

50

SHADES

OF

BROWN

A SYLLABUS ABOUT
COLORISM

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"I am dripping melanin
and honey. I am black
without apology."

UPILE CHISALA





Introduction

Colorism is an ideology, related to racism, in which people are discriminated against based on their skin tones. The term itself was only coined recently, despite the fact that darker-skinned people have faced special challenges for centuries. Although it is often confused with racism, colorism can be intraracial while racism is strictly interracial. Because colorism can occur within one race, there are disputes as to whether it is a legitimate issue. Some people believe that conversations about colorism only further racial divides; however, as you will see in this syllabus, colorism is a real issue with real consequences that needs to be discussed.

When darker-skinned individuals consume media portraying lighter skin as more attractive, socially acceptable, or common, they may also come to see their dark skin as less desirable. They may not believe they deserve the luxury of being perceived as intelligent or worthy of regard. This way of thinking damages mental health and, in some cases, can even carry negative effects on physical health. Today, more and more people have been noticing what colorism looks like and how harmful it can be, but there are still many who remain in the dark.

Consequently, colorism needs more attention. Discussions on colorism can uplift the voices of dark-skinned people and change the way we view dark skin. Change can only be made, however, if the right people listen and learn. Lighter-skinned individuals with privilege need to listen to those of us with dark skin to hear our stories and understand our pain. For those who do not realize how commonly our culture normalizes colorism, this syllabus will help them to open their eyes to how colorism permeates every form of media we consume. Representation matters; conscious media consumption matters. It's time to see and celebrate all 50 Shades of Brown.





What is Colorism?

“Colorism” (2013)

| Shavonn Pearce-Doughlin, Arthur Goldsmith, and Darrick Hamilton
(Encyclopedia) |

An introduction to colorism which includes the use of formal definitions, a brief history, context outside of the US, the science behind colorism, and colorism in our daily lives to lay a foundation in the knowledge of colorism.

“Light-skinned people always win’: An Autoethnography of Colorism in a Mother-Daughter Relationship” (2020)

| Kimberly R. Moffitt (Scholarly Journal) |

A lighter-skinned woman explains her story of raising her dark-skinned daughter and what she has learned from her daughter’s experiences with prejudice from people within her own race.

“Dark-Skinned Girls On Colourism” (YouTube)

Three dark-skinned women explain their first-hand experiences with colorism, its role in music and films, and how it impacts their respective minority communities.

“50 Shades of Black: My Experiences with Colorism |Amaya Allen | TEDxVanderbiltUniversity” (YouTube)

A dark skin black woman explains how she has experienced colorism and uses those experiences to prove why talking about colorism is so important.

Dark Girls (2011)

| D. Channsin Berry, Bill Duke |

Dark Girls is a documentary highlighting colorism and includes heartbreaking stories from black women and children about how colorism has impacted their lives.

"There's complexities in complexion
But your skin, it glow like diamonds



Pigment like the earth, you be giving birth
To everything alive, baby, know your worth"

"Brown Skin Girl" By Beyoncé, SAINT JHN, and Wizkid

Historical Context

“Black Children, White Preference: Brown v. Board, the Doll Tests, and the Politics of Self-Esteem” (2009)

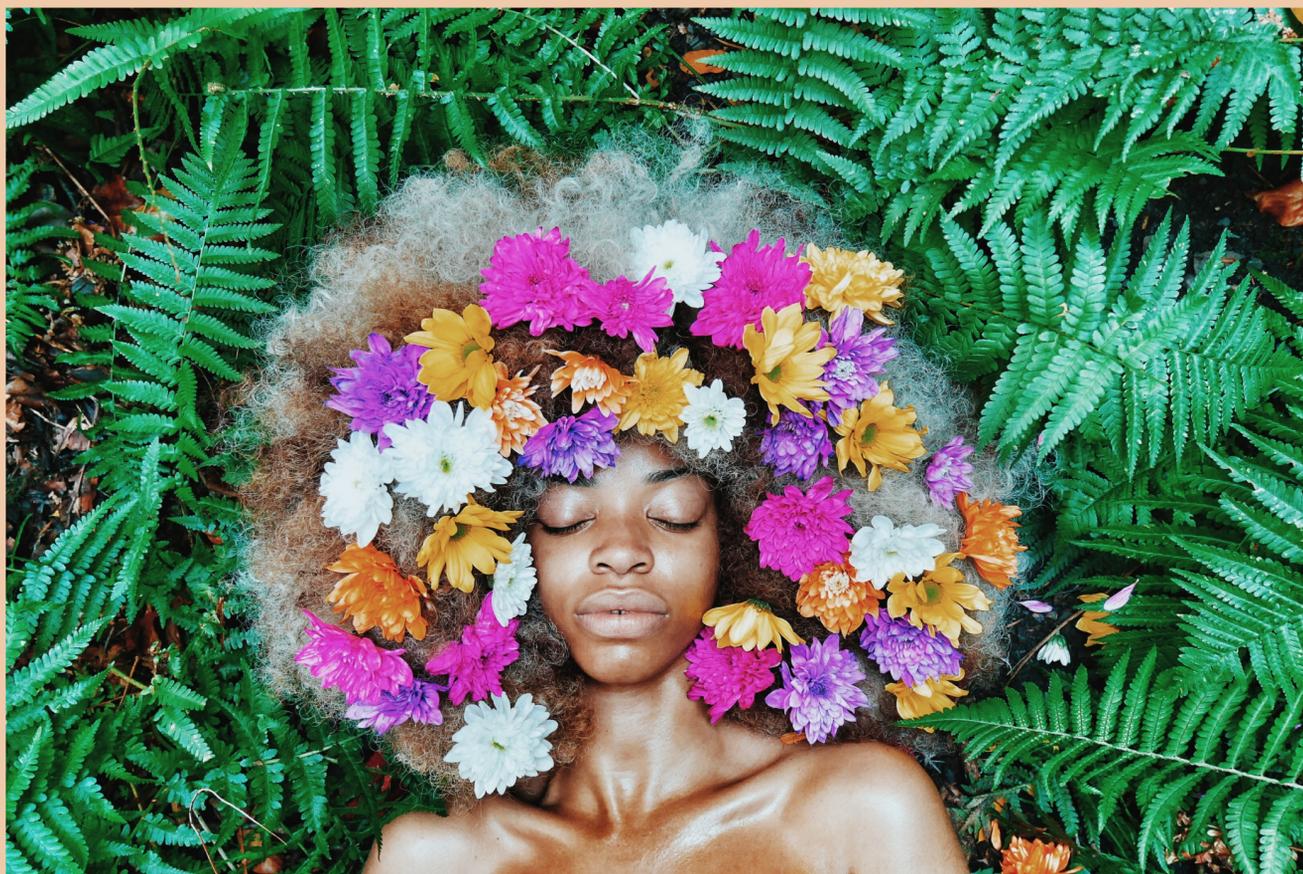
| Gwen Bergner (Journal Article) |

A study done by a psychologist, Kenneth Clark, called the Doll Test, explains why people tend to view lighter as better. The article also describes how the study’s findings have added to the conversations about racism and colorism in monumental court cases.

“The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism” (2005)

| Audrey Elisa Kerr (Journal Article) |

Common during slavery and segregation, the Paper Bag Test intentionally divided people along lines of skin tone differences through the comparisons of skin color. This journal details how such tactics have been fueled colorism.



"Melanin"

"Melanin is the beauty of my skin, the riches deep within
The beauty of my descendants, the faith that builds my strengths
Barriers that have been broken within, my melanin is courageous,
easily to offend

My skin is beautiful. Black as coal, paper sack brown, honey gold,
lightly tan, bronze, almond sand, cocoa with a touch of cream
My melanin explodes my self-esteem. My melanin means Queen
Promised dreams, riches unforeseen

My melanin is fear and faith.

If black is bad, melanin is last

Then whom must be first? You stole from the melanin, first on
this earth

So, what is it we're truly worth? Black cannot mean bad or cursed
Putting a price tag on my melanin would never hurt, the rays
from the sun disbursed enriches color to my skin. Deeply rooted
outside and within

Melanin, melanin they lay under laser lights just for you

Pay thousands of dollars to feel you or should I say me

Laughing hysterically my melanin is free, all my sisters wear it
gracefully

Sitting back calm, hundreds of years, watching your fears
Jealously, ignorant ways in your secret closet begging God for
melanin traits

My melanin is often despised, discredited, mocked publicly
abused

Straight, curly, kinky hair matched well with my melanin 100%
approved

No more denying pigmentations of my skin

Flawless, phenomenal, highly favored and blessed

Over 500 years you assumed we were oppressed, stressed, worth
less

Melanin sisters we passed Society's test perfecting our melanin
to display at its best"

Shamiika Michell
Mitchell

Modern Colorism

In the Music Industry:

“Colorism in the Music Industry and the Women It Privileges” (2018)

| Aja Witt (Honors Thesis) |

In the music industry, specifically rap, artists tend to write lyrics regarding women they prefer but in with this preference, there are often detrimental effects on the formative development of young women who listen to these songs.

In Younger Generations:

“African American Adolescent Girls’ Beliefs About Skin Tone and Colorism” (2020)

| Jasmine A. Abrams, Faye Z. Belgrave, Chelsea D. Williams, and Morgan L. Maxwell (Scholarly Journal) |

When asked a range of questions regarding how they view themselves, this study found that young African American women share similar opinions of themselves to the negative view society has regarding black women.

Skin Bleaching:

“Investigating Motivation for Women’s Skin Bleaching in Tanzania” (2011)

| Kelly M. Lewis, Navit Robkin, Karie Gaska, Lillian Carol Njoki (Scholarly Journal) |

In this study, an investigation was done describing the different reasons why women use skin bleaching in Tanzania and how aspects of colorism can be a prime motive.