

Writing Sample (Edited excerpt from published book chapter)

Defining body politics. Before one can fully comprehend how body politics might have impacted Black women's college experiences, an awareness of the constructs of body politics is necessary. Not to be confused with racism, colorism has been defined as a system in which lighter skin is privileged and valued higher than darker skin (Keith, 2009; Hunter, 2002). Pigmentocracy, a similar notion, references a hierarchy in which women of color are stratified based on the lightness or darkness of their skin (Hunter, 2002, p. 178). Similarly, hairism and hairtocracy refer to a system in which hair texture is stratified and greater value is placed on hair as close in likeness to that of White women; typically, long, straight hair (Okazawa-Rey, 1986). Hegemony promotes the existence of these oppressive ideologies.

These constructs originated during slavery when forced sexual relations by White men against Black women were a common occurrence. The offspring of such unions were often children with light skin and long, straight or curly/wavy hair or other physical traits that were most associated with Eurocentric features (Keith, 2009). An environment where skin hue served as social capital developed. Bourdieu's (1977) social capital has been described as "'social obligations' [or] 'connections'" that impact cultural capital, contributes to one's socioeconomic status, and influences one's overall social status (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, pp. 194-195). Similarly, Hunter (2002) defined social capital as "a form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks...[that] can be converted into economic or educational capital" (p. 178). During slavery, some privileges bestowed upon slaves who possessed light skin and straighter hair texture included better treatment by overseers, duties in the house instead of the field, superior housing, opportunities for both formal and informal education, access to clothing, and even the possibility of freedom (Okazawa-Rey, 1986). After the Civil War, with lighter skin came prestige in the Black community (Rockquemore, 2002). To have lighter skin afforded one higher social status and eventually led to the growth of a Black middle class within which preferential treatment was granted to lighter-skinned Blacks in mission schools and Black college admissions (Okazawa-Rey, 1986).

An overall increase in education, employment, and financial success within the Black community by World War I and into World War II seemed to indicate that skin color as a factor in upward social mobility was on the decline. However, the stigma associated with darker skin remained. "Numerous fraternities and sororities [mandated] the correct skin hue and hair texture...[as did] 'blue vein' social clubs, in which membership required a skin color light enough for one's blood veins to be seen...[and/or] a hair comb test—the more easily a comb could flow through the hair, the higher one's chances of gaining admission" (Okazawa-Rey, 1986, p. 13). As evidenced in the case of Oberlin College, it is not unusual for what is occurring in mainstream society to be mirrored on college campuses. What was occurring "at Oberlin College...[was], in part, a reflection of larger national issues at play during a significant period of social, political, and economic change in the nation" (Waite, 2002, p. xiii). Therefore, it is not unimaginable that the above-described aesthetically dichotomous mentalities would manifest on college campuses or that respectability politics implemented in everyday life by Black women would be employed on college campuses to achieve a measure of upward mobility.

Take, for instance, Wallace Thurman's (1929) fictional character, Emma Lou Morgan, in *The Blacker the Berry*. Though a work of Thurman's imagination, "literature reflects life" (Okazawa-Rey, 1986, p. 13), and several elements of the story he tells are reminiscent of his own encounters "as a [B]lack man from an unusually [W]hite state" (Thurman, 1929, p. 12). In an introduction featured in a later edition of the book, Shirlee Haizlip (1995) provided the following summary of Emma's tale:

Emma Lou Brown...had been so indoctrinated by her family, her schools, and her friends that she was sure...she was of little value, that she was to be pitied, that she could never succeed because her skin was dark...Few who might have been called her own disavowed what seemed commonly held beliefs: not her mother, not her teachers in Idaho or in college in California...For the college reader, [Emma Lou] becomes the girl who is not accepted into a certain sorority or remains dateless in her dormitory every Saturday night. [In 1929, through an account of Emma Lou's life from childhood to womanhood], for the first time in a novel Wallace Thurman openly explored color prejudice in the [B]lack community (p. 11).

Most of what is written chronicling Black women's experiences on campus during the 20th and 21st centuries brings to light the following themes in terms of their emotional well-being and environmental response: appreciation, frustration, and dedication (Evans, 2006). In Evan's (2006) study of Black women in college prior to the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision overturning separate but equal as constitutional, she surveyed the memoirs of and other sources pertaining to Black women who attended both PWIs and HBCUs. Evans found that "each woman...expressed overwhelming appreciation for the opportunity to attend college...aggravation with the barriers they encountered and the insults leveled by those who sought to stunt their growth...[and] a dedication to excel...despite their frustration" (pp. 114-117).

Their frustration may have been exacerbated by residual effects of colorism and hairism. After several attempts to ingratiate herself with the Black community on her campus, Emma Lou found herself consistently excluded due to her dark skin. A schoolmate's response to her lament that she had not yet been "pledged" or recruited to join a sorority was that she would not be "because [she was] not a high brown or half-white" (Thurman, 1929, p. 56). Emma Lou did not want to believe that the same skin color prejudices rampant in her hometown of Boise, Idaho could also be present on her Southern California college campus. Eventually, she became so depressed about her dissatisfaction with college life that she left without completing her studies (Thurman, 1929). Likewise, many documented perceptions of college life by young, Black women revealed an overwhelming sense of loneliness, despite the presence of other Black students (Evans, 2006). Especially after the 1920s, it is likely these women were exposed to advertisements, influenced by mass media and popular culture, portraying Black as ugly and White as beautiful (Walker, 2007). Despite the efforts of some Black beauty companies to produce advertisements depicting Black as beautiful, most "advertisements consistently promoted a beauty standard of smooth, glossy hair and a light complexion, [and] some...crudely portrayed [B]lack hair and skin as defects that needed to be corrected through the use of hair straighteners and skin whiteners" (Walker, 2007, p. 38).

Consequently, in addition to the usual aspects and daily stresses of college student life (e.g., homework; study; extracurriculars; and finding time for family, friends, and self), Black collegiate women may have also been contending with all that comes with prevailing standards of beauty when one does not meet them (Collins, 2009). Melissa Harris-Perry's (2010) explanation of *shame* encapsulates the feelings these young women may have experienced. She wrote:

Shame comes when we fear exposure and evaluation by others...especially...for girls and women who draw a larger sense of self-identity from their friendly, familial, and romantic relationships. Shame is evaluation of self...a belief in the malignant self: the idea that your entire person is infected by something

inherently bad and potentially contagious... shame brings a psychological and physical urge to withdraw, submit, or appease others. 'Shame transforms our identity. We experience ourselves as being small and worthless and as being exposed. When individuals feel chronically ashamed, they tend to attribute all negative events to their own failings... instead of seeing the external world as capable of producing both good and bad outcomes... Shame eats away at self-esteem and makes every social role more difficult (pp. 104-105).

It is this shaming that moved Emma Lou to flee college. For Black women who remained on their college campuses, some may have dealt with competition, commencing in high school, in which they vied for the affections of Black males who favored women with features most aligned with European beauty standards (Rockquemore, 2002, p. 493). Others may have faced professors and administrators who maintained biased views of them and of their work based on race and/or skin hue. Studies investigating links between skin tone and educational attainment have provided evidence of favoritism displayed by teachers toward students with light skin. Specifically, "[W]hite teachers and administrators are prone to make distinctions among African American... children about who the smart... and good kids are... Those most closely approximating [W]hiteness will have more so-called [W]hite traits attributed to them, such as intelligence and civility" (Hunter, 2002, p. 188). These teachers then reward the lighter-skinned, "good" students, and punish darker-skinned students with lower expectations of high scholastic achievement and positive behavior, requiring less challenging work of them, and even assigning lower grades for their academic efforts (Keith, 2009, p. 29). These interactions were confirmation of "prevailing standards of beauty [that] claim no matter how intelligent, educated, or 'beautiful' a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must 'git back'" (Collins, 2009, p. 98).