Shady Beats: Unveiling Colourism in Hip-hop and Rap Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Colourism, the act of discriminating individuals as a result of their skin tone, is often perpetuated by members of the same ethnic group, resulting in this form of prejudice being intra-racial. Colourism prevails within Black communities worldwide. Within the growing body of literature, which primarily reveals the experience of African American women in the United States, research shows African American women of darker skin tones face barriers in their everyday lives due to this discrimination. This research examines instances of colourism within rap and hip-hop music. I examine the lyrics of 20 popular songs performed by Black North American artists who all reinforce colourist ideologies. Drawing on Black Feminist Thought to explain the systemic discrimination faced by Black women, the research finds the ongoing negative colourist messaging within hip-hop and rap music to be prevalent within the last twenty years. This research addresses the ongoing struggles faced by Black women, particularly those of darker skin tones.

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of Jean-Murat Georges, my father, whose profound passion for Black empowerment continues to live on.

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Feminist critiques of the sexism and misogyny in gangsta rap, and in all aspects of popular culture, must continue to be bold and fierce. Black females must not allow ourselves to be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the race by resisting.

– bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Aye, where them yellow bones?
I don't want no black bitch
I'm already black, I don't need no black bitch
Put yo' hands up if you a bad bitch
Kodak Black, "Snap Shit", *Psychotic & Iconic*, 2017

Colourism has long affected Black communities and other racial communities around the world, but this form of discrimination continues to be ignored in the research agenda. Coined by African American writer Alice Walker in 1983, colourism refers to the ongoing prejudice and discrimination faced by persons of colour whose skin is deemed too dark (Davis, 2020). Forty years later, colourism continues to influence how we see one another. Sadly, this form of discrimination often originates from within the Black community, resulting in intragroup conflict. Like racism, this form of discrimination can be traced to European colonialism and their viewpoints on race and hierarchies. In American history, early forms of colourism presented themselves within the distinction of "Field Negroes" treated as objects – used for labour and reproduction, while their counterparts, "House Negroes", who were forced to care for the social lives of their masters such as child care and domestic work, were at times lighter skinned (Hall, 2023). It is important to note that this distinction was not intentional. Rather, the distinction was learnt and utilized by masters to further create racialized hierarchy and divide amongst the workers within the plantation (Hall, 2023). Though incorrect and dated, these colourist assumptions persist in our communities today. As a result, White supremacy has unfortunately been adopted by marginalized groups, which they impose on their own. This form of intercultural discrimination can also be found among Southern and Northern Asian groups, Latin American groups and Black racial groups around the world.

Lighter skin is a form of social capital as studies have shown several benefits awarded to lighter skin persons, which have improved their life chances such as higher income levels, most likely to marry, most likely to be seen as attractive and less likely to be perceived as dangerous (Hunter, 2007; Keith & Herring,1991; Wade et al., 2006; Hamilton et al., 2009). Hunter (2007) notes the two dimensions of colourism. The first dimension is that African North Americans[1] already live in a society wherein discrimination and systematic racism permeate their everyday lives solely due to their race – regardless of their skin tone. The second dimension, colourism, creates further discrimination for a specific group of African North Americans. As Hunter (2007) states:

> Although all blacks experience discrimination as blacks, the intensity of that discrimination, the frequency, and the outcomes of that discrimination will differ dramatically by skin tone. (p.238)

As such:

> Darker-skinned African Americans may earn less money than lighter-skinned African Americans, although both earn less than whites. These two systems of discrimination (race and colour) work in concert. The two systems are distinct, but inextricably connected". (Hunter, 2007, p. 238)
>
> Though colourism affects both men and women, Black men and women experience it very differently, and women experience the phenomenon most negatively. Thus, this research examines the experience of Black North American women.

Through a Black Feminist lens, Collins (2000) notes that "African-American women come to understand the workings of intersecting oppressions without obvious teaching or

[1] For the purpose of this study, Blacks, African and North American will be used interchangeably to mimic the studies and books cited throughout this study.

conscious learning" (p.88). As this research demonstrates, though many of us are not taught that colourism exists, Black women quickly become aware of this discrimination through their mothers, friends, schools, partners, and mass media. Light-skinned women are affected by colourism differently as "darker women face being judged inferior and receiving the treatment afforded to "too-big Negro girls with nappy hair" (p.91). Thus, my research demonstrates explicitly how colourism within music depicts darker-skinned Black women.

1.2 Research Question and Objectives

While research has linked the existence of colourism in North America to slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries and the influence of White supremacy (Hunter, 2002; Collins, 2000; Hall, 2021), I demonstrate within this study that North American Black male musicians also reinforce Western ideals of beauty. The purpose of this study is to understand how Western society's beauty standards, which valorize Eurocentric features, have influenced the ongoing colourist ideology within the Black community that continues to create social disadvantages for dark-skinned women. My research question asks: *How prevalent is colourism in rap and hip-hop music performed by Black North American male artists? And how do its lyrics depict darker-skinned Black North American women?*

This research question is sociologically relevant as it not only aims to unpack another facet of colourism, which is in itself an ongoing form of racial bias that affects different ethnicities throughout the globe, but it also focuses on how dominant pop culture harms the perceptions of many Black women in North America which results and perpetuates racial subjugation. Colourism also deeply harms the Black community by advancing beauty standards that affect the everyday lives of dark-skinned women. It is also significant as it shapes the lives

of many Black women. Equally, it is thought-provoking as it can be a new concept for many readers unaware of this form of discrimination. Finally, the topic of colourism continues to be under-researched, and this study would provide new information to this growing body of literature.

The goals of this study are threefold: First, it will investigate the presence of colourism within North American rap and hip-hop music between the years of 2000 and 2022. Second, the study demonstrates how lighter-skinned Black women and darker-skinned Black women are described and perceived differently through this music. Finally, it will reveal how colourism in music may negatively affect and influence the choices and minds of young Black youth.

1.3 Reflexivity

I have entered this research with my own standpoint deriving from my own experiences as a dark-skinned Black woman, a second-generation immigrant born in Canada with Haitian heritage. Findings reported in scholarly research resonated with my own experiences (Leath and Mims, 2023; Bond and Cash, 1992). I enter this research knowing that I am not a neutral party. Having been offered skin-bleaching products, told my hair would be better if relaxed and straightened, and told my nose is a bit too broad, I enter this research with past experiences that have shaped the way I perceive colourism and how I perceive myself. In the past, I have also allowed myself to succumb to colourist ideologies and Eurocentric beauty standards. For example, I have spent thousands of dollars on wigs to mask my hair and would never allow others to see my natural hair. My perception of myself and how I want to represent myself has thankfully changed in the past few years as I wear braids regularly now as a *protective* hairstyle (not as one to hide my natural hair) and only wear wigs when I desire – no longer as a necessity. Additionally, I have heard many of the songs I will later discuss and have even had some

downloaded and enjoyed them before *truly* listening to the lyrics. Unfortunately, songs may sound good until you recognize the message that is being shared.

I recognize that my knowledge of the subject and experience may influence how I perceive my findings. However, nothing found in this research is ethical or positive, hence why I do not aim for this analysis to be free of bias. As someone who is a victim of these colourist ideologies and who continues to hear this music, I feel as though it is important to speak truthfully about the negativity surrounding this topic. However, I also demonstrate how artists have gone against this dominant ideology and provided positive representations of all Black skin tones. My hope is that in the future, more research can be conducted to analyze how colourism *no longer* affects or is *no longer* such a prevalent issue within racial groups. Presently, however, this issue continues to affect us and needs to be addressed.

It is also important to note my position as a Sociology student at the University of Manitoba. Though equipped with a remarkably knowledgeable all-female committee, I am the only Black woman on this project. I am also researching a critical topic surrounding people in my community without the help of someone from my community. Due to the power dynamics in which I am the student and them as experts/professors, I am also taking direction in completing this thesis. When entering my Master's program, there were no Black professors within the department. As such, I am a Black student surrounded by a predominately White department and living in a White majority city. Though I may have *different* knowledge deriving from lived experiences on specific topics presented in this thesis, I am confident that the committee I have chosen to guide me in completing this thesis have extensive expertise on racial issues, women's rights and the dimensions of pop culture.

1.4 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 reviews the literature surrounding this research. First, I outline the Western beauty standards and demonstrate that the Eurocentric beauty ideal has become a standard of beauty for women, regardless of their race. In addition, this beauty ideal does not solely focus on facial features; rather, it focuses on one's entire body. It also notes how difficult it is for Black women to achieve this standard of beauty. Secondly, this chapter examines colourism in the research. It notes its origin, with its roots beginning with European colonialism. The chapter also focuses on how colourism has become embedded in society and specifically how it affects Black North American women. Here, past research is also shared that demonstrates how young Black girls learn about colourism at an early age. The struggles many Black North American women face in terms of life opportunities, skin bleaching, hairstyles, and prejudice faced by Black men are discussed. Lastly, this chapter mentions past research surrounding colourism in music. Sexual Scripts, derived by Dionne Stephens and Layli Phillips is used within this research to examine how Black women are portrayed in the songs analyzed.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework. It examines how Black feminist thought will help further analyze colourism within rap and hip-hop music. It also highlights four tenets Patricia Hills Collins deems important to Black feminist thought.

Chapter 3 outlines my methodology, detailing my data-gathering process, including the use of genius.com, coding, searching keywords, and identifying the limitations surrounding data acquisition. Chapter 4 examines 20 songs released within 2000 and 2023 that include colourist ideologies. Music videos are presented to support the analysis at times. Additionally, lyrics are analyzed in connection to existing research. This chapter also examines themes that derived from my research question. These themes include colourism within music, songs referring to a light-

skinned woman's body as an object, the dislike of darker-skinned women, colourism affecting men, female artists and colourism, and artists that may be depicting both sides of the fight. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the limitations of the data, outline the significance of this research, and propose future studies that would help grow this body of literature.

My research demonstrates the intra-racial discrimination many of us Black women face at the hands of our own – Black men. It reveals the ways in which Black men objectify us and divide us often into two categories – dark-skinned and ugly or light-skinned and sexy. It uncovers how many within the Black community have internalized self-hatred for their skin tone – another of the long-lived consequences we continue to endure at the hands of colonialism. It unveils what is commonly unknown to others within different racial and ethnic groups and it can disguise itself as something so ordinary and ingrained in our everyday practices that it is unknown in our own community as well. Colourism may affect how we navigate society without knowing its profound impact on our daily existence. The songs analyzed in this research expose how colourism is hidden in plain sight through music and how easy it has become ingrained within us all. The lyrics by Kodak Black found at the beginning of this chapter are a glimpse of the long list of songs that currently trend, despite their intense and hateful colourist ideals.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

For instance, I get-get my dick licked, Red bone, complexion like a piglet, kiss-kiss
A$AP Rocky, "Keep it G", *LIVE.LOVE.A$AP*. **2011**

Though a relatively newly studied phenomenon, researchers have found and discussed several events and outcomes related to colourism at the expense of African American women. Below, I discuss Western beauty standards and their effect on the emergence of colourism, colourism as a phenomenon and its prevalence in Black women's everyday lives, and finally, colourism in music.

2.1 Western Beauty Standards

Studies show that women worldwide are met with a beauty standard that is often unattainable for most (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; Cunningham et al., 1995). Within this beauty standard, "value[s] are placed on fair skin, light colored eyes, hair that is long, straight, and light in color, and smaller facial features and thinner bodies" (Avery et al., 2021, p.181). Perkins et al. (2023) add cleanliness and valuing their personal appearance to the dominant beauty standard (p.873). Worldwide, women continue to face this beauty standard through advertising, further pushing a 'normative' beauty ideal (Russell, 2021). Beauty standards have also been influenced by the media and have resulted in women seeking surgical body alterations to achieve the standard that Western society deems to be beautiful (Harrison, 2003). Sha (2023) notes that between the years of 2005 and 2013, women of colour were increasingly getting plastic surgery to better resemble Eurocentric ideals. Within the beauty ideal, women are also encouraged to be thin, but not too thin, because that would lead to negativity (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006). However, the curvier body is now becoming a new obsession– which has been more apparent through

social media (Hunter et al., 2020). Fujikoka et al.'s (2009) survey revealed that White women have a desire to be thinner, but Black women desire the curvier body. Hunter et al. (2020) named this the Curvy Ideal, which is defined as "a body with a small waist and wider hips" (p.239). It is important to note that society places a clear divide between curvy and fat, as fat shaming the "practice wherein people living with overweight or obesity are purposefully stigmatised and made to feel ashamed because of their body size" continues to exist (Dolezal and Spratt, 2023, p.89).

Several studies have shown that the one beauty standard that is hardest for many to achieve is fair skin (Snell & Tsai, 2017; Russell, 2021; Hunter, 2005). Eurocentric features including long straight hair, narrowed noses and coloured eyes are also desired (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006, Hunter, 2005; Maxwell et al., 2016) but are more accessible to achieve through surgical means. Thus, Black North American women live in a society which holds their natural features and beauty to a lower standard. The emphasis on fair skin being the ideal essence of beauty ignores Black women and renders it impossible to achieve the white standard of beauty, which further alienates them in society and Otherizes them (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) further states that these controlling images in popular culture that do not represent Black beauty and features work to "derogate African American women" (p.89). In a study interviewing 640 Black college women, Avery et al. (2021) found that Black women have complied with the beauty ideal and "are not protected from the sociocultural pressures of hegemonic femininity and its emphasis on Whiteness and thinness" resulting in a negative view of their body (p. 188). Black women are in a constant battle when attempting to achieve a beauty standard that celebrates and is, by definition, a "proximity to Whiteness" (Perkins et al., 2023, p.874.).

2.2 Colourism

It is important to note that research on colourism among Black communities is mostly located in the United States. In contrast, research in Canada is limited and heavily influenced by American discourse. As a result, much of the research reviewed relies on studies conducted by American authors representing African American women and men. This is one of the gaps in our research knowledge.

The origin of colourism is rooted in the dimensions of globalization that enabled the forced kidnapping and slavery of Africans to the Americas (Stevenson, 2015). As enslavers abused and raped enslaved women, more light-skinned children of mixed race were born and took on prominent leadership roles that were not available to their African and Caribbean parents (Hunter, 2005). Many of these mixed-race children of much lighter skin tone, possessing Eurocentric features were categorized as "mulattos" and were awarded benefits that their darker-skinned counterparts did not receive (Ross, 1997; Reece, 2018). These benefits included the ability to work as house enslaved people who did not face the heat and dangers slaves working in the fields experienced, although their own abuse in the households cannot be devalued (Hunter ,2013; Hunter, 2005; Ross, 1997). Other benefits may at times have included better clothing, education and even the chance of freedom – especially those related to plantation owners, although this was not always the case (Hunter, 2013; Hunter, 2005; Ross, 1997). The differential distinction and status given to lighter-skinned Blacks began to be internalized by the Black community (Lane & Mahdi, 2013). As several light-skinned enslaved people who were granted manumission made their way into leadership roles by becoming successful entrepreneurs, the distinction between light-skinned and dark-skinned Blacks intensified (Hunter, 2005). Some light-skinned Blacks continued to benefit from White people for their white skin and "white

blood" as they gained higher status, access to various social clubs, and prestigious employment opportunities (Hunter 2005; Makkar & Strube, 1995; Stephens & Few, 2007). The historical "benefits" of being Black but with light skin continues to permeate the dominant discourse of colourism today.

It is important to note, however, that not all mixed-race children experienced these benefits. As stated by Almaguer & Jung (1998), mulattos born from a Black enslaved mother were still categorized and treated as enslaved people. For example, in Maryland, the law designated that mulattos born from a Black mother were to be enslaved, while those born by a White mother were to work as servants for seven years (Stroud, 1856).

Collins (2000) makes note that "(i)nstitutions controlled by Whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject White images of beauty" (p.91). Thus, colourism continued to develop as Blacks learnt that they were "better-off" if they possessed Eurocentric features. It became clear that lighter-skinned Blacks were awarded more privilege than their counterparts, and Black persons commenced in furthering these anti-Black ideologies (Okazawa-Rey et al., 1986).

Unfortunately, this form of internalized racism continues to exist within the Black community today. Children learn which skin tone is desirable at an early age by their mothers, friends, and family members (Spellers, 2003; Collins, 2000). Children quickly realize the difference between 'good hair' and 'bad hair' (also categorized as nappy hair), as well as 'light-skinned' and 'dark-skinned' (Spellers, 2003, p. 223; Banks, 2000). Though this is unfortunate, Black parents have realized that "to be born light mean[s] that one [is] born with an advantage recognized by everyone" on the other hand, "to be born dark [is] to start life handicapped, with a

serious disadvantage" (hooks, 2006, p.204). (h)ooks (2006) finds that while a parents' typical initial concern at the birth of their child is their gender (and health), for Black parents, the initial concern is the shade of Black their baby possesses due to the reality of the discourse in which we live today. It is also important to note that colourism is a gendered phenomenon. Previous research shows that colourism affects Black men and women differently, as men are most likely to endorse it through their actions, and women, primarily dark-skinned women, are most likely to be negatively affected by it (Hunter, 2008; Phoenix, 2014; Laybourn, 2018; Alexander & Carter, 2022).

This beauty ideal surrounding fair skin has, in turn, resulted in several different means of achieving it. Such means include skin bleaching which are also known as, "skin lighteners, skin whiteners, skin toning creams, skin evening cream, skin fading gels, and so forth" (Hunter, 2008, p.73). These are utilized by the use of soaps, creams, pills, injections, cosmetic procedures and homemade products (typically made with baking soda and bleach) (Ashikari, 2005; Hunter, 2008; Mohammed et al., 2017). Skin bleaching is a lucrative global market, estimated to be $8 billion in 2020 (Senthilingam et al., 2020). Skin bleaching, however, is extremely harmful, "African women [users] incur increased risks to their health leading to the disruption of internal organ function" (Hall, 2008, p.37). The ingredients in skin-bleaching products, mainly steroids, hydroquinone and mercury, are extremely harmful to one's skin (Senthilingam et al., 2020). While the increased use of steroids can lead to infections and mercury may cause kidney and liver damage, and neurological issues, hydroquinone may be a carcinogen (Senthilingam et al., 2020). Though many side effects follow its use, bleaching must be used constantly to achieve and maintain a lighter skin tone. It is "marketed as simply another beauty product available to

women to increase their beauty, their Whiteness, and therefore, their status" (Hunter, 2008, p.73).

Hair has also become a constant struggle for Black women in terms of meeting the "western standard" of beauty. Hair is a central part of a Black woman's identity, and in many ways, it can result in her acceptance or denial in society as it holds social meaning (Spellers, 2003; Rosario et al., 2021). Hair possessed by Black people come in various textures, ranging from tight, coily curls to looser curls. Since tight coily hair can often be hard to untangle and manage, it is often called "nappy" and "bad". In contrast, Black people can also possess looser curled hair that can be managed more regularly and easily straightened. The latter appears more Eurocentric and is often described as "good" hair (Banks, 2000; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1986; Robinson, 2011). Though this varies, dark-skin Black persons are those most likely to have what is categorized as "nappy" hair and unfortunately this type of hair "is not celebrated in a society that privileges straight (blonde) hair, and by extension, white skin" (Banks, 2000, p.24). Measures used to achieve straighter hair include purchasing hair relaxers to straighten one's natural hair, which also contains harmful chemicals (Helm et al., 2018). Those with hair deemed undesirable also purchase wigs, weaves and extensions regularly, which are incredibly costly. Baboolall et al. (2022) find that African Americans are spending billions yearly on beauty in the United States.

In addition to using dangerous products and purchasing expensive products to achieve the beauty standard, dark-skinned Black women are faced with prejudice in their everyday lives and by Black men. Studies find various ways in which skin tone has negatively affected Black North American women. For example, dark-skinned women earn less money than light-skinned women (Hunter, 2013). Thus, family income is also affected as it increases with one's lighter

complexion (Keith & Herring, 1991). This can be a result of the fact that White managers hire light-skinned job seekers over dark-skinned ones even though their credentials are similar (Wade et al., 2006). Light-skinned women are also at an advantage in educational attainment as they were found to have "more than one entire year of additional education than a darker-skinned woman with similar background characteristics" (Hunter, 2002, p.182). This disparity may exist due to the life advantages a light-skinned woman's parents may have had. In terms of marriage, Hamilton et al. (2009) assert that a Black female's skin tone influences her chances of marriage and that "young Black women with light complexion were significantly more likely to have been married than dark-skinned Black women" (p. 45). A recent study by Alexander and Carter (2022) finds that among their participants, "men preferred light over medium skin tones, light over dark-skin tones, and medium over dark-skin tones" (p.248). These findings demonstrate the ongoing tiring struggle faced by Black women to feel accepted. Their "hair and skin tone become sites of African American women's struggles to define their identity and their relationship to Black men" (Spellers, 2003, p.223).

2.3 Colourism in Music

Studies show that rap and hip-hop are the most popular genres of music for young American adults, and 80%-85% of its consumers are African Americans (Maxwell et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2003). Though data on young Canadian adults' music preferences is sparse, a study by The Nielson Company (2019) finds that young Canadian adults listen to dance, hip-hop and rap more than any other genre of music. However, classic rock or pop remains the most popular throughout the country. Sullivan (2003) finds that Black teens are most likely to listen to hip-hop and rap and believed that rap was a "truthful reflection of society" (p.613). According to

Roberts et al. (2005), Black teens are also most likely to listen to rap and hip-hop performed by other Black artists. In addition, Miranda et al. (2015) note that music can act as an influence "to the development of ethnic identity in adolescence" (p.208). Thus, African Americans are most likely to be influenced by such genres of music, but only a small body of research has analyzed colourist ideals within music videos and lyrics.

In their study, Perkins et al. (2023) found that Black women's body image and mental health were negatively affected by the portrayal of Black women in mainstream media. These portrayals included Black women within the Eurocentric beauty ideal – slim, straight hair and lighter skin. To date, research has demonstrated that colourism exists within rap and hip-hop (Conrad et al., 2009; Stephens & Few, 2007; Maxwell et al., 2016). Stephens & Few (2007) find that the sexual depiction of African American women in hip-hop music videos as overly sexual and influenced male and female adolescents to believe that Eurocentric features are more attractive. Stokes (2007) reveals that common portrayals of beauty in music videos and songs emphasize Eurocentric features such as long, straight hair and light skin as the norm. These caricatures cause African American adolescent girls to want to attain these beauty standards. Maxwell, Abrams and Belgrave (2016) take note of the various nicknames given to women concerning her skin colour such as "light-skin" and "yellow-bone". Their study also reveals the common exclusion of dark-skinned Black women – though they are sometimes included when portraying women negatively or for a song specifically celebrating skin colour.

Video representations also affect our views regarding beauty. Conrad et al. (2009) report the gendered component of colourism within rap and hip-hop videos as women were most likely to be light-skinned, though men in videos were most likely to be dark-skinned. Additionally, physical attributes differed as "male characters are more likely than female characters to have

Afrocentric features. Female characters are more likely to have Eurocentric features including thinner noses and lips, and straighter and longer hair" demonstrating the pressure women face to attain the Eurocentric beauty ideal (p. 152). Ultimately, rap is a multi-billion-dollar industry that continues to dominate and is influencing and shaping the minds of millions of African American youths and adults.

It is essential to note the importance of music within a sociological lens as its consumption subsequently shapes our understanding of the world. Music is an example of culture, a "set of processes or practices through which individuals and groups produce, consume and make sense of things, including their own identities" (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p.6). Furthermore, such culture "is produced through complex networks of making, watching, talking, gesturing, looking, and acting – networks through which meanings are negotiated among members of a society or group" (p.6). Within this study, findings show how meanings have been created within Black communities surrounding images within music. Music is also often consumed regularly, at times every day and whilst doing different activities, shaping our everyday life. Thus, Sturken and Cartwright (2018) note that music, as an element of media consumption is "how we make meaning through our practices of looking at things" and is related to how "media inform[s] [our] everyday practice" (p. 222). The authors also state that consumers often long for specific lifestyles that they consume through various means of media (p.228). Ultimately, "music serves to stimulate the mind, stir the soul, and elicit emotions" (Adams and Fuller, 2006, p.938-939). Our minds, actions, and perceptions are often formed as a result of our music choices.

2.4 Sexual Scripts

In *Outlaw Culture*, bell hooks pens various essays examining cultural expressions and provides amazing explorations of what we think we know. Of particular importance to my research includes her analysis of the emergence of gangsta rap, the wrongs in the messages in our music, internalized racism, beauty standards, colourism, and sexism. In particular, she states that Black men in America:

> Often find that the assertion of sexist domination is their only expressive access to the patriarchal power they are told all men should possess as their gendered birthright. Hence, it should not surprise or shock that many black men support and celebrate 'rape culture'. That celebration has found its most powerful contemporary voice in misogynist rap music. (hooks, 1994, p.129)

These artists, celebrating misogynistic and sexist messages are celebrated, rather than condemned and ignored.

Stephens & Phillips (2003) categorized sexual scripts, also known as stereotypes, forced onto Black women which later "became the foundation for framing African American women's sexuality through the eyes of the wider culture, the African American community, and eventually, through which African American women themselves came to understand their position in American society" (p. 8). It is important to note that these are presumed heteronormative characters that fail to mention members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community and mimic the sexual normativity of the songs chosen for this study.

While they note that these scripts used to include the *Jezebel*, the *Mammy*, the *Welfare Mother* and the *Matriarch* (which are not analyzed to the songs studied in this research) which all "reflect dominant male cultural beliefs about females and African Americans sexuality", from

these scripts have emerged eight new ones representing how Black women are perceived today (p.10). The authors also note these scripts are widely used in hip-hop, namely in their music videos. Of these eight the *Diva*, *Gold Digger, Freak* and *Earth Mother* are used throughout my research. These scripts "not only work to reinforce stereotypical beliefs of viewers living in predominantly White communities who have little contact with members of other racial or ethnic groups… but also shape how African American adolescent women view themselves" (p.14).

Table 1: Sexual Scripts

(Stephens & Phillips, 2003)

Diva	Divas are known to be pretty, high maintenance and light-skin. The Diva has her own money, but searches for a man who is up-to-par to match her lifestyle.
Gold Digger	Gold diggers are seen as women who use sex as a commodity. They tend to be seen as "ghetto", poor and in need of men to sustain themselves.
Freak	Freaks are described as women who are hypersexual with no desire for relationships or monetary gain. A woman can be categorized as a Freak through her physical appearance or her actions.
Earth Mother	The Earth Mother is seen as a woman who knows herself and what she wants. She often wears Afrocentric clothes and hairstyles. She is vocal about her rights, is spiritual, attractive and this often intimidates men.
Dyke	"Dykes" are typified as masculine women who have gone against the grain – against "heteronormality". This woman is not interested in men

	– often said to have had a bad experience with men resulting in this woman being a part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. She is often unwanted and seen as abnormal.
Gangster Bitch	Gangster Bitches are seen as aggressive women but value their male partners. They've grown up in poverty and enjoy trouble. These women provide comfort, alibis, and sex for their men.
Sister Savior	These religious women see sex as a sacred act. Sister Saviors do not explore their sexual identity as sexual activity is feared through the guise of God.
Baby Mama	Any of the scripts above can ultimately become a Baby Mama. Though the Baby Mama always describes the mother of one's child, she can be estranged, in a relationship, or highly respected by the father of the child. However, the Baby Mama can also be seen as a woman, so desperate for a connection with a man to "trap" him by having his child.

Divas are women with an attitude and care about the attention they receive while ensuring they are the center of attention (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Divas are known to be pretty, high maintenance, "long, straightened hair, not too dark skinned, having a slender build, being a tad modest but not wearing skimpy clothing" (p.15). Divas are also identified as light-skinned women who are "ghetto and sultry" – but never too much (p.16). When referring to women, ghetto describes women whose "behaviors, dress, communication, and interaction styles" that do not comply with the version of femineity expected by society (Thompson &

Keith, 2004, p.58). Instead of being forthright with their sexuality, they do so more obliquely using "seductive walk, glances, body shaping outfits, and totally coiffed appearance" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.16). They are also solely attracted to men that are successful but do not necessarily care for his money – as they provide for themselves. Divas are successful and wealthy enough to maintain their own lifestyles, pay for their own hair, nails, and clothes. Thus, she is "not seeking material goods, the Diva selects men based on how their achievements can enhance what she already has. His social standing must help the Diva gain greater awe, envy, and attention as what being associated with him signifies not only to the Diva herself, but also how it looks to those around her that is important" (p.17). The Diva is one of the more predominant characteristics appearing in the lyrics of the songs selected for this study.

Unlike the Diva who is not concerned with the wealth of a potential mate, but rather his social standing, the *Gold Digge*r is "a woman who explicitly seeks material and economic rewards above all else and is willing to trade sex for it" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.17). Such economic rewards may include groceries, material gifts, vacations, etc. The Gold Digger is portrayed as poor without sex and a wealthy partner, as "sex is her commodity because it is the only valuable thing she has in society" (p.17). The Gold Digger links her persona to poverty and 'ghetto-ness'. The Gold Digger are women who equate men with money and are merely interested in the financial gain they can expect from that man. How do Gold Diggers find partners? The authors state that "some would argue that the men never saw it coming" (p.19). Another assumption is that "men want women they can buy, presumably so they can control them" (p.19).

The Freak is seen as a woman who does not solely perform sexual acts for monetary gain, rather, she does so because she wants to as "she is seen as a woman who simply loves to

have sex without any emotional attachment" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.20). Other names for her persona include "slut, ho, chickenhead, hoodrat [and] floozy" (p.20). When asked the definition of hoodrat, Black college girls characterized the character as 'too much' and as "a Black woman engaging in illegal activity, loud/ratchet/ghetto, and a joke in the Black community" (Leath & Mims, 2020, p.784). Physically, a freak is to wear "dresses in tight clothing, short skirts, and walks with a strut in the mall; often such women are assumed to be strippers" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003,p.21). The freak is unapologetically herself and becomes tempting to others, rather than seen as shameful like a Gold Digger. They "use sex as a means of gaining sexual control over their partners while fulfilling their own insatiable physical needs" (p.21). The Freak is characterized as one who lets it be known through her everyday clothing and activities, while the *undercover* Freak is known as one who "by day protect[s] the good girl image, but in a darkened club or under the sheets engage in unconventional sexual games for personal physical pleasure" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.21). But this Freak is only accepted if she does so within her own relationship and privately, "anything outside this context is problematic, labeling the women a Freak, available for all comers and takers" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.21). This temptation however does not include sexual relationships with her as men are "most comfortable with this hyper-sexual image but have little respect for it" (p.22). Additionally, "admitting this attraction or associating oneself with the Freak is undesirable" for men (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.21).

The *Earth Mother* is distinctively different than the latter scripts. She is in tune with herself and her spirituality. These women's "Afrocentric political and spiritual consciousness is obviously part of their everyday discourse and worldview, as expressed through their general demeanor, and the lyrical content of their songs" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p.31). Additionally,

“They embrace the naturalness of their hair by choosing not to use chemicals, instead wearing dreadlocks, afros, or other alternative styles” and acknowledge different skin tones and body types (p.31). Women who are framed as Earth Mothers are seen as intimidating as these women do not necessarily need a partner for their advancement. If they do have a male partner, he tends to reflect her beliefs and is also an activist for his community. These women also have a heightened sense “self-assurance, self-esteem, and level of racial identity” and rejects negative and harmful norms surrounding sex and gender (p.32). The authors state, “most adolescents are learning to negotiate their sexual selves and rely on the sexual scripts to guide what models are acceptable for fitting in with their peers. Earth Mothers reject this, and as such, are alienated as potential partners for mainstream members of Hip Hop culture” (p.32).

Examples of each of these scripts are shown within the lyrics of the songs that make up the analytical database for my thesis. These scripts will help better understand the ideologies of men in reference to the persona a woman is given in relation to her skin tone and how she is perceived. While these scripts are displayed in music videos, the lyrics of songs below will reveal that these scripts can also be visualized and found with the words of artists. I must also acknowledge that the terms “Gold Digger” and “Diva” do appear in music studied but the “Earth Mother” does not. In addition, while terms such as slut, ho, and hoodrat are alarmingly offensive, they are important to note that these are so often used to describe Black women – no matter which ‘sexual script’ others label them. These terms are unfortunately commonly used in music and appears throughout lyrics examined in my study.

As Adams and Fuller (2006) state, misogyny in rap “provides the listener with derogatory views of women" and “these views ultimately support, justify, instill, and perpetuate ideas, values, beliefs, and stereotypes that debase women” (p. 940). The authors subsequently provide

six themes that are often present in rap songs whom are considered to be misogynistic. Though not all songs will include all themes, the first theme is sure to be present. These include:

> (a) derogatory statements about women in relation to sex; (b) statements involving violent actions toward women, particularly in relation to sex; (c) references of women causing "trouble" for men; (d) characterization of women as "users" of men; (e) references of women being beneath men; and (f) references of women as usable and discardable beings. (p. 940).

Unfortunately, all six themes can be found throughout songs analyzed below.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

2.5.1 Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought is a theoretical framework that can assist in our understanding of colourism and its influence on the development of contemporary Black music. Patricia Hills Collins' is an important scholar in the literature surrounding Black feminist thought. Hills extensively analyzed the theory in *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought* (1989) and was later more popularized in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). Her work is useful in understanding the complexities of the lives of Black women (Armour-Burton & Etland, 2020; James-Gallaway, 2024; Porter at al., 2020). Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework highlights several dimensions of oppression faced by Black women (and other oppressed groups), but also the women who fought against the systems that have for so long and (continue to) prevent us from upward mobility.

Black feminist thought allows Black women to question and challenge our experiences that have unfortunately been decided for us. As Collins (2000) states, "clarifying Black women's

experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black feminist thought" (p. 16). This paradigm gives us the opportunity to write the end of our stories and not accept our fate that has already been written for many of us. Black feminist thought also recognizes that Black female intellectuals who have and are contributing to this theory are not always located within academia like Alice Walker and bell hooks. Others include "not previously considered intellectuals – many of whom may be working-class with jobs outside academia" such as Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, and women in politics such as Michaëlle Jean or Ketanji Onyika Brown Jackson, performers like India Arie or Lupita Nyong'o, or simply your aunt, mother or grandmother (p.17). Though "producing intellectual work is generally not attributed to Black women artists and political activists" these women's very existence and knowledge gained from their experiences warrants their thoughts to be incorporated within the Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000).

This ability to express my lived experience as a Black woman from Canada on a larger scale within academia is a new phenomenon in terms of disseminating Black feminist thought. According to Collins (2000), the situation of having one's voice ignored or diminished historically can be interpreted as "subjugated knowledge" (p.251). Music and other forms of expression are some of the earliest ways that Black feminist scholars can have their voices finally "heard". In speaking about power and authority, Collins (2000) states:

> (t)he suppression of Black women's ideas within White-male controlled social institutions led African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness. More recently, higher education and the news media have emerged as increasingly important sites for Black feminist intellectual activity. (p. 252)

Black feminist thought empowers Black women (and other marginalized women), giving them a space in which they feel included, and most importantly, to provide awareness of the negative lived experiences of Black women. Such lived experience does not solely focus on the race of these women, but also their gender and how such intersectional factors affects their life choices and life chances. Collins (2002) further explains that "Black feminist thought encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a group" (p.31). Thus, Black feminist thought is an appropriate theoretical framework for my research as it allows various forms of discrimination to be included as part of the context of Black women's lives. This approach is used to analyze this data as it encompasses the intersectional realities of Black women. Black feminist thought is not merely just a critique of our oppressions. Rather, it is a "social thought designed to oppose oppression" (Collins, 2002, p. 9). This ideology also celebrates Black women, whether mothers, activists, scholars, celebrities, or simply members of the community. Within Black feminist thought, "Black women's empowerment" comes "through self-definition" (p. 101). While Black people are continuously victimized by the majority through dominant ideologies, Black women experience lateral oppressions due to their shade of skin and their gender, in addition to all the other economic, social and cultural oppressions they face as members of a racialized community. Black feminist thought allows me to analyze Black women's experiences in regards to colourism within music and helps to understand the lived experiences of these Black women.

2.5.2 Tenets

I explore four tenets found within Black feminist thought specific to my study. The first, "Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning", reinforces that Black women who study other

Black women have an authority in terms of experience and subject matter that gives them a unique and important knowledge that is shared due to common experiences with the women they study (Collins, 2000). Within the Black community Black lived experiences are reputable knowledge. Collins suggests that White women who study Black women may not value lived experience to the degree as Black women because of their position of power and authority vis a vis Black women (p.260). In contrast, Black middle- and lower-class women, whether a relative, a member of the church, or of the community, are respected and her knowledge and meanings based on her lived experience will be recognized and seen as credible. However, social and economic standing of a Black woman may create negative power dynamics. Because Black women often form a sisterhood, they "may find it easier than others to recognize connectedness as a primary way of knowing, simply because we have more opportunities to do so and must rely upon it more heavily than others" (Collins, 2000, p. 260).

This tenet is utilized to give a voice to Black women who realize the presence and effects of colourism within music. It allows me to give voice to something that has altered the experiences of many Black women. Though studies show how colourism affects Black women's earnings due the colourism (Hunter, 2013), ability to find employment (Wade et al., 2006), health status (Hargrove, 2019), educational attainment (Hunter, 2002), likeliness to marry (Hamilton et al., 2009) and rates of imprisonment (Viglione et al., 2011), Black women seldom need to read an article to know this. Rather, we *already know* as we are living through it. Our lived experiences as Black women trying to navigate a world that constantly creates barriers is credible knowledge to be shared. Though I use the limited body of research to further explain my analysis, Black feminist thought allows me to know that my experience *is* real and *is* true.

The second tenet, “The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims", includes the importance of dialogue and listening by researchers in the Black community. Such dialogue does not only encompass words within verbal communication, it also places importance on verbal responses such as shouts and singing heard in churches as a reaction to preachers. Daniel and Smitherman (1991) refer to this as a “call-response” – an “African-derived process” which is “the verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which each of the speaker’s statements (or ‘calls’) is punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (p. 28). A common example of a call-response is "A-men” (p. 28).

Within my research, the second tenet is used to examine the words of various artists in the ways in which they have chosen to interpret colourism – both positively and negatively. For example, while 2Pac (Tupac) may have chosen to address colourism in a liberating way within his song, *Keep Ya Head Up*, Lil Wayne decided to do the opposite in his song, *Every Girl*. The words, but also the delivery, are examined in terms of music video castings and the stories shared within the songs.

The “Ethics of Caring”, demonstrates that one can both be emotional and intellectual. The two are, within Black feminist thought, not separate entities and can be used simultaneously. As Collins (2000) states, “without emotion, Aretha Franklin’s cry for ‘respect’ would be virtually meaningless” (p. 263). Another component within Ethics of Caring is the notion of empathy. I empathize with racialized women who have also been victimized by colourism and its impact on mass media. I also empathize that while colourism is often discussed in relation to how it negatively affects dark-skinned women, it also affects lighter-skinned persons, regardless of their gender.

This tenet allows me to discuss my personal experience and own emotions when analyzing data – and not diminish a woman's emotions as being *too* emotional or erratic. This tenet recognizes that my own experience with a phenomenon is valid and a useful tool in understanding a sociological issue. It also recognizes that my emotions and interpretations of my own experiences as a Black woman in Canada are valid and enhance my analysis of the data rather than lend bias it.

The last tenet, the "Ethic of Personal Accountability", reminds Black feminist writers that one must be "accountable for their knowledge claims" (Collins, 2000, p.65). In short, I cannot view my standpoint on this topic as the only acceptable belief. Though knowledge from my lived experience may determine my way of thinking, the same can be said for everyone else. Furthermore, while it may be easier to state that colourism in music is always negative, I am also sharing instances of counter-narratives existing in music as this is the most ethical practice to follow. I must acknowledge that one may inquire about my own personal beliefs and previous actions to see whether I truly care about this topic.

The last tenet, the "Ethic of Personal Accountability" is helpful in reminding us to also acknowledge the upbringing and climate in which artist use their words – what one that may be viewed as wrong, can be completely justified and acceptable to others. My own beliefs on the matter may not always be agreed upon. Furthermore, the political climate, the year, the age, the gender, the upbringing and the mental space in which an artist wrote or performed a song have underlying influence on their choices. I hold myself accountable in understanding that humans' decisions are often based on their lives at that moment and often do not reflect who they are. This reveals the common dichotomy of separating an artist and their work as two separate entities.

Black feminist thought "encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment" (Collins,2002, p.31). While my study analyzes the experiences of cololurism in song lyrics, this theoretical approach sheds light on the injustices of colourism to generate conversation and much needed social and attitudinal change in our society and how racialized people are treated. Through this research, I hope to highlight the subtle ways that colourism influences the way we think about ourselves and one another and that sometimes, the threat is within the Black community itself.

My study of colourism within rap and hip-hop music is shaped by Black feminist thought. As Collins (2000) states, "in producing the specialized knowledge of U.S. Black feminist thought, Black women intellectuals often encounter two distinct epistemologies: one representing elite White male interests and the other expressing Black feminist concerns" (p.252). Though rap and hip-hop music performed by Black artists is not often considered as products of elite White male interests, hooks (1994) has a different observation. To her, rap and other genres of music are not solely a reflection of Black culture and values. Rather, "the sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behavior that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p.135). While I take note of this, this does not mean that I move all blame and responsibility to White supremacy – though one may feel inclined to as dominant ideologies believed by White Supremacists have, for so long, dominated our way of thinking. Black male and female artists are to take responsibility as well for their actions in furthering this agenda.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Nothin' like the light-skinned mamacitas in H-Town, they got them pornstar big booties
Travis Scott, "Mamacita", *Days Before Mamacita*, 2014

3.1 Methodology

This exploratory study provides insights into instances of colourism within Canadian and American music through a critical analysis of two genres of music: hip-hop and rap within the years of 2000 and 2023 – encompassing various trends of music in the last two decades. To discover instances of colourism within music, lyrics that display colourism are analyzed. Colourism within lyrics is identified by the use of specific words. These words are listed later within this chapter. My main interest is to explore the prevalence of colourism within music, who these artists are, and whether further research should continue to examine pop culture and colourism.

As a Black woman myself, several songs were chosen as I knew them personally and may have listened to them in the past. However, a majority of the songs in the database were located using the website Genius.com. Genius.com is an extensive resource of music as it is "the world's biggest music encyclopedia with a passionate community of more than two million contributors" (Genius, 2009).

3.2 Data Source

Genius.com is an archive of songs, artists, and their lyrics. In addition to lyrics, Genius provides site viewers with the release date, identification of song production managers, song writers, the label, and links to other songs that have sampled the original track, along with the musicians performing the song. One of the most important components of the site is that the database allows keyword searches of music lyrics across all songs simultaneously. Once a song

is selected , specific lyrics can be displayed to show additional characteristics. For example, when searching “Keep Ya Head Up" by 2Pac and selecting the lyrics “Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” the interpretation reads: “Tupac echoes the sentiment that black is beautiful, a cause that encourages blacks to be proud of their race and heritage”. These useful interpretations and explanations of lyrics and their messages are provided by “contributors” that provide their explanations but are only accepted by a team of scholars to appear on the site.

Lyrics can be annotated and transcribed by anyone; however, all annotations are thoroughly examined for validity by the website editors. Those annotating must also reach a certain level of website “points” to annotate lyrics. These points can increase or decrease depending on the validity of one’s annotation once reviewed. Thus, Genius ensures only those with reliable knowledge can add annotations. Artists, producers, and writers themselves also have the opportunity to “write annotations, confirm lyrics, and co-sign good annotations from scholars” (Genius, 2016). The latter are verified through an extensive verification process. Sadly, artists are not compensated for their songs being featured on the site. These lyric explanations are also provided by the artists themselves on Genius’ Youtube channel which they have titled as their “Lyrics and Meaning” segment. As of July 30, 2024, 1,449 of these videos are available.

3.3 Methods

This database’s features are particularly important in my research as several terms were searched to identify colourism within songs. My search terms include: *light skin*, *light-skinned, dark skin, dark-skinned, brown skin, brown-skinned, yellow bone, redbone, caramel, Meagan Good and Nia Long.* This list was not exhaustive as other terms used in a few songs were found to be colourist.

The latter two keywords, Meagan Good and Nia Long, though names of popular actresses within the African American community, are often referenced in songs to depict a likeness of light and brown-skinned women. They specifically are often referenced as examples of attractive Black women. They are seen as the ideal Black woman. For context, examples of Nia Long and Meagan Good in other racial communities may include Farrah Fawcett in the 1970s, Dolly Parton in the 1980s, Julia Roberts in the 1990s, Britney Spears in the early 2000s or Margot Robbie, more recently.

I specifically analyzed songs released between 2000 and 2023. This allows me to analyze whether colourism in music exists today and whether it has become more or less prevalent within the last two decades. The twenty-year range also demonstrates how artists of different generations and ages continue the rhetoric. Though a narrower time parameter may have still included numerous song examples, this time frame would not allow me to uncover whether colourism within these genres of music has existed in the past as well. Conversely, a longer span of time would create an excess of information and examples and would not allow me to directly explore how colourism presents itself within our pop culture now. I aim to uncover the prevalence of colourism in current music to analyze whether its presence affects adults and youths today.

3.4 Coding

Organizing and coding songs involved identifying over 50 songs that included colourist ideals that were selected due to their lyrics, popularity of the artists and its standing on Billboard. Once collected, the songs were grouped by the artist's country of origin, the United States or Canada, based on birthplace. Artists were categorized by place of birth. Thus, although they may currently publish their music through American publishing labels, artists like Drake, The

Weeknd and Tory Lanez are considered Canadian artists within my research. From this categorization, songs were arranged by the type of colourist ideal the songs represented. These categories include broad mention of skin tone in lyrics, lyrics depicting preference for lighter skin, and lyrics depicting preference for darker skin.

Coding helped identify what type of colourist ideal the artist projected, the patterns, and the differences and similarities within the artist's national groups. Within my research, 20 songs were selected. This number allowed for a balance between the messages conveyed and also for songs to be categorized according to themes I have noted. Though more songs could be selected, I have chosen 20 songs, those with heightened viewership on Youtube, that may represent how influential the song is – though future research should focus on the number of downloads on streaming platforms, if possible. These 20 songs were also selected based on their messaging, their popularity, and the artist performing the song. Artists were considered as largely known artists, such as Drake and Lil Wayne, have more influence on pop culture and their listeners than less popular, less known artists.

As listed in Chapter 4, many songs selected are also on *Billboard* – an online and printed magazine concerning all genres of music. Through Billboard, the public is made aware of the most popular songs weekly, yearly, and of all time through their various Charts. Billboard is used within this research as an indicator of popularity due to its use of data when deeming music to be popular. Billboard uses sale charts, airplay, and streaming numbers to calculate how popular songs are and chart them in accordance with this data. In addition to charts, Billboard provides further data by offering a bibliography and discography of an artist, the number of Number 1 Hits they have had, alongside the number of songs they've had in the Top 10 Hits chart and how many published songs they have released.

In addition to the song analysis, this project uses the limited body of research surrounding colourism, and literature on the power and influence of music. The inclusion of academic literature and articles allows for a more complex evaluation of colourism in the context of music. This strengthens the research by giving the subject more context, background and reliability.

This research uses latent coding when examining lyrics. This form of coding is "most often defined as interpreting what is hidden deep within the text" (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p.129). Thus, "the role of the researcher is to discover the implied meaning" (p. 129), Furthermore, this form of coding "acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in the analytical process and that their role is to actively use mental schema, theories, and lenses to interpret and understand the data" (Kleinheksel & Rockich-Winston, 2020, p.129). This coding pattern is used when interpreting the meaning behind the lyrics of the songs selected. This pattern allows for the interpretation of lyrics. An artist referring to the beauty of a light-skinned woman in a song is much more than just sexual preference – it is a bias deeply rooted in a colourist society. Latent coding proved to be challenging at times as music is often filled with rhymes, double entendre's and hidden meanings. Ultimately, listening to the entire song, rather than just the specific colorist lyric, viewing the associated music video, and my own experience and understanding of African American Vernacular English facilitated in understanding the meanings of lyrics.

3.5 Limitations

A previously foreseen limitation to my research was not being able to identify the number of songs that exemplify colourism due to the ways in which artists may have discussed the phenomenon. For example, while Nia Long and Meagan Good are mentioned in songs, there may be other well-known names mentioned in songs that relate to other skin tones that I may not

be aware of. Secondly, this study discovers the prevalence of colourism in music that affects women. Though the male artists are furthering the discourse and are seemingly affected as they believe in colourist ideals, this research does not analyze music in which colourist ideals focus on the skin tones of Black men. Similarly, music with negative messaging against lighter-skinned Black women was not found. This may be due to the fact that such messages in music do not exist – furthering the common theme in colourism wherein dark-skinned Black females are victimized. Thus, this study does not consider lyrics negatively affecting lighter-skinned Black women. In addition, this research solely focuses on music produced by North Americans; this thesis does not interrogate instances of colourism in music by artists in other countries. Countries that should be further studied in future research include, but are not limited to, Jamaica and the United Kingdom. Afrobeats has also dominated charts within these last few years, and more people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are now listening to this genre of music originating in Nigeria and Ghana. Colourism within Afrobeats, and other genres of music is not analyzed in this research.

Another limitation surrounds the lack of Canadian artists within my analysis. While there are several Canadian rap and hip-hop artists, many have not become as influential as their counterparts in America which represents how influential America continues to be in the sphere of music. Due to their lack of popularity and corresponding lack of influence, these artists were not included. The final limitation of the research is the fact that this study, though important, does not measure the impacts of the songs and their messaging on listeners. Thus, I am not able to conclude how listeners may react, act upon and/or internalize messages conveyed within songs. Though this study does not analyze these reactions, I do believe that it is crucially important to study the effects of colourism within music for the younger generation especially.

In summary, this chapter addresses the process of this research and its limitations. As a researcher, I understand the limitations of my study and the missing components that could further this study, such as analyzing how these songs impact the Black community in North America. I acknowledge that this study is only the start of what I hope is a larger body of research in the future and lends itself valuable to the already existing body of literature addressing the impacts of music. My aim for this research is to shed much needed light on colourism and its impact on the Black community – specifically Black women. I feel the methods used within my study help me meet this objective.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Bad red boned bitch, body inked up!
Juicy J, "One of Those Nights", *Trippy Codeine*, 2013

4. Findings

I have not always listened to songs for their lyrics or messages, but for the beats and overall feel of the song. As a result of my study, I have now noticed the messages conveyed in some of my favourite songs. Unfortunately for me, many of my favourites are songs which convey colourist and/or sexist lyrics. My existential crisis is not unique. Morgan (1995) shares this revelation saying, "(b)ut in between the beats, booty shaking, and hedonistic abandon, I have to wonder if there isn't something inherently unfeminist in supporting a music that repeatedly reduces me to tits and ass and encourages pimping on the regular" (p.66). While many songs I have listened and enjoyed have been songs that share the message above, they often convey underlying, or very present, messages depicting colourism.

This chapter is organized into subsections according to the underlying message in the song. I examine lyrics using negative rhetoric surrounding colourism and focusing on a preference in skin tone. I also include examples of songs that attempt to fight against colourist ideals. Each song is analyzed separately and notes the artists' achievements to demonstrate their influence and ability to influence listeners through their work. The songs, performed by both Black men and women, demonstrate that colourism and sexism are prevalent in rap and hip-hop music.

4.1 Colourist Ideals Within Music

4.1.1 Lightskin

Having or being "lightskin" (light-skinned) has been a fascination in fashion, beauty, and for many decades. Modern musicians may show their colourist ideals by greferencing lighter-

skinned women as more desirable than darker-skinned women. The word "lightskin" expresses the hierarchal nature of light-skinned women being 'better' than women of darker skin tones. Some may also explicitly note their preference for mixed race women and expressing their preference for women with lighter skin tone within their song lyrics.

Producer, singer and rapper T-Pain dominated charts in the early 2000s. He is a top music producer and celebrated for his singing ability. Unfortunately, his song, "Mix'd Girl", is one of the most distasteful songs in my analysis. Notable few lyrics from the song include:

Hey, light skinned girl with the curly hair
You and all of your friends look so exotic
I'm looking for a mixed girl

Skinny black girl with the real straight hair
I know it ain't no weave up there
"Mix'd Girl", *RevolveR*, 2011

T-Pain fetishizes lighter-skinned women – notably, mixed girls, and in his song lyrics, focuses exclusively on her European traits. In particular, his emphasis on hair is of importance. While he states that the "ideal" lighter skin woman has curly or "coily" hair, he then redirects his attention to a Black girl with straight hair, with hopefully "no extensions" because he is not interested in a Black woman with kinky natural tighter curls. While curly and coily hair is hair with looser braids that can be easier straightened to resemble straight hair, kinky hair is extremely curly, resulting in it seeming shorter, dryer in nature, harder, more time-consuming and painful to be straightened. Ultimately, within the Black community, many who embrace their kinky hair are deemed pro-Black, as wearing one's natural hair is often seen as *brave* due to the stigma surrounding the supposed unattractiveness of the hair. Sadly, his preference in many songs is to straighten coily and curly hair and is not dissimilar to the preferences of other lyricists.

Childish Gambino is a rapper and successful actor. He has had 8 songs on the Billboard's Hot 100 list since 2013. His popular song, "Redbone", in *Awaken My Love!* was on this list for 44 weeks, peaked at #12 and won a Grammy in 2018 for Best Traditional R&B Performance (Billboard). Though the title itself already catches one's interest, this song describes paranoia in a relationship in which Childish is scared of losing his partner. In this song, he does not discuss a preference for light-skinned women. He does, however, express colourism in his song, "Put it in my Video", where he shares his desire for lighter skin tones – specifically mixed girls[2].

Mixed girls from Williamsburg, that's my fucking kryptonite
Baby girl, shorty, have it however you want it
Whatever you asking 'bout, I promise you that I done it
"Put it in my Video"*, Culdesac*, 2010

In this song, Childish Gambino explains what seems to be an obsession and infatuation. When examining the video for "Put it in my Video", the women are all light-skinned. The message he is reinforcing in both the lyrics and the video is harmful for listeners. Lyrics such as these put dark-skinned girls and women at risk of body dissatisfaction and "threaten[s] the maintenance of healthy body image" (Maxwell et al., 2016, p..1496). While Childish Gambino and others could defend these lyrics by saying he has the right to have a preference, studies show that such preference for lighter skin only exist for men and that Black women have no preference as to whether a man is darker or lighter (Hills, 2002). Is it truly an innocent preference then? Or a preference deeply rooted in anti-Black colourist beliefs?

4.1.2 Redbones and Yellow Bones

Nicknames for light-skinned Black women often appear in modern song lyrics. Terms common in African American Vernacular English are "redbone" (red bone) and "yellow bone"

[2] It is important to note that mixed-race is not synonymous to lighter skin. Skin tones, eye colour, facial features and hair patterns all vary within mixed-race people.

(yellow bone) and these appear frequently in modern song lyrics. It is important to note that though yellow bone describes a light-skinned Black person with yellow undertones, and redbone describes those with red undertones, these two terms are often seen as synonymous (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, red bone and yellow bone are often used in songs but are interchangeable as they simply represent a lighter-skinned woman and thus more 'desirable'.

Though he tragically passed away in 2020 at 20 years old, Pop Smoke, a rapper from Brooklyn, New York whose music was reminiscent of 50 Cent, received numerous awards after his death including two Billboard Awards in 2021 for Top Rap Artist and Top Rap Male Artist. In addition, he was nominated that same year for the American Music Award's Favorite Male Hip-Hop Artist, Favourite Hip-Hop Album and Favourite Hip-Hop Song. His song *Hello*, was previously on Billboards' Hot 100 list. Below is an example of song lyrics:

I like my bitches redbone, ass fat, Jell-O
Lightskin, yellow, iced out, hello
"Hello", *Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon,* 2020

In this lyric, Pop Smoke explicitly shares that he prefers his women to be red bone. "Redbone", is a term from Southern American States which labels the lighter skin tone of a Black person. As Ray (2007) defines the term, its "precise meaning and application varies in time and place, but it always denotes an implication of 'racial' mixture" (p.103). In addition, when possible, redbones "successfully resisted categorization as 'Negro'" (p.104). Pop Smoke reinforces this narrative later in the song, by referencing yellow bone, this time more directly, by stating "lightskin, yellow".

Record breaking rapper Lil Wayne has surpassed Elvis' records for most songs on Billboard's Top 100 list and he's proven to be influential to many. His song, *Right Above It*,

featuring Drake, kept its place on the Billboard Top 100 charts for 24 weeks, its highest position being in number 6. Women in his song "Right Above It" are described as follows:

Beautiful black woman, I bet that bitch look better red
"Right Above it", *I am not a Human Being,* 2010

Lil Wayne shares that in spite of the fact that a Black woman is beautiful, her beauty is at its best when she possesses lighter skin – a red bone. It is also interesting when we reflect on how many of these rappers are themselves men of darker skin tones with mothers, siblings and daughters of the same skin tone. Messages like these – the fact beauty is dependent upon skin tone are harmful to our community. Sadly, while in search of their self-identity, music "may lead young Black college women to consciously and/or unconsciously integrate into their developing identities the messages promulgated by hip-hop culture" (Henry, 2010, p.140).
Lil Wayne repeated this lyric, in case his message was not understood by listeners the first time, in another song; "Every Girl". Here, he begins the song by rapping:

Ugh, I like a long-haired, thick redbone
Open up her legs, then filet-mignon that pussy
"Every Girl"*, We are Young Money*, 2009

Lil Wayne reiterates his preference for lighter skin once again, by stating that he prefers 'redbones' and continues on to overtly sexualize her by referring to her sexual organs as steak. Pop Smoke's earlier lyrics are also mirrored in this song as Lil Wayne similarly mentions how he prefers a "thick" red bone. Thick, a term widely used within African American Vernacular, denotes a woman who is very curvy – especially her buttocks. The chorus of the song includes a repetition of the line "I wish I could fuck every girl in the world". Though it seems that every girl in the world would only comprise women having lighter skin tones.

Lil Wayne also depicts women in this song, and many others, as Freaks. Women who are comfortable with "sex in any place, any position, and with any person (or number of people)" are freaks (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p. 20). Though he is also clearly labelling himself as one as well, he is no longer referencing the woman as a being, rather, she is of a specific skin tone and he could do what he pleases to her. As Stephens and Phillips (2003) state, "labelling the women a Freak" denotes she is "available for all comers and takers" (p.21).

Women do not want to be victims of men's misogynistic demands, be categorized as Freaks or be judged by the tone of their skin. We just want to be referred to and spoken to with respect.

4.1.3 Lightskin with a Body

Many artists illustrating colourist ideals within their song also mention a female's body shape when referring to women with lighter skin tones. This furthers the rhetoric that light-skinned women are often believed to be more physically attractive than darker-skinned women.

In *Hello*, Pop Smoke's lyrics imply he is 'shopping' for a woman. Not only does he prefer lighter-skinned women, but she must also have a curvier body, especially with a bigger buttock. The music video for "Diana" has also been viewed 15 million times with over 276,000 likes to date on Youtube.

Shorty, light-skinned (Woo), tatted, huh, ass fat (Grrt)
I need your number and that's that (That's that, yeah)
"Diana", *Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon,* 2020

Similarly, as in "Hello", Pop Smoke begins "Diana", by reiterating, once again his preference in women, specifically light-skinned women with bigger buttocks. While listeners may just interpret the first line as Pop Smoke describing a particular woman, it is important to note the way in which he shares his preference. Rather than a being, Pop Smoke defines this "dream" woman as one with lighter skin, tattoos and a "fat ass". He has categorized and

dehumanized this woman by solely focusing on her physical attributes. He also leads with the second verse, in which he explicitly states his need for her number – emphasizing his attraction.

While rapper Nipsey Hussle passed suddenly in 2019, nine of his songs have made it to Billboard's Hot 100 list, with the earliest being in 2012. The one song that charted in 2012 is "Bitches Ain't Shit", a song by rapper YG, featuring Nipsey Hussle and Tyga, which samples Dr. Dre's song from 1992. While the song title is alarming in itself, Nipsey's verse reinforces the light skin narrative that is predominant in some hip-hop music today.

Look, I like bitches, that's lightskinned-ed
With a whole a lot of ass, and get right with it
Bitches Ain't Shit, Just Re'd Up, 2011

Similar to the songs previously discussed, Nipsey's lyrics provide a concrete example of the Freak script; a woman is perceived to be sexual with no other external cares or purpose. Here, Nipsey expresses his preference by referring to her as a "bitch," one who has lighter skin, with a bigger buttock, and one "get[s] right with it" – namely sex. Interestingly, a year later he began dating and later married Lauren London. Lauren, a lighter-skinned woman who began her career in Pharell's music video "Frontin" as the main character and later began her acting career. Lauren's name also appears in numerous lyrics performed by rappers such as PartyNextDoor and Big Sean as they reference her beauty and her skin tone. Though lyrics and messages conveyed in songs are often the personas of artists and may not always reflect the artists themselves (in the same way that a rapper may rap about using drugs yet having never actually done so), was Nipsey's preference an infatuation with lighter skin a deal breaker or pure luck when choosing to marry Lauren London? Nevertheless, the lyrics are damaging for both the perception of women and the minds of men. When asked about the negative sexual images of Black women in music videos, young male participants "placed the blame squarely in the hands of the females,

indicating they believed that females could stop the 'nasty' images if they wanted to" (Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011, p.62). Thus, not only are these lyrics affecting the self-esteem of young girls and women, young men are also furthering misogynistic perceptions and placing the blame on victims.

Previously voted as one of the greatest rappers of all time by Billboard, inducted into the Hip-Hop Hall of Fame, and one of the best-selling artists of all time, Tupac Shakur (2Pac) continues to be a household name 27 years after his passing. Tupac, as he is commonly known, is remembered for his activism concerning economic inequality, patriarchy, and against Anti-Blackness American society (Stanford, 2011, p.8). This is not surprising as both his mother and stepfather were active members of the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary Action movement, as well as being surrounded by other activists (Stanford, 2011). Though he is often remembered for his conscious lyrics, his songs "Thug Style" and "Keep Ya Head Up" (mentioned later in this chapter) are two songs that put his humanitarian commitment into question.

And tryin' to get with light skinned 'cause she good lookin'
"Thug Style", *R U Still Down? (Remember Me),* 1997

Tupac's style continues to influence contemporary artists, even though his work tends to glorify the "gangsta life" today. Often, music and pop culture only accept Black women if they are light-skinned and plays a part in the "rightful erotic place set aside for black women in the popular imagination" (hooks,2014, p.75). The emphasis on a woman being "good lookin'" and the correlation between light skin and attractiveness in this lyric creates a space in which many Black and Brown girls and women attempt to gain this – at many times – unattainable look.

Beginning his career as an actor, Canadian rapper Drake became a household name following the release of his third mixtape "So Far Gone" in 2009. Since this mixtape, Drake has won countless awards and is seen as one of the most successful artists today. According to Billboard (2024), to date, Drake has been nominated for a Grammy award 55 times and has won five of these awards. He's also had 11 songs on Billboard's Number 1 Hits list and has had 67 songs on their Top 10 Hits list. Two of his songs are selected in this analysis, *Lust for Life* – a song within his third mixtape and *Nonstop*.

And as for them pretty light-skinned models
Standin' in the cold, ah, yeah, they with us
Let them girls in for a drink and I'm all in they ear
Sayin' she should be the one I see every time that I'm here
"Lust for Life", *So Far Gone*, 2009

While alluding to going to a club or a bar, Drake shares who he would like to have by his side. Drake does not only define these light-skinned women as pretty but also as models. Thus, the listener makes that correlation – a lighter-skinned woman is pretty and when she has the likeness of a model, she is even prettier. His last verse is also important to analyze as he states that he hopes to see this type of woman every time he visits. This clearly shows his preference for light-skinned women, which tells women like me that may be of a darker skin tone that we are not welcome in his space.

Lastly, award-winning rapper Juicy J, who rose to fame with his one-of-a-kind sound in the early 2000s, is notable for his explicit lyrics that focus on the sexualization of women. In 2013, the artists released "Bounce It", featuring Wale and Trey Songz. Though its highest position on Billboard Top 100 was in 74th place, the song stayed charting for 19 weeks in 2013, his music video has gained over 68 million views on YouTube (Billboard,2024). A notable lyric in this song includes:

With an ass like Serena and a face like Aaliyah
Redbone in some red bottoms
"Bounce It", *Trippy Codeine*, 2013

As the title of the song indicates, the song references her buttocks. The lyrics above illustrate explicit colourist ideals and the current thoughts of many within the Black community. Here, Juicy J explains that while her body may resemble the body of Serena Williams, who is curvier (though her musculature and darker skin is often ridiculed), this woman must have the complexion (redbone), and facial features of Aaliyah, a rapper who died in a car accident in 2001. Aaliyah was and is frequently mentioned for her beauty, light skin and small features. Thus, having a great body is not enough – one also must have the correct skin tone to match.

4.1.4 Dislike of Darker-Skinned Women and the Label "Bitch"

While artists may portray colourist ideals within their work, they may also intentionally degrade dark-skinned Black women. Songs below are examples of these instances. Songs of the sort are extremely dangerous for the young generation as they may shape the beliefs of young listeners.

Recognized as one of the greatest rappers and lyricists of all time, Jay Z's music is highly influential. Having signed major artists such as Rihanna and Kanye West, Jay Z became the first billionaire hip-hop artist and is tied with Kanye West for most Grammy wins (as rappers) with their 24 Grammy's (though Kanye West was nominated 75 times, compared to Jay Z's 88) (Grammy, 2024). During the 2024 Grammy's Jay Z's contributions to the music industry were recognized as he received a Global Impact award (Grammy, 2024). Jay Z's song, "December 4th", further demonstrates colourist ideals' impacts on Black men.

And all the wavy light-skinned girls is lovin' me now
My self-esteem went through the roof, man, I got my swag
"December 4th", *The Black Album*, 2003

When examining photos of Jay Z and Beyonce together, we can agree that he would not be deemed as one who is lighter-skinned, though he also not darker-skinned – rather in between the two, brown-skinned. His emphasis in these lyrics in which his self-esteem is dependent on the approval of light-skinned women further affirms Uzogara et al. (2014), who state that skin tone and their constructed meanings affect one's self-esteem as it "may threaten an African American man's sense of belonging" (p.213). This message portrays the notion that if a light-skinned woman is interested in a male, especially a Black man of a darker skin tone, that man is deemed worthy. This further emphasizes the narrative that lighter is better. Jay-Z continues this narrative in another song accompanied by its video, "Girls, Girls, Girls".

I got this African chick with Eddie Murphy on her skull
She like, "Jigga Man, why you treat me like animal?"
I'm like, "Excuse me, Ms. Fufu, but when I met your ass
You was dead broke and naked, and now you want half"
"Girls, Girls, Girls", *The Blueprint*, 2001

This song is meant to depict Jay Z's many female partners. Through his lyrics, he refers to a Spanish woman, French woman, a stewardess and more. He also refers to an "African chick" whom he portrays in the music video as a dark-skinned woman. In his lyrics, he refers to her as Ms. Fufu which is in reference to a racialized comedy skit performed by Eddie Murphy where he impersonates his African girlfriend 'Umfufu' in his standup performance, *Raw*. Jay Z continues by stating that she was "broke and naked", furthering the stereotype of dark-skinned Black women and their inability to achieve wealth because they cannot be beautiful. When referencing another one of his 'partners', he mentions a "project chick" referring to a woman living in public housing wherein "a high level of gang violence… characterize[s] the neighborhood" (Deutsch 2008:30). Portraying a dark-skinned Black woman as living in 'the projects' which are "sometimes referred to as 'federal prisons'" and are where "hundreds of thousands of African

American families uprooted from southern states during the early decades of the twentieth century by rural transformation, Jim Crow laws, [and] racial violence", is extremely harmful and further pushes this ongoing stereotype (Demissie, 2004, p.689).

The portrayal of his 'African chick' in the music video coincides with the Gold Digger script derived by Stephens and Phillips (2003). While most light-skinned women are portrayed as Divas and Freaks, both women are seen as attractive; in contrast, dark-skinned women are portrayed as poorer women who need Jay-Z for financial aid.

Newer artist Kodak Black is known for his violent lyrics and catchy beats. His stardom is followed by years of legal troubles as he constantly finds himself in court and in jail. Although he faces these challenges, he continues to write music and has even released an album while incarcerated in 2020. Currently, 38 of his songs have been on Billboard's Hot 100 list, 4 being in the Top 10 Hits and the longest being on the charts for 42 weeks (Billboard, 2024). His music video for "SnapShit" has been viewed over 13 million times.

Aye, where them yellow bones?
I don't want no black bitch
I'm already black, I don't need no black bitch
Put yo' hands up if you a bad bitch
"Snap Shit", *Psychotic & Iconic*, 2017

Like other rappers before him, Kodak specifies his preference: lighter-skinned women. Unlike the rest however, he specifically states his disdain for darker-skinned women. While conveying this message he also uses "bitch" as though it is a generic term for women. Despite the fact that the term "bitch" "seem[s] to exist in a variety of contexts in popular culture", which can be seen as he says, "black bitch" and "bad bitch", women would still prefer to not be referred to as bitch at all (Schneider, 2011, p.46). The use of bitch to refer to dark-skinned women devalues our efforts to not be seen as the Other. As hooks (2006) states, "Darker-skinned black

females work to develop positive self-esteem in a society that continually devalues their image. To this day, the images of black female bitchiness, evil temper, and treachery continue to be marked by darker skin" (p.209).

I believe the constant use of bitch throughout these lyrics is best explained by hooks: "Black males, utterly disenfranchised in almost every arena of life in the United States, often find that the assertion of sexist domination is their only expressive access to the patriarchal power they are told all men should possess as their gendered birthright" (p.129).

4.1.5 Colourism Affecting Men

Though colourism is often said to affect women, specifically dark-skinned women, light-skinned men have also faced prejudice. They are often referred and ridiculed as being "soft" meaning docile and less tough, easily controllable and more fragile.

While it has been demonstrated earlier in this chapter that Drake reinforces colourist ideals in his music and shares his preference for lighter-skinned women, he also frequently notes his own skin tone in hopes to prove his own Black heritage as a mixed-race man attempting to find his place within both the White and Black community—regardless of his immense popularity.

Yeah I'm light-skinned, but I'm still a dark nigga
I'm a wig splitta, I'm a tall figure
I'm an unforgivin' wild-ass dog nigga
"Nonstop", *Scorpion*, 2018

In his song *Nonstop*, released in 2018 with 111 million views on Youtube, placing second in the Billboard Top 100 list, and charting for 22 weeks, Drake makes note of his own skin complexion rather than focusing on the attractiveness of women (Billboard, 2024). However, his sentiment still demonstrates how common discussions surrounding skin tone exists within the

Black community. Drake takes note of his lighter complexion but immediately states that he is still “dark”. He then continues to call himself a tall figure and wild. These lyrics make more sense when understanding the distinction between light and dark among Black men. Unfortunately, skin tones affect Black men in several ways. Dark-skinned men may be most likely to be discriminated against, less likely to find employment, and perceived as more dangerous than light-skinned men (Eberhardt et al., 2006).

Within the Black community, however, men “may idealize darker skin tone as one indicator of ‘maleness’” seeing as “dark-skinned men may be idealized as ‘alpha’ males, possessing heightened masculine characteristics, such as dominance” (Uzogara et al., 2014, p.213). Thus, Drake’s lyrics can be interpreted as although his skin tone may be seen as not being dominant, he is still an “alpha male”. Unfortunately. Drake’s need to prove himself makes more sense as we recognize that lighter-skinned Black men have been said to “face ridicule in the black community” and are “often perceived to lack the physical strength and virility attributed to darker males” (Hill, 2002, p.81).

Drake reveals the harm in colourist ideals to both black men and women in two songs analyzed. While light-skinned women may be viewed as the ideal beauty, light-skinned men tend to want to separate themselves from this notion of beauty to this perception of being strong and more masculine.

4.1.6 Female Artists and Colourism

Though it may be believed that colourist ideals in music are solely performed by male artists, women have also taken on the narrative in their work. Below are examples of female artists illustrating colourist ideals – whether negatively furthering the phenomenon or attempting to change the narrative.

DaniLeigh, best known as a professional dancer and rapper, has also released a few singles and featured appearances with various rappers. In 2021, she released a snippet of "Yellow Bone" on Instagram which proved to be very controversial.

Yellow, yellow what he want (What he wants, what he wants)
Yellow bone that's what he wants (What he wants, what he wants)
"Yellow Bone", 2021

Not surprisingly, public outrage for the clearly colourist song resulted in the artist deleting it from her platforms. Her point here is very direct – men prefer light-skinned women, and that's what he wants. DaniLeigh responded to criticism by posting, "Why can't I make a song for my light skin baddies?" (baddies is a term often referred to pretty and desirable women) (Gray, 2021). The issue is not celebrating light-skinned women), rather, the issue is furthering a colourist narrative. DaniLeigh then went on to apologize "It wasn't something that I looked at deeply… I'm sorry that I wasn't sensitive to the topic… I definitely feel misunderstood" (Gray, 2021). As what the public heard was only a snippet of the song, we are still not aware of what other lyrics followed the chorus. Unfortunately, DaniLeigh's song is not the first, and surely will not be the last. My hope is that bigger artists are held responsible for their words. DaniLeigh is the least known artist within this research, while it is great that she was corrected for her actions, better known artists such as Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj should also be challenged.

Azealia Banks is known more recently, not for her few songs, but for creating controversy. Banks, a dark-skinned woman, is a rapper and singer known for publicly sharing that she had started bleaching her skin in 2016 – something that is often not revealed by most celebrities (Tate, 2017, p.206). Though a year later, in 2017, she publicly shared that she changed her mind about bleaching by stating, "'I finally am back to my natural tone. I got curious/desperate and experimented with literally every skin bleaching/lightening/brightening

product on the market! It's been a long road but I've finally figured out a good exfoliating/brightening regimen that doesn't look bleachy!!'" (BET, 2017). Her ideologies were also stated in her song, "L8R".

Light skin world, light skin girls
Switching his vanilla cause he likes that swirl, yeah
He like black girls and he love a musician
"L8R", *Fantasea*, 2012

Truthfully, these lyrics are confusing. While she acknowledges that we live in a world that favours lighter skin, she also mentions that a man may want to "switch his vanilla" and therefore also have relations with a darker-skinned woman. Whether she is condoning the practice, the way in which Banks has addressed this issue demonstrates how relevant this is. Beyoncé and ENNY (discussed later in this chapter) attempted to give voice to dark-skinned women while Banks and DaniLeigh have decided to acknowledge that the world prefers lighter skin with no critique.

Accomplished female rapper, Nicki Minaj holds 6 Billboard Awards, holds several number 1 hits and several more on the Billboard's Hot 100 list (Billboard, 2024). While Nicki Minaj is clearly talented given her accomplishments, many people question whether her fame, and the fame of other light-skinned female artists such as Alicia Keys and Ciara, are as a result of their lighter skin (Conrad et al., 2009). Colourism did prove to have an effect on rap song rankings in Laybourn (2018), as they found that "lighter skinned artists have more favourable ranking on average, while dark brown skinned artists not only have less favourable rankings on average, they do not have the full range of rankings" (p.2095). Nicki Minaj may know of her perceived privilege yet still adds colourist beliefs in her songs such as in "Whip It", released in 2012.

Slim, trim, also light skin
So Pe-Pe-Peter put the pipe in
"Whip it"*, Pink Friday*, 2012

And in "Get Silly", released in 2009,

I'm a dime, you a nickel-ette, light skinned-ed pigment
"Get Silly"*, Beam me up Sco*tty, 2009

In both of these songs, Nicki Minaj mentions the physical attractiveness of being light-skinned. In "Whip It*"*, she notes being slim and light skin (said as though being light-skinned is a bonus), which would then result in a man wanting to have sexual relations with her. In "Silly", she mentions she's a dime with her lighter complexion. When used in to describe a woman, dime describes an attractive person (Safire, 2002). Therefore, listeners of her songs learn to correlate lighter skin with being attractive, especially since Nicki herself has a lighter complexion.

Unlike the previous artists, Beyoncé has taken note of colourism in music and has a different understanding and approach. She first entered the music industry as the lead singer of Destiny's Child from 1990 to 2006. Once the group parted ways, Beyoncé proved to have the most successful solo career – a fact that many wonder if that is due to her being the lightest of the group. In recent years, Beyoncé has taken a turn in embracing her ancestral roots in her music by collaborating with many African artists from various countries on her newest projects. In her music – both lyrics and videos, she's begun celebrating her blackness. "Brown Skin Girl" takes a very different approach to skin colour than her husband's work.

Pose like a trophy when Naomi's walkin'
She need an Oscar for that pretty dark skin
Pretty like Lupita when the cameras close in
Drip broke the levee when my Kellys roll in

Brown skin girl
Ya skin just like pearls
Your back against the world

I'd never trade you for anybody else
"Brown Skin Girl"*, Black is King, A Film By Beyoncé*, 2020

In the video, Beyoncé celebrates the diversities and complexities of Black women. She celebrates Black and Brown women, especially darker skin tones who are so often dismissed or ignored. Naomi Campbell, Lupita Nyong'o and Kelly Rowland, three accomplished female entertainers, also make an appearance in Beyoncé's video which is a stark contrast to 'video vixens' we are used to seeing in Black music. Balaji (2010) explains that "music video models in hip-hop have been labeled 'video vixens,' 'hip-hop honeys,' and 'dimes,' among other things, but they have never been defined by nonsexual traits not represented as anything other than sexual objects and property in this genre of visual fantasy" (p.9). Music video models tend to be "light skinned, with long hair, flawless faces, and bodies belonging to video vixens" (Johnson, 2014, p.185).

Emphasizing on the beauty of Naomi, Lupita and Kelly provides a different insight on what is beautiful. hooks (2014) however, is not quite fond of the character Naomi adopted to become successful as she states, "(a)bandoning her 'natural' hair for blonde wigs or ever-lengthening weaves, she has a great crossover appeal. Labeled by fashion critics as the black Bridget Bardot, she embodies an aesthetic that suggests black women, while appealingly 'different,' must resemble white women to be considered really beautiful" (p.73). This "ever-lengthening weave" hooks mentions is actually the same look Naomi wore for this video as well. This look, is also adopted by many Black female entertainers, including Beyoncé herself.

Beyoncé also sings *"I'd never trade you for anybody else"*. This is a powerful message seeing as "Black women seeking to be perceived by others as feminine and attractive feel compelled to emulate witness– often painfully through the use of skin bleaches, hair dyes, and straightening combs" (Hill, 2002, p.80). By marketing her song specifically to younger Black

and Brown children, Beyoncé is attempting to change the narrative at a young age. Young darker-skinned Black girls experience colourism early on as they "experience more name-calling and teasing" and their "social status in school is heavily contingent upon these racialized and gendered beauty standards" (Rosario et al., 2021, p.506). Beyoncé, unlike her husband who portrayed women as Divas, Freaks, and Gold Diggers, attempts to portray women and encourage them to see themselves as Earth Mothers – one in tune with themselves and with their Blackness while doing so unapologetically.

Beyoncé also makes reference to hair, in which she points to hair in its natural state for many Black people: "*I love everything about you, from your nappy curls"*. In a study analyzing the effects of colourism on the identities of Black adolescent girls, one student, Briana, states

> '... not every Black person they don't have like, short hair, but some Black girls they have short hair, short like they call it Nigga hair, that we're it's like nappy, but other girls they hair can be all flowy and curly… but I don't really take it as a disadvantage because our weave looks great when we put it in…'. (Rosario et al., 2021, p.517)

While Briana is aware of her perceived attractiveness due to her hair, she fights back by purchasing hair to gain acceptance.

Though this song proves to be a great source for Black and Brown women, when analyzing her own actions, such as her hair, Beyoncé seems to seldom wear it naturally herself. While Black women may choose to wear their hair in numerous styles, their hairstyles "speak for their self-identity" and these "hairstyles become signs of values" (Johnson, 2013, p.3). Our decisions on how to style our hair are also often due to Black women's natural hair and ancestral hairstyles "not comply[ing] with a "professional-look" often associated with European straight hairstyles" (p.4). Though Beyoncé celebrates and urges Black and Brown girls to wear their hair

naturally, she does not do this herself. Do we judge her for it or thank her for the song? Black feminist scholars maintain that "people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims" (Collins, 2000, p.265). Just as Collins' students mimics my analysis that while Beyoncé may sing this song, her choices in her personal life may not coincide with her message (Collins, 2000). It could also be disputed, however, that she can do whatever she wants with her hair and that her hair choice does not necessarily reject colourist ideals.

Though not an American artist, UK artist ENNY, a 29 year old female rapper, gained popularity for her song, "Peng Black Girls".

There's peng black girls in my area code
Dark skin, light skin, medium tone
Permed tings, braids, got mini afros
Thick lips, got hips some of us don't
Big nose contour, some of us won't
"Peng Black Girls*"*, *Under Twenty* Five, 2020

Enny, a dark-skinned woman herself, created this song to celebrate not only dark-skinned women but Black women of every skin tone as she raps: "*dark skin, light skin, medium tone*." This song is a stark contrast to the previous ones we have seen. The music video currently has 3.5 million views on YouTube, and the remix, featuring Jorja Smith, a female light-skinned vocalist, currently has 28 million views. Thankfully, the song has been highly viewed and praised.

4.1.7 Playing Both Sides

Though some artists may attempt to go against the colourist ideal, it can, at times, not achieve the desired messaging as the public remind themselves of previous work done by the same artist. Thus, it may feel as though the artist is merely attempting to gain popularity insincerely, or the music video for the song does not quite match the lyrics.

Though *Diana* by Pop Smoke has already been discussed earlier in this chapter, there is an interesting verse by featuring artist, King Combs, best known for being Sean Combs' son, otherwise known as P. Diddy, a successful entrepreneur, rapper and record label founder.

I don't care if she light-skin or dark-skin (I don't care)
Diana, Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon, 2020

Interestingly, King Combs decides to take a different approach and expresses that he has no preference in skin tone. Both light-skinned and dark-skinned women are fine to him. The music video, however, which has currently been viewed 14 million times, shows that light-skinned women the most throughout the video and these women have their own "segments". A single darker-skinned woman appears on the video for a total of 11 seconds combined, with a special appearance at Combs' latter verse in which she, alongside a light-skinned woman are pictured to show the indifference the rapper seems to convey. Such indifference may not be seen as truthful, however, when viewing the entirety of the video and seeing the lack of dark-skinned women – there is only one. Thus, lived experience as a criterion of meaning with Black feminist thought can be applied. Though the rapper may voice that he has no preference, the models hired for the music video tell a different story.

King Combs is also shown seductively eyeing a light-skinned woman as she walks by in the music video. It is also important to note that the light-skinned women hired for the video dances seductively, almost in the nude, representing the Freak script. Furthermore, one of the segments in the music video shows various men fawning while a light-skinned woman passes by. This scenario alludes to the Diva script. Hiring these women as performers of what men perceive

women to be, Freaks and Divas, further demonstrates the male gaze enforced on light-skinned women. In summary, while the lyrics may be harmless, the video may tell an opposite story.

Though 2Pac has been previously discussed as his song, *Thug Style*, demonstrated negative discourse, four years prior to releasing this, 2Pac released "Keep Ya Head Up*"* in 1993, which charted Billboard's Hot 100 list for 20 weeks (Billboard, 2024).

Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice
I say the darker the flesh, then the deeper the roots (Oh)
"Keep Ya Head Up", *Strictly 4 my N.I.G.G.A.Z…*, 1993

In this feminist song, which actively questions the action of men towards women and urging women to keep their heads up, 2Pac begins by acknowledging the hardships of dark-skinned women. This lyric is very influential, especially when delivered by a dark-skinned Black man as influential as 2Pac, since for so long "black men have taken their cues from white men" while the "biracial black woman has been and remains the standard other black women are measured against" (hooks, 2015, p.210). As hooks (2015) states, why can a world accept Michael Jordan, a dark-skinned man for his talent and beauty, but cannot do the same for women?". Unfortunately, "a male's power is enhanced by dark looks while a female's dark looks diminish her femininity" (p.211). Thus, this lyric is extremely positive and reminds listeners that such a divide shouldn't exist. However, when reminded of *Thug Style*, and the women he kept close, listeners can't help but wonder how genuine this is.

While this chapter has analyzed various songs that forward such a harmful narrative to listeners, especially young audiences, we must also be thankful that the public is increasingly not allowing these messages to be shared. DaniLeigh was never given the chance to release her full song. The 30-second snippet she shared was enough for the public to have her question the messages she conveyed. Additionally, arguably the most popular artist on this list, it is reassuring

to see Beyoncé use her vast platform to advocate for darker girls. It is my hope that more artists come to realize that colourism should no longer sell.

4.2 Discussion

Through my analysis of song lyrics, I have found that several rap and hip-hop songs from the early 2000s to now, continue to focus on the fetishization of lighter-skinned women and oppression of dark-skinned women. Within the songs I have specifically analyzed, 17 of the 20 songs follow this rhetoric. Though literature on the presence of colourism in music is sparse, my findings coincide with the observation found in the literature that does exist. Key themes coinciding with present research were revealed through my analysis.

4.2.1 Word Choice

Firstly, the presence of the word "light skin" and emphasis on women being light-skinned were found among nearly all songs discussed. In addition to light skin, other words were used when referring to lighter-skinned Black women such as "yellow bone" and "red bone". In their study analyzing how music transmits colourist ideals to teenagers, Maxwell, Abrams and Belgrave (2016) also find that teenagers are aware of the use of yellow bone and red bone to represent beautiful light-skinned women in songs and "these individuals [are seen] as the ideal females most frequently seen and mentioned throughout rap music" (p.1493). Lil Wayne's "Right Above it" (2010) was included in my analysis for its reference to skin tone – namely for his use of "red". The artist and this song were also referenced in Maxwell, Abrams & Belgrave's (2016): "Lil Wayne and references to his music were mentioned in three of the five focus groups. As one 13-year-old participant put it, 'Lil Wayne act like he can't stand a dark-skinned girl.' " (p. 1494). Another teen responded, "'Yes! All his music… saying something about dark-skinned

girls and saying stuff that's bad about dark-skinned people'" (Abrams & Belgrave, 2016, p.1494).

The use of lightskin, yellowbone and redbone in so many songs is no surprise, as research and literature remind us how Black people have continued the rhetoric of this colour caste system and this obsession with skin tone (Hill, 2002; hooks, 2003). Ultimately, within Black communities, "notions of beauty are so closely related to colour that the terms "light-skinned" and "pretty" were nearly synonymous" (Hunter, 2005, p. 70).

It is also important to note that throughout this research, songs identified made no reference to women of 'medium' brown skin tone. Wilder (2010) found that when interviewing African American women to analyze their use of language and attitudes surrounding skin tone, women did not refer to or mention terms depicting medium skin tones. Rather, colourism seems to focus on the two very contrasting ends – light and dark.

4.2.2 Objectification

Another recurring theme among the songs analyzed were the objectification of light-skinned women's bodies specifically. In the songs referenced earlier in the chapter, artists often also referenced a light-skinned woman's buttocks. Research shows that African Americans, women especially, are aware of this desire from African American men. While interviewing women to examine the effects of colourism on African American women, a woman proclaimed, "'And I think that being light skin shape, like a coke bottle is like the thing to be all right. And when you look online, that's like the thing to be... The ass, totally long hair. That's totally what you see. And you would perceive to be like, that's where I'm trying to get right. You know, like, oh my gosh, I need to, I need to become that'" (Sumo, 2019, p. 44). Research also reveals

however, that African American women, no matter their skin tone, feel pressured into achieving a curvaceous body due to African American men (Hughes, 2021; Hunter et al., 2020).

Skin tone and buttocks were not the only aspects mentioned in songs. Hair is also a prominent topic. For example, artists mention a light-skinned woman's "good" hair. This is an example of "mainstream media portrayals privileging lighter skin or certain hair types and textures" in this case, both (Laybourn, 2018, p.2086). (h)ooks (2006) refers to this issue as African Americans "overvalu[ing] those who are light-skinned and have straight hair, while ignoring other black people" (p. 51). In T-pain lyrics in "Mix'd Girl", for example, we see how colourism is not just an issue relating to skin tone, but also hair texture. Unfortunately, "light skin and long, straight hair continue to be traits that define a female as beautiful and desirable in the racist white imagination and in the colonized Black mind set" (p.209).

Interestingly, in their study analyzing predominantly Black rap music videos, Conrad et al. (2009), found that "Black females in rap music videos are more likely than Black males to have Eurocentric features" (p.150). Often, these women are cast to be "video vixens" and as beautiful desirable women (Conrad et al., 2009). The common use of light-skinned women in videos is considerably harmful as African American female viewers may increasingly compare themselves to these women and experience lower self-esteem (p.153). Many of the songs analyzed in this research were paired with music videos that highlighted Black men and light-skinned women, such as in the song "Diana" by Pop Smoke (2020).

4.2.3 Dislike of Dark-Skinned Women

The vocal dislike for dark-skin women was apparent through songs analyzed. Artists often labelled dark-skinned Black women as crazy, ugly, dirty, overly sultry, promiscuous and ghetto. Research mirror my findings as African American women are made aware at an early age

that darker-skinned women are not deemed attractive (Stephens & Thomas, 2012; Hunter, 2002). Lil Wayne's lyrics have influenced the minds of young teenagers, and some have identified the misogyny and colourism within them. In a study interviewing African American adolescent girls in focus groups, researchers analyzed the impact of colourist messages in rap music, a 13-year-old girl reacted to his lyrics by stating "'Lil Wayne act like he can't stand a dark-skinned girl'" which a 14-year-old shared "'Yes! All his music… saying something about dark-skinned girls and saying stuff that's bad about dark-skinned people'" (Maxwell et al., 2016, 1494).

Research suggests that "light-skinned women of colour continue to be reflected back to us through the media as the most desirable or most attractive black and Latina women" (Hunter, 2005, p. 85). Deutsch (2008) showcases the interview of Nicole, a 15-year-old dark-skinned girl, as she speaks about her disappointment in music videos – "'I was just thinking' – like videos – light-skinned girls. I've never seen any dark-skinned girls in videos or movies. I mean, it's like whenever there is someone dark they are bad and the light-skinned people are all good'" (p. 121). In their qualitative study identifying the effects of images of African American women in hip-hop on Black teenagers, Stephens and Few (2007) found that young African American boys internalized these cultural messages and "indicated their preference for lighter skin" (p.258). In addition, "African American body types, skin colour, and hair texture clearly served as an identifying racial marker about beauty. Overall, it was found here that the boys gave more value to Westernized standards of beauty than the girls did by selecting those sexual images that embodied traits such as long hair and lighter skin as more attractive" (p.259).

Interestingly, most of the male artists examined are darker-skinned men longing for the attention of a light-skinned woman. Research indicates that colourism is gendered as darker-skinned African American men are not challenged in finding a female African American partner

as African American women tend to not have a preference or tend to choose darker male partners (Hill, 2002). However, African American men and women may, at times, equate a man's shade as an indicator of manliness (Uzogara et al., 2014). Though a lighter-skinned Black man may still be deemed attractive, he may be perceived as less manly than his darker-skinned counterpart (Landor & Smith, 2019). Such rhetoric is especially popular on social media. Thus, Drake's verse in "Nonstop*"* furthers this message by stating that although he is a light-skinned man, he still holds the characteristics and temperament of a darker-skinned man. However, songs wherein female artists ridiculed dark-skinned Black men or fetishized lighter-skinned Black men were not found in my research.

4.2.4 Female Artists

Lastly, women are continuously found to be the leaders in attempting to create cohesion and respect whilst fighting against colourist ideals and beauty standards within our society. Research has demonstrated that Black women have, for so long, fought for equal rights. Recent studies show that Black women are contesting anti-blackness and colourism through social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (Childs, 2022). Enny's and Beyonce's songs are examples of "call outs," a form of activism taken on by "women of colour, queer and trans people, and racial minorities who call out, educate, protest and design around toxic social environments in digital media" (Nakamura, 2015, p.106). With their songs, the two artists identified and criticized this hegemonic discourse but it did so in a *catchy* way that allowed listeners to consume the song and gain a quick lesson: all skin, especially darker skin, is beautiful despite what we are otherwise told to think or believe. This form of activism, from people so powerful, transpires in a nurturing way and is often called Mothering, which defines "the power

of black women being able to mother biological, adoptive, and fictive kin" (Tinsley, 2018, p.130).

4.2.5 Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist thought has assisted in better understanding these songs – for what they are, rather than how they sound. At its core, Black feminism exists to fight against intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000, p.22). Black feminist thought specifically recognizes that Black women are not solely oppressed through institutional power. Rather, it understands that lived experiences even listening to something as small as a music lyric, has the power to create struggle within a group's survival narrative (p. 202). For example, the lyricists in my research who speak out about colourism are an example of "spheres of influence that resist oppressive structures by undermining them" (p.204). Through these spheres, African American women "embrace a form of identity politics, a worldview that sees lived Black experiences as important to creating a critical Black consciousness and creating political strategies" (Collins, 2000, p.204). Unfortunately, my research also demonstrates that songs sung by ENNY and Beyoncé which refute colourism are much less prevalent than those that further a colourist agenda. In short, the few songs that do question colourism are often overshadowed by the number of colourist songs of influence.

Black feminist thought understands that Black women may often have the same interpretation of feminism through "Black women's collective wisdom" (Collins, 2000, p.24). However, it also understood that one's understanding may not align with others and may not be popular, as we "neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion (p.27). For example, as a fan of Beyoncé myself, I can appreciate her efforts with "Brown Skin Girl", and her many songs and albums celebrating Black women and culture. But I can also be

wary of this narrative she aims to push when noticing her lighter skin and her blonde wigs for example. Though we must also remember that a person can express themselves artistically, we must also keep in mind that pushing an anti-colourist agenda surely does benefit the artist whether they truly believe the message or not. 2Pac, for example, did both.

Black feminist thought has allowed me to being more open about my thoughts concerning these songs. Although all artists included in my analysis are Black, and there is this desire to not shed negative light on them as we have simply had enough of that from others, it is crucial for me, and the critical theory to examine the songs and artists using a different lens than I am comfortable with.

Black feminist thought also considers controlling images and how the media has an immense effect on the lives of Black women. Collins (2000) specifically notes colourism and its relevance in media: "the long standing attention of musicians, writers, and artists to this theme reveals African-American women's conflicted feelings concerning skin colour, hair texture, and standards of beauty" (p.90). With this, Collins reminds us of the importance of "self-definition" and the "journey from internalized oppression to the 'free mind'" (p.112). This critical theory allows me to take note of my internalized oppression and related practices I used to, and may still do, and refer to the messages portrayed in songs to better understand my consciousness.

Although Black feminist thought at its core exists to help and explain the experiences of African American women in the United States, it also recognizes the challenges experienced by "women of African descent within a Black diasporic context" and other women of colour (Collins, 2000, p. 29). It also includes often taken-for-granted knowledge that Black women possess. Though our knowledge of music, how music affects many Black communities, as well as how listeners interpret them, may not be extensively researched and put into a peer-reviewed

article as proof for a citation, Black feminist thought understands that this knowledge, *my* knowledge, gained and shared by African American women, is extremely valuable. With this knowledge, Collins sates, “the consciousness of Black women may be transformed by such thought” and create a change without the need for Beyoncé or extremely influential individuals like her (p. 34).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

See them dark-skin girls in them light-skin crews
Yeah, we see you
But she the light-skin girl in a light-skin crew (Yeah)
She don't know what to do
PARTYNEXTDOOR, "Her Way", *PARTYNEXTDOOR TWO*, 2014

Conclusion

In 1952, postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (1952) asserted that Black Caribbean people and Africans around the world have internalized the racist discourses which have been continuously pushed onto their subjectivities (Silverman, 2005). As a result, many Black people globally believe these negative connotations and hate not only themselves, but other members of their respective communities, further enforcing that their skin, and who they are, are not acceptable in society. Due to this experience, some Black North Americans have labelled themselves as the "Other" and continue to view themselves through the lens of racialization, even today (Fanon, 2002).

Colourism is seldom discussed overtly within Black communities. Rather, it is portrayed as something of the past – like the "Brown Paper Bag Test" where light-skinned African Americans in elite clubs required new recruits to have skin tone lighter than a paper bag (Bond & Cash, 1992, p.874). Similarly, the Blue Vein Society, a prestigious and wealthy group of mixed African Americans who legitimized their hierarchal status and who could become members if their physical pigment was light enough to allow one's *blue vein* to appear on their forearm (Linwood, 2014, p. 156). Ultimately, "Blue Vein Society signifies the historical phenomenon found among some African Americans in which individuals with lighter complexion and loosely curled, wavy, or straight-textured hair occupy positions of favor, while darker-skinned African American rank lower on the social scale" (p.156). Colourism is also often portrayed as an

ideology enforced by White people through unlawful justice system practices, film casting, and preferential employment, among other social rewards. The history and practice of colourism can be traced to colonialism and slavery faced by African Americans. Colourism as we see it today is reinforced by our own communities, our own "safe" spaces, our own mothers, educators, friends, and lovers.

5.1 Music

My research makes it evident that colourism in rap and hip-hop music performed by Black North American male artists and some female artists remains prevalent and within the past twenty years. The lyrics often depict darker-skinned women negatively – often stating that they would prefer lighter-skinned women as romantic partners. I have presented evidence demonstrating the various songs, both rap and hip-hop music in the past twenty years performed by males, contain explicit lyrics that objectify and idolize lighter-skinned women, while others share that darker-skinned women are unaesthetic in nature due to their skin and perceived levels of attractiveness. In my research, I address colourism as a phenomenon that continues to divide not only Black North Americans but also remains a hegemonic discourse so loosely used within our everyday media through music. The effects and influence of music reveal how important it is to address such hateful rhetoric.

DeNora (2009) argues that "music can be used… as a resource or making sense of situations, as something of which people may become aware when they are trying to determine or tune into an ongoing situation" (p.13). She further states that sociologically, music enters every dimension of our being as it

> "(m)ay influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel – in terms of energy and emotion –

> about themselves, about others, and about situations. In this respect, music may imply and, in some cases, elicit associated modes of conduct". (p.17)

Thus, music is a form of social power. Many of the artists I have examined in this research are incredibly popular and wealthy, which translates into an overwhelming amount of social power. Artists like Drake, Lil Wayne, 2Pac, Nicki Minaj, and Jay Z, promoting colourist ideals through their songs, music videos and actions, create a space in which their millions of listeners consume these hateful, ignorant, and self-loathing messages. The public uncritically consumes and sometimes internalizes these messages. Unwittingly, these messages continue to contribute to the debasing, undermining and devaluing of diversity within Black culture, music and appreciation.

Of specific interest is the dichotomy between Beyoncé's lyrics and that of her husband, Jay-Z. Their songs demonstrate the contrast between both artists. Delaney and Madigan (2016) has also noted this:

> It's interesting to note, however, that the lyrics of some of the more famous songs each has produced reflect differences in perspectives on some key social issues. The explanation for these differences may reside with the differences in their individual musical backgrounds, with Beyoncé's songs characterized by ideals of love, commitment, monogamy, and female sexuality and empowerment and Jay-Z's with a hip hop perspective. Then again, perhaps Beyoncé represents a stereotypical female perspective on certain issues and Jay-Z represents the male perspective". (p.85)

Though one can argue that putting blame on artists for influencing listeners who have their own agency is unjust. We must not negate the fact that these artists have very large fan-bases. These include such internationally popular artists including Nicki Minaj's "Barbs", Beyoncé's "Beyhive" and Drake's lookalikes who roam Toronto and the US. The musicians

themselves deny their influence. Artists such as Rihanna, Lil Nas X, Cardi B, and Tyler the Creator have stated in interviews that they are not role models and reject notions that they are partly contributing to the internalized racism within their own culture. These artists are aware of their power yet decide that mocking women for their shade is important for their success. Lindenber et al., (2011) share that "celebrities can increase the oughtness of a norm they endorse and of norms that are related to the endorsed norm via a common goal" (p.103). Thus, "the prestige-generating power of success makes celebrities special and gives them the power to exert normative influence" (p.103).

5.2 The Study

Many of the songs chosen for this analysis are songs that are featured weekly and yearly on Billboard charts – establishing their relevance and popularity. Harrison and Arthur (2011) reveal the importance and popularity of Billboard as they state, "Billboard has both documented and influenced popular culture. Billboard is without question the definitive trade journal for the music industry" (p.311). Thus, choosing songs that Billboard deemed to be the most popular songs in a period (a week or year) ensures that songs chosen were relevant and can be used to demonstrate how prevalent colourist ideals are within relevant rap and hip-hop. This means, however, that I have missed a large number of songs that may not be as popular in the mainstream media.

Genius.com, the world's largest music encyclopedia, was used to retrieve lyrics. Genius.com was used to find songs that included colourist lyrics. This was done by researching key words such as, lightskin, yellow, caramel, yellow bone, redbone, brown skin, and darkskin. With this tool, thousands of songs were located. The website provides all credits pertaining to the song including the artist, featuring artist, producers, year the song was published, and the names

of the album. Of significant importance is the fact that Genius.com also offers annotations where lyrics of a song are further explained to better understand its meaning. Again, however, the research is limited by what is available in this database.

As an explanatory study, my research relies on the data and literature that examines colourism. By conducting the literature review, I was able to better understand how colourism directly affects the lives of darker-skinned African American women and how colourism presents itself in everyday situations. Research concerning beauty standards and the dominance of Eurocentric beauty ideals similarly strengthened my knowledge of the phenomenon. I must also acknowledge Stephens and Phillips' (2003) work which reveals current sexual scripts, extremely negative personas, and attributes often defining African American women. These allowed me to better understand the ways in which several artists categorized lighter skin and darker skin women.

African American academic Patricia Hills Collin's extensive work provides the theoretical framework for my research. This analysis integrates Black feminist thought as this lens seeks to use "intersectional paradigms" to "stimulate new interpretations of African-American women's experiences" (Collins, 2002, p.227). "Black Feminist Thought" (1989) allows me to research and write about the injustices and intersecting oppressions faced by Black women and empowers the researcher to use their consciousness, lived knowledge and standpoint. With this theory, Collins provides the tools, history, and knowledge to better understand why and how a specific form of injustice occurs. Black feminist thought contributed to my better understanding of the contexts of the lyrics. Rather than excusing the lyrics as playful rhymes, this theory helped illustrate the ingrained self-hate and prejudice occurring with music even I listen to. This theory further demonstrates how colourism within music is another dimension of

the injustices faced by Black women. In using Collins' theory for this research, I learned that colourism is resisted by the masses and that we end this self-hating intraracial practice that affects the lives of so many.

I recommend that those with social and political power, namely musicians, for the purpose of this research, take more accountability for the lyrics they create and the messages they share. I also urge listeners like myself, who purposefully or unconsciously ignore such messages conveyed in music, to voice their concerns to the artists and the music companies who fund them. This type of advocacy works as we saw in the quick removal of DaniLeigh's video "Yellow Bone", a post that lasted mere seconds before being universally rejected by her fans. The outrage of that small clip resulted in the artist never releasing the song – thankfully. Despite Dani Leigh's initial reluctance in issuing an apology or self-reflection for the song, she subsequently released an apology, though seemingly forced and its sincerity questioned by most. However, the public's reaction and widespread disbelief indicates that people are aware of colourism, its history and its effects. Fans and listeners equally have the power to solicit change. Listeners determine the popularity and success of songs and the artist. We must also stop pushing colourist ideals within our own lives. Such as telling our children to stay out of the sun, that their sister's hair is better as it's not as coarse, teaching our sons that darker skin women are aggressive and telling light skin men that they are not manly and question their sexuality. We must also question the other forms of media that showcase colourism such as television shows (Martin and The Proud Family), purchasing specific magazines (People's Magazine's lack of representation for Sexiest Woman Alive), supporting specific brands, etc.

Misogyny must also be addressed in rap and hip-hop music. In addition to the colourist labels, the repeated occurrence of women being described as "bitches" is also alarming. What

was once a genre created to fight against oppression and one to connect with each other, rap music frequently incorporates misogynistic themes. These songs promote and celebrate rape culture, sexism, violence, and bullying. hooks (2008) states, "cultural celebration of black male phallocentrism takes the form of commodifying these expressions of 'cool' in ways that glamorize and seduce" (p.129). But this is only "cool" because we have allowed it to be and consume it.

Though I have asked that listeners call out artists and not reward them by listening to their music, I must acknowledge that I am part of these listeners. Most songs I have analyzed are songs I have downloaded and listened to numerous times. For example, I regularly listened to and enjoyed "Diana" by Pop Smoke who continuously sings, "*Shorty, light-skinned (Woo), tatted, huh, ass fat (Grrt) / I need your number and that's that (That's that, yeah)*" (2020). When reflecting on this, I was listening to a song that did not celebrate me or my skin. hooks (1994) suggests what I believe to be an important factor in why African American women may continue supporting songs that victimize them: "Black females must not allow ourselves to be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the face by resisting" (p.143).

My research has resulted in my own reflection and realization of the messages I consumed and, in turn, supported by their constant consumption. I have now begun listening to music for its lyrics and messaging rather than just its sounds. I can no longer enjoy music that ridicules my own skin tone and Black women.

5.3 Other Study Limitations

This is an exploratory research project and there are some limitations. Firstly, though Genius.com allowed me to easily locate songs and examine their lyrics, it does not provide an

itemized list of songs or how often a word appears in songs. For example, when searching the term “light skin”, only 10 songs are shown at a time. One would have to scroll and count for a very long time to manually calculate the number of total songs. I reached out to the website to retrieve this number but did not receive a response. In the same manner, though the terms I have chosen to search in songs to detect colourist lyrics are very popular, there may be many other ways artists may refer to lighter-skinned and darker-skinned women that were not captured in this analysis. Equally, it was found easier to find songs in which artists make mention of lighter-skinned women rather than dark-skinned women. Pseudonyms for darker-skinned women seemed to be dependent on the artist. For example, Jay Z referred to darker-skinned women when he mentioned “Ms. Fufu” but did not use the word “dark skin” anywhere in this song (Girls, Girls, Girls, 2001). In “Right Above it*”*, Lil Wayne also made no mention of “skin” in his song. Instead, he discreetly mentions “red” as he raps “Beautiful black woman, I bet that bitch look better red” (2010).

There are many other artists not mentioned that have forwarded colourist ideals within their songs but were not included in the analysis as they did not represent popular mainstream songs, mainstream artists or the use of a pseudonym was not completely known. Here are a few: Fabolous in “Lights Out”, where the song evokes “*groups of pretty bitches with them light skin complexion*”. In the latter’s music video, light-skinned women appear beside him in his music video. The Game in “All I Know” states, “*Red boned bitch like Alicia, where the keys at?*”. Chris Brown in “Look at Me Now” which is a very popular song, having charted on Billboard’s Top 10 Hits list and having 559 Million views on Youtube, raps, “*Yellow model chick, yellow bottle sippin"*”. Gucci Mane in “Lemonade’s” introduction raps, “*Yellow big booty yellowbones*” and “*Lemonade-complexion East Australia girl be killing me*”. Jeezy in “Cold Summer” states, “*A*

couple bad things and they all light-skinned" . He also articulates "*Top floor chillin with some light skinned girlies, tryna get my last nut damn right I'm feeling squirrely*" in "Do it For You". Kanye West in "Power" expresses, "*With some light-skinned girls and some Kelly Rowlands*". Kendrick Lamar in "The Art of Peer Pressure*"* raps, "*You know, the light-skinned girls in all the little dresses*". In Ciara's single "Oh*"*, she sings, "*Light-skinned thick chicks, fellas call 'em redbone*". And finally, a more alarming one is Future in "Same Damn Time" in which he says, "*Yellow bone on my team, trafficking them Yao Mings*".

As colourism is a gendered phenomenon in which women are victimized more than men, this research does not focus on the distinctive ways in which colourism presents itself in music to describe North American Black men. This research also focuses only on artists from Canada and the USA. Within this research, there is very little examination of the phenomenon in Canada because the majority of the research focuses on artists from the United States (Maxwell et al., 2016; Deutsch, 2008). In addition, other musicians internationally also portray colourism in their lyrics but they are not examined in this research. Likewise, though my research focuses on Black people of African descent, colourism affects several different races. Additionally, this study does not measure the influence of the songs and their messaging to those who listen to them. As such, we cannot conclude how audiences may react, act upon, and internalize these messages, if at all.

Future Research Directions

I recommend that researchers conduct a study on African and Caribbean men and colourism in lyrics to explore how colourism affects their everyday lives. Moreover, research on colourism often focuses on how dark-skinned women are affected. More research is needed to explore the ways in which light-skinned women are affected negatively, both women who are genetically lighter with two Black parents and those whose lighter skin is due to being biracial or

multi-racial. The latter experience different realities in life in attempting to fit in both White society and Black society (in the case of a Black and White mixed-race person). A study focusing solely on colourism in music videos would also help further analyze how people consume colourist ideals. Lastly, an examination of colourism within Hollywood and its effects on the popularity of celebrities would further this body of knowledge and aid in educating the public concerning the prevalence of colourism.

5.4 Conclusion

We live in a society that compels particular ethnic and racial groups worldwide to use extremely harmful skin bleaching practices, damaging their hair to straighten it, undergoing plastic surgery for a smaller, narrower nose, and lighter eyes in order to attain an unattainable "standard" of beauty that is premised on the typical phenotypical characteristics of Caucasians. My research in analyzing music through the lens of colourism is an important step in understanding how these standards are imposed from outside *and* inside Black communities and how it is inherently harmful for everyone. Colourism directly affects and induces the body modifications stated above. As we know, colourism also diminishes the lives of those deemed too dark. They are less likely to marry, gain economic opportunities, avoid imprisonment, and other negative social outcomes.

Colourism presents itself within music. People of all ages may listen to these songs and unconsciously ascribe to the messages which negatively affect the entire community of Black people. I believe it is time members of the in-group, namely people of African descent, give each other more respect and stop the practice of victimizing our own due to skin colour or complexion. I have conducted this research in hopes of bringing more awareness to this phenomenon. I wish to define colourism as a racist practice that should no longer be fed and

fueled by members of my own community. These songs are not just playful entertainment; they share hegemonic messages that are, in turn, ingrained into the behaviour and consciousness of the masses. It is due time we collectively decide that despite the beats, the catchy words, and the appeal of the artist, racist, misogynistic and harmful lyrics are ultimately neither inspirational nor helpful.

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