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# The inclusion of the term ‘color’ in any racial label is racist, is it not?

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/etn](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/etn)**Anita Kalunta-Crumpton** 

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## Abstract

Through an examination of the term *people of color*, this conceptual paper illustrates how the use of historical racial labels in the US, supposedly aimed at denouncing racism, seems to reproduce that which the labels purport to condemn. With a primary focus on Blacks or African-Americans, this paper draws purely on a review and analysis of secondary information to argue that any antiracist agenda that utilizes terms that were associated with historical racism may well be reproducing the racist ideologies that justified slavery and Jim Crow laws. This paper calls for the elimination of the term *people of color* and related labels from popular usage for the following reasons: (1) the racialized representation of color in historical race relations, (2) the deleterious implications of color for contemporary interracial and intraracial relations, and (3) the misleading universalism and racial divisiveness in the term *people of color*. These issues are discussed following an introduction and a conceptual framework. The paper concludes with a recommendation of appropriate terms for racial identification.

## Keywords

People of color, color, colorism, racial label, racialization, racism

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## Introduction

In present-day US, the term *people of color* is freely used in race-related academic and non-academic discourses. As a reflection of its comfortable existence in various discussion platforms, other sub-terms have emerged as its byproduct, for example ‘women of color’ (Remedios et al., 2016), ‘faculty of color’ (Turner, 2003), and ‘Americans of color’ (Feagin, 2010). The term is not entirely new. A similar label *person of colour* was used as far back as the early 19th century. In reference to slaves who originated from Africa, the 1807 Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves defined slaves as ‘any negro, mulatto, or person of colour.’ The legislation made it unlawful to:

... import or bring into the United States or the territories thereof from any foreign kingdom, place, or country, any negro, mulatto, or person of colour, with intent to hold, sell, or dispose of such [person]... as a slave, or to be held to service or labour. (Finkelman, 2008: 398)

More than a century and half later, the civil rights icon, Martin Luther King Jr. formed a similar phrase ‘citizens of colour’ in his 1963 speech, ‘I have a dream.’ In the same speech, several references were made to the word *Negro*. In considering the era during which Dr King delivered his now famous speech, African-Americans were the primary subject of his speech, and in this context, they were the primary designee of the term *citizens of colour* – used to represent the collective experiences of racial discrimination among Negroes. At the time, blatant racial oppression, visibly illustrated in segregation, lynching, and indiscriminate and frequent acts of police brutality, were lived realities for African-Americans. The term *colored* was almost distinctively associated with African-Americans, and was used in a derogatory manner by Whites especially during the era of Jim Crow, or used by African-Americans themselves to mark their own racial identity. Thus, the use of the phrase *citizens of colour* in an era when the label *colored* was openly associated with African-Americans, and color signified inferiority and segregation, may have seemed appropriate in the context of a protest for civil rights for African-Americans.

However, despite the antiracism legislative advances of the post-civil-rights era, antiracist scholarship and discourses have continued to be inundated with narratives that oft-times conjure up depictions of historical racism of the pre-civil-rights period (Alexander, 2012; Feagin, 2010; Tatum, 2004; Wellman, 1993). Absorbed into the ongoing discourses of White racism is the term *people of color* (and sub-terms), now conceptualized to include all non-White racial groups, i.e. racial groups of non-European descent who have suffered oppression and who have been deprived of the privileges accorded those with a White skin color (Tyson, 2012). Although, in principle, the White racial group in present-day US includes peoples of Middle Eastern and North African descent (see Office of Management and Budget (OMB), 1997), White and its privilege are, in practice, represented in

people of European ancestry, including those who were racialized historically. For example, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Irish experienced overt resentment, stereotyping, and discrimination by the dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestants but, over time, they assimilated and subsumed into White Americans, with access to the rights and privileges of whiteness (see Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991). On the strength of their European phenotype, other historically racialized European ethnic groups, such as the Italians, were able to negotiate their assimilation as White Americans (see Guglielmo, 2003).

Thus, historically and contemporarily, the notion of *people of color* has applied to the racialized racial/ethnic groups who are visibly of non-European descent, particularly those of African descent. As elaborated later in the paper, contacts between Europeans and Africans on the shores of Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries set the stage for the racialization of skin color. While this paper focuses on Blacks/African-Americans, the discussion clearly has implications for other racial groups in the US, such as Asians, Native Americans, and non-White Hispanics whom, by virtue of their non-whiteness, come under the status of *people of color*. Like its counterpart *color* (for skin color), the term *people of color* lacks race-neutrality in that it does not apply to Whites because Whites are ideologically excluded from the racialization that accompanies the term, as if Whites are colorless.

This racialized dichotomy is clearly demonstrated in the mission of *people of color* to make a political and social justice statement, and to foster a social action agenda for all non-White racial groups to stand in solidarity against White injustices and oppression. Proponents of the *people of color* label (and sub-labels) subscribe to and promote the label under the framework of sending a political message that is purposed to identify with the historical oppression of non-Whites under slavery and/or colonialism. The term also caters to claims of contemporary White racism. Thus, overall, the term is conceptualized by its proponents as an indicator of oneness among non-White racial groups based on their shared historical and/or contemporary experiences of subjugation (Tyson, 2012).

But, given the significance of color in historical race relations, this paper begs the question of why *color* is still considered an appropriate term for racial identity, considering the need to eliminate the legacies of historical slavery, particularly its psychological impact that is holding many African-Americans hostage. Literatures on the legacies of slavery have included discussions about African-Americans' negative perceptions of self, their consciousness of slavery and historical racism, and their current experiences or perceptions of racism that stemmed from that past (Feagin, 2010). It is also acknowledged that one of the damaging psychological reactions to racism among African-Americans is the internalization and expression of racialized stereotypical images, which cause damage to their self-esteem and confidence, and ultimately impact negatively on their performance in various areas (Steele, 1997).

Because of the negative connotations of color in historical and contemporary race relations, the paper calls for the non-use of the term *color* in racial labels.

This call is based on three interrelated justifications: (1) the intersections of color and racialization in historical race relations; (2) the detrimental consequences of color in contemporary interracial and intraracial relations; and (3) the false universalism and racial dichotomization in the term *people of color*. These thematic justifications are, respectively, discussed later. The discussions are a product of a review of the literature on the use of the term *people of color* and related terms. In adopting this secondary data collection method, several databases, such as JSTOR, Race Relations Abstract, Google Scholar, Academic Search, Black Studies Center, and ProQuest, were explored. Search terms – people of color, colored/coloured people, person/s of color, wo/men of color, immigrants of color, children of color, etc. – were used, and the search revealed a variety of academic books, scholarly journal articles, and non-academic publications that demonstrate that *color*, as a racial term, is in popular usage in academic, official and popular discourses in present-day United States.

Before discussing the three thematic justifications for disapproving the inclusion of the term *color* in racial labels, the paper first provides its conceptual framework.

### **Conceptual framework: Modern-day racialization and racism through the use of historical racial labels**

This author draws primarily on the notion of ‘aversive racism’ (see Kovel, 1970, 1984) to deliver the paper’s conceptual argument, which is that there is White racism – albeit subtle and perhaps unconscious – in modern-day use of historical racial labels even though the labels may be utilized in the context of an anti-racism agenda. This conflicting feature of White racism is reflected in Kovel’s description of aversive racism (also see Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005) as indirect and cold, yet damaging. It is one of three types of White racism described by Kovel, the other two being dominative racism (reflected in the direct racism practiced during slavery and Jim Crow segregation) and metaracism (subtle and strategic perpetration or use of racism by technocratic methods, etc.).

Aversive racism is a form of White racism that denies possessing racial prejudice and upholds a nonprejudiced self-image, but nevertheless holds negative views toward Black people and others of another race. The racial prejudice in aversive racism is borne out of various psychological, social, and cultural processes in society through which racial bias is created and promoted. As an example, aversive White racism can naturally align with the normalcy among Whites to classify people into racial groups (see Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005) based on race-based prejudices and judgments commonly held among most White people (also see Bonilla-Silva, 2013). It is within this framework that White aversive racism uses historical racial labels to differentiate between people along racial lines and, in so doing, reproduce the racial order of White superiority and the racialization of the past, albeit indirectly. Today’s racialization identifies distinct physiological differences between groups of human beings, an identification that, according to Miles

(1993: 135), ‘... has usually been accompanied by an explicit or implicit use of the discourse of “race.”’ Likewise, the use of racial labels is still a foundational differentiator of racial groups and has continued to set the tone for racial beliefs about differentiated racial groups.

History is inundated with examples of racial labels, of which the recipients were primarily non-White. Some of the historical racial labels have been reinvented and, as was largely the case historically, they are used today to define non-Whites, while present-day Whites remain immune and invisible to racial labels and their racist connotations (Dyer, 1988). The difference between past and present-day use of racial labels is that racial labels of the past were overtly pejorative, racialized, and racist. Today’s use of similar racial labels is presented in covert paternalism so that, despite the titling of the *Other* through an identifiable racial label, the display of a *good-will* White protectionism pronounced in White antiracist rhetoric camouflages the racialization and racism that were otherwise apparent in historical racial labels. This is more so when Black/African-American and other non-White antiracists embrace and use historical racial labels to define themselves in line with how Whites define them through such racial labels.

The endorsement of historical racial labels by non-Whites echoes attributes of internalized racism which describes the inculcation of racist ideologies and stereotypes of one’s own race, as propagated by those who have the power and resources to construct the racist ideologies – in this case the dominant White. Accordingly, Hall (1986: 26) defines internalized racism as ‘the “subjection” of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them.’ The racial label *people of color* resonates with historical White racism, and despite its signification of racial identity differences, Black/African-American antiracist scholars and others subscribe to this term (see, for example, Marbley and Ferguson, 2005; Pinderhughes, 1989; Tatum, 2004) because it is couched in social justice ideals that many White Progressives also agree with. Meanwhile, the uncritical use of the term reproduces historical and contemporary racial identities perpetuated by the dominant White to sustain and promote White supremacy.

The acceptance of racial language as appropriate, specifically the type that hides racist ideologies, is one way through which White hegemony and its modes of oppression proliferate (see Cazenave, 2016). In the guise of social justice, the racialization of the term *people of color* is indirect, a hallmark of aversive racism, which Dovidio and Gaertner’s (2004: 3) note ‘is presumed to characterize the racial attitudes of most well-educated and liberal Whites in the United States.’ According to Dovidio and Gaertner, aversive racists are known for their tendency to ‘sympathize with victims of past injustice, support the principle of racial equality, and regard themselves as nonprejudiced, but, at the same time possess negative feelings and beliefs about blacks, which may be unconscious’ (2004: 3).

Muir has used the term *kind racists* to describe racists who would be characterized as aversive, *hidden racism* to describe racial dynamics that are aversive, and *mean racist* to describe those who would be classed as dominative. He metaphorically likens the roles of ‘mean’ and ‘kind’ racism to a gun whereby ‘...mean

racists use it to coerce or kill' while 'kind racists help keep it loaded by supporting the underlying racial concepts' (Muir, 1993: 347). For Muir, even subscribing to the idea of race, that is, to believe that human beings can be classified into racial groups based on physiological factors is a qualification for racism since the 'essence of racism is to interact with others on the basis of racial assignments...'  
(Muir, 1993: 34).

Like dominative racism, aversive racism has 'significant and pernicious' implications (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004: 3). For example, regardless of intentions of purpose, history is revisited by reintroducing familiar pejorative phrases of the past. Feagin's (2013: 98) analysis of the preoccupation of the 'white racial frame' with Black Americans makes a statement that gives insights into the danger in invoking racialized terms of the past:

...if pressed to think about or discuss a vague category like 'nonwhite people' or 'people of color,' most whites today will likely think and respond with reference to black Americans unless asked to do otherwise.

This observation points to the unmistakable probability of an association of the term *people of color* with African-Americans or Blacks, regardless of the popular claim that the term represents a political statement in the interest of discriminated-against, non-White racial groups. The historical depiction of color in derogatory meanings, including its representation as a mark of inferiority, particularly of people of African ancestry, indicates that to endorse any racial label with the term *color* is to endorse the characterizations of racial inferiority and the ideological justifications for racism and racial oppression that history had ingrained in the label. Color intertwines with race, and as Harris (2008: 62) states, 'Color is a long-standing trigger for discrimination along the black-white colorline.'

*People of color* and related labels are racialized and racist terms, if viewed from the lens of the three respective topics which follow.

## History, color, and racism

Even though in the current climate, the term *people of color* (and sub-terms) is conventional, it is problematic to assume that the term *color*, in the context of race, has shed itself of its historical connotation simply because *color* is currently contextualized and conceptualized differently, i.e. in a social justice framework. A look back at history may rattle readers to question whether the modern-day inclusion of *color* in a racial label that defines all peoples, with the exception of White people, is helping with the process of eliminating the racism that, many believe, still underlines relations between Whites and non-Whites. In this relationship, the Black racial group has been the most subordinated and oppressed, and it is toward this group that the use of color has worked against the most.

Perhaps, there is no period in history where color was more relevant than during the eras of the slave trade and slavery. The history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade

is well documented. The ideologies on which the slave trade and slavery were justified, although also well documented, are worth showcasing repeatedly as the brainchild of the racial beliefs that have shaped contemporary race-relations. Skin color was a pivotal driver of the European impression of non-Europeans with whom they came into contact before and during the slave trade. In his article *First Impressions*, Jordan (1968, reprinted in Back and Solomos, 2000) narrates how skin color was at the center of the Englishman's first impression of Africans in Africa, and preceded his impressions of other African characteristics: physical (such as hair texture) and non-physical (such as mannerisms and customs). Note the following statements by Jordan (1968):

...The most arresting characteristic of the newly discovered African was his color. Travelers rarely failed to comment upon it; indeed when describing Negroes they frequently began with complexion and then moved on to dress (or rather lack of it) and manners. (Reprinted in Back and Solomos, 2000: 34)

Skin color was at the core of the European curiosity and inquiry over the physical differences between them and Black Africans, so that the search for answers revolved around the color difference. Causal explanations for African blackness invoked what seemed to be the most logical accounts at the time, ranging from the darkening of the skin by the sun to a religious narrative that attributed the blackness to God's curse on Africans (Allahar, 1993; Husband, 1982).

According to Jordan, blackness was a concept that was already inundated with negative meanings in the English vocabulary, even before the English made their initial visual contact with Africans. Whiteness, on the other hand, was loaded with positive connotations and images, particularly when contrasted with blackness. Consider these contrasting examples in the ideological conceptions of White and Black among the English: White denotes 'God,' 'beneficence,' 'virginity,' 'virtue,' 'purity,' and 'beauty'; Black, in contrast, symbolizes 'the devil,' 'evil,' 'sin,' 'base-ness,' 'filthiness,' and 'ugliness' (Jordan, 1968, reprinted in Back and Solomos, 2000). Given these already existing color-based imageries in the Englishman's psyche, the foundation for viewing Africans in pejorative terms had been set, so that with the growth of the slave trade in the 17th century, which reached its height in the 18th century, it was much easier to correlate Africans with those negative ideologies in order to justify the European business interests in the slave trade, and the subsequent colonization of Africa (McClintock, 1995). Thus, African customs, mannerisms, religious practices, and sexuality were some of the range of non-phenotypical features that became intertwined with blackness and other phenotypical features (such as flat nose and thick lips, characterized as ape-like) in European discourses to debase Africans as bestial and barbaric.

Such views were advanced by European philosophers (for example, David Hume) who articulated notions of Black inferiority and White superiority, such as the belief that intelligence, reason and civilization can only be found among the White race while Black Africans were not suited for any activity that required the



application of reason (Fryer, 1984; Walvin, 1973). Color was integral to the inter-racial groupings of humankind by early scientists, some of whom were more recognized and influential than others. Of all, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's work stood out (Kitson and Lee, 1999). His five-fold typology of racial varieties, discussed in the three editions of his book *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775/1795/1781 cited in Kitson and Lee, 1999), centralized color when he classified humankind into: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. Each was first identified by a skin color. The racial varieties were ranked in a hierarchical order of human development in which the Caucasian (White) race was designated as the most beautiful race of people, and the original race from which other races degenerated.

Even though during the early period of the English contact with Africans, blackness and Africa were inextricably linked in the English consciousness, and all peoples of Africa were collectively labeled Black, later on (notably in the 17th century) distinctions on skin color were drawn between Blacks from sub-Saharan Africa (dark-skinned, popularly defined as Negros) and those from North Africa (light-skinned, described as the Moors). The distinction showed apparent preference for the Moors, and was reflected in the skin color discrimination that was applied to the selection of candidates for enslavement in which '...Negroes were being taken up as slaves and Moors, increasingly, were not' (Jordan, 1968, reprinted in Back and Solomos, 2000: 34). There were reports of skin complexion differentiations within regions, for example accounts about 17th century West Africa alluded to skin color variations among Negros of West Africa (Jordan, 1968, reprinted in Back and Solomos, 2000). These are further indications of how much skin color mattered to Europeans as far back as the 16th century.

As far as slavery and colonialism were concerned, color was particularly intertwined with notions of race and racial order in European interactions with the enslaved and the colonized (Bhavnani et al., 2005). It became a valuable tool used by Europeans to control people of the same racial group; Blacks were differentiated along color lines. On the belief that light-skinned Blacks were more intelligent and attractive, they were treated favorably than their dark-skinned counterparts. Privileges and favors (e.g. access to training and other opportunities that were directed at skilled jobs) were accorded light-skinned Blacks on slave plantations, while their dark-skinned counterparts were limited to tasks that required physical, not intellectual, abilities (Davis, 1991; Horowitz, 1973; Johnson, 2001). Colonized societies in Africa and elsewhere (Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean) internalized the skin color hierarchical ordering and values that European colonizers infused into their interactions with the colonized. The obvious preferences and privileges that European colonizers granted to light-skinned colonized people, in contrast to their dark-skinned counterparts, left their legacies in those societies' postcolonialism.<sup>1</sup>

Also, it was not unusual to find intraracial skin color analyzed in scholarship. In his writing, Reinsch (1905) saw beauty in people of mixed-race origin (mix of European and African). To him, the mulatto race possessed intellectual

capabilities. He described the mulatto women of Martinique as beautiful, charming, kind-hearted, and sweet-tempered. Reinsch distinguished the light-skin color and other phenotypes of the Hamites from the physical features of sub-Saharan Africans, describing the former as pure, and the latter as coarse. Sub-Saharan Africans, characterized as the Negro race and typified in the black skin of people of central Africa, were placed at the bottom of the African color hierarchy. The Berbers' 'pure white skin' put them at the top (Reinsch, 1905).

In sum, it is on the basis of skin color, along with other phenotypical characteristics, that racial categorizations of peoples are made (Banton, 1991). Going back to Blumenbach's typology, whilst the labels associated with his typology may be out of favor in today's racial classification, the varieties of humankind that formed his typology are relevant to contemporary racial grouping (Kitson and Lee, 1999). In other words, contemporary racial labels may be different from Blumenbach's, but the phenotypes that were associated with Blumenbach's racial groups remain significantly unchanged. For example, Blumenbach's Caucasian group is first identified by its color, white, and made up of Europeans (excepting the Lapps and the Finns), Eastern Asians (to a certain geographical boundary) and North Africans. Note that the US racial classification for White includes Europeans and North Africans. The US Asian category resembles part of Blumenbach's Mongolian racial variety defined as 'yellow' in color; Black or African-American is equivalent to the Ethiopian identified as 'black' in color; American Indian and Alaskan Native are comparable to the 'copper-coloured' American; and Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders share some similarities with Blumenbach's 'tawny-coloured' Malay racial variety.

Skin color remains active in race relations today. Interracially, the negative representations of blackness before, during, and after slavery are reproduced in various but less obvious ways in contemporary US (Feagin, 2010). Intraracially, color is a crucial factor for assessing Black intellect, mannerism, etiquette, socio-economic achievement, and attitude to traditional values, such as hard work and respect for law and order (Clark, 2004).

## **The implications of color in contemporary race relations: Colorism**

Unlike racism, which points to out-group bias or discrimination toward a group of people based on racial classifications (such as Asian, Black, and White), colorism makes the shade of skin color the target of the bias. This distinction between colorism and racism is acknowledged in the US. Preference for a certain skintone over another is what underlines the prejudice. But, while much attention has been paid to the legacies of historical interracial racism and discrimination, colorism has not attracted similar levels of attention, despite the origins of both in the same history. In his paper on 'White Colorism,' Hannon (2015: 15) was concerned about the omission of colorism in studies of White racism, arguing that

‘Colorism and racism in the United States are intrinsically linked in that they share the same historical roots, and White hegemony is central to both.’

Interracially, there are claims that Whites still hold the historical belief that Blacks who are light-skinned are more intelligent than their dark-skinned counterparts (Hannon, 2015), and this is likely to create disparate access to opportunities for African-Americans based on color. There are studies that speak to such color-based disparity in that light-skinned African-Americans, relative to their dark-skinned counterparts, tend to be advantaged in various socioeconomic arenas: education, employment, residential area/housing (Herring et al., 2004; Wade et al., 2004). Dark-skinned African-Americans are more likely than light-skinned African-Americans to be suspended from school (Hannon, 2015). They are less likely to graduate from high school, more likely to be unemployed, or employed in unskilled jobs, are typically low-income or poor, and normally resident in disadvantaged inner-city localities where they are more likely to engage in alcohol and drug abuse (Borrell et al., 2006; Burton et al., 2010). Light-skinned African-Americans are more likely than dark-skinned African-Americans to be in employment, to be in skilled jobs, to earn better income, to be better educated and to reside in better residential areas (Goldsmith et al., 2006; Hill, 2000; Herring et al., 2004; Rondilla and Spickard, 2007; Wade et al., 2004).

Even in the criminal justice system, where the presence of Black males in particular has aroused intense controversies over the years, colorism has been reported to favor light-skinned Black males over their medium-skinned and dark-skinned counterparts in various areas of the system. For example, in interactions with law enforcement, the most profiled are dark-skinned males (Eberhardt et al., 2006). In their contact with the judiciary, dark-skinned males are more likely than their medium- and light-skinned counterparts to receive a longer prison sentence, with light-skinned males being more likely than the other two groups to receive a shorter prison sentence (Gyimah-Brempong and Price, 2006).

What makes colorism particularly relevant to the whole discourse of race is that it is also ideologically and pragmatically telling within non-White racial groups, who use it to categorize and define themselves favorably or unfavorably. I use the African-American situation to illustrate this point. African-Americans consider light-skinned members of their community to be more attractive than those who are dark-skinned, and to also believe that others outside their race share the same skin color bias (Hill, 2002; Maddox, 2004). Consequently, colorism is influential in interactions among African-Americans, such that its utilization intraracially may cause more harm to the victim than harm caused by out-group bias. Why skin-tone remains a prominent indicator of within-group differences among African-Americans in 21st century US is troubling.

As detailed in the preceding section, history played a fundamental role in this fixation on color, particularly toward people of African descent whose skin color has been the most scrutinized not only by others, but by this group. Among African-Americans, there is intraracial skin color discrimination that is premised on their own internalized color-based image of themselves, formed during slavery

and passed down to subsequent generations. Because of the skin-tone preference and advantage enjoyed by light-skinned African-Americans, they have been known to discriminate against their dark-skinned counterparts, for example, by excluding them from their social groups (Giddings, 2007; Kerr, 2005; Uzogara et al., 2014). There have been concerns about intraracial colorism institutionally. As an example, despite the origins of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in segregation, color has been known to infiltrate the ranking order of the schools and the composition of the student body, with light-skinned African-Americans, at some point, forming the traditional faces of the most reputable or Ivy League HBCUs, such as Howard University (Washington, DC) (Taylor, 2008).

Over time, the activism of the civil rights movement inculcated a sense of pride in blackness among dark-skinned African-Americans in particular. And, while the color consciousness among African-Americans was not erased as a result, the post-civil-rights era witnessed a paradigm shift in how skin color was interpreted in favor or disfavor of a skin-tone – dark, light, or medium – depending on the setting. Unlike the pre-civil-rights era, going back to the periods of slavery and reconstruction, when the privileged status of African-Americans with a light skin hue was incontestable and may have been unchallenged by dark-skinned African-Americans, today's light-skinned African-Americans endure a backlash in their own community for being light-complexioned and for lacking the ethnic authenticity that persons of 'darker-skin' hue possess (see Hunter, 2007).

Such shifts in attitude toward skin-tones are likely to be most evident in segregated low-income, predominantly African-American residential neighborhoods. There, skin color is a prominent marker of differences (Massey, 2004). Unfortunately, in such a setting the absence of Whites for interracial comparisons ushers in an obvious intraracial skin color-based comparison and discrimination. Uzogara et al.'s (2014) study of skin color discrimination among African-American males demonstrates this point. In the study, African-American men of medium skin-tone are the least likely group to be discriminated against relative to African-American men whose skin color represents the extreme: dark-skinned or light-skinned. These latter groups, especially in intraracial and socioeconomically deprived residential areas, are likely to be victims of discrimination. For light-skinned African-Americans, their color difference to dark- or medium-skinned African-Americans render them susceptible to rejection by these other groups who believe that they are racially united by the skin-tone that is commonly shared by people of African origin, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa. Invariably, light-skinned African-Americans experience discrimination by their racial group for the same reason that they are a preferred skin-tone among Whites, a paradox that Hunter (2007: 245) would describe as a 'conundrum of colorism.'

Notwithstanding the vulnerability of light-skinned African-Americans to intraracial colorism, the African-American community still view light skin-tone more favorably than dark skin-tone (Hill, 2002; Maddox, 2004). Likewise, both African-Americans and Whites hold negative stereotypical notions of dark-skinned

African-Americans relative to their light-skinned counterparts (Herring et al., 2004; Maddox and Gray, 2002). Distinctions drawn between color tones have implications for self-worth, particularly among dark-skinned African-Americans who are perhaps more likely to internalize the negative characterizations of blackness in a White-dominated society (Herring et al., 2004; Thompson and Keith, 2001). Color is a cause for concern in the African-American community (Clark, 2004).

### **People of color: False universalism and the reinforcement of racial dichotomy**

In his analysis of how Blacks have adopted differing racial labels over time, starting with “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” to “African American,” Smith (1992: 497) states that the changes in preferred labels were underlined by ‘a common goal for Blacks,’ which ‘has been to find a group label that instilled group pride and self-esteem.’ The inclusiveness of the term *colored* was key to its acceptability and popularity among Blacks and Whites during its use in the 19th century and part of the 20th century. However, as Smith (1992) observes, it was for the same reason of inclusiveness that *colored* fell out of favor among some African-Americans who felt that it incorporated non-White racial groups, other than African-Americans and mulattoes, and was therefore too all-encompassing. Over time, *colored* and Negro were replaced for reasons that included their direct reminder of slavery and racial oppression. The currently used racial label African-American is also a product of the historical sequence of changes in racial labels. Unlike *colored* and Negro, the label African-American was primarily meant to ‘...give Blacks a cultural identification with their heritage and ancestral homeland’ (Smith, 1992: 507; also see Boatman and Lalonde, 2000).

If *colored* received criticisms for being too inclusive at a time when its primary association with African-Americans was obvious, *people of color* ought to receive by far more criticisms because of its deliberate purpose to cover all non-White racial groups. Proponents of this all-inclusive *people of color* assume that the label is universally acceptable to all non-Whites. In other words, *people of color* is conceptualized and contextualized to depict non-White as a unifying classification that is acceptable to all who are so classified. Echoing the notion of ‘collective consciousness’ (Durkheim, 1964/1893), this representation implies that all non-Whites included in the label *people of color* share a common understanding of the concept of *people of color*, and collectively identify with the label. But in reality, as illustrated in two examples below, the depiction denotes a false sense of universalism given some of the ways in which the label misrepresents its reach.

One, proponents of the term *people of color* have advocated the racial inclusiveness of the term by associating it with disadvantage, so that racial minority disadvantage becomes a qualification for inclusion in *people of color* (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). Examples of disadvantage vary and include unstable immigration status,

lack of English language proficiency, and lack of access to socioeconomic services, such as employment, education, and housing (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). Perhaps unintentionally, this perspective widens the net of inclusivity beyond its intended coverage. For example, the indicators of disadvantage associated with *people of color*, and allegedly caused by White racism, are found among people of European origin, particularly among the non-English-speaking immigrants, many of whom are known to lack English language skills, are undocumented, and experience socioeconomic difficulties (Erez et al., 2009; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017). This begs the question of whether the term and notion of *people of color* should then apply to European immigrants who experience disadvantage.

Two, perhaps the most striking evidence of false universalism in the term *people of color* is shown in the variations in how people are identified according to race. For instance, one can self-identify with a race (e.g. White) that is different from that which is assigned by another (e.g. Asian). A person of mixed Black and White heritage may choose to identify as Black or as White, based on the standards for racial categorization set by the OMB (1997). Under the OMB standards, Hispanics or Latinos, whilst recognized as an ethnic group, are allowed to identify with any of the five main race categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African-American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White. Further, peoples from North Africa and the Middle East are classified as White alongside people of European origin. This challenge in achieving uniformity in racial grouping is likely to be understood by those who have claimed that, due to centuries of human migrations and miscegenation, any belief in a pure race is fallacy. For example, Yinger (1994: 19) argues that ‘we cannot accept the widespread belief that there are a few clearly distinct and nearly immutable races. Change and intermixture are continuous.’ In many cases, miscegenation is observable by skin color and related phenotypes, and in others, genetic analysis will be needed to determine racial mixture, if any exists.

Thus, it is unfeasible for the label *people of color* to achieve inclusiveness and solidarity if members of a racial group that this label classifies as non-White feel comfortable identifying as White than as *people of color*. However, for proponents of the label peoples whose regions of origin are not in the Western hemisphere and who occupy a racial/ethnic minority status are captured under the term. This automatically includes groups whom the OMB designate as White (e.g. North Africans) and those who are permitted to self-define as such (i.e. Hispanics), regardless of whether or not they accept or commit to inclusion in the *people of color* category.

Preceding discussions have shown that skin color has mattered in how people self-identify when it comes to race. In effect, members of certain non-White racial/ethnic groups have tended to socially distance themselves from their own racial/ethnic identity groups. For instance, persons of mixed-Black/White origin, as a result of social distance, are likely to self-identify with the White racial group (see Georges-Abeyie, 2010). In sum, there are non-Whites who may not identify with the label *people of color* because of its association with color. Consider, in

particular, those non-Whites who identify as White not only because they are light-skinned, in addition to possessing other European-like phenotypes, but also because they were born and raised in the US. Groups of Hispanics, Middle-Easterners and North Africans bear these characteristics, and some of them may not encounter White racism, or even if they do, may not recognize it as such. Thus, although included in the *people of color* umbrella, many non-Whites fall into racial group classifications that are distinctively separate from that occupied by African-Americans, whose racial grouping is linked to their sub-Saharan African ancestry.

Further, there may be Hispanics, North Africans and Middle-Easterners who shun the opportunity to identify as White, but who may not associate with the term and concept of *people of color* principally because their perceptions of White racism, if any, may differ from the perceptions of racism held by other non-White groups, notably African-Americans. For the obvious reason that African-American history of White racism does not parallel historical race relations between Whites and other non-White groups would suggest that perceptions of White racism would vary among non-Whites. In effect, certain non-White groups, such as Asians or Hispanics, may not collectively identify with the overall mission behind the term *people of color*. Similarly, African-Americans may not collectively align well with the all-encompassing framework of the term, considering that the inclusiveness overshadows their specific experiences of historical and contemporary racism, and their distinctive association with a similar term *colored*.

In reality, although the label *people of color*, according to Tyson (2012), is linked to the historically 'racialized minorities' in North America, and purposed 'to be all-encompassing across non-White groups,' most would identify the label with people of African descent (Feagin, 2013). It is not surprising, therefore, that African-Americans are more likely to apply the label to themselves specifically (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008), notwithstanding the expansion of the label to include those who would be defined as Brown, Yellow, and Red (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). Essentially, the key determinant for inclusion in this phrase is color, which itself has been the basis of racial classifications and discrimination. Black, Brown, Yellow, and Red (BBYR) peoples have been captured under a variety of other collective racial labels such as 'minorities' or 'racial and ethnic minorities' – labels which assume color differentials between peoples defined as BBYR and those classed as White.

Another compelling critique against the term *people of color* is that it echoes and reproduces the racial dichotomy of the past. Critics of *color* in racial labels have found them to be racially divisive and to reinforce White superiority. Examples from the United Kingdom (UK) have indicated that the term *coloured* (also used in the US as *colored*) was denounced by people of African origin during the 1960s because the term was used by Whites to signify a distinction between two racially categorized groups of people, one of which was White and superior, and the other, non-White and inferior (Banton, 1991; Hiro, 1992). This negative response toward the *coloured* label has not changed in 21st century UK, given that people of African descent and those of mixed-race origin in the UK find the term offensive (Ifekwunigwe, 2004).

Proponents of the label *people of color* could claim a difference in meanings between the terms *colored* and *people of color* based on the argument that the latter was freely embraced (not imposed), welcome by its advocates, and used in the political and social justice interest of all non-White racial groups. However, this view does not negate the fact that the label still reinforces the use of color as a key ingredient to symbolize a non-White and White racial dichotomy. Escobar's critique of the label *people of color* illuminates this point. According to him, the concept reflects an imperialist ideology in which color is the identifier for all racial groups dominated by Whites. His views are exemplified in the captivating statements below (Escobar, 1991: 96–97):

The single most important feature used to classify people in the United States is 'color.' People are classified by the 'color' of their skin: Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, etc. This is axiomatic, you may think, because we all know this. But having this knowledge has not made any difference in how the excluded ones and radical/progressive people approach the question of identity and race most of the time. This approach never moves beyond the 'color/skin' fixation. This fixation has a long tradition, and therefore, is difficult to break away from, to the point that most terms used to generalize the amalgam of 'minorities' within the United States only reflect their dependence on dominant ideology. As a result, the evolution of the old term 'colored people' to the 'new' term 'people of color' remains within the 'color/skin' perspective.

Escobar sees the creation of *people of color* as a reflection of imperialist racial dichotomization, which was based on ideologies of racial superiority of Whites against the racial inferiority of the other racial groups – all lumped under the non-White classification. Herein, the White race becomes the masterpiece and point of reference for defining other racial groups. *People of color* is a label that marks and defines racial groups as separate and different from the one and only White race. And non-White contentment with this label, among other similar ones, is merely a reinforcement of the existence of a master race. Escobar states (1991: 98):

Our dependency on our 'masters' terminology has ontological implications. The term 'people of color' has a dependent idiomatic discharge, i.e., its identity, its meaning, depends on another referent: 'white' people. And within this context, 'white' becomes a code word for 'superior' or 'original.' . . . what we may not realize is that by perpetuating the use of such terms we are ironically reinforcing the other term, 'whiteness.' We are saying: my race, my nationality, my identity, my being, can only be defined in relation to the 'white' race. My 'racial' being is a gift from the other, the master.

Escobar's accounts may well explain why the term *color* does not apply to the White racial group despite white being a color, along with the other colors that are associated with different racial groups. Clearly, the attribution of the color white to the White racial group is only relevant for what the color represents



ideologically, and not for its visual relevance given that the color white does not factually or literally exist in any human being, specifically people of European origin, among whom there are variations in skin hues. This incompatibility between the real skin color of people of European descent and the assigned skin color (white) is not criticized; instead, our perspectives of Whites have been shaped by centuries of indoctrination of what being White represents racially (i.e. superiority) relative to other racial colors (i.e. inferiority). Like white, the color black does not account for the skin color variations that exist among people of African descent, including those from sub-Saharan Africa. Albinos and other shades of light-skin are found within the Black racial group. Regardless of these skin color variations, all are classed as Black and *colored*.

By right, the use of color as a racial identifier means that anyone who is identifiable by a skin color is a *person of color* and a member of a *people of color*. However, the exclusion of Whites from the term *color* and the lumping of all non-White racial groups into one category of *people of color*, despite the phenotypical uniqueness among them, seems to certify White as colorless and as the normative or conventional frame of reference for all racial colors.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the legislative advances to halt racism and the ongoing controversial debates surrounding the issue of racism, it is alarming that labels associated with color are still popularly used uncritically in various discursive arenas. Such labels are rampant in the publications of many social justice scholars of race and racism, but whose work has failed to critically question the *color* in the racial terms that they use to categorize non-Whites. There is hardly any academic interrogation of the inclusion of *color* in racial labels. This paper aims to fill this void by, at least, starting a critical debate on the meaning of racial labels and what their use represents in discourse and practice.

As it seems, the use of a color label for racial identification serves the primary and only purpose of segregating people into racialized representations. In this author's view, no racial label is more offensive than those that have the term *color* in them, as in *people of color*. It leaves one to wonder why antiracist scholars and activists would accentuate the term *people of color* under the guise of attacking what it represents, when doing so only reinforces the racially oppressive and discriminatory symbolism of *color*. Furthermore, the use of the term *people of color* is gradually eroding the identity of non-Europeans as individual racial groups.

This paper has provided explanations to justify its claim that it is unreasonable to use color labels to define racial groups. This author therefore recommends that color/*color* labels – including Black and White – be abolished. Instead, ancestral continent of origin should be used as a marker of racial classification in censuses, research studies and other situations where racial classifications are used. Continent of origin caters to all skin colors without the problematic of making, sometimes inconsistent or inaccurate, connections between color and race/

ethnicity, in addition to the pejorative racial images that accompany some of the connections. This approach is already in use in the US with reference to certain racial groups: Asians, American Indians or Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians or Other Pacific Islander.

Defining racial groups based on their ancestral region of origin has the complementary benefits of accommodating subpopulations who may be associated with other regions by birth, for example. This would allow racial groups whose ancestral continent of origin does not match their continent of birth or citizenship to identify with both regional identifiers without reference to a color label. As an example, Asians (etc.) who identify with Africa by birth or citizenship can be identified as Asian-African. In using a regional identifier, it is also appropriate and even less complicated to be country-specific in classifying people. Ancestral country of origin also provides the base information for grouping peoples under their continent of origin based on their country of origin, without incorporating or referencing color. Phrases such as French-American and Chinese-American illustrate the ancestral country of origin categorization, which can be broadened to ancestral continent of origin as in European-American, and Asian-American. The key point is that racial groups can be categorized based on regional identifiers, and this approach can conveniently accommodate populations and subpopulations.

In closing, proponents of the term *people of color* (and related terms) ought to review their real reasons for using and advancing the use of the term. Perhaps, its use is guided by individual or collective ideological, academic, or political interests, whilst ignoring the enduring implications of such reminders of slavery and Jim Crow policies and practices for White racism toward everyday African-Americans. For it simply does not make any sense to perpetuate a term that is deeply intertwined with historical White racism and oppression.

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### **Note**

1. While this author recognizes that colorism is a global issue (see Davis and Telles, 2017), this paper does not have the space to explore this topic beyond its focus on the US.

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