

Features

THE SHADES OF BLACK AND BEAUTY: THE WOMEN OF XAVIER SPEAK OUT ON COLORISM



by **Brier Evans**
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“You’re pretty for a dark-skinned girl.”
“#TeamLightSkin.”
“Darkie.”
“She looks like a white girl.”
“I don’t date dark-skinned girls.”

From the darkest shade to the lightest, from the age of two – if you’re a young Black girl you realize that you’re just not quite the right shade of Black. Colorism, especially within the Black community, is one of the most traumatic experiences Black women go through and yet there isn’t an active wave to confront the issue. It’s like as a global Black community, we’ve skipped over this movement. No marches, no protests, no banner signs: “down with colorism!” It is one of the legacies and remnants left over from colonialization of our mind, body, and soul as Black people. It is an internal conversation as much as it is external.

For decades the Black community has marched for a multitude of causes. We have marched for our gender rights, we have marched for our sexuality, we have marched against domestic violence, and we have marched for our Black men. After our generation took to the streets in 2020 to protest the death of George Floyd, we are not afraid to tackle hard, painful subjects. So where is the movement where we finally confront colorism? The voices of eight Black women of different shades on our Xavier campus shows that from every corner of our melanated identity, we are still

trapped within the confines of our colorism.

If a woman is too light, she walks around with a target on her back. She is made the objectification of beauty, but at times, is also made to feel guilty for her complexion – that society has made her their preference. If a woman is too dark, at a young age it is not uncommon that she has heard that she is ugly or unattractive. She is made to feel ashamed of her skin, but as she gets older, she is hypersexualized and exoticized.

“Colorism is one of those topics that hasn’t historically been debated. Its effect has been something subliminal within culture,” said Dr. Abena Animwaa Yeboah-Banin, a senior lecturer and the chair of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana. “It is a lived experience rather than spoken, which is why, I believe, it doesn’t generate as much debate as another movement would such as the LGBTQ+ movement,” Dr. Yeboah-Banin added.

I set out to ask young Black women how they view colorism and experienced it to begin to understand why we as a community can’t process it, why we can’t talk about it, why we are ashamed by it, and why we are still trying to find a way of confronting it. These are their voices.

“If you’re not darker skinned, you don’t understand, and you really are oblivious to what’s going on behind closed doors. I never had a problem with my skin complexion until middle school when I was called names like ‘darkie’ and ‘midnight.’ At home, I was always told that my skin was beautiful, but in school I wasn’t made to feel beautiful and so I thought, maybe I don’t like looking this way, maybe I should look lighter.”

-Sabrina Pierre-Paul,
junior Political Science/Pre-law major, Queens, N.Y.

“If we look at the



Illustration by **Liza Montgomery**

people in power today, they’re white, and so a likeness to white is more accepted by society when we look at things such as job opportunities. I’m from a small town where there were just Black people and white people, and so for me when I was younger, it wasn’t that I wanted to be lighter-skinned, I wanted to be white. It’s a mindset, whiter is righter, and I had to break myself out of that.”

-Diamond Bolden,
junior Political Science/Pre-Law major, DeRidder, La.

“I’m Mexican and Black, and in middle school I had Nigerian friends who were darker than me. There had been many instances where guys at my school had told them that they didn’t like them because they were too dark. It comes from the current beauty standard of the short light-skinned girl with curly hair. That’s who I am. I remember there was a time where social media kind of attacked

light skins, and I felt guilty. However, I didn’t choose my skin color, so I don’t feel guilty about what I look like, but I do know that I need to be aware of the privileges I have because colorism is a real issue within the community.”

-Rose Lee, freshman
Biology/Pre-Medicine major,
Los Angeles, Calif.

“I think there is a movement. Is it proactive? No. Colorism is something you hear about it, but you don’t see it. I think it may depend on the environment. A lot of the movements today, I believe, happen in the major cities up North. You don’t typically hear about them in the South, at least I don’t. Born and raised in the South, when you’re Black you’re already raised to a standard and if you don’t fit that standard, it’s frowned upon. Where I’m from, in high school, I was considered light-skinned, and was looked at as prettier because of it by Black peers, but it didn’t matter

because in a pre-dominantly white school, no one wanted to date a Black girl.

-Asia Smith, freshman
Chemistry/Pre-Medicine
Major, Alexandria, La.

“I grew up in a white area, and I have a Black mom and a white dad, so in my school years I was made to feel like I wasn’t Black enough. There was a lot of talk about me having to follow stereotypes in order to be Black. I had to like watermelon and fried chicken, and I had to play basketball and be the fastest in



Asia Smith

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Diamond Bolden

running, and I had to talk a certain way. It wasn't even my Black peers that felt that way, it was my white peers. Now in college, I've never been made to feel that way directly, but I do still feel an inference."

-Trinity Hixon-Wells, junior Dual-Chemistry and Chemical Engineering major, Fort Walton Beach, Fla.

"I went to a party in L.A. last year, and it was a very exclusive party. There was a bouncer at the door who was obstructing and turning away dark-skinned girls from the party, and although he didn't blatantly say what he was doing, all the girls in line knew what he was doing. If you were light-skin, you got in. My friends and I just had to leave. Before that, I wasn't really conscious of color, until I entered high school. I was always told that I was light-skin by my friends and was told that I could get away with stuff because I was 'light-skin'. Even in my family, my younger brother would say that I must not be related to him because he saw himself as brown, and me as 'peach.' I didn't really know how to feel about that."

-Brooklyn Ingraham, first-year Pharmacy student, New Orleans, La.

"I usually see videos online where lighter-skinned women are kind of mocked for claiming to have a struggle. When I was younger, wanting a light-skin girl was kind of the thing in high school, but when you get older that changes. It's now if you're pretty,

you're pretty, and if you're not, then you're not. I grew up in a predominantly white elementary and middle school, and there were only two Black girls in the grade, me and another girl who was darker. I was invited to sleep-overs and parties by classmates, and she wasn't. You could see the disparities between the two of us; she wasn't seen as 'white' enough, but I was. Even in my family, I was always called the white girl, and I never liked that. I was Black. I'm still called that by family members, but honestly, I refuse to care anymore."

-Sidney Mason, senior Biology/Pre-Medicine major, Macon, Miss.

"Colorism is very complex, but I think at least one aspect is the deliberate exclusion of dark-skinned women. I think there's an 'active' movement that isn't necessarily changing anything. I feel as though we are just changing the standard of what we expect from dark-skinned women, but there's no movement that benefits us. People are just picking a palatable version of a darker-skinned woman, making her the face of it, and justifying colorism. There are now 'pretty dark skins,' and although there is a slight kind of privilege, its minute compared to anybody else. These girls are expected to have smaller features, and slimmer bodies. I've tried talking about colorism with my friends and I've always felt dismissed, like what I've experienced could have never happened. I've always heard the darkie jokes or "Where did

Diana go," jokes. They're not funny."

-Diana Dosso, sophomore Biology/Pre-Medicine major, Queens, N.Y.

The common thread here is this: no matter the shade, whether darker or lighter, Black women suffer through some kind of pivotal and traumatic experience centered around colorism. Their experiences may not be

one and the same, but their feelings of shame, ridicule, and embarrassment are mutually shared. It is an unfortunate reality for Black women. One in which, though painful, we must stare down in the mirror in order to find true liberation and empowerment.

Go to xulastudentmedia.com to view and read the extended multimedia feature.



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Diana Dosso



Sidney Mason



Sabrina Pierre-Paul



Rose Lee



Brooklyn Ingraham



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