

Introduction

Economies of Color

Angela P. Harris

MOST POPULAR AND SCHOLARLY discussions of racism take one of two approaches to the topic. The “prejudice” approach treats racism as interpersonal, and explores how processes of cognition, reasoning, and emotion function to make racial difference real and to make demeaning treatment of the racial “other” seem natural, normal, and necessary. The “white supremacy” approach treats racism as institutional and explores how groups successfully defining themselves as “white” have been able to marshal political, economic, and social power for themselves at the expense of those they define as “nonwhite.” The essays in this collection, however, illuminate a third approach to analyzing racism: the constitution of racism through economies of difference—in this case, *economies of color*.

As a threshold matter, the essays in this volume demonstrate that *colorism* and *racism* are not exactly the same. Jyotsna Vaid and Joanne L. Rondilla argue, for example, that the valuing of light skin has evolved in many regions—such as East and South Asia and the Philippines—independently (at least in part) of the black–white, European–African dynamics of race that have so characterized the Americas and Europe. Edward Telles and Christina A. Sue show that in some countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, popular discussions about “race” are difficult or impossible to conduct, yet everyone is able to talk in great detail about “color.” Colorism and racism are not only not identical; hierarchies of color can destabilize hierarchies based on race. In the United States, as Trina Jones, Taunya Lovell Banks, and Tanya Katerí Hernández show, colorism often confounds lawyers and judges, who are used to conceptualizing antidiscrimination laws solely in terms of white versus nonwhite.

Despite the fact that colorism and racism can move independently, the essays in this volume show how the two nevertheless remain linked. Some of the

authors suggest that colorism gives us a way to understand how racism's "color line" is changing in the twenty-first century. The team of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David R. Dietrich, for instance, argue that the United States is moving away from a binary hierarchy of privilege and subordination (whether white-black or white-nonwhite) and toward a social and political "pigmentocracy" that will comprise three panethnic categories: white (including "honorary white"), brown, and black. This shift, they argue, will bring the United States into the Latin American fold.

So colorism operates sometimes to confound and sometimes to restructure racial hierarchy. Meanwhile, the circulating meanings attached to color shape the meaning of race. The description of symbolic relations as "economies" has become a cliché in cultural studies. In the case of colorism, though, the term works at multiple levels. First, the language of color "circulates" at a number of levels of scale—local, regional, ethnic, national—picking up inflections, nuances, and connotations along the way. As Charis Thompson remarks in her chapter, ordinary people do not perceive skin color objectively, as an artist might; skin color is always read in the context of hair, dress, gender, age, and season, among other factors. Moreover, there are not one but many discourses of color, shaped variously by labor and migration patterns, by histories of conquest and subjugation, by class, by gender, and by national identity. The economic metaphor highlights the mobile and dynamic quality of color, as well as its complexity.

Second, colorism as a series of symbolic economies is embedded in material economies of production, exchange, and consumption. The chapters by Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Lynn M. Thomas, for example, reveal a close and harmonious relationship between status hierarchies and consumer capitalism. The medium of advertising shows us how we can overcome personal barriers to success through the consumption of products for sale, and the burgeoning market in products designed to lighten, brighten, and whiten speaks to corporate capital's desire to sell us the dream that we can individually transcend oppressive systems. Creams, lotions, and surgical procedures promise us the ability to defy racism, in the same way that they promise us the ability to defy aging.

The beauty industry's close relationship to the aesthetics of racism also illustrates the central role of gender in relations of consumption. As historians have shown, consumer capitalism was born with the recognition and embrace of women as consumers, and so it is not surprising that women should be so prominent among the shoppers for skin-lightening products. At the same

time, the beauty industry's focus on women reflects the long history of women viewed as products themselves, intended for men's consumption. These chapters reiterate the truth of Simone de Beauvoir's comment that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Beauty projects relating to color are just some of the many projects urged upon gendered-female subjects to improve and perfect themselves. (Contemporary capitalism has not only colonized these projects with enthusiasm, but has helped extend the realm of the pursuit of beauty and desirability to men as well, as the U.S. television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* illustrates. It will be interesting in this context to see whether men as well as women begin to feel the pressure to lighten their skin!)

Third, thinking about color as a series of economies tips us off to colorism's relationship to class as social mobility. Most discussions of white supremacy implicitly or explicitly adopt what might be called a "Marxian" paradigm, examining how groups marked *white* struggle to exploit groups marked *nonwhite*. These chapters suggest that racism also works through a "Weberian" or status paradigm. Within this paradigm, individuals and groups are ordered and compete with one another in terms of their access to and ability to utilize what Evelyn Nakano Glenn describes as *symbolic capital*, which means, in part, skin color (as well as the other aspects of physiognomy associated with race, such as eye shape and hair texture). The pursuit of higher status along the color line may occur on the individual level, such as when a woman purchases a skin-lightening cream or straightens her hair to get a job; it may occur on the family level, such as when a potential marriage partner, or egg donor, is rejected because the resulting children might come out "too dark"; or it may occur on the national level, such as in the projects taken up in Peru, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere to "improve" the nation by lightening its people.

For example, Aisha Khan argues that Indo-Trinidadians strategically negotiate ambiguous color and race identifications in Trinidad society, in part to avoid the stigma of blackness, in part to claim an "Indianness" that is "light" or "clear." Maxine Leeds Craig, looking at a 1960s African American beauty pageant, finds the contestants and spectators engaged in an argument about the relationship of color to racial identity and pride, with an eye to the standing of African Americans in U.S. society. Verna M. Keith, using data about African American women collected from 1979 to 1980, identifies a positive relationship between lighter skin color and educational attainment, occupational standing, and family income. And Christina A. Sue and Jyotsna Vald show how marriage is an important institution for amassing and mobilizing the symbolic capital of light skin,

as partners evaluate the lightness or darkness of their own skin, their potential partner's, and that of their actual or hypothetical children. The examination of color through a Weberian language of status/class and symbolic capital thus highlights the efforts of individuals, families, nations, and other social groups to achieve a variety of goals—beauty, desirability, wealth, political power, ethnic pride, social respectability—through the discursive categories of race.

Last, the economic metaphor is useful to the examination of colorism because of the different modes of social regulation to which color and race are linked. For example, in the United States, and in some countries in Latin America, the state plays an active role in managing race relations, but a passive one in managing color relations. In the United States, U.S. Supreme Court opinions have declared a “public” colorblind liberalism in which racial classification itself is prohibited, whereas social inequalities in what is deemed the “private” sphere are considered beyond the power of the state to address. The formal dismantling of the racial state (by declaring racial classifications illegal) thus does not dismantle the racial hierarchies that continue to perpetuate inequality in the workplace, in schools, in popular culture and the media, in neighborhoods, and in families. To the contrary, racial liberalism makes it possible to characterize behavior that maintains racial hierarchy as the product of individual “choice,” free of racist taint.

Looking at colorism through the lens of this racial liberalism, it is clear that the dismantling of the racial state may have little or no effect on the racial market. Indeed, the actual erosion of traditional categorical racism, state driven or not, may intensify rather than ameliorate colorism. As several of the chapters in this volume indicate, the erasure of a strict color line between white and nonwhite may enable, rather than dampen, conflict. Rather than being equally shut out of prestigious jobs, for example, persons of African descent may now compete with one another, including along lines of color. Several chapters also suggest that in the coming era, the highest status will not be whiteness itself, but a color status that is light without being white. In this economy, perhaps *café con crema* skin becomes a signifier of the postracial society that celebrates multiculturalism and rejects white supremacy. Yet, ironically, this economy continues to rely, covertly, on the racial hierarchy it claims to abandon.

One of the most seductive aspects of color has been central to its value to the hierarchies of race: its seemingly natural, unmediated quality. Skin color seems to just be there—a natural fact. And the danger of racial liberalism is that it leaves people without a language in which to talk about inequality. One

of the challenges for scholars and activists concerned with colorism is thus to disrupt—and if possible prevent—“Latin Americanization,” in which color hierarchy is pervasive yet its relationship to racism denied. Recent events in Brazil indicate that the effect can, in fact, be turned around. This is good news, because it would be unfortunate if the debate about color worldwide took on the characteristics of debate about class in the United States, in which relational understandings of class as a system of exploitation, not just stratification, are unavailable to most ordinary people.

Last, race and color both circulate in an economy of cultural fantasy. Color is haunted by race both in the substitutability of color for race in the naturalization process, and also in what it communicates about the human. The idea of race, as many people have argued, is connected profoundly to modernity, and lies at the convergence of the grand narratives of History and Science. Color, like race, situates peoples along the path of History: More white is more European, and more European is more refined; less European is more primitive, and more primitive is more dark. Color, like race, also situates us within the discourse of Science as a practice that can tell us who we really are and ultimately how to change who we are into something else. We no longer have a science of race, but, as Charis Thompson’s chapter argues, we have new sciences of better living through reproductive technologies that will allow us to manipulate ourselves and our children to fit our fantasies of perfection. Skin color here carries fantasies about personal identity and family unity as well as the confirmation, or disruption, of racial orders.

If the study of racism alerts us to the “big picture” of class struggle, the study of colorism shows us the fine-grained details of how everyday body practices, abetted by everyday technologies of knowledge and exchange, help to make and remake racial difference. These chapters illustrate how economies of color constitute, and are constituted by, economies of race.