

Transcript: Colorism in the Black, Asian, and Latinx Communities

Angela Jackson (Producer)

Before we started with today's episode, I wanted to tell you about something new we're doing on the podcast. Rosemary, Courtney, and I, we want to hear from you, the listeners. So, we're opening up our inbox. Send us your questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events, and Courtney and Rosemary, and maybe one of our guests, will answer them on the show. Email us at ile@umaryland.edu. If you'd like to be anonymous, just let us know in the body of the email. We can't wait to hear from you.

Rosemary Ferreria (Co-Host)

"You're pretty for a dark-skinned girl," "you need to mejorar la raza or better the race by marrying a lighter skinned person than you," "don't play outside in the sun, you'll get too dark" are comments that are sometimes overheard in Communities of Color. They highlight the issue of colorism, which is a form of prejudice and/or discrimination that values lighter skin tones over darker skin tones, specifically within people of the same racial or ethnic group.

Hello, my name is Rosemary Ferreira.

Courtney Jones Carney (Co-Host)

And I'm Courtney Jones Carney.

Rosemary Ferreria

Welcome to The Table podcast where we discuss questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms and current events.

In this episode we'll be discussing what some call the "child of racism," colorism. We'll specifically discuss how colorism shows up within the Black, Asian, and Latinx communities. You'll hear from three guests Lisa Nicholson, a healthcare manager who identifies as a Black woman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She's also the mom of our wonderful producer Angela Jackson who makes a cameo in this episode. You'll also hear from our guests Reina Pomeroy, a certified coach at Reina + Co who identifies as a Japanese woman, and Ayda Gonzalez, a recent graduate student from Emory University who was born in the Dominican Republic and raised on the island and in New York City.

Last year, Amira Adawe of The Beautywell Project, a non-profit organization in Minnesota fighting to end skin-lightening practices stated in an interview with Good Morning America, that colorism is a phenomenon that started with colonization.

Archived Recording (Amira Adawe)

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Colorism is so much embedded in cultures, it's something that started with colonization, those countries that experience colonization, and also communities that experienced slavery. And so, it's deeply rooted in cultures. We have to teach people their identities. We have to teach people their history. We need to redefine beauty standards because that is a huge issue that impacts these communities. We need to empower and uplift communities of color.

Rosemary Ferreria

When Europeans colonized Asia, Africa, and the Americas, they imposed their standards of beauty on the indigenous groups. Today, the European norm for what is considered beautiful and attractive is everywhere and is constantly being reinforced in movies, magazines, television shows, and social media. For centuries now, people of color around the globe have internalized these European standards of beauty, which can result in the rejection of their own melanated skin tones. As Amira suggested, learning about our histories as communities that have experienced the trauma of colonization can empower us. We'll be weaving history with the stories of our guests, beginning with Lisa Nicholson's experience as a Black woman.

Lisa Nicholson (Guest)

I'm Lisa Nicholson and I was raised in Pittsburgh, PA and that'll be pretty significant because that's in Western Pennsylvania. It's not very ethnically diverse there, and identify as a Black woman. And, uh, growing up, I don't think I had a choice but to identify as that. My mom is Asian and Black, and I grew up in the 70s and I was never afforded that opportunity to even identify as such, to even bring in my grandfather side of the family, I should say, my maternal grandfather side of the family. I am much browner than my mom and as a result of that I was always told that I was, I'm trying to think back then they were using terms such as Afro American and so that's what I was Uh, dubbed as by the greater community and that's how I was raised. It was it was very looking back on it now it was very different for me because I could never as I stated before, ever acknowledge the other side of my family.

Rosemary Ferreira

So, it sounds like because you had darker skin than other members of your family, you weren't able to identify or acknowledge or be able to say "no, this is also part of my heritage". It sounds like it was very much imposed on you that you are Black and it kind of ends there.

Lisa Nicholson

Yes, and I don't have a problem with that. I just think that it would have been nice to be able to recognize the other half of my family. So, growing up I grew up in the 70s and kids always made, in the community that I grew up in if you were not lighter skinned, and I and I don't like those terms because they're all they are all terms created during enslavement, so I don't like using those terms, but for the sake of this conversation I will, uhm, that people used to make fun of my skin color and use, you know, derogatory terms to refer to me and that was hurtful and then, uhm, there were people in my family who would always refer to me as with terms

such as, Uh “chocolate” and or “dark skinned” and I don't find any of those terms nice nor endearing at all and so, uhm, I would say growing up during that time period it was it was it was difficult to me and in attempting to navigate spaces in the family and in the greater community.

Rosemary Ferreira

Lisa points to the roots of colorism in the United States, which can be traced back to the enslavement of African people. Lighter skinned Black people were often the mixed children of enslaved Black women and white enslaver men, a relationship that was not consensual. A colorist hierarchy was formed where because of their proximity to whiteness, lighter skinned Black people were deemed as more intelligent and beautiful compared to darker skinned Black people who were seen as unintelligent, undesirable, and aggressive. As a result of these stereotypes, lighter skinned enslaved Black people were given domestic work while darker skinned enslaved people were tolled with the physical labor of working the fields.

In our interview, Lisa talks about how moving to Baltimore from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania almost three decades ago, was a bit of a cultural shock. She felt that because of its location in the South, there was a greater use of colorist language and discrimination.

Lisa Nicholson

So moving to this region here, being in the South, although I don't think people for Maryland think they were born in the South, but they are and I don't know what the Mid-Atlantic region is, that's where they tend to think that they're from, but you live in the South you, you're below the Mason Dixon line so as a result here I sort of was shocked literally when I came here and that was let's see about, 29 years ago and the colorism here is still shocking to me uhm, people very comfortably use terms, refer to people as light skinned, dark skinned, red, yellow, and I have conversations and tell people that those terms are not endearing to anyone, and we should not be using those terms to refer to people by the amount of melanin that is or is not in their skin. So here in this region, I have found that the amount of melanin in your skin It seems to me, often dictate your success and your ease to success. I look in the community that I used to live in in Baltimore City and that community was predominantly people who had melanin like me. It is like that. Those that have Melanin, that's similar to that's lighter than mine tend to live in certain areas, have different sorts of jobs than people who look like me when you look in the areas such as housekeeping, dietary, those jobs tend to have people who look like me in those jobs. When you look at people who have managerial roles except in environmental services, but when you look at people who have managerial roles, they don't have melanin like me. So, I see that in this area being very prominent. I live near Prince Georges County and uhm, what I see here and specifically, women who are dubbed as successful, a lot of them don't have the amount of melanin that I have in my skin so I see that playing out so very much here it's it, it's interesting it can be disturbing.

Rosemary Ferreira

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Research backs up Lisa's points about how colorism shapes the livelihoods of Black people. Historically, being the children of white enslavers, some light skinned Black people were given access to education and even their own freedom, enabling them to obtain particular social and economic privileges such as higher status jobs and owning their own property. After the abolition of chattel slavery, colorism continued to thrive through the use of such discriminatory practices as the brown paper bag test, which was used as a means to gain access to certain Black American fraternities, sororities, churches and social clubs. If your skin was darker than the brown paper bag placed at the front door, you were denied entry or membership. Prominent 20th century Black scholar WEB Du Bois notes how the Black academic, social, and economic elite in Northern cities were predominately light skinned mixed-race people who held onto their elite status by excluding Black people who were of darker skin and lower socioeconomic status.

This isn't to say that light-skinned Black people didn't experience racism and discrimination. In a hypodescent society, just one drop of Black ancestry still determined where you could and could not sit, eat, learn, pray, and live. **And** it's still important to recognize the ways that colorism offered certain privileges and resources to light skinned, particularly mixed-race Black people, because of their proximity to whiteness.

Today, studies show that colorism continues to impact Black people's access to jobs and education, how they are treated in the criminal justice system, and can have detrimental effects on darker skinned Black people's mental health. A 2009 study found that light-skinned Black people were more likely to earn higher salaries and hold more prominent jobs than dark-skinned Black people, even if they had similar resumes and previous job experiences. Another study on education from 2019 found that dark-skinned boys and girls were 2.5 and 3 times more likely to be suspended compared to their light-skinned counterparts. Being hyper-criminalized from a young age, research has shown that dark-skinned Black women received sentences that were 12 percent longer than light-skinned Black women.

Lisa brings home this point about the dehumanization and criminalization of darker skinned Black people in our interview. She starts off by talking about models such as Iman and Naomi Campbell, who although are darker skinned Black models have other phenotypical features such as narrow noses, that align themselves to European perceptions of beauty. Being closer to whiteness means more access to resources, being closer to Blackness means exclusion.

Lisa Nicholson

When we had people back when I grew up models like Iman, right, she is African, right? "And there's no way she could be African 'cause she doesn't look African." Whatever that meant Back in the 70s, right? And you have people like that in the model, Naomi Campbell and you have people who are Black and you, you know, but American media has said If you don't look like that then you're not good looking. And if you don't look like that Then you don't deserve great education. You don't deserve access to clean water you don't deserve access to housing. So, the

closer you look like those kidnapped Africans who were forcibly brought here the closer, you look to that means your humanity is taken away from you. You're the idea of what is acceptable. The idea of what is beautiful is taken away from you, so those in practices and enslavement continue today. Continue that, maybe we could continue on when you look at those people who are jailed here in city in Baltimore City. What, who, what do they predominantly look like men and women children? Uhm, what do they look like? They don't have like, and they do not have, the for the most part, lighter skin. They don't. And so, the media, when they had these cop shows on TV What do the suspects look like? They look a certain way, you know. I follow Baltimore Court Watch on social media and it's absolutely heartbreaking what happens right down the street from us where we work, and people parrot cop tales so easily and you look at people who look like me and you're immediately judged. That whatever the cops say, you look like me, that must be true, you know, it just must be true. So, the media impacts all of that as I said before from housing education, slave patrols here in America, 'cause that's What they are and it's very sad. So, if we don't, I don't know, if we can't collectively just come up and just decide they were all humans, and that the beauty the beauty is in being a human in our community and, I'm not talking about what the greater community says because we're not going to do that for a myriad of reasons. But if we can't if those of us who know Don't make a concerted effort to continue to spread that message we will continue to where we are. Colorism will continue. People will have to try to figure out how to navigate themselves. Trauma will continue. Harm will continue.

Rosemary Ferreira

In our interview, we also discussed the intersections of gender and colorism.

Lisa Nicholson

So, as you know I have two children, a daughter and a son. One, my daughter whose skin tone mimics mine, my son, whose skin tone does not mimic mine. I know that for my daughter, Uh, her father family, they're very much into colorism. They refer to people using terms that are not as endearing and growing up, you know, there is a member of her family who used to always call to her as "she's so also chocolate" and I had to stop and like she's not a piece of candy. She's a human and she's a child. So, with my son as far as colorism is concerned, I for this broadcast here, I'm not sure if colorism is the true issue with him, where I can address more of just racism towards him and I say that to say, because the conversations that he and I have don't specifically refer to colorism. They're simply based in race, him being a Black man. So, I don't have those sorts of conversations with him.

Angela Jackson

I remember being in elementary school and my best friend, who was significantly lighter than I was, got invited to sit at a lunch table, because that was a thing that happened back then. And she was like, "OK, let's go sit with these kids." And I remember being told that I couldn't sit with them because I was too dark. And in that moment two things that happened. One, I had this

weird realization that for Black people there were these differences in skin tone and that they mattered, but that in this environment they mattered differently for cis girls than they did for cis boys. Because the boys who were sitting at the table, I looked at them and thought, “We are all the same shade of brown. What do you mean I’m too dark to sit here?” But in that environment, which my elementary school was almost exclusively Black, darker skinned boys seemed to have certain privileges that were not afforded to darker skinned girls. I know now that darker skin tends to be associated with masculinity, and I can make the assumption that within that space, being seen as more masculine, even as a boy, was considered a positive trait. You’re considered strong and in heteronormative societies masculinity in cis boys and cis men is often equated with attractiveness. On the flip side, if darker skin is associated with masculinity, and you are a darker skinned Black girl, like I was – and I would probably argue that this goes for cis and trans girls and women – then, your skin tone in that environment, it defeminizes you. It makes you less attractive and because of that, as a darker skinned Black girl, I was shut out of that space. And while I’m talking about a lunch table, in my experience, you know, I have seen in the certain pockets of the Black community that I’ve navigated, that line of thinking has expanded to, you know, who certain adults pick and choose as their friends, who they choose as their partners, based solely on their skin tone. And so while I agree that my brother, being a Black man, may not be able to immediately see how colorism has affected his life - and I want to say, being a Black man whose skin tone was lighter than mine – I do think he was likely able to navigate certain spaces within the Black communities that we were in, a lot easier than I was growing up because his lighter skin tone was less of an issue than mine was. However, I do want to acknowledge that, especially when I was growing up, there was this line of darker skin that even people who identified as men couldn’t cross. It was almost like this invisible threshold. But for people who identified as men there may have been these shades of darker skin that were more acceptable for them than for people who identified as Black women, but the deeper their skin tone, the more their skin tone resembled what my classmates in elementary and middle school associated with African-ness versus African-American-ness, then it didn’t matter if you identified as a girl or a boy, your skin tone was considered too dark and it was completely unacceptable. You know, I think about the actress Lupita N’yongo and how, when I was growing up, I never saw anyone with her skin tone being called beautiful. And I grew up in the 90s, so it was not that long ago. You know, no one who looked like her was being called beautiful on such a large, almost global scale. And she is beautiful, right? She is stunning. Everything that everyone says about her now is true. It’s probably almost understating her beauty, but when I was growing up in the Black communities that I was in, her beauty would’ve almost been completely negated because of her skin tone.

Lisa Nicholson

Well, you know you hear people who will say “you’re pretty for a dark-skinned girl.” That is, uhm, in 2021, that is still something that we hear. I mean, you could hear that today “she’s pretty for a dark-skinned girl.” And that infuriates me, and I hate it. I don’t hate a lot of things in

the world, but those statements like that I hate, and I let people know that that is wrong and you should not be saying things like that.

Rosemary Ferreira

Why do you think that we use these terms, or I don't know? I should say we but within communities of color that there is this emphasis on skin color and how have you, you know you've been very vocal on how we shouldn't be emphasizing skin color, and so are there any, guess tips or suggestions that you would offer folks when engaging with people?

Lisa Nicholson

Why do I think we use it? Because we're still young as a society and being quote unquote "free" whatever that means and we have continued to bring over terms from enslavement and one of the reasons I think that we do it is because we don't, our community does not know how to love ourselves and we have been so traumatized that we don't even understand how white supremacy is so ingrained in our own community. So, I know that our community we want to love ourselves. We want to be the best that we can be, and we do that, right? But we have brought over terms from a very horrible period in our life and made them better because at the time that's what we had to do. So, we continue to use them. How do we tell our community or how, tips that I have for our community? And I'm not sure if anybody even wants to take the time to do this but Uhm, just tell people if you're not referring to someone by their name and describing the humanity and the person not just continuing to identify them by something that you can see then do we actually regard ourselves as humans? And that's where our community has to go. We have to start initially believing that we are in fact, humans and humanity is not defined by your physical appearance. However white supremacy has done a bang-up job in our community and because we have been for hundreds of years, centuries identified by that, the media does that, the educational system does that. We continue to move that forward. I choose to identify people by their humanity, so I don't say you know "that light skinned girl who Works on the 4th floor" or now say "the woman, if that's what they choose to identify by the woman who works in psychiatry, you know she sits right by the elevator on the 4th floor in Cube 2", but that's a very intentional thing that I am choosing to do. It's easy to default. Now if I'm on code switch, right? I'm not going to code switch and just say "that light skinned girl who works over there or psychiatry". I'm not going to do that because I am making a choice to identify us by the humans we are so that you then regard me as a human, not as, it's very apparent when I walk down the street that I am a woman, a Person of Color 'cause you don't you don't know how I identify myself, but I am a person of color, so that's very apparent. But that's not just who I am. So what tips is I tell people describe and identify that person by the human that they are and I know that can be difficult, and I know because I am privileged and I have had access to being around a lot of different people and I've had the experience of talking with, working with a wide variety of people, so I know that I may be able to stand somewhat on a pedestal to say we shouldn't be doing that because I've had access to learn history and I have had access to learn a lot of things, some people haven't had that right? So, the very tip is just

regard that person as a human. That that would be my tip, but I know that might take some ways to get there because I'm gonna go back to living here in Maryland it's so ingrained in society, Uhm and because the authority institutions in this city and in this state continue to identify people by their physical features. Well, we're going to do the same thing too, but it's just that I've had the privilege to be exposed to more so and I've made a purposeful choice to identify someone by their humanity as opposed to their physical features.

Rosemary Ferreira

In this next segment we'll be discussing colorism in Asian communities. Examining the history of colorism in Asia requires having an intimate understanding of nations and people that are often drastically different. It also requires a knowledge of how race and color have been formed and maintained in Asia along local and global lines. Periods of increased trade, isolationism, colonialism, imperialism, and now globalism have each impacted how Asians have been racialized. At each moment, the meaning and salience of color have expanded or contracted to deal with stereotypes, bias, and discrimination. As such, before discussing colorism we need to first explore how "color" has been used in racialization processes in Asia.

Complexion among Asian people is heterogenous. Physical characteristics vary widely with features, such as hair type and skin tones being quite diverse. In particular, skin color can range from fair to that of darker hues—as seen with Hmong, the Malays, the Siddi, or the Ainu, just to name a few groups. Yet, as Michael Keevak tracks in his book, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking*, there has also been a persistent desire since the beginning of the fifteenth century by European interests to classify Asians as "yellow." It is also well-documented that before being called "yellow," many East Asian communities (China and Japan especially) were first called "white" for their skin color and presumed level of civilization. For instance, Marco Polo, in the twelfth century, classified people from both communities as *bianca* (white). However, as racial distinctions became further ingrained, the supposed whiteness of these groups was replaced so that these groups could be prevented from claiming resemblance to white Europeans. This is why Keevak writes: "To call East Asians yellow, in other words, was a means of ensuring that while they might not be as dark-skinned as Africans, they could no longer be considered 'white' either."

In the 1960s, the term "yellow" was reclaimed by Asian American Pacific Islander activists in the U.S. from its origins as a slur from white people to becoming an organizing tool to gather Asians of various nationalities and ethnic groups. The reappropriation of "yellow" does not however end colorism within the Asian community. Historical and contemporary research in Asian communities shows that fair or white skin tend to be associated with intelligence and being of a higher social class, while darker skin tones are associated with working outside in the fields as a laborer, which is considered a lower status position. Beauty standards are also grounded in having lighter skin tones. Skin lightening creams are a multi-billion dollar global industry with Asia being a key market. According to a recent World Health Organization report, half of the population in Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines uses some kind of skin lightening treatment

and the number is even higher in India. 60% of the population had used some kind of skin lightening treatment. What underlies the high demand for skin lightening products is the realities of colorist discrimination for darker skinned Asians. Studies show that having lighter skin means better prospects for marriage as well as employment opportunities.

In the interview with Reina Pomeroy, colorism is explored specifically in Japanese culture through beauty regiments (bihaku), taboos (Burakumin), and national holidays (Hinamatsaree).

Courtney Jones Carney

So, folks, we're going to discuss colorism in the AAPI community, specifically experiences with colorism in Japanese culture, and so we've invited my friend Reina to lead this particular segment of the episode, and so can you introduce yourself to us?

Reina Pomeroy (Guest)

Yeah, absolutely thank you so much for having me, my name is Reina Pomeroy. I am so excited to be here for this conversation. What I'll say at the top here is that I can only speak to my experience, and that perspective is as a Japanese, full Japanese woman living in the United States looking at the Japanese culture as kind of a, you know, an outsider. I mean an insider in that I'm Japanese, but I'm really an outsider because I'm culturally American and so I have like a different lens than a Japanese person who lives in Japan and experiences Japan through that. And also, I can't speak for the rest of the AAPI community, right? Because I don't have that context. I am so excited for this conversation.

Courtney Jones Carney

Thanks for that and thanks for focusing on the ability to really only talk about your lived experiences and not being a representation of the lived experiences of everyone who identifies as Japanese, and even more broadly, everyone who identifies as AAPI. And so, can you share a little bit about how colorism, from your vantage point, shows up in the Japanese community?

Reina Pomeroy

Yeah, so I think there's a couple different things that we can go into here, but when you reached out to me first about this topic, I was just like really confused because it like it wasn't like an immediate answer and then I started thinking a little bit more about it and have always I guess I never like really thought about it as colorism, but it very much is, that the Japanese beauty industry has you know if you skew to the whiter side of the Asian complexion, You are more attractive and I never really like thought like connected the two dots. There are skin products in Japan called bihaku which really literally translates to beautiful white and it's telling, right? Because beautiful equals White in this context and people still sell this like Shiseido. I think (not sure of the spelling) like sells these products, like mainstream markets in Japan and in the United States and well, I'm doing a little bit of research about these products. Apparently, what it does, it stops the colors in your skin from like you know, turning into darker

complexions. And I also learned that it back in the day they used to use bird droppings as like the extraction like mechanism for how they stopped people colors from turning darker. But just insane to me. Like why would you want to put bird poop on your face to like be a lighter complexion? That seems insane to me, but yeah, this is like a very pervasive thing that I think that as Japanese women like you will see people walking down the street like holding a parasol still because they don't want to tan and they'll have these like really intense hats, and you'll see Japanese women at swimming pools with full arm full like leg contraptions like I can't even remember, like back in the day in the United States, people used to wear these swimsuits, right? Like covering up and you still see that and it's I would assume that it's because people don't want to tan and like really want to protect their skin to stay lighter. It might be because, like you know, protecting your skin for the sake of like medical reasons is one of it, but I think it's really because it's indoctrinated into us that like white skin is more beautiful.

Courtney Jones Carney

So, to that point you know, are you aware of any associations with darker skin so you know the white skin is seen as beautiful, are there associations in Japanese culture that you know of with having tan or darker skin allowing you know the pigmentation to come out in the way, perhaps that perhaps that it naturally comes out for some folks.

Reina Pomeroy

Yeah, so that's a really interesting question. So, I think it's a little of like if you stay indoors and you have a very you know desk job, you're not going to be tanning, right? And if you are outside and you have a labor-intensive outdoor job, then you will be more likely to tan. I think it comes from this very classist, uh, you know, in olden days we call this Burakumin. There's like a class of people who did the labor of the world and the labor of Japan and they're like it's like a very undesirable caste system and like those people were more like they were, they had darker complexion because they were just more tan and in the sun and I don't know if that's directly where it comes from, but I have this sense that like if you know, do things outdoors and you are, you know, a laborer, it is less desirable than somebody who has an office job who is not you know or not even like working. But like you know, just a lighter complexion because you're not in the sun all the time.

Courtney Jones Carney

Yeah, it's interesting because I actually remember us having these conversations, like over six years ago and so I don't know if we weren't specifically saying colorism, but we were talking about this and we were talking about the ways that complexion was then related to social class and so you know the station of one's life than being associated with their complexion and then so thinking about the way that that then connects to themes of anti-Blackness and darker skin then is associated with folks who are laboring folks who are outside doing works, folks who folks who do have to work and do not have an indoor job, and perhaps are in more strenuous conditions to work. So yeah, I wonder if we just weren't using the terms at the time, right?

Reina Pomeroy

I don't think they were. Yeah, I think that's why when you texted me like about colorism in Japan, I like didn't connect the dots and then I started thinking about it and it like this conversation came to mind about complexion and like the, so what I'll say is that, like you know, Japan is a very homogeneous country or has been for a very very, very long time and Japan has liked keeping it that way. I think more and more we see folks who are bringing the diversity into the country, and I think it's a beautiful thing whether or not the whole of Japan agrees is a different issue, but I think that there are some examples of this right now. I think in terms of like people that the quote, unquote, "skin color spectrum", the "pigmentation spectrum" in Japan is not very wide as compared to, you know, a country like the United States, where there's like a pretty wide range of colors and I think that you know in Japan there's this very, that's not tied to race at all, but there's this idea of, you know, don't be a tall poppy, don't be the nail that sticks out because you'll get hammered down, you'll get cut down and it's really this mentality of like stay sort of like under the current, don't, like really conforming, really fitting in is like the cultural standard and so like being a different color, being too tall being, too wide, what over the like, you know it's not a, it's not a country that necessarily celebrates diversity or embraces diversity and I think that that's like a separate conversation in terms of colorism, but I think that that's one of the contexts through which colorism can be exacerbated.

Courtney Jones Carney

So, let's shift a little bit to you know some of your personal experiences and so can you share a time that you experience colorism directly or you know someone that you're close with has experienced colorism?

Reina Pomeroy

Yeah, so in my personal life this isn't like you know an experience that like something happened necessarily, but there is a holiday in March called Hinamatsuri. It's a Japanese girls' day and one of the things that happens is that you know families will put it, kind of like Christmas you put up a Christmas tree or like you know you there's like objects to celebrate the holiday, and in this holiday, you put together a stand of dolls and it's a groom and a bride doll and the faces are like completely white, right? Like they're like little China dolls essentially, and they have like a full suit of like armed guards. That kind of thing. And so one I thought it was really interesting in retrospect that like, why is girls' day about somebody being married like that's the aspirational thing that girls should look up to and two that like their faces were like incredibly white and pale and she had like all of these girls' dolls have like bright red lips and like you see them at the department store you like wherever you buy these little figurines, they always have, like the similar complexion, similar coloring and I always thought like I mean like they're all in full kimono too, so it's kind of old school in that sense, but that's kind of like the aspirational thing that people sort of looked up to for that holiday and I never like stopped to question why was it

like this or like what was this set trying to do and like what was it trying to tell me, but looking back on it, I think it's really interesting that you know that's the thing that are my culture has really aspired to and aspired for girls to have in their lives and so one if you were, you know, perpetually single is that is that a problem? Or if you were darker than her very you know sheet white complexion, is bad a problem? Uhm, yeah. So like it didn't cause any complexes for me or anything like that, but just looking back on it, I think that that's really interesting like those are the types of messages that we're sending our kids and then yeah, I think we could talk a little bit about my sister's family and we've had a lot of conversations so my sister is married to a Black American man living in Japan and so you don't see a lot of Black folks in Japan and well, let me first step back by saying that when I married my husband who is White, uh, I think a lot of people will stare at him in Japan just because, like he's tall and he's White and he looks different than the average you know, black haired Japanese man who's much shorter, but I think that when you see a Black man in Japan, he stands out a lot and he's also really tall, my sister husband, so we've had a lot of conversations about what is it like to be Black in Japan and then now having a daughter with him, what does that look like raising your daughter in a very homogeneous culture, what is that like?

Now I don't, you know, my sister and I've had conversations about like race, in like being a family with a Black person in their family in Japan and that like has created some friction and you know, makes people it makes him feel sometimes, like a spectacle, which is, which is not fun, right? Like to feel like this isn't actually your home and you don't actually fit in in. Yeah, I wonder how that's going to shape my niece and like what her experience is like in school like what I was saying earlier about like uhm, sorry, I'm saying like a lot, but you know, being like a tall poppy or you know, being the nail that sticks out like she will, she will likely look that way, right? Because she'll look different than her peers in her class, but I hope that her experience is, well, her family will be able to protect her, or, you know, have lots of conversations with her so that she's able to navigate that in a in a safe way. Now if she came to the United States, I also like worry about you know the United States and like being a Black person in the United States. I like worry about her safety in that way, but yeah, my sister and I have like a conversation about this all this time, and I just want her to know that like I'm here to support because it's, it's like it's not like a deficit, and that's not what I'm trying to say. I'm trying to say is like if she doesn't feel safe, it is a problem, right? And if I hope that we can help her create a world that is like accepting in like loving of her just as she is.

Rosemary Ferreira

In this segment we'll be discussing how colorism shows up in Latin America. Colorism in Latin America can be traced back to European colonialism in the region. Both during and after the colonial period, racial mixing among white, Indigenous, and African people was more common in Latin America than in the U.S. However, a racial hierarchy still existed with white Europeans at the top, holding the social, political, and economic power and Indigenous and African people at the bottom. In the middle were mixed race groups such as mestizos who are half white and

half Indigenous and mulattos who are half white and half African, but there were several others and the closer one was to whiteness the more favorable. Racial caste paintings created during the colonial period depict more than 15 different racial categories. For example, a mixed-race mestizo and a Spaniard was called a “castizo” and were depicted as “humble, tranquil, and straightforward” while mixed Indigenous and African groups were assigned names from animals such as lobo or wolf and were deemed as “slow, lazy, and cumbersome.”

These stereotypes and biases based in white supremacy are what led to the practices of blanqueamiento or whitening. Blanqueamiento exists both on national, political scales and within the intimate spaces of family relations. In the 19th and 20th centuries, several Latin American governments deliberately sought to attract European immigrants to “whiten” their populations. Brazil, for example, allowed 4.7 million European immigrants to migrate and settle in the country between 1851-1934. During this same time period, Black Brazilians were encouraged to return back to Africa and immigration from predominantly Black countries was banned.

Within Latinx families, “mejorar la raza” or “better the race” has become a widely used phrase that implies that a person should marry white and lighter skinned individuals so that their children can have a skin color and phenotypical features that are seen as more valuable and desired. Having lighter skin also means being protected from the harsh realities of colorism and having access to more opportunities and privileges.

A study from the Pew Research Center shows that Latinx people with darker skin experience more discrimination than lighter skinned Latinx in the U.S. 55% of Latinx people with a darker skin color stated that people have acted as if they were not smart because of their race or ethnicity, compared with 36% of Latinos with a lighter skin color. Similarly, about half of Latinos with darker skin say they have been subject to slurs or jokes, compared with about a third of those with a lighter skin color. This research goes against a common ideology in Latin America known as mestizaje. Mestizaje is a term to refer to Latin America’s racial and cultural mixtures. Since the 19th century, cultural and political leaders in Latin America have referred to mestizaje to make the claim that issues such as racism and colorism do not exist in their countries because everyone is racially mixed. Research emerging of Latinx experiences in the U.S. and within Latin America are proving that colorism and racism are real and can determine levels of discrimination as well as educational attainment and job opportunities for darker skinned Indigenous and Afro descended people.

We invited Ayda Gonzalez to discuss the ways show colorism shows up within Latin America, particularly the Dominican Republic.

I'm really excited to have you here, Ayda, on this podcast you mean the world to me, and so I'm really excited to include you in this project and I'm really looking forward to hearing more about your experience, particularly with colorism within the Latinx community.

Ayda Gonzalez (Guest)

Well, my name is Ayda, I was born in Dominican Republic, and I moved to New York when I was nine years old but went back to the Dominican Republic every year. I went to undergrad in Bard College in upstate New York and I lived in New York until about 2018 when after that I moved to Atlanta to get my master's degree and now I have moved back to New York as of 2021.

Rosemary Ferreira

Thank you. So, you mentioned that you were from the Dominican Republic. Can you talk to us about how colorism shows up specifically in the Dominican... or more broadly within the Latinx community?

Ayda Gonzalez

Colorism in the Dominican Republic I think is very obvious, since the day you're born, you know? Maybe in the last couple of years it has changed a little bit, but before the first things we see on TV are were these, like white news anchors or like most people that were on TV were, Uhm, light skin or of uhm lighter skin tones. And so, you know that was my first exposure to like what social media was like and it was like "OK, only these people are in this space." That's what it is. Uhm, and then you know, showing up in my family and my interactions with my family where you know one of the first things that people say when you know, they you point out someone color is, you know if their darker skin they're like "Oh no yo no soy Negra, yo soy India" which directly translate to "I'm not Black I am Indian". And this, you know was, I didn't know it at the time, it was one of the first moments where I was kind of like denying my identity and like denying what I looked like or rejecting that part of me. Uhm, it shows up and like jokes within my family about, you know, "marrying White to better the race," quote, unquote. It just, it shows up in different areas in Dominican Republic now. When I moved to America, I think that changed a little bit because, you know, in America I am part, I am considered more light skinned like there. There is a greater I think range of color here and so I was somewhat in the middle and so I think my experience has changed and my experience has changed based on who I am with and how colorism shows up is different and in all of these spaces.

Rosemary Ferreira

Remember the ideology of mestizaje I mentioned earlier where race and color isn't thought of or considered in Latin America because of the belief that "we're all mixed"? Ayda talks about the invisibility of race in the Dominican Republic and how coming to the U.S. changed her understanding of her racial identity.

Ayda Gonzalez

In the Dominican Republic, we don't really identify in any particular race. It's actually funny 'cause I was filling out some paperwork with my father yesterday and I was like "OK, what's your race?" And you know he was like, "oh like, is there a box for none? And I was like "no there isn't." And then I said, "I'm going to check Black" and he's like "no, no, no that's not my race. I'm not, I'm not Black like I am a mix of X&X" and I was like, "well that's not an option

here, so like you know, in America you're Black." And so that is an interesting conversation to have because, you know I grew up in the Dominican Republic and not having that, I was like, OK, no, I'm Dominican, you know I'm India when I still did not accept my identity and then I came to America and that was still the mentality because being associated with Black wasn't acceptable in my culture, uhm, it is more acceptable now, but definitely not back then and I went to college and I've met some lovely people, which was you Rosemary, and you know she we were having a conversation one day and you told me you were Black, this is who you are and I felt very confused because I was like "no, you know this is this is not it", but I think that started, uhm, a lot of like introspection and really thinking about how the world saw me and I think it started a lot of like accepting, ok like this is how I am viewed in America and there is nothing wrong with this but this is just like an additional identity that I have, and I think that definitely started like the self-awareness and the acceptance and then the loving 'cause once I was able to you know, not take that offensively like I was taught to I was able to be like OK like yes, this is who I am and I love who I am so like you just have to love me how I am.

Rosemary Ferreira

Do you want to share a particular experience that you or someone that you've had in your life that kind of demonstrates colorism?

Ayda Gonzalez

Yes, this is a tricky question because it shows up in different ways, even if it's just like slightly you know, uhm it, uh, it also depends on who I'm with because really, what it is it's like a comparison, right? Uhm, if I if I OK it shows up a lot in like social circles or like when I'm out socially and who talks to who and who gives attention to who. I think that's one example that I can share. Uhm, how people treat me based on like who I'm with. If I am with like my other Latino friends who might be like lighter skinned than me and my have come. Hair that is slightly more straight or longer my experience in this space is different, like I am the darker skin friend with the kinkier hair and the more Afrocentric features and so in those spaces I am less acknowledged, less given less attention to and so I've just learned to navigate those spaces and just kind of like be OK with the situation, because this is what people do this all, this is how people treat me. Now my experience is very different when I am with my darker skin friends who have like curly hair than me and who have like Afrocentric features. Uhm, now the attention that that we get when we go out is different, the attention is going towards me because in comparison I am a better skin. Uhm and so it shows up in the attention that is given like in comparison to the people that you're with and that is really when like you feel it and you see it.

Rosemary Ferreira

Yeah so when you're talking about attention within these social spaces, who are you talking about? Who's giving or not giving the attention?

Ayda Gonzalez

That's a good question. You're asking who is who is giving the attention? I think it's in these specific spaces, I'm talking about men, whether it be men of color or white men. It it's kind of the same experience.

Rosemary Ferreira

So, you feel like within social spaces, maybe within like romantic spaces as well, you're seeing this dynamic, where when you're with lighter skin, maybe non-Black Latinx women it's a different experience versus when you're with darker skin Black women.

Ayda Gonzalez

Yeah, yes it doesn't, like yes, definitely shows up in romantic spaces, but it doesn't necessarily have to be romantic spaces. It could just be like at a restaurant you know, we're sitting at a restaurant, we're ordering food and you are just like have a black veil on you, 'cause you're not, you're not existent there. You're not. I think that the value that people give you does not equate and so in social spaces, where, OK, we're all having a conversation sometimes like yes, so to retract, uhm. Yeah, in social spaces people, just, you know, either look at you more, talk to you more or don't look at you at all, do not really refer to you, like, a lot of it, you know, because we have been socialized to be OK and this is using like no, it's not It's kind of, its if you feel it, you really feel it.

Rosemary Ferreira

I feel like what you're highlighting are these like micro aggression, right? Like they're not very like in your face, like uhm, specifically, you know pointing to you and saying, like, "oh you're the darker skinned girl this group? Like I'm not going to talk to you", it's more subtle ways that you're talking about. So, like they're not giving you as much like eye contact, let's say or not asking you how are you doing or being as invested in like what you have to say, maybe as what other folks in the space have to say. And so just highlighting that like these microaggressions, although they're "micro," they definitely still have a big impact on how we see ourselves and how we're engaging with people. So, I guess I wanted to bring it back to this broader topic of colorism in the Latinx community I feel like what's so valuable of what you've shared is that colorism subject this in the Latin American community, 'cause I think oftentimes we're still like, "oh, but race isn't an issue", right? Like with the experience with your father, like he doesn't even see himself as someone with a race, right? And so, like within, especially within like folks maybe who are generationally older than us, who may have spent more time growing up within Latin America, they're having vastly different experiences on what race or like their relationship with race as we are in the US, uhm, and so I just wanted to highlight that from your experiences, that race does impact the way that we are thinking about ourselves. Race is showing up within the media of Latin America within how we're talking about who or who we

don't want to marry or how we think about how beautiful our children are or whatever it might be. It is showing up. It's just we're not naming it the same way as maybe we do here in the US

Ayda Gonzalez

I also wanted to add that, you know the experience for like older, I will speak specifically for like all older Dominicans, is very different because you know I've talked to my grandfather and grandmother and I think a part of the reason why you know they have, they say these things and they've acted like this is due to like a history of violence against darker bodies, you know, and I think a part, a part of that is like, "OK, we're negating that part of who we are because we might get hurt", you know, it's also a part of the reason it's a survival, for their survival. So, I mean, it does, I think, become apparent once you talk to you know the older folks and they tell you about their history, they tell you the times when they were alive, and what they had to do to stay alive, you know. So, I just wanted to add that little bit in.

Rosemary Ferreira

Ayda's final point highlights the ways that internalizing and upholding colorist beliefs are a result of living in violently racist societies. We must give ourselves and our elders grace as we unlearn centuries worth of harmful ideas about the color of our skin. And yet, I also believe we have a responsibility to liberate ourselves and future generations of these legacies of colonialism, white supremacy, and oppression. I hope this episode has served as a starting point or an affirmation for wherever you are in your own journeys of unlearning and rebuilding a world where all skin tones are embraced and held with dignity, love, and respect. Thank you for listening.

Angela Jackson (End Credits)

The Table is a production of the Intercultural Center in the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland Baltimore. It's hosted and produced by Courtney Jones Carney and Rosemary Ferreira. This episode was also written by Rosemary. The show's executive producer and editor is me, Angela Jackson, senior marketing specialist in the Division of Student Affairs. A big thank you to our guests, Reina Pomeroy, Ayda Gonzalez, and of course my mom, Lisa Nicholson, for joining us at the table. For more information about the Intercultural Center, including events where students can learn more about race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events, visit umaryland.edu/ile. We'll see you next time.

As a reminder we want to hear from you, the listeners. So, send us your questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events, and Courtney and Rosemary, and maybe one of our guests, will answer them on the show. Email us at ile@umaryland.edu. If you'd like to be anonymous, just let us know in the body of the email.