Colorism: An Understanding of the Multiplicity of Voices Among Black Women and How Their Experiences Inform Their Postsecondary Lives

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THE MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN

Abstract

In my M.Ed. program, I reflected on and applied a social and cultural lens to my experiences with colorism. Through this process of reflection and my review of anti-racist literature I began to question how the hegemonic discourses of race and racism reinforced a Black-White binary. These questions led me to explore Black women’s often intricate and complex experiences with colorism that are not always talked about. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry to this study, I explored six racialized Black female student’s experience with colorism to understand how colorism informed their lives on campus. By means of purposeful convenience sampling, I heard about their understanding of colorism, experiences as Black women, how colorism informed their experience in the academy, and explored the implications for postsecondary. The theoretical framework that guided my research was Critical Race Theory (CRT). A semi-structured one-on-one interview approach was used to prepare general questions to guide the discussion. The findings revealed that participants learned about colorism at an early age. Apart from skin tone, phenotypic features were attached to their experience with colorism. The findings also showed that some participants conflated colorism and racism and connected their understanding of or experiences with colorism with dominant ideology. Finally, the results also revealed ways in which the participants resisted the multiple issues that intersected and had implications in their daily lives. Some issues included the harmful stereotypes affixed to Black women and how the messages they received informed their choices and reinforced some of the negative images about Black women’s hair. I aimed to bring awareness to the intricacies of colorism and the ways in which the participants used their agency to push back and resist colorism.
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To my daughter, who is my reason for being. Your unconditional love gets me through each day. This study is for you and all the young Black women out there. It is my hope that the awareness it brings shows that your voices matter.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .............................................................................. 1
  My Motivation: Researcher Perspective ................................................................. 4
  Background of the Problem ...................................................................................... 9
  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................ 12
  Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................. 14
  Research Question ..................................................................................................... 15
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................. 15
  Importance of the Study ........................................................................................... 18
  Scope and Limitations of the Study ......................................................................... 18

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................. 21
  Partial History of Colorism ....................................................................................... 21
  Racism and Colorism are Constructed Differently ............................................... 24
  Hairism and the Politics of Skin Tone ....................................................................... 32

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN ................... 37
  Research Design ....................................................................................................... 39
  Research Method ..................................................................................................... 40
  Site and Participant Selection .................................................................................. 42
  Data Collection ........................................................................................................ 43
  Data Analysis ........................................................................................................... 45
  Validity and Reliability ............................................................................................. 47
  Methodological Assumption ..................................................................................... 49

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS ............................................... 51
  Colorism: Certain People Are Left In, and Certain People Are Left Out ............... 55
  If People Are Talking About Colorism, We Should Listen ...................................... 66
  Colorism is Tricky ..................................................................................................... 79
  Awareness Helps ...................................................................................................... 87
  Summary .................................................................................................................... 94

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS .................... 96
  Summary of the Study ............................................................................................. 96
  Discussion ................................................................................................................ 98
  Others Made it So .................................................................................................... 99
  Colorism is Insidious .............................................................................................. 102
  From the Margin to the Centre ............................................................................. 108
  Summary ................................................................................................................ 112
  Implications ............................................................................................................. 114
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 124
THE MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN

References ..................................................................................................................... 128

Appendix A: Interview Schedule for First Interview .................................................. 142
Appendix B: Interview Schedule for Second Interview .............................................. 143
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Overview of Participants</td>
<td>................................................................54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this study, I conducted a narrative inquiry to examine how colorism informed six Black women’s postsecondary experiences at a University in Southern Ontario. A focus on the postsecondary context was important because, as the literature shows, Black women face “dominant ideas of respectability, morality, and attractiveness that [reflect] White beauty standards” (Eley, 2017, p. 89); however, issues of colorism are less documented “in academic literature” (Eley, 2017, p. 88). *Colorism* refers to “discrimination in which people with lighter skin receive more favorable treatment than people with darker skin” (Gonlin, 2017, p. 55). Some of the harmful effects of colorism among Black women that are broadly consistent within the scholarship include depression, low self-esteem, unwelcome advances, bullying, name-calling, underemployment, and underperformance in school.

The theoretical framework that guided my research was Critical Race Theory (CRT). As Taylor, James, and Saul (2007) contend, “Critical theories… offer a rich context through which we can better unpack the relationships among race, difference, and identification” (p. 154). This theoretical lens has also been used within educational contexts to understand a range of racialized experiences (Henry et al., 2017).

The terms *shadeism* and *colorism* are used interchangeably throughout the literature. For my study, I used the term *colorism*, as it was the term most commonly used in the sources I reviewed. Key scholars in the field of shadeism and colorism define *shadeism* or *colorism* as discrimination based on skin tone (Abdulle & Obeyesekere, 2017; Banks, 2014; Blay, 2015; Charles, 2017; Constantine-Simms, 2015; Eley, 2017; Glenn, 2009; Harvey, Banks, & Tennial, 2014; Herring, 2004;
Hope, 2011; Hunter, 2005; Keith & Monroe, 2015; Mathews, 2013; Miller, 1969; Monteiro & Ford, 2017; Norwood & Foreman, 2014; Suchit, 2016; Thompson & Keith, 2004; Walker, 1983). Herring (2004) offers an extensive definition that defines colorism as “the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same ‘racial’ group on the basis of skin color” (p. 3). He further explains that the preferences are based on features such as “hair texture, thickness of lips, eye color, nose shapes, and other phenotypical features” (Herring, 2004, p. 3).

Scholarship on colorism finds that colorism is a feature of racism, yet the two are distinct (Thompson, 2014). An examination into colorism opens up discussions about the complex way in which Blackness is constructed and how Black women are racialized. Fanon (2008), for instance, offers a critical examination of the complex ways in which Blackness is constructed and reproduced through his argument about the fact of Blackness. He argues that Blackness is framed by using problematic Eurocentric standards, suggesting that Black identity is not defined by Black people, but rather, is forced on them based on their environment and in part, by the colour of their skin (Fanon, 2008). He argues that “‘color prejudice’ is indeed an idiocy and an iniquity that must be eradicated” (Fanon, 2008, p. 12). The valorizing of problematic Eurocentric aesthetics and skin tone is entrenched in systemic racism and, by extension, colorism.

An understanding of colorism is not complete without pointing to colonial history. Black women were treated inhumanely and as chattels, whose purpose (among others) was to be sexual slaves to their White master and nurse their young children. Black women were not considered worthy of working in their owners’ homes unless their skin tone and features had the problematic Eurocentric White features; only then would they
be considered worthy, but with restrictions. This ‘divide and rule’ strategy pitted Black people against each other; hence, the privileging of light skin over dark skin gave rise to colorism and intra-racial discord.

The historical context of discrimination based on skin colour disturbs discourses on race and racism by shedding light on the ways in which colorism operates intra-racially and inter-racially. Aside from skin tone, the preferences mentioned above “are typically measured against putative European (i.e., White) standards” (Herring, 2004, p. 3). As such, *intra-racial colorism* arises when individuals within the same racial group discriminate against each other based on skin tone (Eley, 2017). The intra-racial concerns are unsettling, and should also inform the dialogues on difference among racialized individuals.

*Inter-racial colorism*, however, arises when individuals not belonging to a racial group discriminate against individuals within that racial group (Eley, 2017). In their autoethnographic study about their lived experiences with colorism, Taylor, Desjardin, Robles-Lopez, and Stubbs (2017) argue that colorism has harmful effects on Black women regardless of their skin tone, accomplishments, or social class. For instance, stereotypes based on skin hue and phenotype include the stigma associated with differences in academic success, job opportunities, attractiveness, and self-worth (Taylor et al., 2017). Thompson and Keith (2004) point out, too, that Black women face intersecting issues of colorism, racism, and sexism. When combined, these challenges may result in feelings of inadequacy and low morale. Black women, however, push back against colorism by acting in ways that serve their own interests, aspirations, and needs in relation to—and, in some ways—in spite of colorism.
In my research, I was interested in exploring how Black women experience both intra-racial and inter-racial colorism. Given the effects of colorism on Black women’s lives, I was interested in exploring how colorism informed Black women’s experiences specifically within postsecondary contexts and, in particular, with their peers, professors, and social experiences. I was also interested in adding to the voices working to combat colorism by bringing awareness to its harmful effects through the participants’ stories. I borrow Wilder’s (2015) words of “shaming, naming and circulating the truth” (p. 21). By doing so, I aimed to use the sample of racialized Black female students’ experiences, in addition to my own experience, to push back against and actively resist the harmful effects of colorism. Norwood (2017) suggests that Black women have pushed back against colorism through self-empowerment, speaking out, rejecting colonial thinking, and accepting their natural Black features including their natural coiled hair. She further argues that “knowledge and consciousness raising can lead to resistance, which often fosters a new self-definition” (Norwood, 2017, p. 81). With the understanding that Black women have fought back in many ways, I was also interested in how the participants actively negotiated colorism as active agents. The act of resistance is a feature of empowerment that challenges labelling Black women as victims.

My Motivation: Researcher Perspective

A motivating factor for focusing on the issue of colorism stemmed from my experience and observations while growing up in Jamaica. Talking about colorism brings up painful memories of the history of colonialism; however, I believe that talking about it helps to challenge and resist colorism. A part of my goal is to name and
shame colorism in a way that brings awareness to the issue. As Miller’s (1969) study suggests, in the Jamaican context, “colour has been an important determinant of social niche, economic status and personal worth within the Jamaican society for practically all of its history. Whiteness has become associated with the desirable and Blackness with the undesirable” (p. 72). As a child, I learned that the standard for beauty and the ideal colour included being “Fair and Clear” (Miller, 1969, p. 88). Although as a child I did not have the language required to describe my experience, I now recognize how pervasive colorism was in Jamaica. As Hope (2011) explains, “the conflation of skin colour with power, a pervasive shadism [sic], remains a social and cultural legacy of Jamaica’s slavery and colonial history, with lighter skin (identified as ‘brown’ in Jamaica) still perceived as positive and ideal” (p. 67).

Growing up in Jamaica, the nickname by which I was called was “Browning.” At the time, I understood it as a normal way of greeting women of a light complexion. In retrospect, this language was harmful because it is a misogynistic way of reducing Black women by sexualizing and shaming our bodies. According to Miller (1969), the term “Browning” means “a light-skinned female with African physicality who acts as a Eurocentric substitute and a social ideal for all ethnic groups in Jamaica” (Miller, 1969 as cited in Hope, 2011, p. 168). The term “Browning” is particularly problematic because it has also been associated with the sexualization of Black women’s bodies. As Hope (2011) highlights, “the Browning represents the pervasive female body upon and through which many . . . discussions of heterosexual masculinity are based” (p. 169). As a teen, I was called nicknames that I assumed were based on my skin tone. Some girls made up the name “Redebo,” whereas some boys used the word “Browning,” which I
THE MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN

I presume was because of the sexualization of brownness in the society. I am not sure why there was a gendered difference in naming, but both nicknames were related to the “Browning” or “Brown” shade of my skin. This type of name calling was offensive because it was an abusive way for a child to refer to a peer. Hope (2011) explains that “the ‘Brown woman’ or ‘Browning’ emerged as the ideal standard of feminine beauty in a country that had once been dominated by a white value system that gave dominance to whitened images as ideal notions of self” (p. 168). The term “Browning” is still used by some men to refer to me whenever I visit Jamaica: it remains hurtful, and makes me angry and filled with disgust.

I recall as a young girl that I would sometimes be teased and called the nickname “Yellow.” In an attempt to avoid the childhood teasing, I would stay in the sun to get a tan so that the next day, I would not be teased and called “Yellow” or “Browning.” It had an effect on my personal sense of self-worth because I was uncomfortable with these gender-based stereotypes that minimized me according to my skin colour. I wanted to change my skin tone because of it. I was, however, never successful to achieve a darker complexion; I only ended up looking more copper-toned. Even among my lighter-skinned or mixed-race friends, I often felt uncertain because I perceived myself as dark-skinned by comparison. Combined, these experiences contributed to my feelings of self-doubt, which made me feel like the “Other.” My experiences of trying to fit in along ‘colour-lines’ contributed to feelings of insecurity, sometimes making me withdraw and play alone. My response underscores the impact of colorism on health and wellness, which are underlying effects of colorism.
Although my teachers often thought I was quiet and shy, in reality, I was terrified of being teased. I was not withdrawn as a teen, but I felt nervous when I had to endure the name calling. As a result of the legacy of colonialism, colorism was largely socially accepted and frequently normalized because of the historical imprint of mental slavery. On some level, I recognized the societal preference to consider lighter-skinned people for certain frontline jobs than darker-skinned people. It was not until I was in my early twenties that I witnessed and heard conversations about the concept of light-skin advantage, and realized that in Jamaica, I was a beneficiary of that privilege. For example, I did not have the same concerns of not being considered for frontline jobs as some of my darker-skinned friends, because we understood the underlying colour bias that existed. According to Harrison and Thomas (2009), “having a light complexion is a more favorable asset for Blacks seeking employment than their job experience and level of education” (as cited in Charles, 2017, p. 3). Conversely, in some circumstances, my complexion would be considered dark, and so the sense of privilege would not apply. So, as a light-skinned Black woman, I came to understand that the “position of power only exists in relation to other racialized bodies” (Obeyesekere, 2017, p. 10).

In addition to skin tone differences, Black women’s experiences are affected by the complexities of phenotype, including hair, lips, and body features. These nuances demonstrate the complexity of Black women’s experiences, as they can both benefit from and be disadvantaged by colorism. The perceptions of hair texture, facial features, and body type are also significant, and are placed on a hierarchy that affords either privilege or disadvantage, thereby indicating that the
THE MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN

conditions of colorism are not restricted to skin colour. As Dei (2017) suggests, the issue of Blackness is a complex and contested terrain. He adds that “the shifting nature of our identities implies bodies are always read differently and contextually, albeit with similar reactions and responses” (Dei, 2017, p. 6).

In my MEd program, I was able to reflect on and apply a social and cultural lens to my experiences. My professors encouraged me to think critically about the discourses of race and racism. Through this process of reflection, numerous questions unfolded. For instance, I began to question why hegemonic discourses of race and racism reinforced a Black-White binary. Dei (2017) suggests we must shift our thinking from using a Black-White binary lens to view the true complexity of racial issues. He argues that “The ‘Black-White binary’ assigns fixed notions of skin colour racial identity, creating an oppositional division of two sides . . . Black and White” (Dei, 2017, p. vii). Rather, he suggests that we should use a Black-White paradigm that uses a “lens of reading social relations and relations of power” (Dei, 2017, p. vii).

My review of anti-racist literature made me keenly aware that discussions about colorism complicated how Black women experience difference based on their skin tone. The complexity can be attributed to bias based on skin tone, but also includes “key complexities of Blackness as related to phenotype, racial perceptions, and behavior” (Norwood & Monroe, 2017, p. 34). My interest in colorism provides a useful conceptual lens to help me explore Black women’s often intricate and complex experiences that are not always talked about. For example, in their study, Taylor et al. (2017) highlight that other studies on colorism tended to view the
experiences primarily through the lens of skin tone preference; yet, “little is known about the commonalities of Blacks . . . In fact, studies involving women of color…center almost exclusively on race, leaving conclusions about colorism open to question and debate” (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 44). I recognize that there is no singular way of being Black. My intention is to look at the multiple and complex ways that Black women negotiate their Blackness. I hope to use my research to create an opportunity to talk about how colorism informs Black women’s postsecondary experience that is not accounted for or that often remains silent.

**Background of the Problem**

Although colorism affects different racial groups, for this study, I focused on the experiences of Black racialized female postsecondary students. The focus on colorism in my research helped account for Black racialized female students’ experiences on campus, because “systems of discrimination operate on at least two levels concerning race and color” (Hunter, 2005, p. 7). According to Hunter (2005), racism and colorism work together to reinforce structures of racial discrimination, as well as privileging or discrimination based on skin tone. An exploration of colorism is important because it affects all areas of life, including perceptions of one’s attractiveness, desirability, ideas of femininity and masculinity, understandings of belonging, and who is seen as ‘other.’ For example, despite her light skin, a Black woman may experience colorism. A dark-skinned Black woman may experience both racism and colorism at the same time (Hunter, 2005). In addition, Thompson and Keith (2004) note that several studies indicate that “colorism plays out differently based on gender” (as cited in Taylor et al., 2017, p. 48). According to Collins (2002), for
instance, “Black men’s blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness” (p. 89). Moreover, in a study conducted with female college students, their comments highlight that dark skin is seen as positive and beneficial for men. On the contrary, the women felt more often that dark skin did not provide them with the same benefits or rewards (Hunter, 2005). Hence, “dark skin fits the ideal masculine image but not the preferred feminine image” (Gonlin, 2017, p. 57).

Hair texture and styles are viewed differently for Black women based on their skin hue. Black women have spoken about the negative stereotypes associated with wearing their hair in natural, tightly coiled styles. For example, the literature finds that many women with long, straight, or wavy hair are often positioned as more attractive or desirable. In contrast, research has found that dark-skinned Black women and their features have been constructed as less attractive (Eley, 2017). When their hairstyles do not fit the dominant image of long, straight, and beautiful, Black women are treated with indifference (Eley, 2017).

Moreover, the standards associated with how Black women are judged physically was another reason for focusing on the effects of colorism on women (Eley, 2017). According to Hunter (2005), skin colour discrimination is “part and parcel of racism and exists because of it” (p. 7). For instance, Hunter (2005) highlights that “personal income, educational attainment, and even the status of one’s spouse are determined in part by a woman’s skin tone” (p. 8). Similarly, Eley’s (2017) study about Black women’s racialized experiences in a postsecondary context shows that skin colour discrimination
and physical attributes “do impact social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing; self-esteem and self-image; and familial, romantic, and other critical relationships” (p. 79).

The issues noted above highlight some of the challenges Black women face, as “racism and the process of racialization are manifest in intricate ways (Taylor, 2017, p. 185). Hunter (2004) argues that scholars in the past shunned conversations about skin colour bias. She asserts that the discussions were “considered by many to be ‘airing dirty laundry, ‘[and consequently] public conversations about inequality and skin tone were glossed over in favor of discussing racism” (Hunter, 2004, p. 22). An understanding of skin tone stratification must be viewed through the lens of racism and colorism. Doing so sheds light on the challenges Black women face, and also helps to understand the ways they actively navigate their lives.

Finally, the concurrent problem of racism and colorism exist within postsecondary education, but often, educators fail to address “unconscious bias, implicit racism, and colorism” (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 40). Henry and Tator (2009) explain that the process of racialization works together with different types of oppression to marginalize students of colour. Within postsecondary contexts, the racialization of students of colour is manifested in small, yet overt ways to discount their knowledge or silence their voices. The small slights are conveyed “in behaviors; anecdotes; sexualized, ethni-cized [sic], and racialized jokes; inappropriate glares and glances; gestures; and forms of speech” (Henry & Tator, 2009, p. 27). In addition to being marginalized, students of colour experience mental and physical health concerns as a result of their experience (Henry & Tator, 2009). In addition to academic achievement, Black women’s success in postsecondary includes “her sense of belonging and
assimilation, ability to manage multiple, simultaneous responsibilities, and how well she understands and meets college level expectations” (Kraft, Collier, & Morgan as cited in Eley, 2017, p. 94). Further, she contends that “conversations of this kind require consideration of colorism, intraracial discord, identity, self-esteem, body image, and many intimate aspects of Black women’s lives” (Eley, 2017, p. 94).

Therefore, similar to racism, colorism should be addressed in postsecondary education because students realize that “outward appearance—including skin tone—will always shape their experience” (Eley, 2017, p. 40). Further, it is also important to note “intraracial disputes that serve to minimize, invalidate, and discount each other’s very real lived experiences and consequent perspectives and behaviors persist among Black women with varying skin hues” (Eley, 2017, p. 80). An understanding of Black women’s complex postsecondary experiences can thus benefit from an in-depth understanding of colorism (Taylor et al., 2017).

**Statement of the Problem**

This study investigated the effects of colorism on racialized Black female students’ postsecondary experiences. A study of racialized Black female students’ experiences with colorism was useful because colorism is pervasive and affects multiple aspects of their lives, including educational opportunities. Evidence finds that colorism affects teachers’ unconscious and conscious attitudes towards their students (Monroe, 2016). In her study, Monroe (2016) found that light-skinned Black women have more opportunities than dark-skinned Black women to receive a college education, have better socioeconomic opportunities, and to get married. For example, educators may tend to assign stereotypes to a dark-skinned, unmarried, and poor Black
mother, which marginalizes her in the classroom, whereas, an educated and unmarried light-skinned Black mother may receive more favorable treatment. By doing so, educators use subjective criteria to “sway their dealings with students” (Monroe, 2016, p. 50), thereby minimizing and marginalizing students who do not fit the problematic Eurocentric standards.

Issues of self-esteem are also noted among Black women who experienced colour bias (Thompson and Keith, as cited in Monroe, 2016). Various racialized experiences may inform how Black women negotiate schooling, their relationships with peers, teachers, and school experience based on “sentiments that are grounded in racist and colorist constructions” (Monroe, 2016, p. 50). An understanding of the messages Black women receive in their childhood about skin colour is important for educators to address the experiences and point of view of Black women in postsecondary education (Monroe, 2016). As such, “connecting colorism to well-structured, race focused approaches is critical if educators hope to promote strong outcomes in Black education” (Monroe, 2016, p. 51).

Although anti-racism has sought to understand Black women’s experiences with racism on campus, anti-racist efforts have not tended to address colorism or intra-racial discrimination in postsecondary settings (Monroe, 2016). An exploration of colorism within postsecondary contexts was useful because it can inform anti-racist initiatives in education, which have tended to overlook nuances of colorism (Norwood & Monroe, 2017). Some scholarship suggests that approaches to antiracism in educational contexts “[acknowledge] that school discourses are not neutral but are embedded in and reproduced through social and institutional settings
that normalize white racism and other forms of marginalization” (Schick, 2010, p. 48).

Colorism scholars (Blay, 2015; Eley, 2017; Hunter, 2005) suggest that although colorism is derived from racism, they operate differently. Light skin privilege “is difficult to distinguish between our own innocent preferences for skin tones and the socially constructed hierarchy of skin tones informed by racism” (Hunter, 2005, p. 89). Hence, the everyday experience of racism helps to explain why Black women may unintentionally conflate colorism and racism. Therefore, a specific focus on colorism is important because it allows us to understand how Black women’s experience of colorism informs their postsecondary experience.

**Purpose of the Study**

My research had three purposes. The first was to explore how the experiences of colorism inform racialized Black female students’ experience. Specifically, I sought to understand how colorism informs their postsecondary experience. The second purpose was to build upon anti-racist literature by considering interrelated elements of colorism. Taylor et al. (2017) point out that the widespread practice of colorism within communities makes it difficult for researchers to explore. They further note that “although social scientists in the field of education do not generally examine colorism as a component of race and gender, an interdisciplinary literature review of scholarly findings revealed relatively consistent conclusions” (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 42). Hence, an exploration of the issues that are affected by colorism, such as skin tone and phenotypic traits, will provide information to add to the growing body of knowledge. Finally, the third purpose was to seek recommendations that can help educators
understand the implications for postsecondary contexts. By focusing on Black women’s experiences, I hope to identify the variety of “voices, experiences, and knowledge that have not been at the table” (Dei, 2013, p. 7). A focus on Black women’s experience draws attention and awareness to the problematic effects of colorism.

**Research Question**

One overarching question and one sub-question guided the research, outlined below.

**Overarching Question**

How does a sample of Black women’s experience with colorism inform their postsecondary experience?

**Sub-Question 1**

How does an understanding of Black women’s experiences with colorism bring awareness to the intricacies of colorism and help educators to understand the implications for postsecondary education?

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) guided my research. CRT is an offspring of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), and is rooted in a commitment to fight against racism (Bell, 2016). It is relevant in education because it offers a framework to critically evaluate issues of racism in education, and proposes ways to address it (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT uses narratives or stories to give voice to understanding the complexities of racism. As Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests:

The ‘voice’ component of CRT provides a way to communicate the
experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step in understanding the complexities of racism…the voice of people of color is required for a deep understanding of the educational system. (p. 14)

Therefore, it was within the educational context that I used CRT to “recognize the ways in which race informs our everyday experiences and practices and how perceptions of skin colour and physical appearance can be powerful determinants of educational and social outcomes” (James & Taylor, 2010, p. 126). *Race* is defined by Banks (as cited in Solorzano & Yosso, 2016) as a social construct to differentiate people of different racial groups and to show the power of one group over the other. On the other hand, Marable (1992, as cited in Solorzano & Yosso, 2016) applies CRT to “[shift] the discussion of race and racism from a Black-White discourse to one that includes multiple faces, voices, and experiences” (p. 128).

As a theoretical framework, CRT “advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 128). I used CRT in two ways in this study. First, CRT provided a foundation for understanding the structural inequality that disadvantages Black women and acknowledges the marginalization of racialized people (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The intent was to explore Black women’s experience with colorism to understand how the significance of skin tone informed their postsecondary experiences. In this regard, CRT was useful because it “challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Secondly, I used CRT to question the validity of colour-blind ideology, which argues that “acts of discrimination merely reflect larger institutional and structured White hegemony”
(Taylor as cited in Ebert, 2004, p. 178). As well, Ebert (2004) suggests that the colour-blind concept is used to discuss the notion of race neutrality, although it “ignores the many dimensions of structured racism” (Ebert, 2004, p. 175).

My research on colorism drew on the following four assumptions of CRT. The first was the “intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 128). It starts with the idea that other than race and racism, other forms of oppression include “gender and class discrimination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 128). This tenet helped me to critique the relevance of gender in understanding Black women’s experience.

The second tenet was “the challenge to dominant ideology” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 129). It looks at the “deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Bernal as cited in Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 129). This assumption helped me to analyze colour-blind assumptions within educational settings.

The third tenet related to “the centrality of experiential knowledge” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 129). CRT suggests that legitimate experiences of marginalized people are important to “understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 129). As such, Matsuda (1995) advances the idea of “looking to the bottom” (p. 63); this idea means that “those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which should be listened” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 63). Looking to the bottom draws attention to an understanding of Black women’s experiences and brings a focus to voices that tend to be silenced.

Finally, CRT proposes using narratives as counter-narratives to tell the stories “of those
people whose experiences are not often told” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 133). Therefore, the use of narratives explained Black women’s experiences of colorism and how it informed their postsecondary experience.

**Importance of the Study**

As Norwood and Monroe (2017) state, “current dialogues generally do not explore possible connections to colorism in the lives of Black students, especially girls and women” (p. 32). This study considered the experiences of Black women in an educational context to illustrate how colorism informs their lives on campus. Consequently, presenting first-hand accounts of Black women’s stories about how they deal with issues related to colorism can help educators to understand racial issues in educational settings (Norwood & Monroe, 2017).

**Scope and Limitations of the Study**

In this study, I focused on the experiences of a sample of Black women in a postsecondary institution in Southern Ontario. Participant selection included racialized Black female students who self-identify as Black regardless of their skin tone. I used purposeful sampling to select six participants from a university in Southern Ontario. This size was reasonable for this research which, as a qualitative study, was not intended to be generalized to a larger population. The goal of my study, like most qualitative research studies, was to understand a phenomenon in depth, not breadth.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) write that “in qualitative research, a single case or a small, non-random purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular [issue] in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p. 254). Rather, it is more about how the reader of the study finds
how it applies to situations in their lives. This idea means “the person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256). Since Blackness is experienced differently, I invite readers of the study to draw the relevant pieces from the findings that may apply to their specific situation.

Finally, Tilley (2016) points out that when working with marginalized groups, student researchers should “understand, at least to some degree, the complexities of conducting respectful research” (p. 42). Therefore, I recognized that as someone who has experienced colorism, I may bring my perspective and experience of the phenomenon into the research from a different viewpoint than the participants. My perspective can consequently inform the lens I bring to the study. I disclosed this information early in this study, to bring awareness to how I located myself in the research. The purpose was to disclose how my experience with colorism may inform how I filtered the information in my analysis and interpretation.

My narrative data analysis for the study was informed through thick descriptions and the study’s narrative inquiry design and genre. Kim (2016) highlights that, finding an appropriate method of narrative data analysis for your inquiry should be informed by and contingent upon your narrative research design . . . and the narrative inquiry genre you have in mind . . . based on the narrative data you have. (p. 195)

Hence, I used a reflexive stance supported by theory to analyze and present my findings and discussion to show the significance of the participants’ lived experiences. I used the participants’ quotes to reflect their experiences, thereby leaving the reader free to
interpret these. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that a good narrative study can include the researcher using “reflexive thinking and writing to bring himself or herself into the study” (p. 270). Therefore, being reflexive allowed me to acknowledge how I positioned myself in the research, and considered the implications of my positioning in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents literature that addresses issues related to anti-racism and colorism. Among other things, I explored the literature to contextualize the research problem and to establish the theoretical framework of the study. My review includes a partial history of colorism to provide some background on the topic. I also look at colorism, racism, and how colorism differs from racism. Next, I review issues of hair and related issues associated with colorism. Specifically, I look at the messages Black women receive about stereotypical assumptions of Black women and the challenges Black women face.

Partial History of Colorism

Hunter (2004) suggests that “no discussion of skin color is complete without an understanding of the historical context for this stratification” (p. 25). Skin colour stratification is “rooted in the histories of slavery and colonialism” (Hunter, 2004, p. 37). The expression colorism was coined by Walker (1983), and is defined as the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (p. 90). Thompson and Keith (2004) offer an extensive explanation of colorism that states:

Colorism embodies preference and desire for both light skin as well as these other attendant features. Hair, eye color, and facial features function, along with color in complex ways, to shape opportunities, norms regarding attractiveness, self-concept, and overall body image. Yet, it is color that has received the most attention in research . . . The reasons for this emphasis [are] not clear, although one can speculate that it is [because] color is the most visible physical feature
THE MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN

and is also the feature that is most enduring and difficult to change. (p. 46)

This definition highlights that “color preferences are typically measured against
putative European features (i.e., White) standards” (Herring, 2004, p. 3).

Colorism dates to the 1600s. It is grounded in colonial history, where slaves
were either granted preferential treatment or placed on the periphery based on the tone
of their skin. According to Norwood and Foreman (2014), Europeans attempted to
validate slavery by using negative images to marginalize Black slaves. Specifically, an
important factor in understanding colorism is the history of violence and sexual
assault against Black women by their White slave owners. Power and control were
gained by slave owners through the “dehumanization of [slaves] on the basis of race,
and the control of women’s sexuality and reproduction” (Hunter, 2005, p. 17). In an
attempt to violently control Black women, acts of sexual cruelty, which included
physical force and rape, gave rise to the color hierarchy system.

Fanon (2008) explains that the mental, physical, and sexual abuse Black
women endured during colonialization was harmful because the “mutilation they had
undergone affected the very rhythm of their lives, the nervous tension of their
existence” (p. 41). One effect brought about by the brutal treatment was mixed-race
children of Black women and White slave owners. The *mulatto* category, as Hunter
(2005) explains, “was the creation of racially mixed children by white fathers and
black mothers” (p. 18).

Over time, Black women internalized their feelings of inferiority and
oppression in an attempt to attain acceptance into the dominant culture. The stain of
colonialism remains, however, in which skin tone preference is dependent upon
colorist assumptions, thereby reinforcing and reproducing the colonial mindset.

Another lasting effect of colonialism is the construction of the colour-line that brought about colorism (Hunter, 2005). The colonial practice of placing value on lighter skin tones and consequently subordinating darker complexions was used, “as a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy to prevent revolt” (Herring, 2004, p. 25). The intent of this strategy was to instill suspicion and misgivings among slaves. As a result, slaves with a light skin tone had access to power and privilege because of their proximity to Whiteness: they received preferential treatment and were assigned household chores, and were ascribed a status of beauty due to their skin tone. Dark-skinned slaves, however, performed manual labour in the fields and were considered ugly and unappealing. This hegemonic division of labour rests in the problematic Eurocentric idea of White being at the top and Black at the bottom of the race hierarchy. This idea perpetuated the belief that slaves with dark skin were inferior, and those with light skin were superior (Norwood & Foreman, 2014).

The effects of the divide-and-rule strategy perpetuated colorism and existed intra-racially after the emancipation of slavery. This is evident in how the colonialized mind was grounded in the psyche of both the enslaved and emancipated people. On an intra-racial level, individuals of the same race made distinctions based on the shade of their skin, whereas on the inter-racial level, individuals of one racial group made distinctions based on skin hue with members of a different racial group (Herring & Hynes, 2017). This distinction points to the construction of racialization and Othering based on skin hue brought about by colonialism, which led further to internalized racism and mental slavery among Black people.

More so, the liberation of slaves “erased the ‘need’ for a ‘Mulatto’ buffer class
between elite Whites and enslaved Blacks, thus steadily moving people with Black heritage into a single racial category” (Monteiro & Ford, 2017, p. 166). This change gave rise to the one-drop rule “by the end of the nineteenth century” (Brown, 2014, p. 45). The rule was used, “for most of the twentieth century to determine who was black. Under this rule, one-drop of black blood made a person black” (Brown, 2014, p. 44). The one-drop rule gained wide acceptance, and was thus used to rationalize placing people of Black heritage into a single racial category (Monteiro & Ford, 2017, p. 166).

Intra-racial divisions between Black people were evident, in part, due to the disproportionate distribution of wealth between light-skinned Blacks and dark-skinned Blacks. To ‘other’ those considered inferior, the brown paper bag test was used to exclude those with darker hue from Black Associations in the post-Civil war period (Monteiro & Ford, 2017). The brown paper bag test was used intra-racially to measure Blackness alongside the colour of the paper bag as a marker of authenticity. The test was used to categorize people based on skin tone “to signify degrees of acceptance and inclusion” (Kerr, 2005, p. 272). Simply put, people with the same skin tone or darker than the paper bag were granted less privilege than those with a lighter skin tone (Kerr, 2005). This stigmatization of colorism persists today (Monteiro & Ford, 2017; Norwood & Foreman, 2014).

Racism and Colorism Are Constructed Differently

Scholars have argued that although colorism is the offspring of racism, the two are different. Many scholars suggest that a system of advantage based on race is rooted in the structure of racism (Hall, 1996; Henry & Tator, 2002; James, 2011; Konyari, 2013; Tator & Henry, 2010; Tatum, 1992; Taylor et al., 2007). Examining racism and
colorism as separate issues helps with identifying the nuanced ways in which the two concepts are constructed differently.

A Look at Racism

Scholars acknowledge that the structure of racism includes the institutional systems, beliefs, and actions of the dominant group, inclusive of mechanisms for power, and control. This structure stems from a dominant ideology that suggests that “racism consists of individual acts of meanness committed by a few bad people” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 124). This notion, however, produces “a false division [that] reinforces the idea that racism only occurs in specific incidences, and is only done by specific (bad) people” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 125). In addition, Hall (1996) reminds us that racism “operates by constructing impassable boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness” (p. 445). This view is significant: it indicates how racism reinforces structural problems that place Black women on the margins.

Black women’s experiences with racism are not one-off incidences, but rather, are an everyday occurrence. Essed (1991) uses the term *everyday racism* to “explain the (re)production of racial inequality in society” (p. 288). She argues that “everyday racism does not exist as single events but as a complex of cumulative practices. Specific instances acquire meaning only in relation to the sum total of other experiences of everyday racism” (Essed, 1991, p. 288). Consequently, Black women’s everyday experience of racism “incorporates the myriad ways in which racialized ideas are reinforced in ordinary everyday actions, language, and beliefs” (Tator & Henry,
the everyday language, beliefs, and slights become ingrained and normalized if they go unchecked and ignored.

A Look at Colorism

Hunter (2005) holds the view that “because race and gender can only be understood together, it follows that there must be a gender component to colorism itself” (p. 119). She purports that light skin is an indicator of femininity for women. In contrast, light-skinned “men are often feminized as pretty-boys or sissies” (Hunter, 2005, p. 119). On the other hand, dark-skinned men are seen as masculine, attractive, and projecting strength (Hunter, 2005). This comparison “confirms the stereotype that dark-skinned men are more authentically black and that light-skinned men are not” (Hunter, 2005, p. 108). A dark-skinned man may be perceived as dangerous in situations where his skin tone may be seen as threatening; this is in contrast to a more positive perception, in which dark skin tone depicts a masculinized stereotype. A dark-skinned woman, however, is viewed in a singular way, and perceived as unattractive. This distinction highlights the gender difference with colorism, as darker-skinned women are mostly not seen in such a positive light as men (Hunter, 2005).

Thompson and Keith (2004) explain that women as a categorical gender, regardless of their race, are raised to be aware of how they are perceived, and tend to react when they are portrayed negatively. They argue that “women seek to validate their selves through appraisal from others more than men” (Thompson & Keith, 2004, p. 50). The need to validate themselves can be connected to Dubois’s (2018) concept of double
consciousness, whereby Black women may sometimes view themselves through the racist lens constructed by hegemonic structures. The sense of internal conflict arises when Black women attempt to fit into a structure characterized by systemic racism. This example refers to one of the harmful effects of low self-esteem brought about by colorism among Black women, which is broadly consistent within the scholarship. These differences account, in part, for the gendered differences within colorism (Thompson & Keith, 2004).

Aside from the gendered component to colorism, it is also necessary to examine the subtleties between colorism and racism. Thompson (2014) asserts that colorism is part of racism, but they are also different issues. She argues that efforts to abolish racism do not eliminate the concerns of colorism, because skin hue discrimination determines, “what and who has been granted privilege” (Thompson, 2014, p. 152). Further, she explains that colorism leads, “people of color to compartmentalize their identity, which allows them to resolve conflicting and contradictory attitudes about race and color” (Thompson, 2014, p. 151). This idea suggests that colorism works on two levels. For example, Black women may seek, “the privileges of ‘lighter skin,’ while at times creating tests of racial identity allegiance that can privilege those with darker skin over those with lighter skin” (Thompson, 2014, p. 151). This association is a test of ethnic authenticity. Therefore, colour hierarchy creates a structure that provides opportunities to those that meet predetermined physical and colour standards (Thompson, 2014).

Likewise, Hunter (2004) argues that skin colour hierarchy not only grants privilege to lighter-skinned Black women, but it also works to marginalize these
women on an intra-racial level. She contends that light-skinned Black women face the challenges of ethnic authenticity that,

connotes the idea of ‘legitimate membership’ in an ethnic minority community. Ethnic authenticity is often described as a feeling that one is, or is not, ‘Black enough’ . . . Light skin color serves as a liability in creating a sense of ethnic authenticity. (Hunter, 2004, p. 24)

Further, she asserts that light-skinned women benefit from the privilege that comes with their light skin tone, and benefit from the social capital it affords them. They also deal with the issue of legitimacy and may, therefore, feel marginalized in their community. Hunter (2005), however, highlights that within the current context of colorism, the “disadvantages of dark skin still far outweigh the disadvantages of light” (Hunter, 2005, p. 110). This distinction exposed through colorism suggests that although Black women are disadvantaged, they are not disadvantaged equally. This distinction points to the different experiences of Black women, which should not be sidestepped.

As Wilder (2015) explains, “oftentimes, colorism operates within already racialized context” (p. 48). Colorism can occur intra-racially or inter-racially. Intra-racial colorism occurs, “when members of a racial group make distinctions based on skin color between members of their own race” (Eley, 2017, p. 2), while inter-racial colorism “occurs when members of one racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of another racial group” (Eley, 2017, p. 2). For example, when a non-Black woman carries out inter-racial colorism, “[she] elevate[s] or place[s] a higher value (either consciously or subconsciously) on lighter skin, straight hair, and
less ‘Afrocentric’ facial features” (Wilder, 2015, p. 49). Therefore, Black women or non-Black women can perpetuate colorism in subtle or overt ways. When this occurs, “messages of skin tone bias can be blatant and unintentional, yet they can also manifest in hidden and unintentional ways” (Wilder, 2015, p. 48).

Among the unintentional ways are the everyday “messages [Black women receive] about the significance of skin color and hair throughout their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood” (Ward, Robinson-Wood, & Boadi, 2017, p. 5). Likewise, to support the notion of everyday colorism, Wilder (2015), explains that it is how “[Black] women understand and acquire knowledge about colorism in their lives” (p. 159). She uses Parrish’s (1946) idea of colour names and notions to investigate the everyday language and approach about skin tone. According to Parrish (1946), “color plays any significant role in the organization of [Black] society, there is ample evidence that differences in skin color receive at least verbal recognition in the [Black] community” (p. 13). Wilder (2015) extends the idea by proposing that three elements of everyday colorism include, “language, scripts, and practices” (p. 63). Further, she draws on examples of the colour names first suggested by Parrish (1946) that include, “high Yellow, high Brown, Brown skin, and Black” (Parrish, 1946, p. 14). The notion of colour notions or scripts are aligned with Parrish (1946), suggesting, “stereotyped notions [that] are associated with these color designations . . . are physical descriptions and personality characterizations for each color [group]” (p. 16). These scripts serve to assign fixed ideas about Black women, such as internal scripts that view light skin in a positive manner (Wilder, 2015). As such, these everyday practices are, “behaviors and actions enacted by women toward themselves and others based upon internalized views
about skin color” (Wilder, 2015, p. 85).

Finally, in their autoethnographic study about their lived experiences with colorism, Taylor et al. (2017) argue that “skin-color discrimination is haunting, stigmatizing, and can manifest in stereotype threats for dark, medium, and light-skinned people . . . regardless of class or achievement” (p. 41). Thompson and Keith (2004) also highlight the implication of this for Black women by pointing to the intersecting issues they experience. They suggest that “Black women face problems of racism and sexism and when these two negative status[es] positions-being Black and being female-combine with colorism, a triple threat lowers self-esteem and feelings of competency” (Thompson & Keith, 2004, p. 51). As such, Black women’s multiple and intersecting issues converge and create complex understandings of the issues affecting their lives.

**Colorism and Racism are Constructed Differently**

Eley (2017) suggests that racism and colorism are constructed differently. Her argument rests in the suggestion that a “person’s skin color is irrefutable visual fact that is impossible to hide, whereas race is a constructed, quasi-scientific classification that is often only visible on a government form (Tharps, 2016 as cited in Eley, 2017, p. 114). As Foster (2015) notes, Blay contends that,

colorism and racism are kissing cousins because colorism is a manifestation of racism. It’s an outgrowth of racism. A lot of times, people will talk about it in terms of intra-racial racism to suggest that colorism is what we do within our communities and that is true, but I also think it’s essential for us to understand that colorism also guides racism that we have different experiences with racism based upon our skin color as well. So, it’s not just what we do to each
other, but it also informs what other people do to us. (Blay, personal communication, 2015)

Hunter (2004) argues, “that the legacies of slavery, colonialism and modern-day racism still inform contemporary discussions of status and skin color” (p. 40). For instance, colorism and racism can operate at the same time, wherein a dark-skinned person is valued because of their skin tone similarity with their ancestors. On the other hand, racism places less value on dark skin as opposed to skin that is closer to White. She contends that “the interplay of these social processes is an area for future theorization and research” (Hunter, 2004, p. 38).

Moreover, “racism and colorism are both central to understanding skin color stratification” (Hunter, 2004, p. 24). Further, colorism is intertwined with racism as it stems from White racism. Within this context, colorism occurs when “Whites, as well as people of color, act in ways that maintain white and light skin privilege and continue to devalue dark skin” (Hunter, 2004, p. 25).

Similar to racism, colorism creates a structure that supports a hierarchy based on skin tone and phenotypic features. Wilder (2015) argues that “oftentimes, colorism operates within an already racialized context. That is, colorism can add an additional layer or element to an event or situation with racial implications” (p. 48). As well, colorism can function in a “non-racial context” (Wilder, 2015, p. 48). For instance, an ordinary event may not be overtly colour or race-related but may contain negative stereotypes about Black women (Wilder, 2015). As such, although related, racism and colorism require different attention because “little attention has been paid to how skin color operates uniquely in the lives of women” (Hunter, 2005, p. 37). Furthermore,
she finds that colorism,

is the insidiousness of racism that manifests itself in colorism. Colorism is a systematic preference for lightness that stems from the larger and more potent system of racism. It is difficult to distinguish between our own innocent preferences for skin tones and the socially constructed hierarchy of skin tones informed by racism. Many have internalized this racism so deeply, that they can no longer recognize colorism and racism from what they are, and instead see them simply as individual tastes. (Hunter, 2005, p. 89)

Hence, her argument underscores the idea that colorism has become so ingrained in everyday life that it is difficult to acknowledge, although people do recognize it.

**Hairism and the Politics of Skin Tone**

In addition to skin hue, the issue of hair and physical appearance has implications for how Black women are perceived. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) explain that unlike discrimination, oppression goes beyond singular exchanges that may be situational, temporary, or individual. Instead, it “involves pervasive, historical, and political relationships of unequal power among social groups” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 65). The use of words ending with the ‘ism’ suffix represents, “specific forms of oppression” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 65). It is within this context that the phrase hairism, which is a subset of racism and colorism, is used to denote a particular form of bias based on false assumptions of Black women’s hair in its natural state. Hence, Black women deal with the “preferences for ‘half caste’ girls with features that approximate the European or ‘Black-Americanah’ aesthetic” (Norwood, 2017, p. 73). These stereotypical assumptions
and dominant ideology work together to put an extra burden on Black women.

Eley (2017) suggests that Black women’s hair is laden with messages. For Black women, hair has an instinctive meaning and is linked to the Eurocentric standard of beauty (Banks, 2000; Rooks, 1996). Colorism scholars point to the issue of hair in connection to skin colour, self-esteem, dating, beauty standards, and social status (Abdulle & Obeyesekere, 2017; Banks, 2000; Eley, 2017; Herring, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Rooks, 1996; Wilder, 2015). For instance, through her study on colorism in a postsecondary setting, Eley (2017) notes that some Black women wore their natural hair in a neat bun to avoid unwelcome comments, while some felt ridiculed when their hair was worn loose. In other instances, some women were reluctant to attend class because of how they were perceived based on their hair. Eley (2017) argues that Black women are not marginalized solely by their gender, colour, or social class; instead, all three issues work simultaneously to marginalize Black women “under the gaze and scrutiny of perceptions and assumptions by strangers” (p. 96). As well, “when these styles are interpreted as threatening, unattractive, and unfeminine by members of the dominant culture, Black women’s existence as ‘the other’ is reinforced” (Eley, 2017, p. 78). Therefore, a Black woman’s hair adds another layer of complexity as it is, “laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn how you feel about yourself” (Thompson as cited in Eley, 2017, p. 96).

Black women must deal with the perception of ‘good hair’ or ‘bad hair’ to contend with the “everyday struggle to fit Black hair into White beauty standards” (Robinson, 2011, p. 360). Bad hair is seen as natural, tightly coiled hair. According to Tribble, Allen, Hart, Francois, and Smith-Bynum (2019), “natural hair has largely been
considered unprofessional, unattractive, and unfeminine, and is associated with various negative socio-professional outcomes” (p. 382). This type of hair is viewed as “deviant or different from the majority” (Dawson, Karl, & Peluchette, 2019, p. 392), as opposed to ‘good hair,’ which is long, smooth, and straight. To address dominant discourses on hair, Black women turn to straightening or chemically processing their hair, wearing weaves, or altering their hair in some form (Thompson, 2009). By doing so, they address the stigma attached to Black hair, which has, “normalized long, straight hair” (Thompson, 2009, p. 847), thereby feeding into the idea that “Black hair is only beautiful when it is altered” (Thompson, 2009, p. 847). According to Robinson (2011), “racialized beauty standards combined with the color complex make hair texture and length an essential part of Black female identity” (p. 360). Hair is, therefore, an important marker of Black women’s identity.

The Stigma Attached to Colorism has Implications for Black Women

Scholarship on race and gender highlights that by looking at the two as separate issues, “each becomes compartmentalized, and a systemic analysis of the intersections of race, gender, and class is lost” (Rashti as cited in Dua, 2007). Factors in the educational system, such as a teacher’s implicit bias, the curriculum, and pedagogy, work to marginalize women of colour. For instance, a teacher’s implicit bias works to create notions about Black women that serve to marginalize them by predetermining their educational pathways. As a result, these women receive less opportunity to enter academic streams that lead to university education. Accordingly, these women can be excluded from the employment and social opportunities a university degree affords (Dua, 2007). Educators should recognize that “there is no singular experience with race and
The Multiplicity of Voices Among Black Women

gender. Rather than fitting neatly into a new category, racially oppressed women fit into multiple and fluid overlapping categories” (Dua, 2007, p. 191). Instead, race and gender intersect with multiple forms of oppression to place Black women on the margins (Dua, 2007).

Black women also face the issues of being dismissed or feeling invisible in the classroom. Frequently, Black women “in White dominated societies are dismissed and devalued when in fact, they represent powerful opportunities to subvert the status-quo” (Xasan, 2017, p. 179). In her study, Xasan (2017) recounts her lived experience of being dismissed and silenced in an English class in a college located in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). All but one of her five teachers discredited her academic writings, and predetermined her inability to succeed in her course of study. The marker of the ‘angry Black woman’ was assigned when she attempted to express an opinion or feelings of injustice. Xasan (2017) describes it as having, “a ‘chip’ on my shoulder, and I am ‘playing the race card’ by identifying racism as an oppressive system based on constructed notions of White racial superiority” (p. 178).

Eley’s (2017) study also reveals that Black women face social issues due to colorism. She contends that skin hue and physical traits have implications for Black women’s daily lives. She points out that Black women on campus face the issue of presentability because of the stigma associated with skin tone and hair texture. As a result, this affects Black women socially on campus because of the emotional and psychological stressors. Hunter (2005) explains the stigma associated with colorism “impact[s] social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing; self-esteem and self-image; and familial, romantic, and other critical relationships” (p. 79). Moreover, “hair-related
othering pertains to the prescription of negative stereotypes and biases to Black
women’s hair, and assumptions about Black women, their behavior, and overall being
based on those preconceived notions” (Eley, 2017, p. 77). It is against this backdrop that
Black women feel the need to negotiate issues related to the standard of beauty. Eley’s
(2017) study highlights the complexity of the issues faced by Black women,
underscoring, “the conflation of Black women’s multiple positions, spaces, and
identities in society working to negatively impact their lived experiences of the politics
associated with particular physical characteristics” (p. 96). Consequently, an
understanding of the social and psychological implications of colorism on Black women
is essential for educators to understand, “how the politics of interracial and intraracial
othering based on skin hue and hair work to impact the experiences of Black
undergraduate women” (Eley, 2017, p. 79).

Finally, the notion of beauty is tied to skin colour stratification, wherein it is a
source of social capital that offers some benefits. The benefits include higher
educational achievement, better jobs, higher income, and better access to opportunities.
According to Wolfe, as cited in (Hunter, 2004), beauty “became as important as
intellectual qualifications for employment. ‘Beauty was no longer just a symbolic form
of currency, it literally became money’” (p. 31). Hence, the implication of the skin-
tone based standard of beauty are unfair to Black women, as it “expressed attitudes that
valued the mainstream definition of beauty” (Hunter, 2004, p. 33). Often, the standard
of beauty is linked to the problematic Eurocentric standards that are markers to
marginalize Black women.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

My study was a qualitative narrative inquiry that explored how colorism informed the postsecondary experiences of six Black female students. *Narrative inquiry* uses stories to understand the experiences of people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is “the best way . . . to think about experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80). It offers a lens into “*experiencing the experience* . . . aimed at understanding and *making meaning* of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80.) This is the baseline, “why for social science inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80). Similarly, educational researchers are interested in stories about “people’s lives and how they are composed and lived out” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). As a methodological approach, narrative inquiry is “a way of understanding experience . . . [and providing] a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is and for imagining how it might be studied and represented in researcher’s text” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi).

This methodological approach was useful for my study because “narrative inquiry can illuminate social, political, ethical, and moral dimensions of life experience that other research approaches cannot” (Henry et al., 2017, p. 37). From the perspective of Black women’s experience, the “emphasis is on the stories people tell and on how these stories are communicated [and] . . . on the language used to tell the stories” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 231). To glean in-depth information about Black women’s experience with colorism, “telling stories is one of the significant ways [that] individuals construct and express meaning” (Mishler, 1986, p. 67).

Narrative inquiry also considers the environment in which the lived experiences of people take place. As such, Dewey (2015) reminds us that the experience of the
participants is, “part of the problem to be explored” (p. 25). He further explains that “an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his [sic] environment” (Dewy, 2015, p. 43). Regarding this research design, I considered the lived environment of my participants in order to explore the experiences of Black women to better provide context for their experiences. The use of stories in narrative inquiry highlights Black women’s experience with colorism and its effects, and brings, “to light marginalized people’s experiences, changing our perception of them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 553). Scholars of the theoretical framework of CRT that guided my research contend that stories provide a voice for marginalized people to share their feelings and experiences (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Notably, Henry et al. (2017) point out that, Critical race theorists argue that (victims’) stories provide the necessary context for understanding feelings and experiences, interpreting myths and misconceptions, deconstructing beliefs and common-sense understandings regarding race, and unpacking the de-historicized and contextual nature of law and other ‘sciences’ that render the voices of marginalized group members mute. The role of ‘voice’ is therefore central to a critical race approach. (p. 15) Therefore, “the use of voice or ‘naming your reality’ is a way CRT links form and substance in scholarship” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 20).

As with other qualitative methods, narrative inquiry has its challenges (Lichtman, 2013). Narrative researchers must recognize that they are, “in the middle of a nested set of stories . . . ours and theirs” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). This understanding helps to, “decide how to move from a story to a ‘restory’ or
interpretation of what you hear” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 97).

Within the context of this study, working closely with the participants helped me as a narrative researcher to reinterpret the participants’ stories accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers may struggle with when to include their voice—or, if it is even suitable to do so (Lichtman, 2013). It is the “researcher’s decision about how to be present in the research text” (Geertz as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 112). A balance in the weight of the researcher’s voice or point of view should be maintained (Kim, 2016). For instance, “an overly dominant researcher voice could be accused of the abuse of subjectivity, while a weak researcher voice runs the risk of not thinking through” (Clandinin & Connelly as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 112). Hence, I left the accounts of the participants as they stand by presenting the thick descriptions as direct quotes from the participants. I maintained a balance in how I used my voice in re-telling the participants’ stories by stating the questions that I asked them. I also shared my point of view on some of the observations I made regarding the participants’ reactions or how their responses were given to bring life to the story and to humanize the participants.

**Research Design**

Drawing on narrative inquiry design, I used both open structure and process approaches. Designing the narrative inquiry using an open structure approach allowed flexibility with the “understanding there are no rigid plans that we must stick with” (Kim, 2016, p. 114). Given the flexibility of its design, the open structure approach “invites evolvement, unfolding, and discovery in which we allow our narrative to tell its own tale” (Kim, 2016, p. 114). The process approach allowed me to focus on the personal stories of the participants, and to look at the meaning that needed to be
interpreted from the stories (Kim, 2016). So, it “focuses on narrative whose meaning needs to be interpreted. Thus, our act of retelling is constantly involved in interpretation followed by ‘thick description’” (Kim, 2016, p. 133). *Thick description* “refers to a detailed description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257).

From the standpoint of the *process approach*, when moving between researcher and writer, the perspective of the participant must be considered when interpreting the field notes (Kim, 2016). Hence, using both approaches allowed me to “invite the reader to suspend judgment, listen for their point or message, and then decide what measures or truth they contain” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415). As such, an interpretation of the Black women’s experiences through re-telling the story, followed by a thick description, “provide[s] the reader with some glimpse of narrative experience different from the reader’s own” (Kim, 2016, p. 133). Consequently, this allows the reader to understand the lived experiences through the point of view of the participants.

**Research Method**

I used a semi-structured one-on-one interview approach in this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlight that one-on-one interviews help researchers “observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 108). The semi-structured approach allowed me to prepare general questions to guide the discussion, whereby “neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is [sic] determined ahead of time” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110).
I also developed an interview guide that included a variety of open-ended questions (see Appendix A and B). According to Seidman (2013), open-ended questions “[establish] the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer” (p. 87). Therefore, the questions in the interview guide used for this study related to participants’ understandings of colorism, their experiences, and how it informed their postsecondary experience.

I solicited recommendations that can help educators understand the complexities around colorism. My decision to draft the questions in the interview guide was triggered by concepts and previous studies that I reviewed in the literature (Eley, 2017; Hunter, 2005; Norwood & Monroe, 2017; Obeyesekere, 2017). Having a research guide allowed me to listen actively and concentrate on the interview “rather than dictate its direction” (Kim, 2016, p. 163). The semi-structured approach gave me the ability to ask different, but relevant, follow-up questions to explore the participants’ experiences in more detail. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the semi-structured format allows a researcher “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 111). Hence, using a semi-structured approach provided the flexibility to ask open-ended overarching questions to investigate the lived experiences of my participants. In turn, this provided rich descriptions about the “everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31).

In narrative inquiry, researchers should think about “whose stories about what event in which particular context I am going to research” (Kim, 2016, p. 95).
Therefore, it was important to include the “‘how’ or a ‘what kinds of’ . . . prompts exploration or discovery rather than a simple answer” (Kim, 2016, p. 97). Research questions should not start by being too focused; doing so “can lead to tunnel vision, which will inhibit a researcher’s ability to understand and analyze data properly” (Kim, 2016, p. 95). The draft questions, as well as follow-up prompts, thus allowed me to explore the lived experience of the participants.

**Site and Participant Selection**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “one general guideline for sample size in qualitative research is not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studies” (p. 158). Therefore, I used the purpose and process of the study to determine the sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kim, 2016; O’Reilly & Parker, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Further, Beitin (2012) adds that a “focus on process is understanding sample size as fluid and emerging throughout a research design, from research questions to data analysis” (p. 243). Because I wished to develop an in-depth understanding of women’s experiences with colorism on campus, I recruited six Black female students between the ages of 17 to 37 years of age from a university in Southern Ontario.

To select participants, I used *purposeful convenience sampling* to include only participants who met the specific criteria of the study to gather in-depth information about how colorism informed their experiences on campus. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that *purposeful convenience sampling* allows the researcher to “select a sample based on time, money, location, availability of sites or respondents” (p. 98). By keeping the number of participants small, I hoped to gather in-depth information about how
colorism informed a sample of racialized Black female students on campus. As O’Reilly and Parker (2012) explain, “adequacy of the sample is, therefore, not determined solely on the basis of the number of participants but the appropriateness of the data” (p. 195). My focus of six participants was appropriate for my study because it allowed me to gather more in-depth stories and experiences from participants.

Upon receiving ethics clearance, I strategized for participant recruitment. First, I sought suggestions from my thesis supervisor to request approval from different departments to distribute information about the study through their email listservs. In addition, I also posted recruitment flyers on campus.

Data Collection

Before I began participant recruitment, the study was reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board [File #: 18-316-TAYLOR]. Participants were recruited via flyers and email, as described above, and if interested, were asked to review a participant letter. They were asked to sign an informed consent form before conducting the one-on-one, in-person, semi-structured interview in order to authorize audio recording the interview. Audio recording is the most common way to capture data from an interview, and secures everything that is documented for analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I recorded the interviews, and performed the transcription myself to become more familiar with the data and to expand my awareness of participants’ experiences.

Tilley (2016) recommends the use of a transcription software to transcribe the participants’ interviews verbatim and to reduce transcription time. Hence, I used Temi (www.temi.com) transcription software to transcribe the interviews. Access to the voice-
to-data transcript was delivered to my school email address, and then downloaded to my password-protected hard-drive. I then deleted the download file from my school email. Once the transcription was delivered to the email account a user provides for the Temi account, there is the option to keep or delete the recording and downloaded transcript. I deleted both after I completed the data analysis. I then listened to the audio recording twice, compared the audio recording to the transcript, and updated the transcript for accuracy.

Accordingly, Beitin (2012) suggests that “a researcher must also consider the time and resources needed to conduct interviews” (p. 251). Considering the time needed to conduct interviews and for data analysis, my intention was to conduct two sets of interviews with each participant. Seidman (2013) recommends that the first interview should be approximately “60-90 minutes” and the second should be approximately “30-60 minutes” (p. 21). Researchers, however, can be flexible with the structure of the interviews “as long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experiences within the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2013, p. 25).

The interview guide that I developed allowed me to establish the area of interest that I needed to explore with each participant. As well, observation served as a “firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a second hand of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 137). Further, Polkinghorne (2007) holds that not everything is picked up from the language used, so “focused listening” (p. 481) helped me to pick up things not brought to the fore in the interviews. For instance, body language complemented participants’ spoken language, and provide a
richer contextualization of the narrative rather than text alone (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Hence, I made notes to recount events that happened during the interview. This reflective stance allowed me to move between the notes and my interpretation of the participants’ experience to uncover and clarify the meaning of the data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that the “tension of moving back and forth between full involvement and distance is, as with relationships in everyday life, the responsibility of neither the inquirer alone nor the participant alone” (p. 82). Therefore, the notes allowed me to move between the participants’ stories to filter and unearth the meaning of the text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) underscore the strategy by stating that “being in the field allows intimacy. Composing and reading field notes allows one to slip out of intimacy for a time” (p. 82). As I listened to the recorded interviews, I found that as I referred to the notes, there were other connections that I did not make during the interviews. Moving back and forth, in this way, allowed me to feel the emotions that I did not allow myself to feel during the interview process because I was focused on actively listening. While listening to the recorded interviews, however, I was able to distance myself by putting on my ‘researcher’s hat’ to understand the meaning of what was said.

**Data Analysis**

I transcribed the interviews myself to become more intimately aware of the data and expand my awareness of participants’ experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Tilley (2016) recommends that researchers should avoid focusing heavily on the technicality of speech accuracies such as “space fillers – umms and ahhhs, the interpreting utterances
that hold no meaning – the intended meanings may actually be lost to the reader, even when the reader is the participant” (p. 136). Rather, she suggests that “what is most important is not the verbatim process followed, but that the transcripts represent participants’ intended meanings” (Tilley, 2016, p. 136). Hence, I transcribed the data verbatim to reflect the participants’ words.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also point out that data analysis is an extensive and complex process that requires moving between the data and both my reasoning and interpretation of it. To optimize my time, I used ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software, which provided a central workspace. I used Creswell and Poth’s (2018) concept of a data analysis spiral to analyze the data, which allowed me to move, “in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 185). Before starting to code the data, I read through the transcripts to reorient myself with the information shared by the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

I then followed Creswell and Poth’s (2018) data analysis spiral steps. First, I assigned five a priori codes by using a keyword or phrase from the text to label and organize the data. As I read through the first transcript, however, there were other things that were said which were not reflected by any of the five codes that I initially created. As I re-read the transcript, then, I started to do bottom-up coding, which is the process of creating additional codes as one reviews the transcript. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this approach is called lean coding “because it begins with five or six categories with shorthand labels or codes and then it expands as review and re-review of the database continues” (p. 190).

Next, I grouped the codes that had patterns across the data into themes based on
their similarities. Each code group told a different story depending on the perspective it came from. Next, I grouped related codes into broader categories to narrow down the data into a more manageable set.

Finally, as I worked on the data analysis, I identified additional themes and sub-themes from within the participants’ quotes that were more representative of the information contained within the section. I came up with the final main themes by using related phrases or themes from participants’ quotes. I also derived corresponding sub-themes to break down the findings based on the pattern that emerged from the quotes.

**Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative research involves a multitude of ethical considerations to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Polkinghorne (2007) notes that “the validity of the story is attested to by its rich detail and revealing descriptions” (p. 483). Furthermore, in a narrative inquiry, “storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are accurately described” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479). To this end, I used the internal validation technique of *member checks* – also known as *respondent validation* – to check the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

**Member Checks**

The *member check technique* involved asking each participant to confirm that the information I transcribed was, in fact, representative of what was said (Lichtman, 2013). I explained the transcription process and the purpose of member checking at the beginning of my data collection process to participants (Tilley, 2016). Tilley (2016) encourages students to “explain that the transcripts produced are an attempt to turn talk and
conversation into written form and are not to be compared to polished written text” (p. 147). Hence, before I started each interview, I explained the process to each participant.

In transcribing the data to look at the varied perspectives, I provided thick descriptions by way of participants’ direct quotes. To do so, I revisited the raw data as soon as I completed each interview to include additional descriptions, such as my observations during the interviews. In some cases, I made notes immediately during the interview, while at other times, I made notes immediately after the interviews when the information was still fresh. My rationale for the latter was to remain actively involved in my interaction with each participant. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that “detail can emerge through physical description, movement description, and activity description” (p. 263). To ensure reliability, I transcribed the interviews using the transcription software within four days of recording them so that I remembered what I heard, and noted my observations. Creswell and Poth (2018) encourage the approach of recording and transcribing to thoroughly and accurately capture information.

According to Tilley (2016), “based on the research design, member checking can take a variety of forms . . . it is context-specific, so it is conducted in various ways across the research contexts” (p. 145). Once I completed the transcription process, I sent it to each participant by email to give them time to review, think, and make comments before the second interview. The purpose of sending my transcription beforehand allowed the participants time to verify if I interpreted their stories accurately. After I fine-tuned the transcripts, I again emailed it back to participants to solicit their feedback to determine if my interpretations were accurate. I also provided a timeframe for them
Methodological Assumptions

First, regarding my methodological assumptions of the research topic “Colorism: An Understanding of the Multiplicity of Voices Among Black Women and How Their Experiences Inform Their Postsecondary Lives,” I assumed that most Black women in postsecondary education have experienced and will understand what the term colorism referred to, and would be interested in talking about it. Although the degree to which each participant is affected will differ based on each participant’s lived experience, I also assumed it would be significant based on my literature review. Although racism is the common factor, colorism looks at forms of discrimination that may arise based on skin tone.

Second, I informed participants of the risks of participating in this study as much as possible before they participated by reviewing the consent form with them before starting each interview. Although limited, the potential risks included emotional distress or discomfort from discussing experiences of racism, colorism, and other forms of discrimination. However, to mitigate against this risk, I informed participants of this risk—as much as possible—prior to their participation. Also, I made it clear in the consent form that each participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview or following. None of the participants experienced emotional distress or discomfort, and did not withdraw from the study.

In addition, participants were advised in the consent process to seek support services for mental health through the Student Wellness and Accessibility Services if they
experienced any distress or discomfort in the process of the interviews or follow-up. It was made clear in the consent form that the participants could withdraw at any time during or following the interview. I also verbally reminded them of their right to withdraw before the start of the interview. If a participant decided to withdraw, any reference to them from any document up until the point of data analysis and/or the document being published would be removed. No participant withdrew from the study. The documents produced did not contain any identifying features. In addition, participants were advised in the consent process to seek support services for mental health through the university’s Student Wellness and Accessibility Services if they experienced any distress or discomfort in the process of the interviews or follow-up.

Third, I stored the collected data for the interviews on an external hard drive during the project, and kept it secure. Only my thesis supervisor and I had access to the raw data. I used pseudonyms in the data analysis and reporting processes to guarantee confidentiality, as much as possible. Furthermore, I received consent to audio record the interview. I followed Tilley’s (2016) advice that when conducting research involving individuals situated in a marginalized group, researchers should consider the intricacies of conducting respectful research. According to Willett (as cited in Tilley, 2016), “to look twice is to practice respect” (p. 16). Further, Tilley (2016) asserts that conducting respectful research involves using an in-depth and critical lens in the research process to “provoke multiple responses, questions that are often more easily ignored than examined” (p. 16). So, by completing the ethics review process and TCPS2 CORE tutorial, as mentioned earlier, I was informed of ethical conduct practices.
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

In this research paper, I investigated how colorism informed a sample of racialized Black female students’ experiences in the academy. The study drew on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and employed a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to explore Black women’s experiences of inter- and intra-cultural colorism and how it informed their experiences in the academy. As a methodological approach, narrative inquiry provided an opportunity to understand participants’ rich experiences in relation to the guiding research questions of this study, outlined below.

Overarching Question

How does a sample of Black women’s experience with colorism inform their postsecondary experience?

Sub-Question 1

How does an understanding of Black women’s experiences with colorism bring awareness to the intricacies of colorism and help educators to understand the implications for postsecondary education?

The research questions helped frame the interviews that took place with sample of racialized Black female students on campus at a university in Southern Ontario. These questions helped structure the interview schedule and the subsequent data analysis. I asked participants to speak about their understanding of colorism, how colorism informed their experience in the academy, and their experiences generally as racialized Black women. Participants also provided suggestions that could assist educators to better understand Black women’s experience with colorism and to identify the implications of colorism for the postsecondary context.
The use of narratives helped to bring awareness to participants’ experiences by re-telling their stories. Specifically, the use of narrative inquiry allowed for “collaboration between researcher and participants” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). This approach included sharing the actual words of the participants, in addition to my interpretation in the analysis to “provide the reader with some glimpse of [the] narrative experience” (Kim, 2016, p. 133) – thereby lending openness about the interactive nature of the process to highlight the ways in which the experience was expressed (Josselson, 1996).

Purposeful convenience sampling was used to select six racialized Black female students to participate in the study. A one-on-one, in-person, open-ended semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant on-site at a university in Southern Ontario to collect data.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the results, with evidence provided in the form of quotes taken from the participants’ interviews. The results are represented by four emergent themes that developed during the coding process. These themes include i) colorism: certain people are left in and certain people are left out; ii) if people are talking about colorism, we should listen; iii) colorism is tricky; and iv) awareness helps.

Six undergraduate Black female students participated in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the primary demographics for each participant. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and all personal identifiers were protected for privacy and confidentiality. The information presented is based on data collected from each participant in the summer and fall of 2019. Flyers were approved by the Student Life Department at the study site, and were posted on bulletin boards in the Southern Ontario
university where I conducted the research. Participants included Black females between the ages of 17 and 37, who were enrolled in different undergraduate programs. All participants identified their skin tone as Black, with some self-describing the shade of Black. One participant who identified as Black also highlighted that she is of mixed race. I decided to ask the participants to self-describe their skin tone rather than making an assumption that could minimize or misrepresent their identity. The participants were comfortable doing so, and did not hesitate to respond when I asked them to self-describe their skin tone.
Table 1

*Overview of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Self-Described Skin Tone</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Program Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alana</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Black (dark skin)</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodi</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Jamaican/Canadian</td>
<td>Black (light skin)</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Jamaican/Canadian</td>
<td>Light Brown (mixed race)</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Caribbean/Canadian</td>
<td>Black (dark skin)</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table summarizes the demographic information for the six participants who participated in the study. The table also contains the pseudonym assigned to each participant.
**Colorism: Certain People are Left in and Certain People are Left Out**

Colorism scholars argue that more focus should be placed on colorism because it is constructed differently than racism. Notably, these scholars argue that discussing colorism does not distract from the concerns about racism, but rather, it contributes to an understanding of how racism functions on multiple levels (Hunter, 2007). Given its nuances, it was essential to explore and understand how the participants understood and defined colorism.

One participant, Sandy, reflectively contemplated and, with a sense of hurt in her voice, commented that “certain people are left in and certain people are left out,” which demonstrated how some Black women may feel about colorism. Throughout the conversations, it was evident that the different ways in which the participants vocalized their social experience with hair and aesthetics were connected to skin tone. An understanding of the vocabulary attached to skin tone helped to explain how ideas about skin tone are developed and reproduced in everyday life. According to Wilder (2015), “there exists an extensive and sophisticated vocabulary for identifying and distinguishing skin color categories” (p. 64). The participants’ recount of their experiences thus highlighted how they “internalize the mental messages . . . of skin tone” (Wilder, 2015, p. 70).

**Understanding of Colorism**

I asked each participant to explain what colorism meant to them. All the participants attributed skin tone privilege to their understanding of colorism. For example, Jodi described colorism as “racism within its own race kind of thing. Like, um, like the light skin versus dark skin.” Further, she explained that she recognized that her
light skin tone came with privilege, although she did not think it was fair. She stated, “I recognize myself as like being light-skinned and having a lighter skin privilege than other people.” I followed up and asked her when she first experienced colorism or understood the difference in skin tone. Jodi pointed out that she understood the distinction at an early age:

My brothers would call me like Lisa Simpson and like my brother called me a golden Oreo. At first, he said I was an Oreo, and then he said I was a golden Oreo.

So, because I was like White on the outside too.

Likewise, Macy described colorism based on skin tone, which she also recognized at an early age. She pointed out that,

I grew up in a society where I know that we have Black people, we have White people, we have, should I say the Asians and all over the world. So, I just think it's like having different colors, how you’re being described. Like when you see, be like, okay, yeah, I’m a Black woman. Okay, I’m a White woman. So, like, yeah. It’s just basically a description of how you look and your color. Yeah, that’s what I think.

Alana included phenotypic traits in her description of colorism by saying, “it means the discrimination of skin tone. The discrimination of people actually based off of skin tone, length of hair, the colour of eyes. Hmm. Just physical features.” Similarly, Tricia understood colorism as being a form of discrimination, including issues “like the hair texture, um, the color, everything, stuff like that.”

Ideas of privilege, history, oppression, and access to certain spaces also emerged with the participants’ understandings of colorism. Sandy provided an expansive
For me, when I say colorism, I think of like the colour of skin, whether it’s lighter, whether it’s darker. Um, I think of discrimination that’s associated with either lighter skin or darker skin. I think of certain stereotypes that may be attached to lighter and darker skin. Um, I think of certain privileges or accesses that may be granted based on lighter skin preferences to lighter skin or in certain cases, access or spaces for darker skin. Um, I think, I think it’s a category of racism . . . I also think of like systems that were established, um, that set up colorism and who it benefits and who doesn’t benefit. Um, yeah, I think of racism, oppression, I think of colonialism and imperialism and militarism and just history. Um, yeah, for me as a, as a dark-skinned woman, I think of like the middle passage, I think of slavery. I think of just all of these things that set it up and how it’s been set up and why it was set up and how it pits people against each other. So that’s what I think of, um, colorism and certain people are left in and certain people are left out.

At certain points in her response, Kristy paused as she reflected and glanced away occasionally. I could not help but sense a feeling of sadness and frustration, as she noted that it was also subjective. She felt as though,

being treated differently based on the shade of your skin tone. It depends on other people’s shade. Other people’s shades will determine how they interact with you, how they treat you, the way they speak to you. Yeah, it’s, it’s very subjective amongst everybody I would say.
Self-Described Skin Tone

Following the conversation about their description of colorism, I asked participants to share what they considered their skin tone to be. They responded with pride, with varied responses and some participants self-describing their skin tone. For example, Jodi mentioned that “I consider myself Black. I don’t consider myself like light or dark like. I get I am lighter-skinned, but that was only because other people made it that way.” Macy, with a big smile, said with pride, “Well, Black woman. Yeah. Proud Black woman.” Likewise, Alana considered her skin tone to be Black. With a warm smile, she self-described her skin tone, saying that it was “chocolate, dark chocolate Black, yeah.” Tricia stated that she considered her skin tone to be Black. Similar to Alana, Sandy considered her skin tone as Black but mentioned that she is dark-skinned.

In contrast, Kristy acknowledged that as a mixed-race person, her experience with colorism differed depending on who she was with. She mentioned before responding to the question that she was raised with her White mother, and as such, considered herself culturally “I guess White.” With a sound of sadness in her voice, she went on to say, but I’m also mixed. I’m half Jamaican. Unfortunately, I don’t really know that side of my family, so it’s ahh [pause], it’s actually kind of like, something that I still struggle to deal with where I really don’t feel like I have a culture.

Although she considered herself to be a Black woman, the self-description of her skin tone was interesting. Kristy paused several times as she reflected on the question, and at times, her eyes appeared to well with tears. She then mentioned that she considered herself to be “a shade of brown, a mixture of Black and White . . . I’ve been called a light skin [pause] and not Black, not White.” She acknowledged that she had not thought about
her skin tone within this context before, but maintained she considered herself to be a Black woman.

**Phenotypic Features and Underlying Assumptions**

Aside from skin tone, participants spoke about phenotypic features that are seemingly attached to their experience with colorism.

**The issues with hair.** More explicitly, hair accounted for a significant part of their experience with colorism. Participants spoke about the assumptions and harmful stereotypes affixed to Black women’s hair. Some stereotypical labels affixed to Black women’s hair are messy, bad hair, unprofessional, unkempt, ugly, and nappy (Dawson et al., 2019). The participants connected hair texture to skin tone, and assigned expectations or pre-conceived ideas to what was considered beautiful, desirable, or undesirable. For example, Jodi spoke about “ring-letty and foresee hair.” As she explained, this type of hair is loosely curled and long. She described the connection between hair and beauty in the following way:

Well, like the beauty standard is typically like the foresee hair. Like where it’s like really, really ring-letty. Like currently, I’m not the typical like tight curls a lot of Black people do have. Um, so I think the looser your curls are, the more likely you are to be seen as like the, um, the better beauty standard I guess because afros and stuff aren’t seen as like as beautiful as other kinds of hair textures.

She explained that she now embraces her hair, but as a young girl, she did not like her hair “because of the way like the beauty standards are, and the world is.” She acknowledged that it took her a while “to get there.” Interestingly, she noted that “social media has helped with that.” She thought that social media played a role in the portrayal
of body image by “defining your own beauty and not seeing what the traditional thing of beauty is.” It also took her “a while to like actually like what I look like.”

Macy pointed out that she recalled seeing someone in high school who appeared to be of mixed race and remembered saying to her, “I love the hair and everything. Oh, I love your hair. I love this. I love that.” Macy attributed hair texture to skin tone, and spoke about her fondness of long straight hair, which she associated with beauty:

So that was when I noticed it, and I was like, because of that I was saying when I grew older I’m going to get married to someone mixed or maybe someone from like British person or an American man, something like that. Cause I love that shade, that skin tone. So yeah, and the hair and everything.

She also drew a comparison by mentioning that when she first met me with me to discuss my research, she was attracted to my curly hair, but also questioned my cultural background. Smiling, she explained, “cause when I first saw you, I was like, Oh, I think she’s mixed. She’s mixed because of your hair because I love these curls and everything cause I don’t have that type of hair.” She felt that my hair was “so attractive.” She pointed out that “your hair texture and everything, you just seemed different, and I like that.” Macy also brought up the notion of ‘good hair.’ Good hair to her meant “quality and everything, and you have a certain length, like long hair and everything.” So, a Black person with ‘good hair’texture means, “we are perfect in every way,” whereas,’bad hair’“is not texturized . . . It looks damp. It looks dusty. It looks dirty . . . If it’s not properly taken care of.”

Likewise, Alana attributed hair to the perception of beauty, but felt it was not right to do so. She noted that “most people in our society feel that the straighter your hair,
the more beautiful you are. And that’s not right. That’s, that really isn’t right.” She also commented that her hair was curly and unmanageable. She sometimes felt that shaving her hair or wearing it straight would make it easier to manage and be less time-consuming. She believed that,

in our society, they feel like the more coarse your hair is, the less beautiful you are, the bigger your hair is, the less attractive you are. The more Black you are, the more incurred African you are, which is much as no way.

Tricia did not elaborate, but similar to the others, she associated hair with the perception of beauty. She mentioned that “I prefer dark curly hair because it’s really attractive.” However, when I asked if her skin tone affected her day-to-day experience, she was unsure. She paused and brought up the issue of hair. She mentioned that despite her hair preference mentioned earlier, she felt that there is no difference between different hair textures:

I just feel like, you know, people, people tend to feel like there’s a difference, but there really isn’t any difference between the dark, light, curly, straight hair.

People tend to see what there is nothing to be seen about it.

Sandy also felt that hair played a role in colorism. She recalled cutting her hair shorter and was told by a family friend that she “used to be so pretty.” She was a bit surprised to hear it and, after hearing it, she thought, “I think I still am pretty with slightly shorter hair.” When I asked where the messaging about hair originated, she brought up the notion of ‘bad hair,’ noting that:

We learn our messages about hair from racism. From racism that tells us that our hair is faulty, that our hair is problematic, that our hair needs fixing, that our hair
needs adjusting or in some cases, not be able to exist in its own right. Um, so that’s racism. We learn it from colorism, which tells us that, you know, we need to look to lighter-skinned women and what their hair texture looks like as something that we should aspire, that, that we should practice or that we should have.

She added that the messaging also comes from within social circles. For example, she recalled feeling pressured by her hairdresser to maintain her hair in a particular way. She was sometimes told, “well, you need to do this; you need to do that.” As a result, she stopped going to the hairdresser because “it can’t just be an experience where I go in, I engage my personal grooming . . . I’ve always felt tense.” She pointed out that, unfortunately, some Black women “might not braid their hair or have it in like dreadlocks.”

Sandy also acknowledged that her understanding of hair informed the choices she made. For instance, she noted that “I do perm my hair. I do chemically straighten my hair . . . my hair is very thick, so sometimes I feel like if I straighten it, it might just be easier just to comb through.” With a quizzical look, she also questioned it and wondered, “where did that really come from? Like, is that just me being practical and pragmatic, or have I absorbed what society has told me about my hair.” When Sandy spoke with me, she seemed to have a range of mixed emotions including unease, frustration, anger, sadness, and embarrassment. Yet, I also felt a keen sense of awareness and commitment to negotiating the space she was in. She further explained:

I know this sounds completely horrifying, and I don’t want to say I feel embarrassed about saying this, but if I go to a job interview, I wouldn’t put my
hair in braids. I wouldn’t. And I know, I know that sounds awful . . . I am aware of what my hair looks like. So I’m aware. Um, but yeah, the whole braids thing like that, that’s something that I’m like, what? I braid my hair to go to an interview, and I’m like, I know that I feel horrible saying that. I don’t know why I feel embarrassed to say, I hope. Yeah. I feel embarrassed saying that.

Kristy associated her experience with hair as an invasion of personal space and being ‘Othered.’ For example, with annoyance, she mentioned that “people will ask me questions that they wouldn’t feel that is right to ask to a Black woman, which I feel like wouldn’t be appropriate to ask to me either.” She explained that she has been trying to wear her hair in different styles, such as cornrow. She also pointed out that she had to respond to several questions, such as “how [did you] get so long . . . it must’ve taken four hours . . . did your sister do it? I don’t have a sister . . . my friends who are Black have not been asked these questions . . . so outright.” With an annoyed look, she gesticulated to explain that her White friends “just [put] their hand in my hair to be like, Oh my God, like the texture. And it’s like, [why would] you do this?” She also brought up the notion of ‘good hair,’ which is attributed to light skin. In exasperation, she mentioned, “like mixed people, the good hair, like light skin being prettier than darker skin women. It’s, it’s like, I don’t agree with that obviously. I’m like, I struggle with my hair every day . . . it’s like people putting their own opinions.” She further explained the notion of ‘good hair’ as “straight hair, straight, silky hair was, was beautiful . . . but the standard of beauty has always been a straight and like long lashes, White hair.” In contrast, she said ‘bad hair’ is “like frizzy hair, and people think kinky hair, but I don’t know. Yeah. It’s almost like not Black hair, which is terrible.”
When I asked where Black women learned these messages about hair, Kristy responded:

I mean, social media is the biggest thing now. Uh, like TV, it’s all, all you see like shampoo commercials are just like silky White hair. There’s no, like, I’ve never seen hair that looks like mine, like really celebrated, on like a corporation like level. Unless it’s specifically for Black women. So, I’ve always been told my hair is different and not what it’s supposed to look like based on just it being it.

When I asked whether her understanding of hair informed her choices, she used hand gestures to show me how she wore her hair, as she added:

I’ll always put my hair up for like a job interview or like somewhere where I don’t want to be labeled or have someone think about my personality where it’s just like I’m just there for a reason. I’ll throw my hair back, and it’s not comfortable. I have a lot of hair, so getting it in like my ponytail is, I’d rather have it down, but I feel like I’m just preventing any possible presumptions.

When she ended, she shrugged her shoulders to display her frustration as she reflected on her experience.

**Phenotypic features are related to colorism.** Macy thought that the colour of her eyes influenced how others saw her. As a Black woman with light brown eyes, she has received comments such as:

Oh, no, no, no, no, you’re not Black. You can’t be from Africa or stuff like that.

Probably. Maybe your mixed stuff like that. Maybe you’re from like, should I say you’re mix maybe from the US or Canada.

Sandy also added that facial features were a factor, too. For example, Sandy felt that a
darker-skinned woman with fuller lips would tend to be ridiculed, whereas a lighter-skinned woman with the same feature would be considered beautiful:

I think facial features, as well. Like my nose is broader, my lips are full. I think those play a part as well. Um, I think that, yeah, I think those are big too. And I think there’s also that play off of like if women with my skin tone that are darker or if they have quote-unquote finer features like thinner nose or thinner lips, then people feel like they could check off the box.

**Stereotypes affixed to Black women are harmful.** When I asked about her understanding of the stereotypes for Black women, Sandy reflected before responding. She highlighted that the main stereotypical assumptions are “that we’re ugly, that we’re not beautiful, that we’re not attractive, um, that we’re not as womanly or is girlish.” She also explained other stereotypical assumptions about the strong Black woman trope that she felt prevented her from expressing vulnerabilities in the following way:

We’re not as warranted as being treated with more delicacy. It’s a lot of times it’s that we can take it that we’re strong Black women, which I personally find very problematic. That whole concept, meaning that we’ll if something as strong, then it could withstand that it could take more than it should ever have to do. And it’s like, no, I’m not meant to withstand or take more than anything. We have withstood, and we have taken more. But that’s not my role that I’m just supposed to take whatever harshness that is thrown at me because I am not like other women, and Oh, she can take it. So, I’m just a strong Black woman, which I think is so harmful.

With a sense of frustration, she added that “with all of these stereotypes, you’ll never
win.” Finally, she explained that,

Even if I did get educated, even if I did not have kids out of wedlock, even if you know I’m not on quote-unquote social assistance slash welfare, you’ll still look, you’ll still find something else wrong with me . . . that’s like the image of people looking at us that we’re just meant to mother and take care of people that were not worthy of receiving care or being taken care of.

Similar to Sandy, Kristy felt she may not belong in the same way as her White peers because certain images of Black women may not seem intellectual. Kristy pointed out that some of the stereotypes affixed to Black women are “being loud, having hair that’s not yours. Having like everything fake is what I see.” She explained that fake means “like nails, fake hair, which is not focused on intellectual pursuits.” She also added that other stereotypes are,

Low income. It’s all kind of, uh, things that I’ve heard and seen, obviously not what I believe . . . like liking rap, not liking country, uh, you know, talking in certain ways, attitude, blah, blah, blah. It’s all, there’s like a whole little, yeah. Caricature of a, of a Black woman.

The participants spoke with a keen sense of awareness of how their bodies are marked as different. They pushed back against structures that sought to minimize and marginalize their identity. Instead, they owned their Blackness with a sense of pride and privilege as an act of resistance. Their boldness is indicative of their strength in taking ownership and agency over their lives.

**If People are Talking About Colorism, We Should Listen**

The connection to other areas of their experiences with colorism emerged in the
conversation with each participant. More specifically, the discourse around the conflation of colorism and racism, the significance of skin tone, and dating arose. Sandy, one participant, suggested that “if people are talking about colorism, we should listen.” In fact, colorism scholars suggest that giving voice to the issues attached to colorism helps to break the silence (Collins, 2002; Wilder, 2015).

**Grappling with Colorism and Racism**

Many of the participants appeared to conflate colorism and racism, sometimes grappling with the two. My observation underscores the literature, which suggests that skin tone bias affects Black women in different ways. For instance, in response to the question about time when her skin tone placed her on the margins, Jodi noted that sometimes, she is looked at suspiciously when she goes into a store as opposed to a White person who may not be viewed in that way. She said, “it’s still the in-between, like I’m still Black, but I’m just a lighter version.” She was uncertain about whether her skin tone helped her socially or academically. She admitted that “I feel like I haven’t really experienced any, like in school that I’m aware of. Maybe I’m just oblivious to it, but, um, as particularly I don’t think, um, that I’ve experienced yet academically.” She reflected on her previous response questioningly, and noted that “I wouldn’t say it was racism, I would say, or colorism, but yeah.”

Macy questioned whether her Black skin tone related to her experience of being marginalized. She expressed her frustration against the backdrop of White privilege. She recalled:

So I went out because I’m still trying to make more White friends cause right now I have just maybe a little, so I went out on my own, and I tried to talk to some
people, White girls, to be precise as I tried to make new friends and all that kind of stuff. So, I went up to meet them and said, we’re talking, hi, I’m [Macy]. Hi. What’s your name? And I noticed that, um, they gave me this look and when I noticed, maybe they didn’t want to be friends, or they didn’t want to talk to me.

So, during that instance, and you know, okay, maybe this is a racist action because there was, I’m just trying to talk to you. If you don’t talk to me, just make it, state it. State the facts or tell, tell it to me. Or you could just say something, don’t make me go away. Or something like that. But the actual way they behave, then I knew. So, I was like within me. I thought it was like, oh, is it because I’m Black or something? Like, of course, stuff like that happened here. So, is it cause I’m Black or something?

When I asked how the experience made her feel, she said,

I felt bad. So, you know, when those type of things happen at times it makes you see it a different side of people, and at times I feel that affects me towards a lot of people in general because when I see some other White people, I might think that that’s how they are.

Similar to Jodi, Alana felt people assigned a fixed notion of Black people to her based on her skin tone. She highlighted the assumptions people place on skin tone in the following way:

So, for example, if you go to a place, for example, you go into a shopping mall, and you’re trying to get something to obviously to buy something. Then they view you in, they have more eyes on you because of my skin tone, because you Black basically they look at you as more of, you have a tendency to steal or, or cause a
commotion. So, a lot of people, not really a lot of people, but they view your skin
tone to be very suspicious.

**Colorism Does Not Only Affect Black People**

As she reflected on other instances of colorism, Alana appeared to be sympathetic
towards White people who may experience colorism. Alana, however, acknowledged that
colorism happens primarily to Black people. Since her understanding was contrary to the
literature, I was curious to learn more, so I asked her to explain. She mentioned that:

So, um, my experience is that everybody is very different in the sense of how loud
they talk, how loud they speak, and everything. So, based on that is, let’s say, I’m
with my friends and then we’re talking. Obviously, we’re having a good time.
And like I said, most times us Africans, it tends to be loud. So, when that happens
then of course sometimes it’s wrong, don’t get me wrong, but like the way they
would view us is this, for me like discrimination. The thing about colorism is
most times I feel like it doesn’t always have to be, well actions speak louder than
words. It doesn’t always have to be all they say; it’s just with the acts, the way
they look, and optics. You can see I’m talking to my friends all joking and then all
of a sudden you see other people turning back giving you dirty eyes and
sometimes you might not even be very loud. It might just be us having a good
time laughing. And you know, it can, and I’m basing this on my skin tone.

Colorism doesn’t always have to be based on a Black person. It could be there’s
colorism on the White too. But it’s just; it happens to us a lot us Black people. So
that’s my experience.
Reflecting on Experiences in School and a Job Interview

Tricia also appeared to conflate colorism and racism when she felt she was sidelined for a job. She explained:

Yeah, I think my job interview. Which was like recently cause um, I went for the job interview like about two weeks ago, and there was another lady at my back for the interview cause it just took them like three minutes just with me, and the lady was in there for a longer time. So, I felt like maybe it was because she was lighter than me or something.

I asked her if the other applicant was Black as well, she said, “No, she’s White.” As a follow-up, I asked her if she felt the colour of her skin played a role; she responded, “yeah.”

Sandy had a few instances where she questioned or categorized some experiences as colorism and racism at the same time. She seemed torn, and questioned whether she was treated differently because of her skin tone. She felt that,

I’m darker skinned, [so] people might treat me a certain way or talk to me a certain way or um, but then yeah, I always wonder is it strictly a Black thing or a colorism thing?

Further, she clarified her response after pondering it some more. She still questioned whether the tone of her skin influenced the way she is sometimes treated:

That’s why with your question I was trying to, I’m not trying to be difficult, I promise [chuckle], but like I, yeah, I’m like, is it because I’m Black or is it because I’m dark-skinned Black? Sometimes I wish I knew what, what the direction was. But then I wonder would it matter. But yeah, so that’s what I’m
like, is it, cause I’m Black like in general a Black person, like millions of other Black people? Or is it cause I’m a dark skin person? Like does it impact, but yeah, the colour of my skin does. So long story short, yes. The colour of my skin, I think, does impact how people treat me and interact with me sometimes.

After, she elaborated with an example she had in class:

Another White student sitting right next to me, someone comes in, sits down. Oh, you look just like my niece. And it’s like, oh, there’s this warmth and this welcoming. But I said hello to you and not even, oh hi back. Oh hi. How are you? It’s like, so I was just like, okay, just maybe they want it to be, maybe they didn’t want to talk, or I don’t know. But sometimes I think is that cause they, you know, or is it me or is it colorism or racism or whatever. So that’s, that’s something I struggle with. Like is it me, or is it colorism? But there are moments where I do know, it’s definitely like someone’s coming at me, you know, for my skin tone and shades. So yeah.

**Caught Between Two Cultures**

As a mixed-race woman, Kristy addressed her issue from a different perspective. Although she considered herself as a Black woman, she felt that she is caught between two cultures. Her uncertainty is due to the difference in the treatment she received from White and Black people. As she responded to my question, Kristy, at times, appeared conflicted, sombre, or curious depending on what she was saying. She appeared to periodically express experiencing colorism and racism at the same time:

I’m being portrayed as more Black or culturally aware than I think that I am. My personality, like I’m outspoken, and people will call that sassiness, and that’s
White people’s, like my Blackness. [pause] It’s hard to really say cause honestly, I am around more White people. So being they see me as a Black woman but then my experiences in my life, not having any Black family, not being in the culture, me having to learn firsthand about racism and discrimination and things that my mom didn’t have to deal with. Things that I can’t ask my dad about, I’m just doing it. So, I’m having to learn about Black culture while also having to kind of teach people, like White people, about the culture. So, it’s like I’m being given like a, a status where I don’t really have any credibility. It’s like fraud almost, which is terrible. And I like struggle with that all the time cause it’s like who am I? Unfortunately.

**Embracing Blackness With Pride and Privilege**

With colorism being the focus of this study, it was essential to understand how the participants connected their understanding of or experiences with colorism with dominant ideology. It was also important to understand how they worked with and against expressions of colorism in their lives. Most participants mentioned connections to skin tone and privilege. When I asked about how others viewed her based on her skin tone, for instance, Jodi was neutral. She pointed out “because I have kind of like the lighter skin privilege. So, I haven’t really personally experienced it, but I understand where like other people have, um, experienced it.” When I asked to elaborate about her experiences with colorism, she explained that “I recognize myself as like being light-skinned and having a lighter skin privilege than other people.” Connected to the question about how others in university related to her based on her skin tone, Jodi stated,

I did cheerleading all throughout my years of university, and it’s all like White
people. So, I was like the only Black person, but I would be seen as not so Black, I guess, because I was lighter skin, so like they wouldn’t consider me like full Black.

When I asked how she felt about light-skin privilege, Jodi expressed the following:

I feel like because I’m lighter-skinned, I don’t really experience as much as, um, I just don’t, I feel like sometimes people just assume that I’m halfway, so they don’t even really ask me, but, so they’ll treat me differently because if I can pass for, I guess not White but like half White.

When I asked to explain why specific skin tone is preferred, Jodi said that “it just goes back to like traditional, um, views as like White always being like the better, um, I guess race, um, like the dominant.” She seemed to struggle with the significance placed on skin tone, and questioned the fairness of skin tone stratification:

I feel like I’ve gotten, um, I’ve passed for a lot of things and um, I feel like I’ve probably gotten treated better than people with darker skin tones, but I didn’t really notice because it didn’t really, like, I wasn’t really directly affected by it. Like a here, like I’ll hear things from like some of my darker skin friends and I’m like, well, I didn’t experience that, but it’s because of my skin tone. So, um, yeah, I just think you do get treated a little bit better for being landscape because, um, some of my friends have said they’ve gotten called, um, pretty for dark for a Black girl or something. And I’ve never gotten that because I am lighter skin but like at the same time like we’re all Black like doesn’t mean you have to say that. That’s also like a backhanded compliment, not nice.

Likewise, Alana related her idea in metaphorical terms:
It’s like, no, I can’t use that. I was about to say the sun, but it’s because it’s bright, you know? . . . So, it’s like you’re going to see it more. The darker skin tone is just trust me, I’m like, I don’t know the colour but, it’s just the lighter skin tone tends to be more, you have to look twice to understand, because it’s, it’s like the sun, it blocks, your view. I don’t know.

In contrast to the other participants, Sandy spoke about pride and privilege in her dark skin tone. In response to the question about how her skin tone benefitted her or placed her on the margins, she said with pride, “I think it has benefited me when I do speak of oppression . . . because I can speak directly from my appearance, from my experiences . . . I think it situates me uniquely.” She added that “I love referring to myself as a dark-skinned woman. Like that’s almost like a political statement for me.” When I asked her to clarify what skin privilege meant to her, Sandy noted, “skin privilege means that I have to be aware of where I am. I have to be aware of the environment.” The idea of Black women supporting each other came through in Sandy’s response:

I think, as Black women, we need to acknowledge that dark skin women do experience this. I think maybe a lot of lighter skin women might not, I’m not saying, you know, a lot of lighter-skinned women do realize this, but I think a lot of lighter skin women don’t realize this. And I think that same thing goes for some darker, you know, darker skin. Some darker skin women may not, but you know, in some darker skin, women do. So, I think when, and it doesn’t even have to be coming from a dark-skinned woman. I think if anyone among like amongst Black women, if people are talking about colorism, we should listen, and we should be aware of this because, as women, we as Black women we, what’s the
word? It does impact us.

Conversely, Kristy understood the privilege that comes with a lighter skin tone, but viewed it from a negative perspective. When I asked her to share the benefits of her light skin tone or mixed-race, she offered the following explanation:

I guess if somebody wants diversity in something, so I guess that’s more work.

But socially, I guess I have to kind of look at guys who are potentially like for a relationship to kind of make sure they’re not like specifically looking for a mixed woman because that happens a lot, which is weird.

Kristy pointed out that being of mixed means “Otherness.” Further, she explained:

I’ve always had to check other on like demographics . . . or like if you, if I’ll sometimes I’ll like, there’ll be like check one, I’ll check both African American and Caucasian and there’s been some things where you can’t, you can’t pick more than one. So, I will have to be like, Hmm, should I pick Caucasian? Should I pick African American? Should I pick other? But just like it’s not other, it’s my things are right there . . . but it feels like really no group . . . There’s like, I don’t know, there’s no rule book . . . I guess and trying to just not be boxed in into anything because there’s not really a box for anything . . . I find being mixed is very difficult.

Kristy also offered the following regarding skin privilege:

Sometimes I have had more privilege than some of like other darker skin Black girls. Whether it’s job opportunities or like educational opportunities. I’m not really sure...I can see that even though I feel discriminated, like discrimination from White people, I have more privilege than a darker skin woman, which is also
hard to deal with because I am trying to learn about Black culture and try to cement myself more as being comfortable as calling myself a Black woman. But then I also have to realize that I do reap more benefits, even though I’m still seen as other. So, I have to be cognizant of that.

Kristy’s response reflected the struggle that can occur for someone who moves between being Black or White, and sometimes feeling stuck in-between. She articulated it succinctly by saying,

Like it doesn’t matter that I’m lighter. Yeah. Cause I still feel like ugly. I dunno, so yeah, not having the characteristics of being like a, a light skin girl, best of both worlds . . . I do feel like there have been some positives where people will, you know, assume something because I’m lighter. But in the end, I feel like it’s negative because I almost don’t deserve it or they’re using the wrong, um, qualifications I mean.

Conversations About Dating

Most of the participants spoke about the effect of skin tone on personal and/or romantic relationships, or their choice for a life partner. For example, Macy mentioned that at a young age, she thought about being older and getting married to “someone mixed or someone White because of the hair texture. Because I love hair. The length, whatever texture is curly, especially curly.” Later in the conversation, she appeared to contradict her statement about her idea of who she would marry. She mentioned that some male friends prefer women with a darker complexion than hers, whereas, others preferred women with a lighter complexion. She added, I feel it depends on your perspective, what you think . . . but for me, I don’t have any colour [preference] . . . I
can’t demean.”

Alana attached the privilege of having light skin to attractiveness. When I asked what skin tone she found appealing, she admitted, “well I really find sometimes, lighter skin tones.” Alana disclosed that she noticed the preference with skin tone in her postsecondary experience in Canada as opposed to her high school experience outside of Canada. She mentioned that in university,

I see it more, light skin. That’s where I see. High school people didn’t really care; they just dated anyone, but here in university? And our generation is becoming more prominent in the sense that everybody doesn’t wanna date a Black skin person or a dark skin person who just want to date a light skin, light skin, light skin, light skin.

When I asked how it made her feel, she laughed and said, “I really don’t care . . . my insecurity level was down; everybody has it, sometimes it’s up sometimes it’s down. So last week, about two weeks ago, it was down, but now it’s up. So, I don’t really care.” Further, Alana noted that when someone close to her had a negative experience, she thought:

Oh my God, that means this is very saddening to me because I had this fear, oh my God, I’m not going to find anybody. Of course, you’d want to date you, you’d want to be loved and love, but it just makes you feel down. But sometimes I’m like, no, because when you see other people with dark skin girls, you’re like, oh, there’s hope. So, it doesn’t make me feel like before it made me feel sad, but right now, I’m just like, I don’t care. I’m beautiful.

Similarly, Sandy and Kristy felt men preferred women with a lighter skin tone.
Sandy felt that “a lot of men prefer a lighter-skinned woman versus darker-skinned women.” She also noted that “I don’t care.” When I asked if her experience would be different if she had a different skin tone, she responded by saying:

I think it would be completely different. I think I would be looked upon as more desirable or more attractive or more worthy. Or even if you don’t want to date me or take me out just on a simple dating platform, like to just hurl these insults at me. I know for certain that if I were lighter-skinned, I would not be getting that, you know, or I would be considered more exotic or more beautiful.

Kristy recounted her experience on a dating website. There were men who indicated, “I love light skins or like, like some specifying mixed people.” She added, in annoyance:

That’s definitely colorism to me because it’s like they’re not, they don’t want a Black woman, and they don’t want a White woman . . . I feel like all of the experiences of people who are mixed can be similar but are quite different. Based on how dark you are. So, I definitely think that it’s your, the shade of your skin tone can be sought after in some way, like you’re treated differently, and having maybe personality traits kind of affixed to you based on the lightness or darkness of the Brown.

She also pointed out she had contrasting experiences with White and Black boyfriends. Black men are more accepting of her hair as opposed to White men, who thought they were “choking in my hair.” She noted that her “self-esteem could change based on who I’m with because they’ll lift me up and be like, Oh, you’re so cool, or they’ll be like, your hair is crazy.”

By bravely and freely owning their stories, the participants used their voice to
resist and fight back against colorism. Maintaining their self-esteem and dignity showed how they navigated with and against expressions of colorism. In the face of adversity, they exuded pride in being active agents in their lives.

**Colorism is Tricky**

“Colorism is tricky,” a phrase used by Sandy that succinctly expressed the nuances of colorism and underscored the internal conflict some Black women experience. This was common among the conversations I had with the participants of this study. It exposed the multiple issues that intersected and had implications for their daily lives. CRT offers a lens to look at the complex ways in which colorism is manifested and experienced by Black women. As a central tenet of CRT, the intercentricity of race and racism suggests that “racism in its systemic and individual iterations, is intimately connected with other forms of oppression . . . [Therefore], our responsibility is to identify how such oppressions converge and diverge depending on the context” (Stovall, 2013, p. 293).

Some participants expressed their ideas of Blackness. Within this context, the notion of authenticity came up to explain the participants’ ideas of what it meant to be Black. Some participants appeared either hesitant or conflicted by their experiences. DuBois (2018) helps us to understand the expression of internal conflict through the idea of *double consciousness*: the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 1). Within the context of this research, the idea of double consciousness means that Black women may move between rationalizing, desiring, or adopting different identities to adjust in a Black or White environment. The women’s experiences
highlighted how the difference placed on light and dark skin affixed stereotypes to Black women, as the participants’ responses adjusted based on the context of their environment.

**Double Consciousness**

The sense of internal conflict, hesitancy, and uncertainty came across in the conversations with the participants. Sandy said, for instance, that “colorism is insidious.” She explained:

What makes it insidious is how do we track it? How do we nail it? And once we have trapped it, how do we not let it like vaporize through our fingers in the little ways where people might write it off and say, well, I’m not racist because I love Black, but, uh, you know, I’m not racist . . . cause you know, I think all Black women are beautiful.

When I asked if she recalled a situation where her skin tone placed her on the margins, Jodi explained that she was aware that darker-skinned women experience more stereotypes as opposed to her with a lighter skin tone. She also pointed out that she still experiences some stereotypes that are placed on Black people. She felt that although she has a light complexion, she felt a sense of in-betweenness. Jodi provided the example of being treated as suspicious when she enters some stores, in contrast to a White person who does not. She explained:

at the end of the day I’m still Black, so, um, I think darker skin, like in general, if I’m [pause], I don’t want to say necessarily like stereotyped against, but [pause] on the outside I’m still Black . . . it’s still the in between, like I’m still Black, but I’m just a lighter version of it, I guess.

When I asked about the role skin tone played in how beauty is seen, Alana
rationalized her response to comments about her braided hair in the following way:

So, discrimination is obviously negative side. Yes. So, I can use that word. But when I was in London, this really uplifted myself and made me increase my self-esteem because when we do hair, like braids, they’ll come up to us and they’ll be like, oh, I love your hair. You know, right now you do pink braids, purple braids, blue braids. So, they’ll come up to you and be like, Oh, I love your hair so, that’s the, I don’t know. I know this is colorism.

She acknowledged that the experience mentioned above has a negative aspect to it. Notwithstanding, she contended that turning the negative aspect into a positive one helps her to increase her self-esteem. She expressed her reasoning in the following way:

And I know it’s the negative side, but I just try to look at both sides, because no matter what happens, even if they hated me for being Black, sometimes I’ve read it that it’s just they hating me because there’s something, there’s something they know they can’t be, they admire it so much and they so angry that they don’t have it. That’s why they are hating on you. So that’s why I try and just, you know, it doesn’t always have to be focused on the negative. You’re trying to cause the positive to increase your self-esteem and love yourself more. So, in the hair aspect that side where it talks about when they talk about, oh I love your hair. It just, everybody doesn’t have to be the same thing. It’s beautiful. Any other way.

On the other hand, Tricia seemed to shrug off the idea that Black women’s hair is laden with negative messages. For instance, during the discussion with Tricia about the affiliation with skin tone and hair texture, she noted that there is no difference in the level of attractiveness for either. She pointed out that “people tend to see what there nothing is
to be seen about it.” Further, she stated that,

People just tend to like to make problems when there’s no problem . . . It’s more like um; they tend to create stuff that don’t even exist and make other people feel bad and create problems for them because they like dark skin instead of being light or something like that.

Sandy went in-depth in her thought process and was seemingly conflicted at times in the interview. When I asked if the tone of her skin impacted her daily life, for instance, she mentioned that “I’m darker skinned, so people might treat me a certain way or talk to me a certain way or um, but then yeah, I always wonder is it strictly a Black thing or a colorism thing?” She later expanded on the different treatments she has received by saying, “sometimes I wish I knew what, what the direction was. But then I wonder would it matter . . . is it, because I’m Black . . . or is it because I’m a dark skin person?” She also acknowledged that sometimes, she struggled with identifying issues as racism or colorism. She questioned herself sometimes by asking, “like is it me, or is it colorism?” She also felt “there are moments where I do know, it’s definitely like someone’s coming at me, you know, for my skin tone and shades.” When I asked about how she felt in the moments of uncertainty, she responded:

It’s confusing. It’s very confusing because, for me, I’m like, if I knew you were just like an outright racist, I would be like, oh, okay, well, you know, okay, that’s your choice. But if it’s colorism, it’s like, why am I different than another Black person? Like, why does somebody who’s lighter than me warrant more kindness or even an acknowledgment or more than like a head nod versus someone who looks like me? And what does that mean?
Sandy brought up that “with recent experiences that I’ve been describing like now; I’m very cautious. I’m like, I do not want to put myself in that.”

Kristy’s experience as a mixed-race person seemed to vacillate based on who she was with. As the only mixed-race person in the study, Kristy questioned her Black authenticity. She explained that “I’m trying to see my authenticity, which I feel like is lacking obviously.” She also stated that she waited before deciding to participate in the study because she wondered, “whether or not I could even have valid experiences as a Black woman, but I am a Black woman, but I’ve been made not to really feel like one.” Later, when I asked her to share when she first recognized the perception of skin tone, she explained:

Uh, as a child, um, my family is all White. They all have blue eyes. And I’ve just been kind of like, I’ve been me, I’ve been the Brown person in my whole family. I’m the only one who doesn’t really look like my family. So, it’s always, even though they love me, it’s always, um, kind of like being this single one out, the odd one out in my, my own family. Um, and then that just expands into life. Um, where I grew up in Ottawa was typically extremely White, so I was one of the only colored kids in my class. And then there’s the thing where it’s like, I’m not, it’s like not even being full Black. So, it’s like, how can, how can Black experience be, um, like I was, it was an afterthought. It wasn’t really, it was like you’re different, but it’s like I had to do at the same as everybody because you can’t just make things different for one person out of 500 kids. And the fact that I look different when I don’t feel any different is odd.

I asked her to explain how she navigated her environment based on her experience at a
young age; in a sad tone, she said:

Just as best as I could. I mean, I actually remember at least five times in my childhood, me with my mother, people asking me if I was adopted. Um, which is crazy. So, it’s like, I’m not even sure. I don’t belong anywhere, even with my own family, my own mother . . . I feel like, I had a lot of anger as a kid. So, like, yeah, I kind of just, um, took all my experiences and unfortunately, kind of like, it just kind of made me jaded and angry. So, I wouldn’t say I navigated it like, especially well I just dealt with it. Uh [pause].

When I asked if she is treated differently based on her skin tone, she remarked:

It depends on who I’m with . . . if I’m with White people, I guess that they will see more of my Black side . . . When I’m with, I guess Black friends, it’s, I’m not really in the know. I know that I’ll be quizzed on Black culture that I don’t have a connection to, unfortunately. And then with people who aren’t Black or who aren’t White, it’s kind of the same, where, yeah, the color, I don’t know. It’s very, it’s weird.

Kristy felt she could adapt to her surroundings based on who she was around. When I asked how her White or Black friends viewed her, she noted:

I feel like I can almost like be different people with different people based on how they treat me and how like they see me and then how I also can just either capitalize on what they’re thinking or not.

I Have Melanin in Me

Both Macy and Alana referred to Blackness in biological terms, and embraced their Blackness through their mention of melanin. Macy felt that when she met people for
the first time, “they think I’m [not Black]. When I tell them I’m a Black woman, they feel
I’m not, because I think, yeah, I have this, my eyes are kind of like [light] Brown, the
light sheet around under the sun.” She felt she needs to defend being a Black woman
among some of her peers who question the amount of melanin she possessed. They
argued, “you don’t have it because you’re not that shade. You’re not that dark.” To
defend herself, she would say:

I’m a Black woman, so you can’t tell me. I know I have melanin in me . . . I feel
I’m a Black woman so nobody can tell me I don’t have this; I don’t have that
because I know I am a Black woman.

Macy pointed out during the conversation about how she is perceived by her peers that
“we have different shades of Black, there are some people that are like very dark and like,
like your melanin.” Similarly, in response to the impact of her skin tone on her day-to-
day life, Alana noted:

I feel like it negatively impacts my day to day experience because [of the]
Melanin and I feel like, I don’t know about, I feel like us darker skin tone people,
we tend to go through a lot in the sense of the sun, discoloration,
hyperpigmentation, other things. So, it’s hard to be Black sometimes because we,
I don’t know because there’s sensitive skin, you know, there’s melanin, more
produced in different places. So, it’s hard so to be Black, to be a darker-skinned
tone.

As a follow up to the in-depth responses, I asked Sandy what Blackness meant to her. She
stated that Blackness meant many things. Firstly, she thought of Blackness in ancestral
terms. She commented, “I think of my ancestry that is Caribbean from the African
continent, but I also think of Blackness here in Canada as well as people from the
diaspora as well.” Secondly, she thought of Blackness in historical terms, which she
connected to the “the transatlantic passage.” Blackness to her is reminiscent of “people
who originated from the continent of Africa with curly hair . . . rich skin . . . and the
Black skin tone range.” Finally, she viewed Blackness in cultural terms and stated that
“Blackness can be a culture as well, like certain aspects of us together. We’ve created
cultures wherever we go.”

As well, Kristy’s response to the question related to her idea of Blackness coming
from a cultural and experiential point of view. She stated that Blackness to her meant,
Taking freedom, demanding equality, demanding normalness, having to ask for
things that are given to other people . . . my experience in being Black [is] having
darker skin, just getting personality traits thrown on you. I feel like the Black
culture seems to be like people think that they’re more similar, compared to like
the vast amount of White people . . . there’s like a written definition on how to be
Black.

The idea of Blackness also brought about the notion of authenticity by two participants.
Although Macy pointed out that she has not experienced colorism, she accounted for it
through her friend’s experience:

So, her colour is kind of, she isn’t Black per se, when you see her, you know, she
isn’t brown, she doesn’t have the skin color. She’s kind of like the normal White
colour and all that . . . You can’t be Nigerian because you’re not of our skin
colour.

She further explained that she intervened to support her friend and stated that “if she
would want to like identify herself to some other people, she wouldn’t be sure of herself or maybe of who she is.”

When I asked Kristy to explain how her Black friends checked her authenticity, she explained “like, movies, if I’ve seen like Friday or not seeing like airplane things that I’ve not seen or experienced and being like, I’m not Black because I don’t know the Friday movies, um, or my taste in music.”

**Awareness Helps**

The perspectives of Black women who have experienced colorism can assist educators and scholars in understanding the nuances of colorism expressed in the previous sections of this chapter. Macy suggested that “awareness helps.” With this in mind, educators can draw from the experiences of the Black women in this study to understand the intricacies of colorism and how racism works to help them address the issue in school. Further, it can help to understand how colorism informed their postsecondary experiences. Matsuda (1995) suggests that we should look to individuals who can share their first-hand accounts of their lived experiences rather than assuming what they are. To ‘look to the bottom’—as outlined earlier in this paper—suggests that we should look at the experiences and perspectives of those “who are uniquely able to relate theory to concrete experience of oppression” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 63). The use of the language of ‘looking to the bottom’ draws on the experiences of marginalized people.

Many of the participants suggested moving the conversation about colorism from the periphery and including it in the centre with discussions around race and racism in school. They felt this would bring about more awareness to the issue. hooks (2015) reminds us that we should, “[focus] our attention on the centre as well as on the margin”
(p. xvii). The participants shared experiences that highlighted that skin tone does matter, as the proceeding section highlights.

Moving from the Margin to the Centre

When I asked participants about the conversations that need to take place in postsecondary education around the issue of colorism, Jodi mentioned that “I think a lot of is lacking.” She felt there should be more focus on it in education. She explained:

I believe like education, like talk, because people who don’t, who aren’t, um, affected by it don’t necessarily see it. So, like a lot of people are super clueless about even racism and things that don’t necessarily directly affect them. So, if you were to explain to them, um, that colorism and racism are within their own little bubble, I guess, um, that it’s not just racism, that’s a problem. It’s also, um, colorism, that’s its own problem within a race, and it goes with, um, it’s not just Black girls. It’s like it happens in Asia; it happens all around the world. So yeah, I think a lot of people just don’t really understand it because they’re not affected by it directly.

When I asked if she had any suggestions for educators, she mentioned that they should refer to books or research that focused on colorism. She said, “I think there’s more books probably than actual research done on it. So maybe I give them a book like that kind of like highlights it as clear as day.” She also thought, “they could always talk to…anyone who’s experienced it who’s willing to talk about their experiences . . . I guess your research will help that too.”

Similar to Jodi, Macy believed that “awareness helps.” She added that “people who don’t know, they are not aware of it.” Hence, her recommendation was to do
“outreach.” Jodi believed that “if people see . . . something attractive, you get attracted to it. So maybe if they see you and they come up to them to talk to them, they will know more.”

Alana had a different perspective regarding her advice to educators. She outlined:

See some things you just, inevitable, is just going to happen. Like the sun’s going to rise in the morning, things like that. So, a lot of the times we focus too much on stopping colorism. People are going to disagree, not just being, having a certain feature which doesn’t have to do with race is going to be very discriminated against. So, we need to; I feel like we need to stop focusing on . . . being discriminated and start focusing on how to love ourselves . . . no one’s going to make you feel inferior without your consent.

She admitted that “in the educational system, they should talk about colorism.” She maintained that Black people “should focus more on loving yourself because there are people that commit suicide based on colorism.” Notwithstanding, she felt educators still needed to understand the different ways in which colorism is experienced.

In her advice for educators, Sandy felt that talking about colorism “brings a lot of power . . . in terms of education.” She suggested:

We need to have conversations in colorism, racism. I think teachers need to, you know, be educated and not just racism but colorism and be able to have those conversations and also have materials, you know, and you know, yeah. Like correct things that they can include, like tangible things so they can include in their curriculum. So, I think building curriculum at all levels of education, and I’m even gonna go so far as to say is early learning right up to the university. I
think it can be done having materials, books, videos.

She also suggested, “I would say speak to people who have experienced colorism.” She added:

Like you might be able to see racism, … but do you know colorism? And if you don’t know, you know, feel free to ask other, um, Black students or even reach out to other Black faculty.

Finally, she suggested:

Doing the research from the ground up with um, in particular, you know, Black women . . . your fellow Black faculty . . . your fellow Black staff. And I think as Black women we have a lot of rich information that we can really give you and tell you.

Kristy approached her advice to educators from two points of view. She suggested that educators should have an understanding of different experiences with colorism. First, she indicated:

Learning about the actual ways people have been discriminated against and what barriers they face and barriers that people have never faced before. Basically, how to not even just overcome the barriers but eliminate them.

Kristy also spoke about barriers based on her experience. She mentioned that:

I feel like I, I want to be part of the discussion and it’s hard to try to go to Black women to say I’ve been discriminated against, I want support when I have had more opportunities than them. So, it’s hard to like there’s like feminism, but then White feminism is different than Black feminism.

She also pointed out that “figuring out how or like why and how to get rid of lighter is
better, even within the Black community. It’s like I’m very, very much on their side. It’s, it’s hard to say.” She recommended that educators should, “definitely look at Black history, especially Canadian.” These suggestions made by the participants point to their interest in seeing change in the university.

**Asserting Blackness into White Spaces**

Some participants spoke about their need and attempts to prove or validate themselves in the postsecondary context. Their experiences appeared to question the color-blind assumption that suggests “that one’s qualifications, not one’s color or ethnicity, are the method by which upward mobility is achieved” (Ebert, 2004, p. 177). For example, in response to the questions about how she is perceived in university based on her skin tone, Sandy said “a lot of times I feel like I’ll say something and then it doesn’t have as much value, but, or almost like people will just look at me strangely.” She added, “when I’m entering a space, I might feel like people are surprised that I might know certain things.” Having some time to reflect, Sandy added to her response to the above question during our follow-up meeting. As she reflected, she mentioned that she was apprehensive about putting her profile picture up for an online class by stating:

There’re a lot of online courses and some people, and you have the choice to put a picture up. And for some reason I think, well I don’t know if I want them to know I’m Black. I know that might sound horrible. Not that I’m ashamed, but I’m like… I would prefer to have my thoughts and my opinions reflect who I am in an online forum or an online course because I don’t know if people will think a certain way or if I’m saying something or if the issue like for, you know, if it’s an online class, and we’re discussing race, class, gender or indigenous people, if it’s,
if they might look at me and say she’s saying it cause she has a valid point or is it, is she saying it because she’s a person of colour.

She added:

Like in a few courses, there was the option to have like video conferencing or like telephone and before I would prefer to [do videoconferencing]. My laptop wasn’t working that great. I’ll just call. If I’m talking, at least I’ll know that if I’m being listened to, do you know what I mean? . . . But yeah, I always thinking like, huh, is that something like, will, will my thoughts be considered?

With a sense of joy in her voice, she also pointed out that she just recently finished an online course where “I did self-identify, and I said, you know what, what am I hiding? I don’t need to. And you know, I did self-identify, but it’s weird that it took me until one of my last courses to do that.” She explained that initially, she felt the need to hide her identity because “I just wanted people to hear what I had to say and my thoughts.”

Further, she boldly added that she decided not to hide her identity anymore:

I have great contributions, I have a great story, and I’m just not going to play into, I, I’m not going to hide myself. I’m not going to minimize myself to, out of fear or you know, or to not be able or, or to not, you know, express myself or to not share my ideas in an academic setting and be in fear.

Similarly, Kristy felt the need to go the extra mile to prove herself. For instance, in a curious and concerned way, she mentioned that she has never had a Black or mixed-race teacher during her time at the university. She said, “it’s just been White professors, and I feel like there’s different expectations.” Kristy gave an example of an exam she felt she did really well in a class of over two hundred students. When she shared her story,
she was joyful about her achievement, but also surprised at the response she received from her professor. She recalled:

I usually sit at the back, so I’m not really noticed. But I went down, and I spoke to her, and I thanked her for the lecture and said that I got a good mark and she was really surprised, like, like she was surprised, and I was kind of surprised that she was surprised. I mean, she knows the class average, like it was the 70s, so I, I was above the average, but not by a lot . . . I guess that just makes me think if I should participate more, I’m always thinking about like being Black. I wanna make sure that because we’re not, it’s like put in a box, not seen as like intelligent and thinking. And I want to always show that Black women can do whatever. So sometimes, I will put myself out there and answer more questions. I’ll, you know, I’ll go like super hard.

She also explained that she is working on a project on Black leisure, however,

There’s no data . . . Finding like Black data, specifically Canadian and Canadian women. It’s like, I want to show that Black women are also intelligent. You know, you shouldn’t be surprised that I got an 88. I mean, I, I dunno I don’t really have connections with any of my professors. I’ve not, I’ve wished I had like a mentor. But it’s just; it hasn’t happened.

When I asked her to explain why she felt she needed to go the extra mile to prove herself, she answered:

I just feel like my experiences are kind of just written off . . . They don’t expect thinking. I’m not really sure. Like I’ve just been, people will approach me and talk about the basketball game, the weather, like dance, like whatever. But then
when I want to discuss like the implications of the high rate of the drowning of
like African Americans, it’s like, what? Like why do you have to care about that?
It’s like, why, why wouldn’t I? There’s a lot of things that I think about that
people don’t think that I think about. So, I was like, I want to be part of the
discussion. I want to lead the discussion. I don’t know.

When I asked if going the extra mile would make a difference for her in university, she
replied with a sense of determination:

I guess just changing people’s perspectives, which is not really the goal. But I
just, I don’t want to be just sitting in the back with my mouth closed because
that’s what basically we’ve been told to do all our lives. But I’m also not trying to
be like the stereotypical like loud Black woman, blah, blah, blah. I have actual
things to say. Um, and they’re going to think about it.

Finally, she summarized by pushing back in a proud and bold way by saying that the
point is “to be heard . . . and respected. It’s not just how loud I am; it’s actually what I’m
saying.”

Asserting Blackness in White spaces is among many of the ways in which the
participants proudly owned their Blackness and pushed back against being Othered. The
sense of pride and privilege evidenced throughout the interviews highlighted how these
bold Black women, through their agency, rejected colorism and the everyday slight
attempts to silence their voices.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlighted the results of the study. Six participants shared how
colorism informed their experiences in the academy. The results were reflected in four
emergent themes that were obtained from the results. The themes included: i) colorism: certain people are left in and certain people are left out; ii) if people are talking about colorism, we should listen; iii) colorism is tricky; and iv) awareness helps.

Participants commonly agreed that colorism was discrimination based on skin tone. Other elements of colorism were hair texture and facial features. Colorism was found to have significant implications, such as the ways in which hair is associated to skin tone, its effect on social and intimate relationships, the multiple ways that Black women’s experiences intersect and complicate their lives, and the different ways educators can understand Black women’s experience to address issues in schools. While recalling their experiences, participants had varying reactions such as deep reflection, sadness, frustration, conflict, and joyfulness. Participants also felt that the need to include the issue of colorism in academic discourse and finding different ways to understand Black women’s experience can be useful in education. At times, they actively worked to negotiate their Blackness in predominantly White spaces, and sought to insert themselves and their experiences in ways that challenged thinking and assumptions. Finally, Kristy’s feedback at the end of her conversation underscores the importance of giving Black women voice to share their experience. She succinctly stated that,

I have all these experiences and I really don’t have anybody to talk to with it . . . I have a lot to tell different people because different people will have different opinions on that . . . I’m just happy that I’ve been able to just kind of like word vomit all my life.

The next chapter will offer a discussion on the findings and consider implications for practice, theory, and future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter will present a discussion of the results, along with implications for practice, theory, and future research. I will look at primary and interrelated themes that developed in the study, and review the research questions and theoretical framework for the research. I will close with my final thoughts.

Summary of the Study

Many scholars suggest that a system of advantage based on race is rooted in the structure of racism (Hall, 1996; Henry & Tator, 2012; James, 2011; Konyari, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Tatum, 1992; Taylor et al., 2007). Blay (2015) suggests that colorism is a symptom of racism, as people experience racism differently based on skin tone. Within this context, the notion of Blackness is constructed along colour lines (Blay, 2014). The color-line refers to “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men [sic]” (DuBois, 2018, para. 6). A study of Black women’s experiences with colorism is useful because colorism is widespread and affects multiple aspects of their lives, including educational opportunities. According to Hunter (2005), racism and colorism work together to reinforce structures of racial discrimination, as well as privileging or discriminating based on skin tone.

The study explored Black women’s experience with colorism to understand how colorism informed their lives on campus. My research had three purposes. The first was to explore how the experiences of colorism informed racialized Black female students’ experiences. The second purpose was to build upon anti-racism literature by considering interrelated elements of colorism. Finally, the third purpose was to seek recommendations that can help educators understand the implications of colorism for
postsecondary education.

My study was a qualitative narrative inquiry that explored how colorism informed the participants’ postsecondary experiences. I used a semi-structured, one-on-one interview approach to prepare general questions to guide the discussion. The interview questions explored topics about participants’ understandings of colorism, their experiences as Black women, how colorism informed their experience in the academy, and suggestions to address the implications of colorism for the postsecondary context. Purposeful convenience sampling was used to select six Black female students. As a qualitative study, it was not intended to be generalized to a larger population of Black women. The goal of my study, like most qualitative research studies, was to understand a phenomenon in depth, not breadth.

Three themes emerged from the data analysis sections, which were a combination of the broader subsections within each of the main themes. These themes address the purposes of the study, which were (i) to explore how the experiences of colorism inform racialized Black female students’ experience; (ii) to build upon anti-racist literature by considering interrelated elements of colorism; and (iii) to offer recommendations that can help educators understand the implications for postsecondary contexts. Hence, the three emergent themes that structure the discussion are as follows:

i) *Others made it so* was articulated by one participant. This theme addresses the findings that suggest participants attributed their understanding of colorism based on how they absorbed what their society told them. Specifically, the messages they received at a young age informed their choices and reinforced some of the negative images about Black women,
including hair.

ii) *Colorism is insidious* focuses on ways in which participants navigated colorism. In particular, an understanding of the ways in which participants conflated colorism and racism, the intersecting issues affecting their lives, and the harmful stereotypes affixed to Black women will be discussed.

iii) *From the margin to the centre* looks at first-hand accounts of how Black women speak to their experiences living on the margin. I also look at how they actively negotiated their racialized positions, and sought to navigate the barriers they were presented with. In this section, I discuss how an understanding of the participants’ experiences, along with their own suggestions, may help educators understand the complexities around colorism and the implications for the postsecondary context.

**Discussion**

This section features the three primary themes of the study’s analysis: i) others made it so; ii) colorism is insidious; and iii) from the margin to the centre. The analysis and discussion of the data will address the theoretical framework and research questions that informed the study. As a theoretical framework, CRT helped in the analysis by providing an “analytical lens that accounts for not only race and racism, but also for their constitutional parts of color and colorism” (Trevino, Harris, & Wallace, 2008, p. 10). The research questions that informed the study are outlined below.

**Overarching Question**

How does a sample of Black women’s experience with colorism inform their postsecondary experience?
Sub-Question 1

How does an understanding of Black women’s experiences with colorism bring awareness to the intricacies of colorism and help educators to understand the implications for postsecondary education?

Others Made It So

One of the purposes of this study was to explore how the experiences of colorism informed racialized Black female students’ experiences. To do so, an understanding of their experiences within their social and academic environments was needed. The questions that framed the initial part of the interviews were designed to elicit the participants’ understanding of colorism, self-described skin tone, and the interrelated issues that informed their understanding of colorism. This approach was central to the understanding of Black women’s experiences of colorism, and supported one of the central tenets of CRT.

CRT provides a foundation for understanding the structural inequality that disadvantages Black women, and acknowledges the marginalization of racialized people (Ladson-Billings, 1998). For instance, one of the findings mentioned earlier in this study highlights how one participant, Sandy, was apprehensive about putting her picture up for an online class and decided against it. This example connects to education because of its implications for Black women engaging with peers in class and online spaces. The findings highlighted that participants attributed skin tone discrimination to their understanding of colorism. Moreover, some of the messages that shaped their understanding were received at an early age. Further, participants attached the issue of phenotypic features to their understanding of colorism; for instance, hair was arguably a
central issue experienced by all the participants.

**The Messages That Were Received**

The data showed that participants’ understanding of colorism was influenced by messages received from family members, societal beliefs, and dominant discourses on race and racism. Collins (2006) contends that discourses and customs play a part in affirming and adopting racial structures. This idea may help to explain how the messages some participants received affirmed the idea that privilege was attached to a light skin tone, and also something that should be desired. This is in contrast to dark skin tone, which was seen as problematic and undesirable. Wilder and Cain (2011) argue that “Black families serve as points of origin to introduce color consciousness yet can also function as the site for color reaffirmation and transformation” (p. 591). Hence, the idea of reaffirmation helps to account for how the negative messages about dark skin tone can normalize and validate the harmful assumptions of colorism (Wilder & Cain, 2011).

**The Issue of Hair**

The findings further suggested that aside from skin tone, participants spoke about phenotypic features that were attached to their experience with colorism. More explicitly, hair arguably accounted for a significant part of their experience with colorism. In understanding how “[B]lack women and girls view their worlds, it is essential to understand why hair matters to them” (Banks, 2000, p. 4). Throughout the conversations, participants vocalized their social experience with hair and associated aesthetics, and connected their experiences to skin tone. For instance, participants spoke about the assumptions and harmful stereotypes affixed to Black women’s hair, such as ‘good hair’ and ‘bad hair.’ According to Macy, ‘good hair’ is viewed through the prism of texture,
length, and quality, which is equated to the Eurocentric standard of good quality hair. Conversely, ‘bad hair’ is viewed as unkempt, dirty, nappy, tightly coiled, difficult to comb through, and unattractive. The labeling of Black women’s hair as good or bad “gives the impression that Black hair is only beautiful when it is altered” (Thompson, 2009, p. 847). Studies have shown that Afrocentric hairstyles are connected with stereotypical images such as being unattractive, uneducated, low socioeconomic status, and hostile (Eley, 2017; Hunter, 2005; Thompson, 2014). These negative stereotypes provide a lens for us to understand the conflicting messages Black women receive about their hair. Therefore, skin tone, along with “hair texture and length [are] an essential part of Black female identity” (Robinson, 2011, p. 360).

For instance, Sandy’s contention about Black women’s hair being assessed against a Eurocentric standard helps to explain how Black hair is negatively labeled because of its difference. Participants also explained that the issue of hair impacted their choices of how to wear their hair. Specifically, their choice of hairstyle was contingent upon the setting they were in. Their experience helps to explain how “Black hair, in all its manifestations, must always be contemplated” (Thompson, 2009, p. 839). Interestingly, Kristy noted that the issues she had with her hair were subjective. Her experience varied based on who she was with. Kristy’s feeling of not belonging underscores the nuances of colorism. The different hair-related issues show that not all Black women are “disadvantaged equally, and the burden that Blacks may face is highly dependent on whether they are light or dark skin” (Harrison & Thomas, 2009, p. 136).

The participants’ perceptions and experiences highlighted some of the everyday language attached to skin tone, which is filled with vital information (Wilder, 2015). The
issue of hair and physical appearance was connected to the participants’ experiences or understandings of colorism. The women’s comments illustrate that Black women’s hair adds another layer of complexity, as it is “laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn how you feel about yourself” (Thompson as cited in Eley, 2017, p. 96). As a result, the multiple ways in which the participants are marginalized is dependent on where they fall along the color line and the hair texture scale (Robinson, 2011).

**Colorism is Insidious**

The second purpose of this study was to build upon anti-racist literature by considering interrelated elements of colorism. The data indicated that some participants, at times, conflated racism and colorism, with experiences of intersecting issues and stereotypical assumptions being common in participants’ lived experiences.

**Conflating Colorism and Racism**

The findings, which revealed that participants appeared to conflate colorism and racism, relates to another of the central tenets of CRT that challenges the idea of race neutrality. The idea of colour-blindness “ignores the many dimensions of structured racism” (Ebert, 2004, p. 175). Instead, CRT acknowledges that “the simple matter of the color of one’s skin so profoundly affects the way one is treated, so radically shapes what one is allowed to think and feel about this society” (Williams, 1991, as cited in Taylor, 2016, p. 7). The data showed that two participants believed they needed to go out of their way to prove themselves in class for their ideas to be noticed and for their voices to be heard. They recognized stereotype threats as being damaging to their academic success, but appeared to grapple over whether their experiences were connected to racism or
colorism. Their belief that Black women needed to work harder could suggest that the learning environment was not an equal space. Hence, their response was a push-back against the idea of equal opportunity within a structure they felt contained racialized practice.

Some participants also questioned whether their experience was categorically racism or colorism. Scholars have defined *racism* as “beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation” (Clark, Anderson, R.Clark, & Williams, 1999, p. 805). Racism establishes the idea of a binary option as either being racist or not racist (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017); this binary lays out a false narrative that “reinforces the idea that racism only occurs in specific incidences and is only done by specific (bad) people” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 125). The participants’ struggle with trying to discern racist undertones highlights what Essed (1991) calls the taken-for-granted everyday experiences of Black women that oppresses, represses, and marginalizes them. The everyday experiences “encapsulates the routine practices, attitudes, and behavior of racism that taken alone would go ignored and unnamed as racist” (Wilder, 2015, p. 57).

Conversely, some participants seemed to wrestle with categorizing their experience as colorism. After some reflection, they acknowledged that their experience was colorism. Colorism is structured differently than racism, although both share “similar qualities, manifestations, and consequences” (Wilder, 2015, p. 6). Scholars agree that *colorism* is the unequal and discriminatory treatment of people within the same ethnic group based on the shade of their skin and phenotypic features (Eley, 2017; Hunter, 2005; Obeyesekere, 2017; Wilder, 2015). The experiences cited by some of the participants
provides a way to understand the everyday language that these women ponder to understand and interpret their experiences. Wilder (2015) explains that daily experiences of Black women, including the “language, rules, norms, practices, etc. are attached to the everyday feature of Black life” (p. 53). Hence, sidestepping the issue of colorism by assuming it is the same as racism discounts the experiences of Black women. The messages Black women receive “are [subtle] and often invisible” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 131), thereby making it “difficult for us to address the unconscious [bias]” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 131). The harmful effects of dominant ideas and language reinforce and reproduce systems of oppression that marginalize Black women.

The idea of internalized racialized oppression can help to explain the participants’ conflation of racism and colorism. According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), internalized racialized oppression “occurs when a person of Color, consciously and subconsciously, accepts the negative representation of invisibility of peoples of color” (p. 135). Hence, the participants’ experience highlighted the complex ways in which colorism informed their lives.

The Intersecting Issues That Affect Participants’ Lives

The intercentricity of race and racism holds that both forms of racialized oppression intersect with other complex types of subordination to suppress and oppress marginalized groups (Stovall, 2013). CRT offers a lens with which to look at the complex ways that colorism is manifested and experienced by Black women. Participants in the study attached a social meaning to skin tone, with a common theme of light skin being desirable and the standard of beauty; conversely, dark skin is often seen as less desirable and unattractive. The social construction of Blackness is taken from the perspective of
dark skin tone, full lips, and other phenotype associated with the categorization of Blackness. This assumption serves to “separate the ‘real’ (‘authentic’) from the ‘not real’ (‘inauthentic’) co-ethnic, and individuals construct self-conscious ways in which they use ‘natural’ and specified characteristics to signify group affiliation” (Tuan, 1999, as cited in Carter, 2003, p. 138). The data showed how one participant pushed back against colorism by asserting her positive identity through a focus on self-love. By doing so, she challenged discourses that sought to limit and oppress Black women as being inferior. Her focus on “loving ourselves” is a statement that demonstrates taking charge and reclaiming her power in a space that is constantly trying to take that power away.

The data also revealed that participants held different meanings about what it meant to be Black, which in most cases was subjective. Yet, there was a common understanding that regardless of the variety of issues that marginalized them, they were still Black. Fanon’s (2008) idea, known as the fact of Blackness, succinctly conveys their feelings, arguing that “ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the [B]lack man [sic] since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the [B]lack man[sic] be black; he must be black in relation to the [W]hite man” (p. 90). Therefore, Blackness from a dominant perspective regards Black women as lacking and deficient. The hegemonic structure creates a Black-White construct that legitimizes dominant views as superior, and “assigns fixed notions of skin colour racial identity, creating an oppositional division of two sides (Black and White)” (Dei, 2017, p. vii). So, it is from the dominant point of view that the narrow definition of Blackness relegates Black women to a feeling of inadequacy and uncertainty. The data, however, showed how some participants embraced their Blackness with a sense of pride and privilege: they had a clear idea about
what it meant to be Black, and attempted to assert their Black identities despite or against hegemonic structures. Referring to their Blackness as melanin, for instance, was a way to discuss the meanings of Blackness and talk about authenticity with pride and privilege. Blackness has historical, physical, and cultural meanings and implications, so talking about Blackness helps them to address the complex meanings of Blackness and their intimate relationships with it.

As the literature shows, identity is constructed in different ways, including within and around a social or cultural context. Within the social context, identity is constructed, in part, based on how we view ourselves and how others view us. Appearance is an essential factor in constructing identity, specifically skin colour. Cultural identity, when viewed through the prism of race, brings into focus group membership (Rockquemore, 2004). The data showed that some participants proudly expressed their cultural identity by embracing their Blackness through their self-described skin tone and the ways in which they spoke about their Black experience.

The participants’ resilience—despite their experience of colorism—indicated that they did not allow how others viewed them or their experiences of racism and colorism to oppress them. Rather, a part of their identity was formed in opposition to factors that marginalized them, such as stereotype threat. There were also different ways in which the participants worked through and negotiated their experiences with colorism, such as moving forward to achieve academic goals. hooks (1992) reminds us we “are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination” (p. 20). Hence, by articulating their identity with a sense of pride, the women in the study pushed back, which demonstrated an act of resistance. By doing so
they took power, control, and agency over their lives.

**Stereotypes Affixed to Black Women**

Sandy highlighted that the main stereotypical assumptions about Black women are “that we’re ugly, that we’re not beautiful, that [we are] not attractive, that we’re not as womanly or [as] girlish.” The data also showed other stereotypical assumptions placed on Black women such as the strong Black woman, being loud, low-income, and not being intellectual. The participants’ view of the stereotypes affixed to Black women underscores Black women’s experience of being dismissed or feeling invisible. These negative images of Black women’s identity demonstrate the idea of *stereotype threat*, whereby the participants are concerned that they “will be evaluated negatively due to the stereotypes about [their] racial group” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 136). Their concern emphasizes the idea that colorism is not only about being Othered: “it is about who has the power to construct the ‘other’ as different” (Dei, 2017, p. 5).

In the case of the participants, other than skin tone, the power ingrained in dominant discourses legitimized the construct of light versus dark skin. So, light skin is idolized, and dark skin is degraded—consequently enabling systemic discrimination. So, creating a milieu of inequality meant the participants had to figure out how to navigate specific spaces. As Sandy put it, “I wish I knew what it was.” Here, an identification of the participants’ experiences about the negative images placed on them helps to understand that “the shifting nature of our identities implies bodies are always read differently and contextually, albeit with similar reactions and response” (Dei, 2017, p. 6). Hence, an understanding of the stereotypes assigned to Black women can help to question the discourses on race and racism that assign traits deemed fitting of the dominant
ideology of beauty and privilege.

Interestingly, Kristy’s experience showed that skin colour hierarchy not only grants privilege to lighter-skin Black women, but it also works to marginalize light-skinned women on an intra-racial level (Hunter, 2004). The issue of authenticity fits neatly into the discourse of skin tone bias. It amplifies the argument that the issue of authenticity is a product of the dominant ideology that situates Blackness as inferior. It also underscores the critique of biases towards light skin in favour of dark skin. Having light skin may present challenges in some social spaces, and legitimate experiences of intra-racial marginalization should not be overlooked. Dei (2017) suggests that the issue of Blackness is a complex and contested terrain. He argues that we should “take into account the nuances and complexities of the Black and African experience and the value of multiple knowings such that we do not present a singular way of seeing and defining Blackness” (Dei, 2017, p. 2). This recognition provides a way to understand that although light skin grants privilege on the colour hierarchy, we should be mindful not to exclude the legitimate experiences or concerns of lighter-skinned Black women.

**From the Margin to the Centre**

hooks (2015) challenges us to “provoke, shift our paradigms, change the way we think” (p. xvi). It is against this background that I use the first-hand accounts of the Black women in the study to not only look at the dominant discourses on race and racism, but also “include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women . . . who live on the margin” (hooks, 2015, p. xviii). So, including the voices that we do not often hear from “addresses margin and center” (hooks, 2015, p. xviii).

This study sought to understand how the participants’ experiences with colorism
informed their postsecondary experience. Further, the study aimed to seek recommendations from participants that can help educators understand the complexities around colorism and how to address the issue in postsecondary environments. An integral component of CRT used in this study relates to “the centrality of experiential knowledge” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 129). CRT suggests that legitimate experiences of marginalized people are essential to “understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 129). As such, Matsuda (1995) introduces the idea of “looking to the bottom” (p. 63); her argument rests in the belief that we should speak to people that can share their lived experiences to support theory. Therefore, the idea suggests that “looking to the bottom for ideas . . . will tap a valuable source previously overlooked” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 64).

In Black women’s daily lives, they face multiple intersecting forms of oppression. In some instances, participants spoke about the social atmosphere in school that contributed to their experience with colorism. In other instances, some participants saw their everyday life and identity as being separate from how they see themselves in school and working towards their degree. To explain the multiple ways Black women experience difference, Collins (2002) uses the notion of the matrix of domination to illustrate the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (p. 246). Gender, race, and class are features that are most relevant to Black women’s intersectional experience. Black women’s actions to make their voices heard and to assert their agency rises in opposition to dominant structures that seek to oppress them. These measures portray their self-reliance, determination, and strength.

The data showed that although the participants highlighted the different ways in
which colorism informed their postsecondary experience, they did not make the connection of colorism to their experience in the academy. Even though the participants were clear about their experiences, it could be that they “had ambivalent responses to the issue of power” (hooks, 2015, p. 84). There is a possibility that the participants do not see themselves reflected in the social groups, and thus view their existence in the academy on an individual basis. The fact that they did not make the connection could reflect, in some ways, the success of the racializing institution in keeping certain power relations in place.

Hence, participants may not make the connections in the academy because the low number of their marginalized group may make it challenging to “see patterns of structural injustice, recognize that key perspectives are missing, and know how to pursue those missing perspectives” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 201). As a result, “power is reinforced in the very fact that we can look around and not see anything of value missing” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 201).

From their study on racism in the academy, Henry and Tator (2012) find that curriculum reflected more “Eurocentric frameworks, standards, and content” (p. 46). Further, Henry and Tator (2012) suggest that the message sent is “that only particular kinds of knowledge are validated and valued” (p. 46). Within the context of dominant discourses on race and racism, the curriculum “is the result of long-term structural oppression” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 200). Curriculum is viewed through the lens of dominant groups, which frequently and systematically exclude the views of racialized groups. By doing so, the discussions dismiss both the ideas and voices of Black women from conversations.

Hence, this additional layer of complexity helps to understand how dominant
ideology is used to speak about racism in education. It also sheds light on how the participants experience the school environment. It could be that the participants chose an easier way to navigate school, such as not self-identifying in an online class or not making any linkages of colorism to their experiences in the academy. I offer an explanation that they may believe “that they are outnumbered and unable to count on anyone else in the room to support them” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 202).

For instance, one participant felt the need to not self-identify in an online forum or to speak up in class. The decision to not self-identify illustrates Tatum’s (2017) idea that Black women battle stereotypes that are diminishing and that position them as unintelligent or incapable of functioning at high levels compared to the dominant group. It is possible that feeling the need for anonymity reflects the “extent that [Black women] internalize the images that the dominant group reflects back on them” (Tatum, 2017, p. 104)—hence, the need to avoid the harshness that they may be exposed to. Furthermore, one participant expressed feeling the need to speak up in class. The desire to do so connects with Steele’s (1997) characterization of stereotype threat—whereby Black women fear “that ‘others’ judgment or their own actions will negatively stereotype them” (Steele, 1997, p. 613). Speaking up illustrates the desire to challenge attempts that seek to minimize their value. Stereotype threat can manifest in different ways; for example, two participants felt they needed to have their voices heard to acknowledge their ability and identity.

The participants understood that their markers as Black women influenced how others saw them. Their lived experiences “played a key role in shaping how they currently comprehend difference, particularly between themselves and [other] students”
Dominant ideology holds a deficit view of Black women as “lazy and victims of their circumstances” (Picower, 2009, p. 201). Hence, it is reasonable to argue that the participants were concerned that they would be “evaluated negatively due to the stereotypes about [their] racial group” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 136). Consequently, participants expressed the need to speak up because they understood that their “identities are always in flux, and constructed and negotiated by individuals who [hold dominant views]” (James, 2010, p. 48). Speaking out portrayed the participants’ acts of resistance against dominant ideology. The act of defiance portrayed their determination and resilience in confronting gender, race, and skin tone discrimination.

**Summary**

The concerns and issues noted in the participants' stories reflect the nuanced and complex ways in which the intersection of colour and gender more broadly shapes Black women's experiences. Underlying the stories, the Black women in the study voiced their understanding and experiences of colorism in ways that may not use the everyday language highlighted in the literature. The findings may not explicitly draw attention to the participants’ gendered experiences. Nevertheless, the indirect messages around Black women's hair, the social meaning assigned to skin tone, and stereotypes affixed to Black women point to a broader conversation of their gendered experiences. For instance, the association of light skin as beautiful and dark skin as undesirable stands in as markers for which the standard of beauty is judged for Black women. Hill (2002) argues that skin tone affects women more than men. Black women are more affected by “issues of skin color, facial features, and hair” (Hill, 2002, p. 78).

The majority of the participants recognized that the labels assigned to skin tone
are aligned with the problematic European standard of beauty for women—which sends subtle and overt messages representing the ideals by which their bodies are read. How the women took pride in owning their Blackness was a push back against the status quo and a challenge to the dualistic thinking of features that are considered desirable or undesirable.

To the extent that hair is considered a marker of beauty and desirability, the participants' concern about the issue of hair expresses the frustration of their marginalization based on the social construct of good and bad hair. Hair is evaluated along colour lines and, in part, shapes the social experiences of the participants. Wilder (2015), points out that "women develop a 'mental sky' about what it means to be light, dark, or brown-skinned, regardless of their own skin tone" (p.159). Although the participants did not articulate the specific language connected with their experiences of colorism, they understood that issues of good and bad hair served as labels for Black women along colour lines. According to Thompson (2019), "black bodies were imbued with a visible, corporeal difference such that hair and skin became politicized aesthetics, irrespective of black women's intentions" (p. 200). As such, the Black women in the study must deal with corporeal legacies of colonialism. The often-unspoken relationship between hair and gender impacts their everyday lives in much the same way as the other issues that directly and overtly confront them. The participants confront and own their Black hair as an identity marker and as a part of their constituency.

Finally, the study participants articulated their experiences with colorism in different ways, but they all shared a common understanding of the stereotypes affixed to Black women. The literature showed that Black women navigate harmful stereotypes brought about by colorism such as low academic achievement, being loud, low-income,
and not being intellectual (Eley, 2017; Hunter, 2005; Obeyesekere, 2017; Wilder, 2015). Their experiences typify the gendered nature of their lived realities based on how they spoke about their experiences. Despite their often conflation of colorism and racism, it also reflects how "colorism mirrors many of the same qualities of racism" (Wilder, 2015). Although their experiences were not always articulated in clear terms as the literature suggests, their examples represent their gendered experiences that sit within the larger structure of other intersecting issues. Wilder (2015), reminds us that colorism must be understood within the larger "societal structure" because it "functions as a structure that interacts and co-exists with the larger structures of race, gender, and class" (p. 160). By confronting the issues of stereotype threat, some participants rebutted the harmful stereotypes affixed to Black women.

Implications

This section looks at the research questions to determine how they facilitated an understanding of Black women’s experience of intra-racial and inter-racial colorism and, subsequently, how that informed their experience in the academy. The study is informed by CRT, and used narrative inquiry to hear the participants’ stories. The research questions that guided the study were as follows below.

Overarching Question

How does a sample of Black women’s experience with colorism inform their postsecondary experience?

Sub-Question 1

How does an understanding of Black women’s experiences with colorism bring awareness to the intricacies of colorism and help educators to understand the implications
for postsecondary education?

In this section, I look at implications for practice, implications for theory, and implications for future research.

**Implications for Practice**

I highlighted throughout the study that the complexity of the issues surrounding colorism requires different attention than just a broad focus on racism. I also provided data to support the intricacies of colorism and the implications for Black women. Further, I argue that to address the issue of colorism, educators should examine the three themes that I discussed in this section: others made it so; colorism is insidious; and from the margin to the centre. These themes should be viewed as interrelated rather than separate issues when examining the experiences of the women in the study. The suggestions that I present in this section are against the backdrop of the lived experiences of the participants. They represent the ideas of the participants and the implications for postsecondary education.

Participants felt that much is lacking in discussing colorism in the classroom and that there should be more focus on colorism in education. hooks (2015) reminds us that we should "[focus] our attention on the centre as well as on the margin" (p. xvii). Focusing on the margin calls attention to the intersecting issues of gender, race, and class that account for Black women’s lived experience. The socio-cultural issues on the teaching and learning environment require that educators address the confluence of issues affecting Black women as noted in the suggestions below.

Creating a space for open communication that provokes candour to hear about the way in which the issues noted above works with colorism to marginalize Black women.
Encouraging pedagogical activities that challenge the status quo and upend racialized classroom practices that disregard Black women is essential to this work. To do so requires bold actions that unsettles the quiet discourse about institutionalized racialized policies and practices that are inequitable. By seeking approaches that go beyond the traditional learning strategies to reflect the everyday classroom reality, educators facilitate student-centred learning while promoting their socio-cultural well-being.

Borrowing from Tilley and Taylor (2013), anti-racism in education must include attention to "both content (such as the materials teachers use in class) as well as process (pedagogy)" (p. 407). Changes to pre-existing content and process requires continued efforts to "interrogate the curriculum, school policies, and the institutional practices that support inequities that persist in schools" (Tilley & Taylor, 2013, p. 407). Including anti-racist pedagogical initiatives into an already pre-determined curriculum will require institutions and academic units to institute and support flexible practices that foster emancipatory research and independent learning. As academic units push to maintain a balanced approach that respects learning outcomes, students should be encouraged to explore topics that are not reflected in the planned curriculum. Teachers should also have the option to choose pedagogical strategies and resources that will cater to their classrooms to respond to the fluidity of the lived curriculum.

Course readings and discussions should be reviewed to include literature pertaining to skin tone discrimination and differences in phenotypic features. Specifically, literature pertaining to the messaging around Black women’s hair contains essential information to assist educators in understanding the complexities of colorism. The scholarship shows that receiving information about the lived experiences of Black
women is beneficial because “little attention has been paid to how skin color operates uniquely in the lives of women” (Hunter, 2005, p. 37). The literature also shows that an understanding of the messages Black women receive about skin colour is essential. The points of view of Black women should be included discussions about colorism to address these concerns in the school context (Monroe, 2016). As such, “connecting colorism to well structured, race-focused approaches is critical if educators hope to promote strong outcomes in Black education” (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 51).

Many of the participants suggested that having more open conversations and awareness programs, for instance, are some ways to bring attention to the issue of colorism in the classroom. Conversations with stakeholders should be situated in the broader context of racism on campus to identify and understand the persistent issues. Drawing on Brock University's Human Rights Task Force, including the voices of stakeholders within the academic, administrative, union, and student bodies open up the conversation about broad human rights and anti-racism issues (Brock University, Task Force on Pushing Forward, 2017). Institutional and departmental leadership teams must examine, discuss, lead, and act upon the recommendations by the task force initiative for change to be lasting and meaningful. To shape classroom climate and student experience, academic leaders should embed everyday anti-racist conversations into the academy's culture, policies, departmental meetings, and classroom practices. Doing so shows a willingness to "critique and change the hegemony of White culture that is embedded in everyday interactions in classrooms and in the institutionalized spaces where power is exercised" (Henry & Tator, 2009, p. 23). Commitment from leadership and executive team members conveys the message of sustainability for institution led anti-racism
initiatives.

During the conversations with the participants, it appeared that some were not aware of available resources to support marginalized students, specifically Black women. Wellness centres and student support services should be equipped with a contact list for related student associations, meetings, or counseling services. Specifically, providing workshops or training for support staff to educate them about the issue of colorism and the implications for racialized students would be beneficial. For example, including awareness sessions or activities in events that recognize Black history month would help to shed light on the issue. Support staff should also be given professional development opportunities to observe racialized peers with experience handling issues that affect racialized students. Allocating release time for support staff within the dominant group to observe, reflect, and participate in peer support activities increases self-awareness to question implicit bias.

I concur with the thinking that educators should use critical race and anti-racist initiatives within their classrooms “as an educational lens [to] engage the activism and politics of enunciation that makes use of the concept of race as a tool for demystifying schooling and education” (Dei & Lordan, 2013, p. 10). Doing so gives voice to those silenced or sidelined by the stigmatization of colorism—and, by extension, allows them to reclaim their identity, self-pride, and challenge dominant ideology. Race does matter, but the insistence of a collective approach to understanding differences regardless of skin gradient moves anti-racism efforts forward (Dei & Lordan, 2013). Including active participation of members within academic and administrative units in anti-racist efforts broadens the shared purpose—one that goes beyond racial identity.
Teacher education about colorism and its implication in Black women’s lives was also highlighted in the data. An understanding of the nuances of colorism can help educators to understand the complexities of colorism. The literature suggests that although anti-racism efforts have sought to understand Black women’s experiences with racism on campus, these efforts have not tended to address colorism or intra-racial discrimination in postsecondary settings (Norwood & Monroe, 2017). Further, fostering research and pedagogical initiatives that explore the lived experiences of those marginalized by inter-racial and intra-racial systemic discrimination encourages critical exploration and advocacy. As the literature suggests, “anti-racist teachings must also evoke pedagogic authenticity of local subjects’ experiences and the power of using such knowledge to help heal ourselves” (Dei & Lordan, 2013, p. 12). As such, providing support and knowledge mobilization opportunities for faculty and student researchers in anti-racist research provides resources about marginalized individuals' lived realities.

Colorism complicates discourses on race and racism in the postsecondary context because the problem exists along several sites of difference. The complexities include skin tone bias, phenotypic traits, harmful stereotypes, systemic barriers, and institutionalized racism. Dei (2013) proposes that schools can be a site for change. I see the implications of this study contributing to greater educator understanding, while also contributing to educators understanding the everyday attitudes towards lighter skin and certain qualities of phenotypical traits that make legitimate experiences of colorism hard to place. Including colorism in classroom discussions on racism and other initiatives in postsecondary classrooms deepens our understanding of race and skin colour. Engaging educators to extend the discourse beyond the Black-White binary pushes back against
racism and colorism, and challenges the taken-for-granted perceptions about skin colour. Doing so also encourages agency and, hopefully, changes attitudes.

**Implications for Theory**

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on colorism because it takes into account the different firsthand experiences of a sample of Black women in the academy. The literature shows that a recognition of the salience of the gradient of skin colour related to race is significant in understanding the underpinnings of the perception of skin tone (Abdulle & Obeyesekere, 2017). I used CRT to challenge the effects of race and racism in education and questioning the colour-blindness notion (Ebert, 2004; Yosso, 2005). The study drew attention to a sample of racialized Black female students' points of view to demonstrate the multiple and intricate experiences Black women have with Blackness. Skin colour and phenotypical traits such as hair, nose, lips, and body image, shaped their perception of Blackness. The data from this study showed that the participants felt marginalized based on skin tone bias, and issues related to body features, specifically hair. Understanding the multiple and nuanced ways the women in the study negotiated race and how they experience difference informs CRT by opening up the discussion on Blackness. A deeper understanding of the lived realities of Black women informs our thinking. It encourages scholars and researchers to deconstruct the colonial and binary notions of Blackness. The participants’ experiences illustrated that there is no single way of being Black. By adding to the voice component of CRT, the participants’ stories demonstrated that a part of being Black is acting in their own empowerment. As the participants fought back through self-empowerment and taking a stand to address issues in their lives, they have exposed, questioned, and talked back against colorism.
There is resistance in talking back, because it brings to the surface the colonial past and, by so doing, draws attention to issues that often do not get enough attention.

As with some of the literature I drew on, the data in the study described how participants became aware of colorism at an early age. This observation is instructive, as the study builds upon CRT by offering a lens to understand how family influences the production of colorism. CRT reveals socio-cultural issues that are often hidden or remain silent (Henry & Tator, 2009). As such, CRT influenced the study by allowing us to critically evaluate how the messages Black women receive at an early age inform their experiences, shape the construction of their identities, and how they use this information to navigate their environments. By doing so, the study challenges us to look beneath the façade of colour blindness to delve into the extreme biases dark-skinned women face.

The detailing of the Black women’s multiple experiences showed how children at a young age identify with beauty and negotiate discourses on race and identity by assigning traits they deem fitting of the stereotypical indicators of beauty and privilege. These misconceptions are often perpetuated into adulthood. This recognition should unsettle the privileging of lighter skin over darker skin and creates spaces for self-love. Although studies have highlighted the influence of families in reproducing and reinforcing colorism, more work needs to be done.

As well, the study aligns with the growing body of knowledge which highlights that individuals of light complexion who do not embody the stereotypes associated with Blackness may be the subject of disparaging comments, negative criticism, or unwanted advances. This attitude is perpetuated both inter-racially and intra-racially, and it is within the complexities of intra-racial discrimination where the harmful effects of
colorism lay (Carter, 2003). Data from the research found that individuals who do not match the criteria based on the perception of Blackness may find themselves being judged and placed on the periphery within their cultural group. They may also face skin tone discrimination outside their cultural group. These concerns are unsettling and should also inform the dialogues on difference among racialized Black women. Using CRT in the study to critically examine intra-racial concerns provides a lens to understand the profound effects of intra-racial discord that contributes to acceptance and normalization of the problem. Focusing the gaze on this issue should interrogate the idea of authenticity and, at the same time, challenge the delegitimizing of membership within the group based on the social construction of Blackness.

The study also highlighted the stereotypical labels placed on Black women that worked to minimize them and place them on the periphery. Stereotype threat is emblematic of the harsh reality Black women face in postsecondary to prove themselves to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Therefore, the complexity of the issues faced by racialized Black female students underscore the need to engage in more in-depth discussion to address the issue of colorism in postsecondary contexts. A focus on colorism contributes to CRT by adopting a non-hegemonic approach to decentering whiteness by considering the Black experience, nuances, and complications. Such as understanding the racialized body politics, the construction of identity, and the barriers Black women face.

Finally, some of the literature I relied on focused on colorism using a binary lens of dark versus light skin tone. As understood from this study, the self-described skin tone of participants included dark, light, and brown skin tone. Similar to looking at racism
through a binary lens, doing so with colorism creates an oppositional view of light versus
dark. This only feeds into intra-racial discord, and leaves out the voices of Black women
that fall in-between these two categories. CRT was used to unpack the issues that should
be included in the conversation about colorism, and an understanding of the underlying
factors of colorism. Critiquing colorism using CRT raises questions about who is
included or excluded from the broad discussion about racism and colorism. Investigation
into colorism is strengthened when the different experiences of Black women who fall
along the spectrum of the colour line are included. When we provide a space for Black
women to move from being spectators to active participants in telling their stories, the
various perspectives will bolster the ongoing discourse and activism.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The research participants for my narrative inquiry study were recruited by using
purposeful sampling to select six participants from a university in Southern Ontario.
Given that the site for participant recruitment was located at a predominantly White
university, the pool of potential participants was limited. Many of the participants did not
make the connection of their experience with colorism to education. Future studies
should explore broader experiences explicitly related to life on campus to understand how
Black women understand education as a socializing agent, and as part of a larger
structural racist system.

Given that the participants had ether a Caribbean or Nigerian background, their
stories had different social experiences and meanings. The growing body of literature
would benefit from future research that compares the experiences of Black women within
African and Caribbean diaspora living in Canada.
This study was limited to Black women in the academy. Future research that looks at Black men in the academy would serve to generate data for a comparative analysis of the gendered experience with colorism in postsecondary education.

The focus of this study was to investigate how colorism informed Black women’s experience in the academy. The data and discussion add to the growing body of knowledge by bringing awareness to issues affected by colorism and the implication in Black women’s lives. The data also shows that despite the participants’ different cultural and social backgrounds, their lived experiences and perspectives share a common understanding that many Black women do experience colorism in different ways. The growing body of knowledge would benefit from research to understand how specific instances of intra-racial colorism reinforces and reproduces colorism, and how it informs Black women’s experiences.

Finally, since most of the participants recalled being aware of colorism at an early age, future research that focuses on Black girls in elementary and high school would be beneficial. This information would help to shed light on how the messages received about colorism at an early age in education informs Black women’s experiences.

**Conclusion**

My concluding thoughts provide a summary of the main points of this study. I also include an analysis of the process, as the women’s stories have lived in my head for the last six months of collecting data and writing up the findings. In the narrative process, I tried to share the participants’ stories the way they were told by using their own words, while at the same time, sharing glimpses of our interaction during the interview process. Re-telling the experiences and lives of Black women ushers a sense of responsibility, as I


felt they entrusted their stories to me to be told the way they wanted. At the same time, I understood that I needed to step away, in part due to the overwhelming emotions I experienced living the stories with them. I also needed to do so to honour my ethical responsibilities in conducting this research. Since the narrative process is built on a relationship, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that moving in between sharing the story is normal. They also advise us that to

become fully involved, [you] must ‘fall in love’ with [your] participants, yet [you] must also step back and see [your] own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants’, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81)

Colorism deepens our understanding of the racialized experiences of Black women in an educational setting. During the interview process, I received firsthand accounts of the lived realities of the participants. This interaction, together with other documented literature, bring into focus the nuanced discussion on race and racism. The women’s stories, along with my own, bring attention to multiple issues and barriers we face daily. Navigating issues of racism, hair, skin tone bias, stereotypes, and making adjustments based on each situation are facets of our daily lives. These issues taken at face value appears to be racism. It is an important reminder that “oftentimes, colorism operates within an already racialized context” (Wilder, 2015, p. 48). Therefore, colorism adds an additional burden because the degree of the everyday experiences of colorism varies based on where each person falls on the colour hierarchy. These concerns raise awareness about what educators must understand when confronting issues of colorism in school, as Black women experience colorism differently. Colorism complicates
discourses on race and anti-racism efforts in education because the problem exists along several points of difference. As a reminder, Wilder (2015), suggests that although colorism grew from racism, it operates and “co-exists with larger structures of race, gender, and class [and] . . . therefore must be understood within the context of these other societal structures” (p. 160).

As highlighted in the data, participants did not seem to want to talk about colorism the way I expected based on the literature. Instead, they disassociated their experiences of colorism and their life in the academy. This separation raises questions about how racism is spoken about in education. The complexities for those doing anti-racist work could be that “dominant members of the faculty of administration often devalue claims that curriculum or pedagogy is racially insensitive or not inclusive of peoples, Aboriginals, or women” (Henry & Tator, 2012). Based on the findings of the study, more attempts should be made to include discussions that challenge dominant discourses on race and racism. A study of how power is constructed between dominant and marginalized groups in the classroom would be beneficial to assess how it “reinforces structural inequality by obscuring unequal power between groups” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 142). As Henry and Tator (2012) reminds us, “discrimination is a matter of impact and not intent” (p. 29). An evaluation of how racialized students experience school should be done to help in understanding the implications for postsecondary.

This study has shed light on the experiences of a sample of racialized Black female students in the academy, and illustrated the multiple issues that affect their lives. The study sought to bring their voice to the forefront in the discussion about colorism.
Memories of our colonial history are painful, but it’s through our pain that we can begin to confront and address the issues brought about by colorism. I believe that when we confront and challenge the issues, we open ourselves to understand and see what we can do otherwise. Our journeys and stories may be different, but I believe we speak with a collective voice. The message of defiance and resilience instills a sense of Black women’s pride in spite of adversity. It is my hope that this study was able to highlight that “there is no singular voice of all [B]lack women; rather our lives represent a multiplicity of voices that are shaped by both our collective journeys and individual biographies” (Wilder, 2015, p. 15). It is imperative that our voices are included in conversations about race, racism, and colorism.
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Appendix A

Interview Schedule for First Interview

Opening Questions:
1. What does colorism mean to you?
2. What do you consider your skin tone to be?
3. In your experience, do other people view your skin tone differently than you do?
   a. If yes, how so? b. Do you have any examples?
4. What has been your experience with colorism or skin tone?
5. How old were you when you started to think about or notice the perception of the difference in skin tone?
6. What specific event or experience comes to mind?

Core Questions:
7. You’ve talked about skin tone difference and your understanding of colorism. Do you feel the shade of your skin impacts how others in university relate to you or perceive you?
   a. If so, how so? What example(s) come to mind?
   b. If No: What do you think impacts how others in university relate to you or perceive you?
8. In what ways do you think skin tone, hair texture and length play into what you find physically appealing and/or attractive? Please elaborate.
9. In your experience, have you seen any differences or patterns between what White and non-White friends or acquaintances find more attractive and/or appealing?
10. Do you think certain shade of skin, hair texture, and length are more attractive or appealing?
   a. If so, why do you think there is still a certain shade of skin, hair texture, and length that are more attractive or appealing?
11. In what way do you think your skin tone has an impact on how you experience day to day life?
12. If so, in what ways?
13. Can you think of any situation where your skin colour has placed you on the margins in school or socially?
14. Can you recall a situation where your skin colour has helped you in school or socially? Please elaborate.
15. We’ve talked about colorism and some of its implications in your life. What conversations do you think need to take place between racialized Black women about skin tone difference?
16. We’ve talked about many challenges around the issue of colorism. How do you think conversations around race and racism can be addressed in an educational context?

Closing Questions:
17. Is there anything else that you would like to add or expand on about colorism?
18. Are there any other related issues that you would like to address?
Appendix B

Interview Schedule for Second Interview

Opening Questions:
1. Is there anything you thought of since our first conversation that you would like to share?
2. Have you given anymore thought about any experiences that came up in your youth about race and racism?

Core Questions:
3. What does being mixed mean to you?
4. What does it mean to you to be seen or perceived as being mixed?
5. Tell me some more about skin privilege? What does it mean to you?
6. What does Blackness mean to you?
7. How do you differentiate between your experiences in school and social?
8. What activities are you involved with outside the classroom or have been involved in? (extra-curricular activities)?
   a. If yes, what was the experience like?
9. Do you see the university as an equal space?
10. Do you think racism happens here?
11. Do you feel there is any different pressure being a Black woman on campus?
12. Can you think of how your experience may differ when you are with your Black friends and White friends?
   a. If yes, explain.
13. Does an understanding about hair inform the choices you make?
   a. Where do you think people learn messages about hair?
14. I’ve been hearing a lot about Black men preferring lighter skin women. What is you understanding about where that interest comes from?
15. What stereotype(s) do you understand are there for Black women?
   a. How are Black women seen differently?
16. Has there been a time where you felt you didn’t want to draw attention to your Blackness?
   a. If yes, explain.

Closing Questions:
17. Are there any final comments that you would like to add?