Pigmentocracy

Trudier Harris
J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of English, Emerita
University of North Carolina
National Humanities Center Fellow

Definition and Background

In the past couple of decades, the word pigmentocracy has come into common usage to refer to the distinctions that people of African descent in America make in their various skin tones, which range from the darkest shades of black to paleness that approximates whiteness. More specifically, the "ocracy" in pigmentocracy carries with it notions of hierarchical value that viewers place on such skin tones. Lighter skin tones are therefore valued more than darker skin tones. Such preferences have social, economic, and political implications, as persons of lighter skin tones historically were frequently—and stereotypically—viewed as being more intelligent, talented, and socially graceful than their darker skinned black counterparts. Blacker blacks were viewed as unattractive, indeed ugly, and generally considered of lesser value. Europeans standards of beauty thus dominated an African people for most of their history in America.

Although the word pigmentocracy may have come into widespread usage fairly recently, the concept extends throughout the history of Africans on American soil. During slavery, black people who were fathered by their white masters often gained privileges based on their lighter coloring. Indeed, one reported pattern is that blacks of lighter skin were reputedly selected to work in the Big Houses of plantation masters while blacks of darker hues were routinely sent to the fields. Moreover, one of the origins of the Dozens, the ritual game of insult in African American culture, is reputed to have developed as a result of slurs darker skinned blacks who worked in the fields hurled at lighter skinned blacks because their mothers had given birth to children sired by white masters. Some masters who recognized their paternity publicly sometimes sent their partially colored offspring to the North to be educated. This practice explains in part the belief that blacks of lighter skin were more intelligent (they simply had more educational opportunities). It was convenient to the mythology of slavery to suggest this pattern as well, for even without formal admission, whites were aware that some blacks looked more like them than others. Since many theories of bestiality and dehumanization were aligned with darker skinned blacks, it was perhaps preferable to be more tolerant of the lighter skinned ones. Even this, however, was not a consistent pattern, for theories also developed about mongrelization, that is, the mixing of black and white blood, leading to extreme anti-social behavior in persons so endowed.

Value based on skin tones led to some interesting historical developments both within and outside African American communities. To prevent blacks fathered by white masters from making claims on their masters, children born to enslaved women were legally designated to take the status of those women. Blond-haired, blue-eyed enslaved persons, therefore, could not change their condition through any legal process. To ensure that this pattern could not be broken, anyone determined to have had black blood in one of their ancestors five generations removed

was still designated “Negro.” Mulattoes, quadroons, octoroons, sextaroons, and whatever word would define a person who had 1/32 black blood were all designated to be fully black by laws of American society. “The mighty drop” of black blood, as some scholars refer to it, was powerful enough to control generations of persons legally classified as black who might otherwise have been classed as white or who might have passed for white.

Many persons who were light enough to pass for white did indeed do so. With their straight hair and fine features, they simply left their “black” identities behind, moved into white society, and became “white.” Some blacks made this move for financial reasons and continued to return to black communities to remain connected. Others assumed completely new identities and did not look back. Politics surrounded both decisions. Given the climate of the late nineteenth century, when any educated person of African descent was expected to use his or her education to help other blacks, to depart completely for the white world was considered a form of abandonment as well as a form of racial self hatred. Nonetheless, many persons did take advantage of this biological option, while others remained committed to their fellow blacks and used their advantages of skin and education to help them.


W. E. B. Du Bois


Booker T. Washington

The idea of uplift, that is, blacks of talent and education helping each other, is strongly tied to pigmentocracy, for many of the persons who were well educated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were indeed lighter skinned. They fit into what W. E. B. Du Bois described as “The Talented Tenth.” Du Bois maintained that one tenth of the black population in America should become educated as quickly as possible and should help the remaining ninety percent. That seemingly altruistic proposal had class and color as its basis. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were several pockets of lighter skinned, middle class blacks throughout the United States, especially in the South. Cities such as Washington, D.C., Richmond, Virginia, Durham, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia were among those where blacks of lighter hue ensured that they married similar persons and became “lighter and lighter every generation.” They watched carefully over the educations of their offspring, vacationed together, and ensured that their kin met the “right” kinds of black folks when considering marriage. They could interact with the great unwashed black masses, could indeed help lift them up (“Lifting as we Climb” was a black club women’s motto), but they were a breed apart. Both Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, the other political leader of this period, were of this breed. Many of these talented tenth had relatives who were leaders in their communities, such as Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, writer Jean Toomer’s grandfather, who served briefly as acting governor of Louisiana during Reconstruction.

Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback

Jean Toomer

As near-white Toomer, who could easily have passed for white, grew up in Washington, D.C. in the 1880s and 1890s, he observed the impact of color and class upon his lifestyle, for his family resided in one of the most select "black" areas of Washington, D.C.

Black people of lighter hue who claimed class distinctions based upon their skin colors provided an ambiguous and problematic model for darker skinned blacks. Even as visibly black Negroes resented the presumed inherent right of lighter skinned blacks to be leaders and spokespersons for all black people, they nonetheless adhered to that hierarchy. Patterns developed in which darker skinned blacks sought to marry lighter skinned blacks; this tendency existed well into the late twentieth century. Darker blacks sometimes envied lighter skinned blacks and sought, through any means possible in the early twentieth century, to become like them and, by extension, like whites. From the hair straightening products that Madam C. J. Walker perfected, to the processed hair that Malcolm X recounts getting in the 1940s, to the skin lightening creams that were advertised in prominent magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet*, darker skinned African Americans were offered wish fulfillment options to try to make themselves as "white" and therefore as acceptable as possible.

The politics of skin color, therefore, has some disturbing prongs. On the one hand, it enabled some persons legally classified as black to enhance their educations because of their lighter skins. On the other hand, it encouraged darker skinned blacks to devalue their black skins in imitation of lighter hues and whiteness. Racial pride thus became tied up in ambiguous ways with racial self-hatred. Lighter skinned blacks who were happy not to be dark were frequently very helpful to their darker skinned brothers and sisters. Class, however, prevented them from socializing with such persons or even remotely considering them their equals. Many darker blacks failed to value themselves for who they were as they were. Issues of identity formation, racial progress, self worth, class issues, and racial pride were all brought together in the visible shades of skin coloring in African Americans.

Teacher and Student Engagement

Students in the twenty-first century may initially have difficulty imagining how people of African descent, all of whom were routinely devalued as they were brought to America and enslaved, could have developed hierarchies of value among themselves based on the very superficial matter of skin coloring. Obviously they did, so a beginning point for discussion would be to determine the advantages of denying blackness, or, in other words, the advantages of identifying white. What did newly freed blacks have to gain by trying to be white? For those who had advantages of education, clearly there were rewards in terms of where they could live, with

whom they could socialize and marry, and how persons outside black communities perceived them. But what else, either tangibly or intangibly, did they gain?

And of course there's the fear factor that defined Reconstruction. Whites were now being fed the message that blacks, especially black males, were a menace. They used the idea of threat to explain the founding of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1860s. Develop assignments in which students research how blacks were perceived during slavery as opposed to how they were viewed in the late 1860s and 1870s. Why were black males now considered more of a threat? What did the Emancipation Proclamation and freedom have to do with this? What mythologies surrounded how blacks were treated in the late nineteenth century as opposed to their treatment earlier? Allow students to watch (over several class periods) the D. W. Griffith movie, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and explore the issues of race, color, and class that are woven into it.


Charles W. Chesnutt

Visual aids are of crucial importance in this discussion, so please locate photographs of prominent black figures and others from the late nineteenth century. Washington, Du Bois, and Charles W. Chesnutt could serve for the prominent figures. Have students contemplate what it meant for Chesnutt to consider himself "a voluntary Negro." Clearly, he prided himself on his blackness enough not to pass for white. However, in terms of contemplating pigmentocracy, he obviously had advantages. He studied law, became a court stenographer, and garnered success as a writer. A couple of his stories, "Her Virginia Mammy" and "A Matter of Principle," as well as other selections in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), provide excellent opportunities for students to study skin color and passing.

These visual aids can lead students in a different direction for discussion. Have them contemplate this question: Why should a "black" person such as Chesnutt have been legally classified as Negro when there is no visible sign that he is of African origin? Why could he not just as easily have been classified as white? What cultural, political, and social factors made such a classification impossible, even if Chesnutt had been desirous of it?

Use visual aids as well to locate photographs and paintings of very dark skinned black people of the period. What in their physiology led to them being labeled ugly? Have students really engage with the selected photographs and paintings. Encourage them to move beyond whatever initial discomfort they may feel to try to see beauty as an abstraction. If people's noses and lips are fuller than others, if their skins are darker than others, what makes them less attractive than persons whose noses, lips, and skins are thinner and lighter? Try to get students to see that there are factors outside human bodies that govern the valuation of human bodies, even when those bodies, alone, might suggest a different standard of valuation.

Students become increasingly engaged when they see the relevance of an issue in their own time and place. Identify ways, therefore, in which students can see contemporary examples of pigmentocracy around them. A simple exercise would be to have them watch television, television commercials, and/or movies for several days or a week, then report back to the class about what they have observed in terms of roles being assigned on the basis of skin tone. Which

skin tones are most frequently assigned to villains? Which to persons who are represented as being for "justice, right, and the American way"? This exercise might extend to awards that are given to these programs, such as the Academy Awards and the Grammys. How does skin color seem to average into who gets which awards? The NAACP Image Awards should be especially informative in this connection. Do the NAACP Image Awards provide an alternative to criteria established for awards given by other organizations?

Consider specific actors and actresses. Why does Halle Berry seem to get more roles than Cicely Tyson may have gotten or than Angela Bassett can get? Denzel Washington seems to get all the juicy roles he wants. What difference, then, does gender make in terms of color politics? How is this apparent in sports as opposed to movies?

Have students check to see when the designation "mixed race" was first used on the United States Census form. What does this designation really mean, since there is no legal "mixed race" category that anyone observes in the United States? What cultural or political significance does "mixed race" have? Is it meaningful, or is it just another form of separation among people who might otherwise find common bonds?

Nadinola Bleaching Cream, *Ebony* magazine.

Black and White Bleaching Cream, *Ebony* magazine.

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Beauty Star Skin Lightener, *Ebony* magazine.

Another exercise would be to have students examine 1950s and 1960s issues of magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet* and compare them to contemporary issues. Note the earlier ads for skin lightening creams as well as for hair straighteners. Are any contemporary ads comparable? What are the color politics of advertising? Similarly, invite students to contemplate and evaluate the color politics of news reporting by having them watch local news reports for a few days. If crimes are the same for a black criminal as for a white criminal, how long does it take the program to show the faces of each? When they are shown, what is the "beauty component" of those photographs? In other words, does one criminal look as if she has been sleeping under a bed for a week and the other as if she were just picked up from her job? These exercises will allow students to think about color in contemporary society and will perhaps give them a clearer sense of how value based on color has informed our society throughout its history. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that persons of African descent wanted to get rid of as much of the devalued blackness as possible.

Exploring how black people have referred to themselves throughout their history in America can also be informative for students. From "nigras" to "niggers" to "Negroes" to "Afro-Americans" to "Black" to "African American" is a history in itself. It took people of African descent in America more than two hundred years to accept, on a universal basis, the designation "black." Prior to the 1960s, to call a black person "black" provided an occasion for fighting. How did African Americans move from considering blackness an insult to echoing James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud"?

Either begin or end with the Constitution. What impact, if any, did this document have upon race designations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Why were all American groups not covered sufficiently by the guarantees this documents purports to offer? What about other founding and legal documents in America? Where do they fall short in protecting and providing opportunities for people of African descent no matter their skin tone? Which brings us to a basic question: Who in America is truly American, and what or who determines that status?

Scholars, Writers, and Color

It is always instructive to consider how blackness became identified with slavery and inferiority in American society. A good starting point is Winthrop D. Jordan's *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968). Jordan makes clear that Africans and indentured servants brought to America were fairly comparable in their lesser status until white indentured servants starting running away and disappearing into the larger society. Visibly black Africans clearly did not have that option as a way out of slavery, and if they ran away, their color enabled them to be retrieved easily. Servitude and slavery were thus fairly quickly institutionalized as pertaining to persons of African descent and were identified with the color black. For a history of skin preferences within African American communities and how they affected class, see Willard B. Gatewood's *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (1990). A younger scholar who has studied the basis for class and skin color status among blacks in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries is Andrea Williams, who defended her dissertation on the topic in the English Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2006.

Of course Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is instructive on most things relevant to the period, including the obligations of the educated elite to the masses of blacks and the preference for classical education over merely suggesting that black people learn trades. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) is informative about the masses of blacks, education, and the philosophy of uplift that ruled at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he became President in 1881. Chesnutt's writings about his own life, which are contained in *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1990), as well as about literature are instructive in examining how a "black" person who could have passed for white viewed life in America from the 1880s into the second decade of the twentieth century.

In terms of the literature itself, short fiction writer and novelist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper has provided several works in which skin tone is a prominent feature. Her serialized novels, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-77), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89), which were collected and published by Frances Smith Foster in 1994, all deal with women of very fine features whose race is more assigned because of the author than decided by any definite factors in the texts. The focus of the narratives nonetheless makes clear the tremendously prominent place skin tone played in African American communities of the period. Less ambiguous is the novel for which Harper is best known. *Iola Leroy* (1892) features a sister and brother who are visibly white but who are sold into slavery once their white protector/father dies. After a series of misfortunate events, which she braves triumphantly, Iola commits herself to working for racial uplift. Rejecting a proposal from a white physician, she forms a union instead with a black man of fellow missionary spirit. Harper's politics are clear in that commitment to race comes before any opportunities that skin color may occasion.

In his literary creations, Chesnutt also explores color issues in his short stories as well as in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). In this novel, John and Rena Walden are the very pale children of a black mother and a white father, one who is reputed to be of the best blood in the South. The father has provided a home for the mother and her children, but the son is restless. He reads with an attorney to practice law, then migrates from North Carolina and passes for white. He invites Rena to join him, but disaster strikes when she is far less able to effect the passing scheme than

her brother. More successful at passing is James Weldon Johnson's narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). Similarly sired by a white man who has some of the best blood in the South in his veins, the unnamed narrator migrates with his mother to Connecticut, where the father provides financial support until the mother's death. The son then migrates to Atlanta, Florida, New York, Europe, and again to the South before deciding, after witnessing a lynching, that he will disappear permanently into white society.

These works illustrate that color and its implications, both within and outside African American communities, have prevailed throughout the history of people of African descent on American soil. The period from 1865 to 1915 was especially significant in this history because newly freed blacks were trying so desperately to define themselves and claim a space in the great American democratic experiment. Those efforts often led them to judge themselves and other blacks in superficial ways that have left continuing scars on the black psyche. The pigmentocracy that reigned during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has descendants in the twenty-first century that are at times just as ugly as their predecessors.

Trudier Harris is J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of English, Emerita at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. During 1996-97, she was a resident Fellow at the National Humanities Center. She has written and edited more than a dozen books on African American literature and folklore. In 2003, her memoir, *Summer Snow: Reflections from a Black Daughter of the South*, was published by Beacon Press. In 2005, she received the John Hurt Fisher Award of the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English (SAADE) for the outstanding contributions she has made to the field of English scholarship throughout her career.

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To cite this essay:
Harris, Trudier. "Pigmentocracy." Freedom's Story, TeacherServe©. National Humanities Center. DATE YOU ACCESSED ESSAY.
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