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### My Face is Not the Problem

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## ***My Face is Not the Problem***

By Malique Morris

Word Count: 4,170

Los Angeles is irresistible. For six consecutive years, the city's beautiful weather and steady pace was my annual retreat from the crowded subways and nonstop productivity that defined pre-COVID New York City.

This particular weekend in May – the last one I would spend in the city before the pandemic – was supposed to be marked by nonstop dancing at nightclubs like The Rage, Mickey's and The Abbey on Santa Monica Blvd in West Hollywood.

WeHo, as it is colloquially known, is home to LA's mainstream gay scene. If the City of Angels is known for being overpopulated with Malibu Ken dolls in tight tank tops that flatter symmetrical washboard abs, then centrally located West Hollywood is where such coveted specimens congregate to drink, gossip and hookup with each other.

I was never put off by this racially exclusive and shallow pool of male-dominated queerness. Not that I didn't feel a bit out of place as a dark-skinned black guy, but my craving for the fluorescent lights, effervescent dance floors and thumping bass eclipsed any shame I had about not looking like an aspiring model or actor. I was a nerdy journalist who liked gyrating to pop anthems, and the bars in WeHo had no cover charge and played Beyoncé, so I was good.

I promised myself there would be no deep considerations of desirability politics this weekend, just dancing. I was successful in carrying out my mission on Friday at Nightingale Plaza in West Hollywood and on Saturday at The Satellite in Silver Lake. When Sunday rolled around, my energy shifted.

I frolicked along the strip of bars on Santa Monica Blvd, hopping from sensual blasphemy at The Chapel to frozen margaritas at Mickey's. Each spot featured go-go boys in neon briefs titillating attractive patrons who were getting drunk and frisky. It was Sunday Funday and, suddenly, I wanted some of the action.

At each saturated and festive watering hole, I watched as stylish men with Aryan facial features flirted and grinded against one another in their distressed denim and palm tree button ups. It looked like a free for all, except that it wasn't. What I interpreted as a display of sexual egalitarianism was not open to me, a boy with dark skin and a flat, wide nose.

By the time I reached the tiki bar at the end of the street and the end of the weekend, my enthusiasm was gone.

I had exhausted my chances of at least making out with someone, let alone anything more salacious. I wanted instant sexual gratification, and in WeHo the Malibu Ken dolls were

overrepresented. So, if I were to get lucky, it would only be if a conventionally attractive white or non-black man with European features thought I was worth it. In the best LA neighborhood for men to find easy hookups up with other men, the only attention I had gotten from a cute guy was a drunken compliment on my ridiculous paisley pants.

This wasn't my first round in the ring of rejection. Yet this time I couldn't avoid the ugly fact that my dark skin, wide nose and soup cooling lips made West Hollywood's sexual egalitarianism inaccessible to me.

Black Americans are more than 150 years removed from chattel slavery, but popular culture still treats Black people as aesthetically inferior to white people.

In the past five years, only 28% of models who starred in advertisement campaigns for high-fashion brands like Christian Dior and Missoni have been non-white, according to a 2019 diversity report by The Fashion Spot, a digital forum for industry insiders. When the same outlet broke down fashion's diversity numbers by race in spring 2016, it found that 8% of models featured in major advertisements that season were Black, versus the 78% who were white.

The glamorized images produced and distributed by the fashion and cosmetics industries are the metrics that establish optimal attractiveness in popular culture. For decades, under their tutelage, that standard has been light skin, straight hair and slender noses. And whoever embodies this superior aesthetic gets to feel worthy.

## RACE & FASHION ADVERTISING

The data represented in the chart does not account for specific races, ethnicities or skin tones

■ Spring 2015 ■ Fall 2015 ■ Spring 2016 ■ Fall 2016 ■ Spring 2017 ■ Fall 2017 ■ Spring 2018  
■ Fall 2018 ■ Spring 2019 ■ Fall 2019

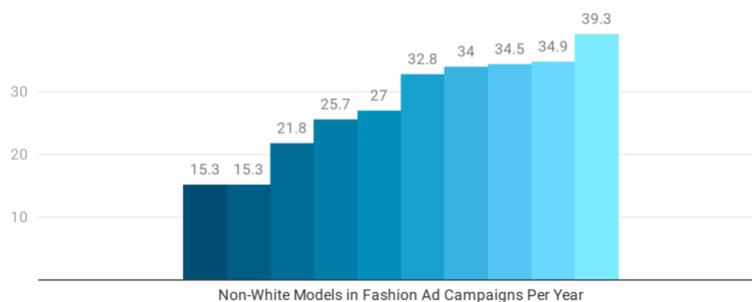


Chart: Malique Morris • Source: The Fashion Spot • Created with Datawrapper

As a child of Nigerian immigrants growing up in Washington, D.C., Dr. Donna Oriowo would strut around her house with a t-shirt on her head pretending she had long, bone-straight hair. This was the type of hair “beautiful” children had, fair-skinned kids who would routinely receive affirmations about their appearance from others. What about the dark-skinned girl running around donning the t-shirt as a coiffure? “People did not let you forget that you’re not cute,” the psychotherapist said, “that you did not have the right hair texture and the right skin tone.”

Surely, a young Oriowo's parents would reassure her that her natural features, exactly as they were designed, were good enough. "No matter the love you receive from your parents, when you watch TV, you see it's not true," Oriowo said. "Those are the places where you learn about your values, while you are watching TV and seeing billboards and magazines."

When I boarded the plane back to congested New York City from calm Los Angeles, I had six uninterrupted hours to pick myself apart. There I was, a healthy and well-groomed young man who wore well-tailored trendy clothes that hugged his fit body. But my ebony skin, Negroid nose and tightly coiled hair negated all of my labored attempts at achieving popular culture's optimal attractiveness.

I sat upright in my seat, unsettled by what I couldn't escape on the plane: I was not beautiful. And I wasn't only ugly to the flirtatious cute guys who patronized West Hollywood's barrage of bars. The world was in consensus about my defective facial features.

It felt counterproductive to be mad, I mean my anger wouldn't change anything. But, at a life-threatening altitude, I couldn't help myself.

When I was 19, Saks Fifth Avenue's talent acquisition manager decided that a dark-skinned gay kid with acne was good enough to work at one of the most storied luxury department stores in the world. And just like that I was welcomed into an ivory tower that was home to crisply tailored suits, chiffon gowns and \$200 eye creams from La Mer.

At Saks I was exposed to \$5,000 Brioni suits and \$2,000 pajamas from La Perla. I learned enough about cashmere wool blends, herringbone tweeds and tedious Italian craftsmanship to justify selling a sport coat from Ermenegildo Zegna that cost triple my parents' mortgage. I was also exposed to a wave of hostility from an unlikely source.

My gay male co-workers had perfectly coiffed pompadours, Anglo-Saxon facial features and wore Armani blazers and Prada loafers. They carried themselves like the glossy style savants I ogled at in the pages of GQ, Details and Esquire magazine. I was transfixed by the idea of sharing space with real life cosmopolitan homosexuals. I pictured myself attending meticulously curated dinner parties at their chic apartments and brunching with them on Sundays.

But whenever I tried to break ground with the polished gays, by asking them about products we sold or discussing the latest gossip in the fashion industry, they would scan me up and down with a disapproving expression like I was a stray dog with rabies. I assumed it was my \$150 pale blue blazer from Zara – the most expensive item I owned at the time – that turned them off. During my first week of training, a leading member of the clique, with his arms crossed and head tilted up, called me out for wearing my fast fashion faux pas three days in a row. My clothes were cheap and tacky, no wonder I was met with such aversion.

Watching “The Devil Wears Prada” until I memorized the dialogue and reading “The Fashionable Savages” an in-depth look at the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century luxury apparel by John Fairchild, the former publisher of Women’s Wear Daily, prepared me for the fashion crowd’s scathing elitism.

For the first month or so, it didn’t dawn on me that my dark skin and Negroid phenotype were the reasons I was being dismissed by the dashing men I hoped would embrace me. Then I watched as the new hires who had fair skin and keen noses were immediately adopted into Saks’ elite circle of fashionable gay men, regardless of what they wore.

My enthusiasm dissipated.

I didn’t make any more attempts to socialize with the glossy gays. Instead, I overanalyzed what caused my colleagues to decide I wasn’t worth the warm, inviting welcome my lighter skinned counterparts received. I would go home and study my face in the mirror. I started to look at myself like I was a stray dog with rabies. And no matter how hard I stared, my wide nose, large, uneven lips and dark brown beady eyes didn’t morph into the Grecian-like symmetrical features it required to be good looking.

My childhood was marked by kids telling me the width of my nose and my skin tone were eye sores, but they still played hopscotch with me during recess. Back then, I didn’t register their perception of my ugliness as a form of systemic discrimination. I just wanted to play hopscotch at recess.

No one taught me about colorism – the societal favoring of fair skin and Eurocentric facial features. In school, I was given a cursory understanding of anti-black racism as a horrifying bit of history. I learned about the violence of slavery, Jim Crow as benchmark legislation and redlining – a discriminatory housing practice that kept Black people out of middle-class mostly white suburbs and into under resourced inner cities.

My childhood education led me to believe that anti-blackness lived in my textbooks, not in my real life. But the way the Black people I read about were denied the opportunity to access the socioeconomic comfort White people were entitled to was colorism, not an unfortunate part of history but an ongoing system.

The glossy gays’ palpable disdain and refusal to adopt me into their circle was the first time I saw my phenotype affect my social outcomes. I was shunned by a community I thought I would belong to, all because I wasn’t pretty.

Dr. Robert Reece studies the calculable harms of colorism.

In “What Are You Mixed With: The Effect of Multiracial identification on Perceived Attractiveness,” the sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin draws a link

between the European standard of beauty and the social benefits of being a Black person with “white-like features.”

In Reece’s study, a group of Black teens rated each other’s physical appearance based on variables like racial identification: whether the participant self-identified as mixed – a person who has black and non-black ancestry, or non-mixed – a person with only black ancestors. Teens with features Reece describes as phenotypically black – a wide nose, tightly coiled hair and full lips: my features – rated lower on a scale of attraction than participants who had more European features – keen nose, light skin and hair with a looser curl pattern.

The experiment reflected widespread social attitudes about what kind of blackness is palatable. But Reece took it a step further during our conversation. A preference for multiracial appearing Black people over those who look like me could amount to life or death, he said.

A 2017 University of Texas at Arlington study called “Colorism and Police Killings,” concluded that unarmed Black people with more afro-centric facial features and skin tones were more likely to be shot by the police than their racially ambiguous counterparts. So, the beauty quotient doesn’t stop at establishing dark-skinned Black people as a less desirable sort. It kills them too.

“That is a damning indictment on how powerful colorism is,” Reece said. “People’s lives are being dramatically impacted in ways we don’t talk about nearly enough.”

For black people who look like me, society is a mirror that reflects our inferiority. After my last weekend in West Hollywood, all I wanted to do was avoid this inferior reflection. And there was no way I was alone in seeking an escape from my blackness.

According to Reece, I was.

After years of gathering data on the sociological effects of colorism, Reece has found one thing to be true: dark-skinned Black people love being Black. Light skin is the right skin may be the prevailing school of thought, but Black people with darker skin tones don’t have a desire to run away from their blackness.

“There is a counternarrative that dark-skinned people view other dark-skinned people as more authentically black,” Reece said about a so-called testament of self-love that sounds more like submission than affirmation.

Nothing in the we may not be cute, but we are real sentiment tells people that Negroid phenotypes are just as good. All it does is establish unambiguous blackness as a more accurate representation of the race. And saying dark skin is more authentically Black, while a fair complexion is more physically attractive and universally desirable, continues the normalizing of anglicized beauty as the standard.

Not exactly.

Dark-skinned people “recognize that society values light skin this way,” Reece said. “Saying dark skin is authentic is a way to build themselves up. It’s not normalizing these negative things. It’s combating the notions of light skin as prettier.”

Counternarrative is mental programming that tells dark-skinned Black people they can exist in the world, unencumbered. I wasn’t one of them.

When I got back to my apartment in Harlem from Los Angeles, I found my roommate in the kitchen cooking himself dinner. He was happy to see me and wanted to hear about my trip. I hesitated to tell him that I spent a weekend in West Hollywood feeling invisible and undesirable. He had only been living in our shared apartment for a month, but we already opened up to one another about our chronic dissatisfactions with life, and I felt some emotional security with him. So, I laid it all bare.

As a tall, straight white man whose height and lean body type placed him very high on the hierarchy of attractiveness, I didn’t expect him to understand the contours of how race intersected with sexuality. When I explained that I spent years learning I didn’t measure up in the gay male world, he immediately questioned why the routine rejection had affected me so much this time around. In a fit of betrayal against my better judgment, I confessed my desire to be considered beautiful, words I normally wouldn’t disclose to anyone, especially not a conventionally attractive white man.

“You are beautiful,” he said. I can never take anything at face value, so I told him he didn’t mean that. In our world, he couldn’t mean it.

“Well, everyone is beautiful,” he backpedaled after I had pressed him. I felt a sharp pain in my stomach. There was a truth I had been running from since I came out of the closet at 18.

“But you’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever met,” he said what I knew he was really thinking with a reassuring smile.

Regardless of what he meant to communicate; my roommate’s words were the final punch in the constant fight for validation of my looks. He verbalized what gay men were often communicating to me with their cold distance.

Feeling like I had just been knocked out, I ran off to my room mid-conversation, fighting back tears. Once I was snuggled under my warm down comforter in my bed, I wept until I fell asleep.

The next day, I pulled myself out of bed to get ready for work. In the shower, I couldn’t stop thinking about Pecola Breedlove. I had reread Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye” a few months before. In the novel, Pecola was a young girl sentenced to a life of emotional neglect, physical abuse and mentally debilitating insecurity because of her dark skin. Her circumstances led her

to obsess over having sea blue eyes, the feature that pretty white girls who received love and nurturing had, unlike Pecola, whose phenotypical blackness made her a ripe subject for scorn and ostracizing by everyone around her.

My skin complexion had also subjected me to a life of emotional neglect and debilitating insecurity. I understood how Pecola could think that having just a drop of whiteness would mitigate how people saw her. In that moment a pair of blue eyes would have made things better for me too. But I wouldn't obtain some Aryan feature and then all would be well. A fear of sharp objects prevented me from considering a cosmetic procedure like a rhinoplasty, and my skin was too sensitive to survive the chemicals in bleaching creams. Even my daily moisturizer made my face breakout on occasion.

My wide nose and dark skin would stay as they were, and, from where I stood, so would my circumstances.

When I stepped out of the shower and the steam cooled down on my body, I stood in front of the foggy mirror and brushed my teeth. After I spit the final load of toothpaste out of mouth and into the sink, I stared directly at the fog. In an instant, I resisted the urge to wipe it from the mirror and reveal the reflection behind it. I didn't need to keep reminding myself of what I didn't look like, of the blue eyes and thin nose and angular bone structure I didn't have. Instead of longing for European facial features like Pecola did, I decided to avoid mirrors altogether.

For the next month, as I barely ate a full meal and cried myself to sleep most nights, I actively eluded my reflection. I was emotionally crippled by society's perception of my Sub-Saharan African features. It was mentally incapacitating to know I would be treated like I was less than for the rest of my life because of my face. And being "one of the smartest people" my roommate had ever met was no consolation.

By connecting Pecola's struggle to mine, I realized I was not alone. Millions of other dark-skinned people of African descent are constantly subjected to structural discrimination because the world doesn't think they're good enough. In truth, the conversation about racism is a conversation about beauty. Racism is about responding to people based on physical attributes and treating them accordingly.

My face was not the problem.

In 1903, Charles Dana Gibson, a Bostonian illustrator, launched the face of American beauty.

"Mr. Gibson's American Girl," which debuted on the February cover of Ladies' Home Journal, had pale skin, a straight nose and brown hair pulled up into a chignon. She was a picture of poise, respectability and patriotism.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, The Gibson Girl, as the famous illustration would come to be known, was the classic image of Americanness. And she was everywhere, in lifestyle magazines like

Cosmopolitan and even on tableware, as her image began to inform the aesthetic standard of an entire country.

Carolyn Kitch, a journalism professor at Temple University, noted in her book “The Girl on the Magazine Cover,” that Gibson’s illustration was “the first visual stereotype of women in American mass media.”

The Gibson Girl is the linchpin of the fashion industry’s image making. From Christie Brinkley in the ‘70s to Christy Turlington in the ‘90s to Gigi Hadid in the new millennium, the look of classic Americanness has remained a person with pale skin, a keen nose and straight hair. For every Naomi Sims or Beverly Johnson or Naomi Campbell or Jourdan Dunn – prolific Black models of the past and present – there is an Amber Valetta and Carolyn Murphy and now, Kaia Gerber who embodies the beauty ideal Gibson created. And the fashion industry rewards them with more magazine covers than a Campbell or a Dunn will ever receive.

In a 2019 interactive study, Malaika Handa, a data scientist and software engineer, found that in the past 19 years, American Vogue magazine, arguably the most influential publication in the fashion and beauty industries, featured only three dark-skinned black women on its cover – actress Lupita N’yongo, athlete Serena Williams and former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama – a mere 1.1% of 262 cover models.

Kimberly Jenkins is well-versed in the heavy hand fashion has had in packaging American whiteness as a global symbol of glamorous aspiration. The historian and professor of fashion studies at Ryerson University in Toronto wants the industry to acknowledge how it has “passively upheld white supremacy – in an aesthetic sense.” And Jenkins is calling for a genuine correction that extends beyond “throwing more Black people on magazine covers.”

“What I remain interested in is deep education, deep reformation,” she said. “I want our stories to be broader than that and complex. Why can’t we just fit in? Why can’t you stop upholding white beauty standards?”

There are dark-skinned Black people all over the world going to extreme lengths to fix a physical attribute that mainstream fashion imagery has convinced them is a corporeal defect.

Amira Adawe, a Somalia-born, Minnesota-based public health scientist, has spent the last decade testing the ingredients of more than 500 skin bleaching products. What she found is that many of them contain mercury, a toxic chemical that can lead to negative health effects like kidney damage.

Health risks aside, skin bleaching remains a multi-billion-dollar sector of the cosmetics industry. One of the industry’s most lucrative markets is Africa, where a black woman in Somalia will buy skin lightening cream to improve her marriage prospects, therefore increasing her social value.

As it turns out, exploiting the link between skin tone and economic well-being is a profitable business.

Skincare brands cashing in on colorism initially struck Adawe as a public health concern because she had been approaching the trend from a purely scientific perspective. But immersing herself in more field research brought her to a different conclusion. The risky impulse to use life-threatening products to erase one's melanin isn't a matter of achieving socioeconomic security, it is dormant trauma begging for attention. "Those individuals who are using, we cannot just blame them," Adawe said. "This is a psychological issue."

By the end of the summer, five or so months after my weekend in West Hollywood, I was craving a dance floor, strobe lights and thumping music again. Susanne Bartsch's weekly soiree at The Standard hotel in Manhattan's Meatpacking District – replete with overpriced drinks, rambunctious house music and a chic crowd – was the exact kind of party scene I temporarily abandoned and was eager to return to.

For my reintroduction to fashionably curated queer nightlife, I had to put on an ensemble that was understated but still Avant Garde. So, I tucked a short-sleeved black crepe button down into black dress shorts and threw on a pair of chunky soled black-and-white lace-up oxfords from Vivienne Westwood. And I topped off the look with a black felt hat I recently bought and hadn't worn yet.

Before I could leave for a night of kinetic bliss, I had to see how my new accessory looked.

My body tensed up.

I had not seen my face since I decided to avoid mirrors. I hesitated and went back and forth about whether this was necessary. But I couldn't leave without checking if my new hat fit my head properly, otherwise my fashion sense would suffer. If I wasn't cute then the least I could do was be meticulously dressed.

So, I went to look in the mirror for the first time since my roommate confirmed, in the kitchen of our shared apartment, that I was not beautiful. This time I stood before the reflector I promised I would never use again, strategically holding a book in front of the bottom half of my face to cover my nose. I wasn't ready to see it. My Sub-Saharan features would ruin my night, and I was in desperate need of some fun. Besides, I was only making sure my hat was on my head correctly. It was.

Still, I paused in front of the mirror for a couple minutes. As I looked at my reflection, I remembered staring at my roommate's pale, angular face waiting for him to assure me of what the glossy gays at Saks and the salacious gays in West Hollywood decided they would not, that my face as it naturally looked was good enough. Now, I was staring at a fragmented part of my face because I couldn't even do that for myself.

In that moment I knew the counternarrative that Dr. Reece observed dark-skinned Black people telling themselves was a falsehood made with the most formidable intentions. On the surface, thinking of dark skin and wide noses and tightly coiled hair as authentically and beautifully black is a radical act of self-love, baked with nutritious affirmation. But the counternarrative was no more than a den of denial because society does not celebrate Negroid phenotypes. If it did, I wouldn't have been covering my nose.

That night, as I stood in front of the mirror with a book hiding half of my face, I didn't have it in me to deny.

## **SOURCE LIST:**

Interviews –

Kimberly Jenkins, historian and fashion studies professor at Ryerson University

Amira Adawe, public health scientist and founder of The Beauty Well, a nonprofit organization that aims to end skin-lightening practices in African communities

Dr. Donna Oriowo, a sex therapist

Dr. Robert L. Reece, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin

Research –

“Girl on the Magazine Cover” (The University of North Carolina Press, 2001) by Carolyn Kitch

“The Bluest Eye” (Holt Reinhart, 1970) by Toni Morrison

“What are You Mixed with: The Effect of Multiracial Identification on Perceived Attractiveness” by Dr. Robert L. Reece

“Black and Beautiful: A Content Analysis and Study of Colorism and Strides toward Inclusivity in the Cosmetics Industry” by Cynthia M. Frisby at the University of Missouri

“Effect of African American Skin Tone on Advertising Communication” by Yuvay Jeanine Meyers at University of Texas at Austin

“Colorism and Police Killings” by Jandel Crutchfield at University of Texas at Arlington

“Black Models Matter: Challenging the Racism of Aesthetics and the Façade of Inclusion in the Fashion Industry” by Scarlett L. Newman at CUNY’s Graduate Center

“Displaced looks: The lived experience of beauty and racism” by Monica G. Moreno Figueroa at Newcastle University in the UK

“Colorism in High Fashion” by Malaika Handa

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