

Desecrated Spirits: Bodies, Intersectionality, Redemption, and Dark Skinned Girls  
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*Abstract. This paper considers questions of dishonoring the bodies of dark skinned African and African descended women and girls by considering intersecting oppressive systems of gender, race, class, and sexuality that desecrate the spiritual wellbeing of a dark skinned girl and may result in ultimately destroying her physical body. The experiences of dark skinned girls, questions of contexts of meaning, and intersectionality are analyzed using videos and documentaries. Redemption is explored within faith communities and their educational ministries for faith and formation.*

The body is God's tangible gift of love, touchable grace, given unconditionally.<sup>1</sup> The choice to honor or dishonor the body is also freely given to women, men, girls, and boys. We honor the tangible gift of the body through simple acts that include adorning, bathing, exercising, and resting the body.<sup>2</sup> We dishonor the body not only by failing at these practices but also through economic, political and social means that render the human body physically, emotionally, and/or psychologically unable to function optimally. Verbal and physical violence against the body by willfully divesting the body of its sacredness is to egregiously desecrate the body, God's unmerited gift of love.

While desecration of the body is gender specific it is not gender exclusive. We have witnessed the abused and murdered bodies of boys and young men at the hands of powerful men and women. However, desecration of the body is gender specific when we consider the nature of abuse and violation. Battered and psychologically abused women manifest in an alarming rate of one abused female in four. Young girls trafficked for sex, labor or organs occur in forms unique for females. While these physical forms of dishonoring the bodies of women and girls are important, this paper considers questions of dishonoring the bodies of dark skinned African and African descended women and girls by considering intersecting oppressive systems of gender, race, class, and sexuality that desecrate the spirit of a dark skinned girl and may result in ultimately destroying her physical body. What are the experiences of dark skinned women and girls that "kill their spirits" emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually? How are their experiences related to sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts of meaning? How do experiences and contexts of meaning intersect? What is the role of communities of faith in the desecration of dark girls' spirits? Where/what are the sites of redemption? What role might education for Christian faith and formation play?

Visual texts of film and video provide a starting point for analysis of African and African descended girls' experiences of desecration due to the dark hue of their skin. There are two visual texts selected for analysis. The first is a YouTube video of an experiment on skin color preferences among children done by a high school student name Kim Davis. The second is a preview of the documentary *Dark Girls*, directed and produced by D. Channsin Berry and Bill Duke. This documentary explores the deep-seated biases and attitudes about skin color,

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn L. Parker, "Honoring the Body" in Dorothy C. Bass and Susan R. Briehl (editors) *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*. (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

particularly dark skinned women, by people both within and outside African descended communities. While the documentary is yet to be released for general viewing, its nine minute trailer provides insights on key themes that thread the film. The central theme of dark skin color among African descended women connects to other themes that include physical features (e.g. hair texture) and sexuality. The theme of dark skin color begs questions of historical origin and the intersecting aspects of gender, race, class, and sexuality. This use of visual texts for analysis of skin color bias against dark skinned African descended women does not preclude the importance of other research methods that include empirical research such as oral histories and ethnographic studies. The use of video and film gives another analytical perspective (through cultural studies) that compliments empirical research on intersectional questions about African descended women's lives. Relevant to all research methods on the topic of skin color bias is a historical overview of the topic.

Individuals that experience negative treatment due to their racial/ethnic group, those who are non-white individuals, also experience racial bias connected to “the idea that White Eurocentric phenotypic characteristics (e.g. lighter skin and eye color, longer and straighter hair, narrower nose, and thinner lips) are preferable to features toward the other end of the continuum (e.g. darker skin color, kinkier hair, broader nose, fuller lips).”<sup>3</sup> Many scholars have examined the phenomena under the rubric of skin color bias within racial/ethnic groups (e.g. African American, Latino/a). The phenomena have been documented by scholars dating back to S. C. Drake and H. R. Cayton's 1945 publication of *Black Metropolis*.<sup>4</sup> The Kenneth and Mamie Clark Doll experiments during the 1930s and 40s demonstrated that black children preferred lighter skin toned dolls rather than dark skin toned dolls, believing the former were prettier and smarter.<sup>5</sup> There are many labels for the phenomena that include racial phenotypicity bias, Afrocentric bias, colorism, and skin tone bias.<sup>6</sup> “Some of these terms emphasize skin color or tone among those features reflecting an assumption by the researchers that skin tone (as opposed to variation in other features of the face) is the most salient or important dimension on which distinctions among group members may be made.”<sup>7</sup> Historical evidence suggests that both European Americans and African descended individuals in the United States demonstrated biases based on skin color dating back to the slavery era.<sup>8</sup> Within African American Communities skin tone bias influenced aspects of life including educational opportunities, employment, social advancement, and political involvement. Empirical data has shown that skin color bias effect on interpersonal outcomes mirrors the impact of racial bias.<sup>9</sup> While African Americans experience greater racial discrimination and disadvantages than whites regarding morbidity, mortality, and access to health care, darker skinned blacks are more likely to experience discrimination than lighter skinned blacks. “Studies suggest that darker skin tone is associated with higher diastolic and systolic blood pressure.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 383.

<sup>4</sup> Keith B. Maddox, “Perspectives on Racial Phenotypicity Bias.” In *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2004, vol. 8, No. 4, 384.

<sup>5</sup> Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Maddox, Ibid, 384.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 386.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Racial bias and accompanying stereotypes about people with dark skin color have a direct relationship to the experience of dark skinned girls. However, historical evidence through empirical research to support this claim is not readily available. Researchers continue to use the Clark Doll experiment to evaluate skin color preferences and stereotypes in children. The *Dark Girls Documentary* shows a contemporary Clark Doll experiment with a little black girl who consistently selects the white doll over the black doll as prettier and smarter in contrast to the ugly and dumb black doll. In 2007 New York high school student Kim Davis conducted the Clark Doll experiment with 21 African American children. In her short YouTube video documenting the experiment she features eight girls and three boys. Of the eight girls only two preferred the black doll. At the end of the video Kim summarizes her study indicating that fifteen out of twenty-one children preferred the white doll. The video shows a little black girl who unequivocally identifies the white doll as smarter and prettier. The last frame of the video shows the same little girl slowly pushing the black doll towards Kim in response to her question "Give me the doll that looks like you." Analysis of the little girl's facial features and body movements suggest an awareness that she is like the black doll. Without the ability to ask the little girl how she felt, her image suggests her awareness of being like the black doll seemed to damage her spirit, or violate the sacredness of her very being.

#### Desecrated Spirits of Dark Skinned Girls

Analysis of the *Dark Girls* documentary suggests two forms of desecration of the spiritual being of the women featured in the video. First, the women are desecrated because of rejection by their own community, the African American Community, because of their dark skin tone. There were several women who talked about such desecration. I wish to highlight three. One woman recalled a conversation with her friend about the friend's baby girl. The friend commented that she was "...so glad she [the baby] didn't come out dark." The woman in the video said, "When she said it, it felt like a dagger, like someone took a dagger and stuck it in my heart because I was use to expecting hearing something like that from other races. But this was someone I considered to be my sister." Another young woman recalled an incident where her mother was bragging about her appearance by naming all her physical features that made her daughter beautiful. The young woman recalled her mother saying, "My daughter is beautiful. She's got great eyelashes, she's got the cheekbones, and she's got great lips. And then she's going on and she adds can you imagine if she had any lightness in her skin at all she would be gorgeous... Just that last little part, just all the pride that I had, having her brag on me just dissipated, just dissipated." A third woman talked about whites complimenting her on her smooth skin and flawless complexion, concluding her statement with, "but my own people don't see any beauty in me." All three women woefully expressed the deep pain caused by skin color bias they experienced from other blacks who were sisters, mothers and significant community people. As several women mentioned earlier in the video, it's expected that degrading and hurtful remarks should come from whites and other racial/ethnic communities. Many of the women talked about such experiences during their childhood. However, the denigration experienced from intimate members of the black community painfully wounded the women emotionally and spiritually.

Another form of desecration due to rejection by members of the African American community has to do with sexual appeal to black men. Several women spoke about the pain of

being sought after in secret as a sexually exotic woman that is not worthy of public accompaniment with a black man as someone to date or marry. One woman commented, “The darker you are, it’s more of a sexual approach. It’s more of a relationship without much meaning sought of approach than it is I could get married to that woman and have a few kids.” A second woman commented, “All my lighter friends always had those boyfriends. They always were seen together, but if someone wanted to date me it was...I’ll meet you after school. It was more of a hidden thing. Nobody just wanted to be with you.” The video only showed women discussing heterosexual relationships with no mention of skin color bias among lesbian black women. Given the research on skin color bias among African Americans it is safe to speculate that dark skinned girls are also discriminated against among black same gender loving female relationships.

The second form of spiritual desecration that women in the *Dark Girls* documentary experienced is that of self-loathing. The sacred self of a dark skinned girl is battered by feelings that she is worthless because of her skin color. Women recalled the pain they felt as little girls with dark skin. The first women in the video said, “I can remember being in the bathtub asking my mom to put bleach in the water so that my skin would be lighter. And so I could escape the feeling I had of not being as beautiful, as acceptable, as lovable.” Another young woman stated, “I use to wish that I could wake up one day lighter or wash my face and think that it would change. I thought it was dirt and I tried to clean it off but it wouldn’t come off.” Other women recalled the pain of never being good enough or acceptable as a dark skinned girl. Even though the women in the video recalled painful incidences of growing up dark skinned the tears that streamed from their faces suggested deep seated trauma from skin color bias that they experience but had not been fully addressed.

Some women talked about their hair with a self-loathing point of view. Dark skinned girls are frequently ridiculed if their hair is kinky or curly. Some girls will cover their hair until they can get it chemically relaxed. Other girls have never seen their hair in a natural state because their mothers permed their hair from early childhood. The words of these women inferred self-loathing. On the other hand, a young dark skinned woman with permed straight hair stated, “It doesn’t look clean I feel like. It looks like nasty almost. If you just roll out of bed and if your hair is like nappy. It’s like the most disgusting like unclean thing.” Her words are clearly a self-loathing that is unreflective and an unawareness about the value of kinky hair. In contrast another young woman in the video made a conscious decision to wear an afro in celebration of her gift of kinky/curly hair.

Some women in the *Dark Girls* documentary offer commentary on the sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts of meaning. They discuss the history and effect of the slavery era in the United States that has resulted in internalized racism among African descended people that has resulted in skin color bias within the African American community. However, their analysis does not distance them from the pain and injury they experienced (and some continue to experience) as dark skinned women.

Although the sacred souls of dark skinned women have been violated by egregious stereotypes and prejudices about their skin color and hair there is hope for their desecrated spirits.

## The Role of the Congregation

What is the role of communities of faith in allaying the desecration of dark girls' spirits? Where/what are the sites of redemption? I hope that congregations, both predominately African American and mixed-race, are aware of the color consciousness that is related to the dark skin tone biases both within and outside the black community. By color consciousness I mean issues of race and ethnicity are taken seriously as problems stretching back more than four hundred years to the African enslavement era. Unlike color conscious congregations, some congregations prefer to ignore problems of race/ethnicity that members of their congregations face daily. A color conscious congregation seeks to address problems of race and ethnicity in support of their parishioners. Support for racial/ethnic persons who struggle with issues of race/racism and prejudice that includes skin color bias includes effective pastoral care, worship contexts that highlight the issues, and advocacy on behalf of dark skinned women and girls that shapes local, state, and federal policy as well as ecclesial policy.

What role might education for Christian faith and formation play? I imagine the use of the Bible (Bible Study) coupled with the issues of skin color bias/colorism as possible new practices for communities of faith. Such a Bible study is necessary to influence society in a way that redeems, justifies, and fortifies the bodies of dark skin girls and thus their spirits. Bible study should explore The Song of Solomon and other relevant texts such as Psalms 139:13-14:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

Film and video such as the *Dark Girls* documentary should be placed alongside selected biblical texts to explore the issues of colorism. The documentary allows some distance from the lived painful experiences of dark skinned girls in congregations. Bible study should be coupled with pastoral care in an effort to heal girls as well as educate them.

The video preview of the *Dark Girls* documentary begins and ends with one of the dark skinned participants who tearfully lamented about her fear of having a dark skinned baby girl. She offers hope to women like herself with the words "Rise dark girls." Indeed a dark skinned girl must rise up from her desecrated place so her spirit can soar in the sacred embrace of the Holy Spirit as an honored and beloved child of God.