

Course Number

Course Name

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Tackling the Structure of Internal Colorism

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## Introduction

The public discussion about systemic racism in the United States has no doubt been informed by the recent murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. It is discussed daily between scholars, advocates, media personalities, and government/civic officials alike. It is fair to say that people today are more aware of the historical lessons regarding people of Color, particularly Black. This year we have been thrust into a topic regarding race. The term, Systemic racism, is discussed daily between scholars, advocates, media personalities, and government/civic officials alike. The historical lessons regarding the oppression of people of color, particularly Blacks, is taught almost daily. And White privilege has caused some people to cringe. While we are aware and continue to learn about interracial problems, intraracial problems are often left behind. That stone remains unturned.

But in other parts of the world, racism is not the issue. Throughout Latin American cultures, colorism is the leading cause for inequality. In fact, it is something that exists in Latin American cultures within the United States. Colorism as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary is the, “prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin.” While some of this mistreatment is cross cultural (Puerto Ricans vs. Dominicans, Salvadorians vs. Hondurans, Peruvians vs Uruguayans, etc.), there is a battle within these individual sects/communities. Lighter skinned Puerto Ricans/Dominicans often look down upon/treat darker skinned persons differently.

MTV’s Decoded! devoted an entire episode on colorism. The web episode which aired in premiered in 2018 followed a series of other race and cultural sensitivity issues world-wide. And

while colorism can be found in a variety of races, cultures and societies, this episode focused on colorism in the Latino community. And although it was just a web episode, it was the first time that a major cable channel took on the topic. Popular Latino channels such as Telemundo and Univision have shied away from such a topic. But this episode brought the issue of colorism into the light of MTV's pop culture audience. And undoubtedly they explored many facets of the issue giving background to some of its roots and modern day examples.

In this 21st Century age of fast information and social media this medium that MTV chose to deliver this message is unique. Traditional television is one and done, meaning after it airs it's over until it re-airs. But the internet allows for unlimited, on-demand access to content. The season 6 episode has over three hundred thousand views, and is their highest viewed episode on Youtube. Something about colorism in the Latino community has sparked interest. It is a safe bet to say that media companies, journalists and perhaps researchers trying to shed light on the issues can probably rely on social media to get their message out to the masses in a positive way.

To understand colorism it is important to figure out where this attitude came from and why it exists. Research thus far from Cristina Beltran examines these questions within Latinx Community. In her book, *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*, Beltran looks into how the various identities of the Latinx communities contribute to how they treat one another. But most importantly, it gives the historical context as to how Spanish colonialism played (still plays) a part. In articles like, "Looking at that Middle Ground: Racial Mixing as Panacea? Challenges to Latin American and Caribbean Racial Discourse" and "Boricuas vs. Nuyoricans—Indeed!: A Look at Afro-Latinos," by Miriam Esther Jimenez, Jimenez dissects the roots in which the divisions amongst the Latinx communities have.

According to Tanya Katerí Hernández, colorism has been deeply rooted in some of the Latin American. Some laws in these countries denied darker skinned Latinos from rights and privileges in society. Hernandez points to the country of Brazil which “used its immigration laws to exclude Afro-descended workers from the formal labor market.” Such a law prohibited many darker skinned Brazilians from quality jobs.

Colorism has also lead to discussions of latino identity. Because of one’s color, light skinned latinos would not consider darker skinned latinos to be latino, or latino enough. The lack of representation of darker skinned latinos in various parts of latino culture plays into this very well. In her article, *Mestizo, Negro, Blanco—What Does it Mean? Racism and Colorism ’s Effects in the Latinx Community*, Frida A. Alvarez writes, “ Often the Latinas who are darker are seen as the putas whereas the light skin Latinas are seen as the santas if you observe who are the main people on TV networks like Telemundo or Univision, you see that there is a limited representation in the diversity of latinidad.” This depiction of light skinned latinos being the face of “latinidad” causes some darker skinner latinos to feel as if they do not have a place in their society.

There are many examples of colorism, even instances where dark skinned latinos treated other dark skinner latinos unfairly. Take for example, Nayara Justino in Brazil. According to a recent documentary from the Guardian, Justino, a dark skinned Brazilian, had become Brazil’s Carnival Queen in 2013. But after a public backlash, she was stripped of her title. The new recipient was a woman with a lighter complexion. While much of the backlash came from lighter Brazilians, a significant number of the criticism came from Brazilians who were dark skinned.

Latin Dancehall artist Amara La Negra, whose real name is Diana de Los Santos has

recounted how colorism affected her when she decided to become a professional singer. She mentions how she sometimes feel torn between her skin color and latinx heritage. In fact, her pseudonym, which translates to “love the black woman” is in homage to her past traumas, and to those who share it. La Negra shares that her woes regarding colorism became before she migrated to Miami. However, when it comes to colorism-- there is no difference living in Miami compared to the Dominican Republic. She talks about here past dealing with colorism from those who look like her and/or not.

People speaking up on their experience seems to be promising in combatting colorism in the Latin American community. According to Data from Pew Research, more people of the Latino diaspora now identify as some variation of Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean. And with the issue becoming more mainstream, popular television platforms like MTV have devoted time to create content regarding the issue for its *Decoded* segment that airs both on television and on its online platforms. Media outlets like the Guardian have devoted time on the issue as well--giving, Nayaro Justo a platform to tell her story. A combination of these factors can lead to more representation of darker skinned latinos in both Latin American and U.S media.

## Literature Review

Latinos have a unique culture. It is a culture rooted in deep pride and identity. Music, language, and food are just some of the things that make up this vibrant culture. But this culture has had a dark secret. For decades this culture has participated in a two tiered system. A system where darker skin Latinos are oftentimes mistreated. This mistreatment comes from their white counterparts who are a part of this same culture. This is known as colorism. Colorism is a mirror of racism and is believed to have been a result of colonial racism. Latinos being treated harshly by their colonizers began treating those darker the same. Colorism had been both intentional and unintentional. While colorism remains a problem in the Latino communities, it can be reduced or potentially eliminated through the effective awareness driven on platforms by celebrities and social media.

### Theme: Roots of Colorism

While colonialism is a central reason behind colorism, there are various factors that have exacerbated it across Latin America and its diaspora. There were several governmental/institutional policies that had long lasting effects on how people were treated based on their skin color. Some believe that Latinos need to identify as its own race, separate from black and white. Such a concept resulted in the structure of words such as *mestizaje* (Jimenez 2008). But such concepts had negative consequences. In *Mestizo, Negro, Blanco—What Does It Mean? Racism and Colorism's Effects in the Latinx Community*, Frida Alvarez uses Mexico as an example. Mexican President Vicente Guerrero eliminated the question of race on the national census. Though Guerrero identified as black, he believed that eliminating this

question would eliminate problems racial problems. But that resulted in a colorism. And while that policy was an example of colorism flourished in Mexico, Brazil constructed policies intentionally targeting those of a darker skin color. According to Tanya Hernandez (2015) During the late 1800s, Brazil passed several immigration laws limiting the migration of people with darker skin tones. Immigration Decree No. 528 by President Manoel Deodoro da Foneseca all members of the indigenous populations of Asia and Africa from immigrating to Brazil. This degree had been enacted in the early days when Brazil became a new republic.

Theme: Education & Awareness through Internet and Media Platforms

In recent years media platforms have been highlighting the issue of colorism through various ways. Because the mainstream conversation around colorism is new so are some of these strategies. In 2016, the British newspaper, The Guardian created a documentary about Nayara Justino. Justino, a dark skinned Brazilian, was voted to be Carnival Queen in Brazil in 2013. After her crowning, there was backlash from people in the country who believed she was too dark. Stories like Justino have since been echoed. For example, MTV, a music video platform launched Decoded, a web series dedicated to bringing awareness around social justice initiatives. A 2016 episode was devoted to the issue of colorism, giving historical facts and highlighting Justino as an example. NPR profiled Amara La Negra, an American singer born in the Dominican Republic, who recalls her experiences of colorism and racism with her community. Even lower media sites/blogs have been launched as a way to empower those around its community. Writers share their personal experience and support is offered from those who follow (Castro 2020).

Theme: True Latino Identities Arise--Mestizaje Failure



While most policies by Latin American countries existed to create a unity identity, there is evidence suggesting that it has done the opposite. In 2015 Mexico reversed course and added the race question back to its census. As a result, it recorded that 1.4 million of its citizens classify themselves as Afro-Latino was able to count how many of its citizens classified as Afro-Latino. (Fernandez de Castro). According to a Pew Research poll in 2016, 24% of Latinos in the U.S. identify as Afro-Latino (Gustavo, Gonzalez-Barrera). Such movements of identifying as Afro-Latino can be traced to the U.S. commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960 played a major part. Darker skinned Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland identified with the struggles of black Americans, especially those living in New York. (Roman 2008).

## Analysis

One of the most effective ways of telling a message is mass media. Television, radio, and now digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter, are just some of the ways people receive their news or become aware about things going on. But a combination of these platforms perhaps may be the most effective of them all. In February 2018, MTV's aired an episode of its *Decoded!* program. The episode entitled "Colorism in the Latinx Community," is self explanatory. The episode gives great context about colorism with history, analogies, and current examples. Colorism in the Latin American community affects individuals and the privilege they have, their self-identity, and the language they use.

One of the ways lighter skinned Latinos have more privilege over darker skin color latinos is through passing. The episode describes this as those with a lighter skin being able to pass as "white." This is confirmed by research conducted by Margaret Hunter. She points out that, Passing allows these Latinos to integrate into a white community and into a culture other than their own without completely disowning their culture, allowing them to benefit from the socioeconomic benefits of white privilege. "Darker-skinned Mexicans and Cubans face significantly lower occupational prestige scores than their lighter-skinned counterparts even when controlling for factors that influence performance in the labor market," (Hunter 242)

Latinos who self-identify as white benefit the most. Unlike passing, this requires the person to give up their culture, essentially allowing them to assimilate into white culture. "Hispanics who describe themselves as black are in substantially poorer and less white neighborhoods than their compatriots who describe themselves as white" (Hunter 250). This self

identity is also highlighted in things like census data. In the 2010 Census 76 percent of Puerto Ricans identified themselves as white. But according to data from Jay Kinsbruner, nearly 60 percent of Puerto Ricans have African heritage (48).

The speaker in the video highlights that the language used by some in the Latino community perpetuates colorism. In the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, words like “cafre” is used by people of all colors and races. The word is used to describe people of lower class. Since the roots of colorism establish that those of a darker tone are inferior, the word takes on a similar meaning. When used, “cafre” implies that someone is acting dark. And it’s not just the way some cultures speak that highlights colorism. According to David Lopez, Lighter skinned Latinos are likely to use “proper” Spanish (Spanish used in Spain); while their darker counterparts tend to use broken or colloquial Spanish, based on their native country (34).

Theme: Roots of Colorism

While colonialism is a central reason behind colorism, there are various factors that have exacerbated it across Latin America and its diaspora. There were several governmental/institutional policies that had long lasting effects on how people were treated based on their skin color. Some believe that Latinos need to identify as its own race, separate from black and white. Such a concept resulted in the structure of words such as mestizo or mestizaje. Miriam Roman Jimenez writes, “Latinos and Latin Americans themselves have been among the most vocal in making this claim to racial exceptionalism, arguing not only that we/they do not “fit” into the “standard” racial categories but also that any accommodation to such classifications spells political disaster” (67). Thus, efforts were often made in Latin American countries to carve out ways for latinos to identify themselves by. This was tainted

however because of the structures in place by European colonists.

Though some believed that Latinos should be of one race and one people, such concepts had negative consequences. In *Mestizo, Negro, Blanco—What Does It Mean? Racism and Colorism's Effects in the Latinx Community*, Frida Alvarez uses Mexico as an example. Mexican President Vicente Guerrero eliminated the question of race on the national census. Though Guerrero identified as black, he believed that eliminating this question would eliminate racial problems. But that resulted in colorism. “Actions like these promote assimilation tactics in which Afro and Indigenous Latinxs suffer if they do not fit the status quo. Vicente Guerrero... promoted the assimilation of uniting as one rather than being able to identify as you chose to” (Alvarez 12). This has had a lasting effect on people-- how they see themselves, others, and the world. Actions by Guerrero demonstrates how looking white is favored because it almost eliminates people from identifying with their African or indigenous heritage.

And while that policy was an example of colorism flourished in Mexico, Brazil constructed policies intentionally targeting those of a darker skin color. According to Tanya Hernandez, during the late 1800s, Brazil passed several immigration laws limiting the migration of people with darker skin tones. Immigration Decree No. 528 by President Manoel Deodoro da Foneseca all members of the indigenous populations of Asia and Africa from immigrating to Brazil. This degree had been enacted in the early days when Brazil became a new republic (Hernandez 688). All the while the country increased and incentivized migration from European countries. “Furthermore, the government expended funds to encourage European immigration with the payment of transportation costs. The Brazilian national government paid these European transportation costs to Brazil from 1851 to 1909” (Hernandez 690).

Amongst Puerto Ricans, many movements on the island and on the continental U.S. were launched to help advance the island. By calling for unity amongst Puerto Ricans, movements like The Young Lords pledged to help all Puerto Ricans, but especially those who were on the bottom. But this message went over some heads. During the 1970s when the Young Lords were most active in New York City, there was a shift in the lives of Puerto Ricans and the Young Lords platform did not fully represent that shift. The platform and community was “coherent and concentrated-- monolithic communities with a few ‘outsiders’” (Beltran 36). These outsiders refers to the Puerto Ricans who were moving into regular sectors of American life. They were less ethnic, racially diverse/mixed, used the English language more and less spanish, had assimilated into various communities, and married outside (mainly to whites) their culture-- things darker skinner Puerto Ricans were not privy to. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960 played a major part. Darker skinned Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland identified with the struggles of black Americans, especially those living in New York. (Roman 2008). The Young Lords platform to lift the vulnerable (darkest) amongst them did not resonate with their privileged (lightest) amongst them. “...Movement activist often chose to rhetorically produce a more homogenous vision of the community rather than grapple with this complex reality” (Beltran 38).

Theme: Education & Awareness through Internet and Media Platforms

In recent years media platforms have been highlighting the issue of colorism through various ways. Because the mainstream conversation around colorism is new so are some of these strategies. In 2016, the British newspaper, The Guardian created a documentary about Nayara Justino. Justino, a dark skinned Brazilian, was voted to be Carnival Queen in Brazil in 2013. Her

achievement was a pretty historical event. While past Carnival Queens have been of African descent, they are usually of a lighter complexion. They also tend to identify as mulatto or mixed. These Carnival Queens, though not white, succeeded because of their privilege of being of a lighter complexion. Justino was the opposite. She identifies as black and even acknowledges that her ancestors were brought to Brazil from Africa as part of the slave trade. She recounts her experience in the documentary saying, “There are very few black women who become carnival queens. White women with straight hair and a good body makes more commercial sense.” After her crowning, there was backlash from people in the country who believed she was too dark. Stories like Justino have since been echoed.

"If I say I'm Afro-Latina, you'll automatically, visually in your mind see [that] I'm dark. And [in] my family we all speak Spanish, we're Latinos. This is my culture," Amara La Negra tells NPR. (Meraji, Richmond) Amara, an American singer born in the Dominican Republic, is a dark skinned Latina woman. In the NPR article she recounts her experiences with colorism and racism while trying to pursue her dream. Amara notes that most of these experiences happened with people from the Latin American community. At the age of 4 she won an opportunity to appear on the hit show *Sabado Gigante*. Being the only dark skinned child on the show, she recounts being placed in the back or in the middle by the producers. She was never good enough for the front, and never randomly placed somewhere in between. Another experience came when Amara was on the reality show, *Love and Hip Hop!* Meeting with a Puerto Rican producer, she was told she needed a different image. And when asked what needed to change, the producer, Young Hollywood said, “a little bit more Beyoncé, a little less Macy Gray,” and later said, the industry was looking for a “cookie-cutter poster child.”

## Theme: Reflection and Acceptance

The Decoded! Episode ends with ways that are best for combatting colorism. One way is to reflect--something both Justino and Amara have done. Accepting their skin, loving themselves for who they are, and challenging the systems that perpetuate the colorism hierarchy. Though challenging, such ways have been echoed by people on social media who watched the episode. One Twitter user references the knowledge she obtained from the episode writing, I have been trying to figure out how to explain the difference between racism and colorism for a while and DID NOT know how to do it well. Thank you MTV Decoded for this great video and I learned another word I need to stop saying” (@LitAgentSaritza).

Others have taken to community blog sites like HipLatina to share their own experiences. Darleny Suriel shares with the writer of one post about her experience growing up with a lighter skinner cousin. “I couldn’t help but notice that when speaking about her beauty, relatives would always praise the whiteness of her skin, her noticeably rosy cheeks & her natural blond hair; meanwhile I was constantly warned in a fearful tone to stay out of the sun so I do not get darker, as if receiving melanin from the sun was a tragic form of disfigurement” (Castro, HipLatina).

This reflection seems to be a growing trend in the Latino community. It is a reflection that is rooted in acceptance. And this acceptance has already proven to be somewhat true. In 2015 Mexico reversed course and added the race question back to its census. As a result, it recorded that 1.4 million of its citizens classify themselves as Afro-Latino (Fernandez de Castro). According to a Pew Research poll in 2016, 24% of Latinos in the U.S. identify as Afro-Latino (Gustavo, Gonzalez-Barrera). The new data deals a blow to people in Latin American cultures

who believe that Latinos should all be 'one'. The idea of mestizaje has not yet been achieved. In fact, it was probably never on track to be achieved since such disparities existed between light and dark skinned latinos.



## Conclusion & Recommendations for Future Research

In the Decoded episode, host Lee Chin suggests those in the Latino community should “have those tough conversations with family members, especially the ones telling their *primita* to date a lighter skinned guy,” as a way to eradicate colorism. And Miriam Roman Jimenez mentions that some of these familial expressions and encounters as well: Dominicans telling referring to another as, “black behind the ears,” alluding to black/African ancestry, or Puerto Ricans asking “Y tu abuela dónde está,” which colloquially means hiding someone’s black grandmother in the kitchen (72). We know these habits are learned. These experiences, perhaps traumas, occur generationally.

But uncovered is the data backing this up. How many primitas avoided dating a darker skinned guy? What were the repercussions for dating a darker skinned guy? How hard is it to find a lighter skinned guy? How many found true happiness with their light skinned guy? How many Puerto Rican’s really hide their grandmother’s in the kitchen (or other parts of the house)? By not acknowledging the “black behind their ears,” what did Dominicans lose? While some of these questions may not be scientific, or hard to capture quantified data, an analysis of it could be helpful to determine how colorism is more rooted in the sociological aspect of Latino communities.

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