A Brown-Skinned Lady and Her Sunblock

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In 1984 I, like every other girl in America, wanted a Cabbage Patch Kid. To impress everyone with my logic—I was one of *those* brats—I asked for the brown-skinned version, a request my Sri Lankan-born parents could only understand as preposterous: dark-skinned dolls were for black children. That this was pitiable for them—the dolls' homeliness was a given—was no reason for me, however, to get a doll that matched my skin. At Zayre's, my father held the boxed toy at arm's length, wondering was I sure I didn't want a *regular* doll?

A month later I bored of her but before abandoning her altogether, I made her over. Applying the ivory-shade foundation I (incompatibly, *absurdly*) wore when performing classical Indian dance, I deracinated my Cabbage Patch baby, covering her face in stage-strength makeup until she had a glistening beige face atop a cloth brown body.

Twenty-five years later, I noticed that my face was lighter than the rest of me—*more fair* in the lexicon of my mother—my hands and shoulders most conspicuously. This could potentially be explained as the ordinary outcome of idling on beaches while obsessively outfitted in hat and sunscreen, or the fact that I stroll, bike, and jog in the same

sort of protective accouterment. I am, after all, thirty-four and terror stricken by the inescapability of wrinkles.

Once, for example, I purchased a $125 vial of vitamin-C serum despite the fact that I was making nineteen grand as a grad student at the time, never mind that I was on the pill—the low-dose kind that eradicates blemishes—and that I ate compulsively well—grapes for their collagen, fish for their oils—and never mind that: *I had no skin problems whatsoever*.

Like many women I feel a keen pressure to look as good as possible for as long as possible, "as possible" in this case meaning "as you can afford." But as an American of South Asian descent, and thus a deeply raced person, I have to question whether gender-based panic about aging is the sole reason I avoid the sun. With skin the color of a wet graham cracker (I would have failed the old paper-bag test), a graduate degree in critical race theory, and a lifetime preoccupied with color, I have to consider that for me, skin—youthful, poreless, undamaged *skin*—is never fully divorced from colorism.

A product of the ethnically mottled tenements of Langley Park, Maryland, I grew up drinking milk because I was told it would make me more fair and thus more appealing. When I wanted to punish my mother for some injustice, I would willfully play in the sun, then weep later over how dark I had become. How transformed.

Sucking her teeth, my mother would apply Fair & Lovely cream, purchased at what was only called the "Indian" store. On the pink tube of what was mostly sunscreen back then, silhouettes advanced in lightness and presumable attractiveness from left to right. I tried to pinpoint my location on the Fair & Lovely gradation.

As I examine my adult lighter-than-my-body face, echoes of that former sensibility reverberate, despite the liberating values of Malcolm and Cleaver that I would ultimately embrace as a teenager. Against the backdrop of *Do the Right Thing* and the rap music that reflected the hallways of my predominantly black (and eventually Latino) school, these sensible preachers of self-love made me bristle with confidence.

When I was halfway through *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the cassette liner to Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* suddenly made

cataclysmic sense. Each illuminated my childhood and everyone in it with raced trajectories, newfound complexity, and, most vividly, power. I felt awakened. And beautiful.

But to be upfront I must mention that this newfound self-regard as a brown person coincided with weight loss, soft contact lenses, and the confidence that coincides with a spot on the pom-pon squad. Though for years I credited Malcolm for my newfound "consciousness," I cannot isolate his impact from these other surface-level developments. Stated differently, I wasn't moved to self-love via a politicized self-awareness alone; I was suddenly more attractive by traditional yardsticks, too: I was no longer chubby nor did I have a windshield affixed to my face.

By which I mean self-love for me has rarely been detached from the social forces that can deform it. Yes, Spike Lee and Angela Davis made me feel valued because I saw myself through a historical lens, one that exposed norms I had understood as universal. But I also felt beautiful because on the conventional scale—one that often privileges Western, patriarchal preferences—my location on the grand gradation had moved. Thinner, no glasses. From this standpoint it was easier to condemn. It's always easier to denounce a club that will have you as a member, isn't it?

After all, can golden Gwyneth Paltrow instruct Lil' Kim—faithfully all blond weave and blue contacts still—that looking like Barbie doesn't matter? Can the pouty Angelina Jolie advise the injected Julia Roberts, at least with any earnestness, about the superfluousness of engorged lips? Fitting an ideal by birth luck or effort is one thing; arguing that fitting is irrelevant, especially to those who don't fit, might be its own kind of vain. Downplaying the usefulness of being perceived as attractive by normative and racist beauty standards is a misguided way to signal that one understands the oppression of racist beauty standards.

Moreover, being viewed as attractive by these standards, though riddled with pitfalls, can potentially be as empowering as anything else, the least of which in terms of joy. All oppression is not created equal, nor is it equally felt. The positive stereotyping that casts Asians as good at math, for example, is not as damaging as the prejudice that views black men as criminally dangerous (or labels Muslims as terrorists).

I have argued in fact that it is beneficial to "model minorities" to be perceived as such, at no small cost to blacks and Latinos, of course. This is an admission of an unearned, uncourted, but ultimately useful privilege that is destructive to others—not the endorsement of it.

The same can perhaps be said about racist beauty standards. That I detest them does not remove their impact on me, at least not entirely. My sense of beauty cannot be divorced from its racist origins, nor can it be isolated from the human urge to be found beautiful. It can only be interrogated.

Do I wear sunblock because it prevents the effects of aging? Yes. My vanity runs in numerous directions: I obsess about my weight, hair, and teeth as much as I do my skin. But would I wear sunblock if it deliberately made me lighter, like the face on the far right of the tube of Fair & Lovely? Probably not. That is as confident as I can be: *probably* not.

I cannot deny that fair skin is nearly always considered more desirable than dark and that I am, despite my education and ideals, deeply susceptible to what is perhaps our greatest common weakness: to be found desirable. That conflict—between love of what I am and love of being desired—is what complicates my relationship to my skin.

It's not that I don't love my skin. I have a pleasing color. I redden as much as brown in the summer and often my bronzed arms and legs remind me of my childhood teddy bear. But that love is hard won.

I recall the intro to Black Star's "Brown-Skinned Lady," an audio clip from the film *Chameleon Street* where a dashiki-clad black character defends his appreciation of "the light-complexioned look" to a disapproving audience:

> I'm a victim brother. I'm a victim of four hundred years of conditioning. The man has programmed my conditioning. Even my conditioning has been conditioned!

There is a painful truth in that comical confession. What anyone may find beautiful about me, what I find beautiful about myself, is the sum of a universe of influences—some kind, many racist, most

spawned by our culturally local moments. Our historical zeitgeists. I fight the ones I find unfair, I unravel the ones I don't understand, I aim to love myself. Like I tell my students at Howard University, you don't have to like or agree to anything, but you need to care why you do or you don't.

While performing "Brown-Skinned Lady" at the 9:30 Club a few years ago, Mos Def scanned the crowd during the last chorus. He theatrically shielded his eyes and leaned over each side of the stage. He squatted and peered, shimmying his head before trotting to another spot to try again. He squinted, searching.

The audience was, as is true for many hip-hop shows, largely white. As he eyeballed the women in front, his gaze finally landed on me and my friend Julie: the only two women of color in sight.

He grinned, pointed his finger first at me.

"She's a brown-skinned lady!"

He crooned, pitched far over the stage, only a few feet from us both. He then pointed to Julie and sang to her. "She's a brown-skinned lady!"

The crowd cheered, amused by his difficulty in locating brown-skinned women to serenade. In that moment it was I who fit the ideal of the room. Our belief in our own beauty is often—if not always—colored by what others think of us. This can make it a fragile, fleeting thing, contingent on ugly, unfair legacies. I'm unsure, however, if that makes it feel any less good.