her in the Jezebel category, or that the comfort and protection she offers her students is a symbol of a Mammy, or that her sharp witted, no-nonsense attitude reflects a Sapphire or an in-charge Matriarch.

In looking at any character, there will be contradictions and commonality in what is represented. A deeper study may intend to further analyze the role that Davis plays. Maybe a researcher may investigate audience perception of Davis's character. Likely, someone will explore the ways that Davis subverts stereotypical images of black women on television, or offer explanations of how she nicely fits into a specific stereotypical category. I'm sure that a critique of the ways that she challenges popular media images of authentic black womanhood will soon happen. Someone may insist on exposing the either/or binary that affects black women—I've started the process by exploring the lighter skin/darker skin controversy. I chose to focus on only one aspect, skin tone, though there are other ways of exploring and expanding this topic. Yet, I insist on keeping the conversation moving in a productive manner, with a special emphasis on including the lived experiences of black women. Like Boylorn, I believe that "the ability to resist representations . . . allows Black women to own the positive and negative, good and bad, real and fictional aspects of Black womanhood that are depicted on television.

Black women must bring their own personal experiences and realities to the forefront to serve as a place and point of comparison” (430). This article is my contribution to Boylorn’s quest.

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Popular culture can be a site of change and resistance to stereotypical images. Hall argues that popular culture provides an opening of new spaces in which marginalized groups can present new identities on the cultural stage. We’ve seen steady changes over the years. And academic research has to critically examine the ways that popular culture influences identity transformations. We can see an edge towards this discourse with Andrew Herrmann’s article, “Daniel Amos and Me.” I follow in the footsteps of Danielle Stern’s article, where she uses autoethnographic reflections to explore the development of her feminist identity as constructed through her dating experiences and her role as a media consumer. It is from Stern’s writing that I was inspired to create “stories of my identification with specific television characters” (420). Furthermore, Manning’s autoethnography on *Mad Men* helps me understand the ways in which we can project our identity onto the characters we find on television, and how we use characters to better understand our lives. He writes, “As I watched and re-watched ‘The Marriage of Figaro’ [1.03] to better understand the situation, I kept coming back to how I am prompted to think of my family while viewing even though we have little in common with the Drapers” (94). Like the authors mentioned above, I, too, find the benefit of exploring popular culture as a way of understanding myself; in fact, an exploration in popular culture is an exploration of self, as “popular culture helps us define who we are, what we believe, and influences whom we befriend” (Herrmann 7).

Yet, I take my analysis one step further by examining my experience with popular culture from a critical race theory (CRT) perspective. As Trevino, Harris, and Wallace write,

CRT privileges storytelling, not only as a rhetorical device for conveying personal racialized experiences but also as a way of centering the metanarratives—the images, preconceptions, and myths—that have been propagated by the dominant culture of hegemonic Whiteness as a way of maintaining racial inequality. (8)

It is through my personal experiences with colorism that call attention to the ways that racism and discrimination still exists. Using a CRT perspective, I am further able to challenge the notion of the colorblind discourses perpetuated in the media. Colorblind discourses fuel racism and white privilege by diminishing the effect of race, opting instead to view race as inconsequential and irrelevant. For example, Kretsedemas discusses the effect of colorblind discourses on television viewing audiences of the primetime show, *Ugly Betty*. He notes that colorblind discourses urge viewing audiences to disregard race in their interpretations of the characters and their actions; instead, black characters should be judged by their qualities and characteristics alone, without any concern for racial classification.

Yet, colorblind discourses are a ruse to distract from the system of racial oppression that exists in this country. And colorblind discourses are used in the media to subvert attention away from race and racism and instead promote idyllic moments of racial harmony, thereby preserving Whiteness and white privilege. Bonilla-Silva discusses the impact of colorblind discourses, writing, “And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards” (4). Even the shows that I analyzed purport to engage in colorblind practices. Everett notes that Shonda Rhimes’ shows, including *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* both feature racially and sexually diverse cast members who reflect typical United States society. They challenge white hegemonic cultural practices, opting instead for “non-traditional casting choices” (36), with African American women as the lead, and in particular, with the

casting of Viola Davis as an attractive, dark skinned, sexually desirable woman.

Yet, I think Rhimes was fully aware of her choices when making the decision to cast Viola Davis. Maybe she knew that television viewing audiences were unfamiliar with seeing a dark skinned woman as the lead in a primetime show. Maybe such casting was Rhimes' way of challenging stereotypical and colorblind portrayals of women with a darker hue. I often wonder if Davis' character would say and do the things she does if she were of a lighter skin tone.

I liken Rhimes' effort to my own movement of resistance. In fact, my experiences vehemently resist colorblind assertion by my insistence on calling attention to these discourses. My experiences show how palpable colorblind discourses are, and yet, my experiences also stand in opposition to colorblind discourses. From the mundane experiences of choosing nail polish to hair color to being a concert-goer, my experiences call attention to the ways in which race and white privilege have affected my life. Even precious moments, like becoming a mother, succumbed to colorism—a byproduct of racism. Given that I have to find a dark skinned advocate in Viola Davis proves the futility of colorblind discourses. The sudden emergence of leading black women in primetime television, which is limited to two, demonstrates why color and race still matter.

At the end of the day, I'm not looking for validation for my skin tone. I've accepted it in all of its glorious majesty. Who cares if I am judged as inadequate or unintelligent as a byproduct of my dark skin? Should I be discouraged that my dark skin does not come with "kindness, popularity, attractiveness, and social desirability associated with lighter-skinned black women" (Stephens and Thomas 292), or that my skin is not considered [beautiful] as defined by lighter skin (Landor et al. 823), or that I likely did not receive "certain advantages when it comes to educational and occupational opportunities, or . . . experience discrimination to a lesser degree" (Harrison 68)? Validation would imply that I suffered from low

self-esteem, which I deny. Validation assumes that I need some kind of support or confirmation, a recognition for my dark skin or for my experience. I do not need validation of my lived experience. But, I must admit, my world is a little more bearable with Viola Davis as Annalise Keating.

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