Introduction

Nikki Khanna

“Whiteness will make you win,” she tells me.

She smiles brightly before my screen, and I watch as she tries to sell me a skin-whitening pill in a fifty-second Thai commercial. I can only see the Asian actress from the shoulders up, though from her face I can easily see that she is strikingly attractive, with ebony hair and porcelain skin. I glance down at my own skin, quickly comparing our skin tones. Without the pill, she warns, the whiteness she has invested in will vanish, and as if to illustrate her point, her skin slowly fades to black and her on-screen expression turns despondent and depressed with each darkening frame. The product name, Snowz, aptly chosen to evoke whiteness, reminds me of the flakes that fall from winter skies—white, pure, nearly translucent. The skin of the second model in the commercial, perhaps like snow, is bright and white as she beams with a cheery smile before my computer screen; apparently she has invested in the dietary supplement of glutathione that will prevent her, as the ad claims, from becoming a “faded star.” Her light skin and wide grin are in direct contrast to the gloomy, black-skinned model next to her. I am simultaneously captivated and disgusted by the ad, the juxtaposition of light and dark and smiles and frowns, the unapologetic and explicit racism. I am immediately taken back to my childhood.

Far from Thailand, or anywhere in Asia for that matter, I grew up in suburban Atlanta in the 1980s. As a child, I often spent weekends with my parents and younger brother at the local Indian grocer, standing among displays of colorful Indian sweets, brass statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, and imported tubes of whitening creams and bars of whitening soap stacked ever so neatly on store shelves.
Like the two Thai actresses in the Snowz commercial, Indian models, all light-skinned and nearly white, smiled to me from every package and tube, promising “total fairness” and “complete whitening.” As a child waiting in busy check-out lines, impatient and often bored to tears, I would occasionally occupy my time by checking my skin color next to the seven shades of the “expert fairness meter” printed on the side of a Fair & Lovely package. Strategically holding my arm next to the box, I felt satisfied when I found my shade; it most closely matched the second-lightest skin swatch. I smiled.

Growing up in the Indian American community, and as a mixed-race-part-white child at that, I already understood the value of having light skin.

The 2016 online Snowz advertisement was heavily criticized both within and outside of Thailand for its blatantly racist message and was promptly pulled by its parent company, though skin-whitening products like Snowz and Fair & Lovely remain popular throughout Asia and around the world, and are only the tip of the iceberg. Skin whitening (also called skin lightening or skin bleaching) is a multi-billion-dollar global industry that promises consumers “translucent,” “bright,” “fair,” and “white” skin through moisturizers, foundations, night creams, anti-aging serums, sunscreens, lip balms, face washes, soap bars, facials, foot creams, deodorants, and even feminine washes, pills, laser treatments, and whitening injections. Light-skinned, near-white models peddling products with names like Snowz, Fair & Lovely, Bright, White Perfect, White-Light, Lightenex, Whitenicious, Fairever, White Beauty, CyberWhite, Refined White, DiorSnow, Snow UV, and Blanc Expert conjure images of whiteness and its explicit link to beauty, flawlessness, and femininity. The product tag lines, too, reinforce the message that white is beautiful and read like musty artifacts from a bygone era: “From Ebony to Ivory” (Glutamax), “Whatever Keeps My Skin the Purest White” (Bird’s Nest), “Reveal Your True Inner Fairness” (L’Oreal White Perfect), “Turn Down the Dark, Turn Up the Bright” (Elizabeth Arden), and “Dark Out, White In. Increase Your Face Value” (Pond’s White Beauty Facewash).
Throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, advertisements for skin-whitening products are aimed at consumers, most notably women, who are routinely told that their dark skin is unattractive and a social liability. The advertising is everywhere: splashed across roadside billboards, in the pages of glossy fashion magazines, and on television commercials seemingly aired on repetitive loops between regularly scheduled programming. Across South Asia, a common theme for skin-whitening commercials goes something like this: A dark woman is unhappy with her life—she is often portrayed with a saddened look as depressed, dejected, and discouraged. She cannot get hired, get promoted, or find a mate. She uses said cream and, voila! She lands the coveted job, the elusive promotion, and/or the handsome and successful husband. These “Cinderella” or “ugly-duckling-to-swan” advertisements are provocative, highly controversial, and (let’s be honest) unabashedly racist, yet they are exceedingly effective because of widely shared cultural beliefs that dark skin is a stigma and a

Figure I.1. Advertisement by Pond’s White Beauty with the tagline, “Dark Out, White In. Increase Your Face Value.” Marketed in Asia, it promises consumers that they can “get fairer skin right from the first wash.”
physical handicap in marriage and job markets. The ads mirror the message of many societies: Light skin is superior to dark. For women, the message is even more sobering: Those with light skin are beautiful and will marry and be successful; if you have dark skin, too bad for you.

In a study of 312 cultures, fifty-one were found to use skin color as a marker of beauty, and in all but four, light skin was favored. Hence in much of the world, skin shade is significant and light skin an enviable asset. According to sociologist Margaret Hunter, most Americans have a general understanding of discrimination between racial groups and its insidious effect on people of color, but she notes that “hidden within the process of racial discrimination, is the often overlooked issue of colorism.”

“Colorism,” a term first coined by novelist Alice Walker in 1983, refers to the practice of discrimination whereby light skin is privileged over dark—both between and within racial and ethnic communities. The bulk of the literature on colorism typically focuses on intragroup bias—that which occurs within racial and ethnic groups. African Americans, for example, have a long history of discriminating against each other on the basis of skin tone; those with lighter skin are relatively more privileged within the African American community, while those with darker hues are typically discriminated against by their lighter-skinned counterparts. However, colorism also occurs between racial groups (e.g., whites who privilege light-skinned African Americans over African Americans with darker skin) and even between ethnic groups (e.g., Asian ethnic groups discriminating against each other, such as lighter-skinned Japanese discriminating against darker-skinned Cambodians). Scholar Darrick Hamilton and his colleagues conceptualize colorism “as a byproduct of racism,” and Margaret Hunter argues that “colorism would likely not exist without racism, because colorism rests on the privileging of whiteness in terms of phenotype, aesthetics, and culture.” Perhaps “racism” and “colorism” can be conceptualized as cousins or as parent and child—distinctly different, but nonetheless closely related. Colorism affects racial and ethnic groups worldwide, and its harmful effects are well documented in the United States, particularly
for African Americans. Research shows that light-skinned African Americans tend to have better health, greater job prospects, higher-status occupations, higher earnings, greater wealth, and more years of schooling than those with darker skin; light skin is also linked to perceived intelligence and trustworthiness. Dark-skinned African Americans face within-group bias from other African Americans, but also bias from other racial groups, including whites, who tend to favor those with light skin. This practice dates back to slavery, when white slave owners privileged those with light skin over those with dark tones; they gave them the more desirable indoor jobs (while darker-skinned slaves labored in the fields), opportunities for education and skilled labor (privileges unavailable to most slaves), and for some, even their freedom. In fact, during the slave era, free blacks in America were often lighter in color than those who were enslaved.

Long after slavery ended, the preference for light skin continued—even among African Americans. During the Jim Crow era, light-skinned blacks often used exclusionary practices to discriminate against those with darker skin, and they segregated themselves physically and socially by creating their own elite social clubs, fraternities, sororities, neighborhoods, churches, preparatory schools, colleges, business organizations, and even vacation resorts. Qualifying “tests,” such as the paper bag test, were used to control membership, and only those lighter than the dye of a paper bag would be granted entry. The pressure for light skin was also evident in the homemade and store-bought skin whiteners used by African Americans during the Jim Crow era to access light-skin privilege—including widely marketed brands such as Nadinola, which guaranteed black women a “clear, bright, Nadinola-light complexion,” and Dr. Fred Palmer’s Skin Whitener, which promised that they could be “lighter, clearer and more beautiful than [they] ever dreamed.” Though skin-lightening products aimed at black women are less visible (albeit not absent) in American markets today, the bias for light skin persists: when Barack Obama ran for his first term as president, Senator Harry Reid, then the Democratic majority leader, predicted that Obama could become the nation’s first black president because he had “no Negro dialect”
and was “light-skinned.” He apologized for the politically incorrect gaffe, though perhaps he hit on an uncomfortable truth: Americans, white and otherwise, react more favorably to light skin as compared to dark even today.

A closer look at colorism among African Americans further reveals that for black women, in particular, light skin is associated with physical attractiveness and success in the marriage market. Scholar Mark E. Hill argues that light skin is more valuable to black women than to black men, drawing attention to what he calls “gendered colorism.” Beauty, often defined in the American context as possessing light skin, is a form of social capital or “currency” for women, and Margaret Hunter notes that “study after study has shown that light-skinned African American women marry spouses with higher levels of education, higher incomes, or higher levels of occupational prestige, than their darker-skinned counterparts.”

This “gendered colorism” is also evident in American media. Most black actresses, especially those cast in lead roles, are light in complexion. Hollywood actress Zendaya, who is multiracial and light skinned, observes that because of her skin color, she represents Hollywood’s “acceptable version of a black girl.” Consider, too, Halle Berry, Thandie Newton, and Paula Patton—all three light-skinned “black” actresses with some degree of white ancestry, though black male actors tend to show comparatively more range in skin tone (think Sydney Poitier, Wesley Snipes, Denzel Washington, and Idris Elba, for whom dark skin is perceived as more acceptable and often presented as masculine). Catherine Knight Steele, a professor at Colorado State University, even finds colorism in American children’s cartoons. In her analysis of the animated Disney series *The Proud Family*, which features a black family (a rarity in children’s media), the central female character, Penny, and her mother are illustrated with light skin and Eurocentric features; this is in direct opposition to the father, who is darker by comparison. Moreover, the lighter-skinned characters are depicted as intelligent, while those with darker skin are portrayed as “clownish” and “less intelligent,” reinforcing colorist beliefs about African Americans.
Gendered colorism is further seen in the music industry as light-skinned black women take center stage. In a 2018 interview with *Ebony* magazine, Mathew Knowles, father to American pop star Beyoncé, asks, "When it comes to Black females, who are the people who get their music played on pop radio? Mariah Carey, Rihanna, the female rapper Nicki Minaj, my kids [Beyoncé and Solange Knowles], and what do they have in common?" The answer: light skin and Eurocentric features. His daughter, Beyoncé, is known for her light skin and long, blonde, straight hair. While black male performers typically show a range in skin tones (some examples include Tupac, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, Usher, Kanye West, and Drake), black female vocalists are overwhelmingly light-skinned. Perhaps then it is not surprising that some of these women, such as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, have been accused of lightening their skin; there is value in doing so.

The bias for light skin is even found in mainstream media outlets accused of photoshopping black and brown women to appeal to the white masses (for examples, see the unnaturally lightened hue of actress Gabby Sidibe on the cover of *Elle* in October 2010; recording artist Beyoncé in a print ad for L’Oreal in 2012; and actress Kerry Washington on the cover of *Instyle Magazine* in March 2015). Moreover, colorism within the African American community is well documented in research and in documentaries such as *Dark Girls* (2011) and *Light Girls* (2015), which give voice to African American women and the discrimination they face within the African American community—particularly from other black women. The coin of colorism, however, is two-sided; it involves dark-skinned women who feel negatively stereotyped and rejected by light-skinned women for being too dark, and light-skinned women who feel rebuffed by their darker-skinned counterparts for not being “black enough.” Negative stereotypes, valuations of beauty, and perceptions of black authenticity are intimately intertwined with skin color in the African American community.

In addition to the extensive literature on African Americans and colorism, there is a burgeoning body of work on Latinx populations in both Latin America and the United States. Light
skin in these communities is similarly privileged, and skin tone affects one’s life chances and opportunities. Latinx populations show wide range in skin color, and studies suggest that, as with African Americans, light skin is linked to better mental and physical health, more years of schooling, higher occupational status, and higher income. Light-skinned Latinos in the United States also tend to live in more affluent neighborhoods with high property values, are more likely to marry “higher-status” spouses (those with higher levels of education, income, and occupational prestige), and are considered more attractive than those with darker tones. Perhaps this explains ex–baseball slugger Sammy Sosa, a native of the Dominican Republic, who over the course of several years went through a very public shift in skin shade—from deep brown to nearly white. When asked about the transformation, Sosa reportedly remarked, “It’s a bleaching cream that I apply before going to bed and whitens my skin some,” suggesting that darker-skinned Latinxs face many of the same pressures as African Americans.

Moreover, although colorism occurs within Latinx communities, skin-color bias also stems from other groups, including whites. A 2015 study by sociologist Lance Hannon, for example, finds that whites are much more likely to view light-skinned Latinxs as smart as compared to those with darker skin—a phenomenon he labels “white colorism.” This is problematic given the power of whites in American society, and Hannon writes that in the school context, for example, if whites equate lighter skin with intelligence, it may impact the level of expectations white teachers have for Latinx students. This light-skin-equals-intelligence bias likely also influences hiring, promotions, pay, and even access to political power. Raquel Reichard, a Latina feminist and scholar, observes that “from state and local officials to Congress to the current 2016 presidential candidates, most Latino politicians . . . are light-skinned or straight-up white-passing. Just take a look at the Latino politicos getting the most media attention right now, Republican contenders Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio.” Arguably, their light skin makes them palatable to American voters.
Colorism and Asians

Though research on colorism in the United States has grown in recent decades, especially as it pertains to African American and Latinx populations, less attention has been given to Asian Americans, for whom colorism is equally pervasive and deeply entrenched. Colorism exists in just about every part of Asia and affects Asian diasporas, including most Asian American communities—most notably affecting those descended from South and Southeast Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia), as well as those from Japan, China, South Korea, and other parts of Eastern Asia. The preference for light skin is deeply rooted both in Asian ethnic cultures and in European colonization, which makes Asians rather distinct from other racial groups, and throughout Asia, light skin typically functions as a marker for wealth and class, caste, and proximity to whiteness.

Because colorism among Asian populations is understudied and, until recent years, nearly absent in public discourse, this is often surprising to many non-Asians—even to some scholars well versed in colorism. In her 2013 article, professor of law Trina Jones, an African American woman, writes about her own surprise when first learning about colorism in Asia, and when reflecting on her first visit to Asia, she writes that she began to notice a “fascinating phenomenon—the ubiquitous presence of skin-lightening or skin-‘brightening’ products . . . in grocery stores and at cosmetic counters in department stores [in Asia].” Describing her own unfamiliarity with colorism in Asia and the skin-whitening practices there, she adds, “As an African-American academic who had written about skin color differences among African Americans, I was familiar with the conventional use and sale of skin-lightening products by and to the African-American community. But these new products were directed at a different market. I did not give much thought to the significance of skin color differences among Asians and Asian Americans. I erroneously and naively assumed that skin color was a nonissue within these groups. My 2001 visit
to Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, and Hong Kong began to open my eyes.” Jones is not alone. While colorism is pervasive across Asia, this fact is unknown to many non-Asians.

Nonetheless, most of Asia has a preoccupation (and perhaps an obsession) with light skin. Japan, for instance, has “long idolized ivory-like skin,” as sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes—skin that is “like a boiled egg”—soft, white, and smooth on the surface.” Historically, Japanese women shielded themselves from the sun and covered their skin with thick, white pancake makeup because white skin has long been linked to social perceptions of beauty, sophistication, and high social class. The adulation of white skin is reflected in an ancient Japanese proverb that translates to “a fair/white complexion hides faults,” which suggests that as long as a Japanese woman possesses light skin, she can be forgiven for any shortcomings. The connection between light skin and whiteness is common in the Western world, though writer and blogger Seimi Yamashita asserts that the preference for light skin in Japan is not associated with Europeans nor with a desire to be Caucasian, and has existed in Japan since the Heian Era (from about 794 AD to 1192 AD), when rich, noble women remained indoors, protecting their light skin. In fact, according to Eric Li and colleagues, white skin is tied to Japanese racial identity and Japanese notions of beauty, which, they argue, are seen as “quite different from and even superior to Western whiteness.”

While deeply rooted in Japanese history, the preference for light skin continues today. “Bihaku,” a Japanese term coined in the early 1900s with the emergence of whitening products, translates to “beautifully white.” The pressure to be bihaku can be seen in modern Japan in the wide range of skin whiteners on the market, on roadside billboards that exclusively showcase light-skinned Japanese women, and even on online dating and matching sites where the younger generations use apps to edit their profile photos to make their faces look brighter and whiter. Moreover, as in ancient times, light skin continues to be a sign of high social class, while darker skin is perceived as unattractive and associated with lower-class people who work outside in the sun. Even in
modern-day Japanese American beauty pageants, the preference for light skin is evident in the “no tanning” rules for contestants because dark skin is, in Japanese society and Japanese American society, linked to the peasant class or those who work in the fields.\textsuperscript{44} According to sociologist Rebecca King-O’Riain, some contestants even rub lemons on their faces to try to lighten their skin.\textsuperscript{45}

The association of wealth and light skin, according to scholars Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard, can be found in other parts of Asia as well, such as Cambodia, the Philippines, and Taiwan. One Cambodian respondent in their 2007 study described the connection, saying, “[People] want to look whiter because it’s associated with wealth and status,” and another respondent, Taiwanese, similarly claimed that “light skin is the standard of beauty in Taiwan. . . . Wealthy people tend to be light skinned, while darker people are associated more with low socioeconomic status.”\textsuperscript{46} In Taiwan, more than half of all women pay “big money” to lighten their skin.\textsuperscript{47}
some paying as much as three hundred to five hundred US dollars per session with dermatologists who promise white skin—these appointments may include prescribed pills, skin-whitening injections, and in-office treatments with chemical concoctions for the face and body. Rondilla and Spickard argue that customers are not necessarily seeking whiteness (in other words, to be Caucasian), but rather they often want to look like “rich Asians.”

In China, skin whiteners account for one-third of all facial skin-care products, and as in Japan, skin color is a signifier of both social class and beauty. A popular Chinese adage passed through the generations is, “One white covers up three ugliness,” suggesting that white skin compensates for physical unattractiveness. In a 2018 study of women and culture-based meanings of skin color, one respondent, Chinese, observed that “if you are white, you are beautiful no matter how you look. . . . Whiter skin color automatically upgrades you.” Thus, white skin is not merely an indicator of physical beauty, but is perhaps its most significant measure.

Chinese women traditionally whitened their skin by swallowing crushed pearls or by applying white chalk or rice powder to their skin, though contemporary women can purchase whitening products that are routinely advertised by light-skinned, multiracial, Asian-white models; go to whitening salons that hype laser-operated machines promising to lighten one’s “entire body . . . in just one hour”; or simply whiten their online faces. A Chinese company whose app makes its users appear thinner and whiter in their “selfies” was valued at nearly five billion dollars in 2016, though critics charge that the app imposes “an ideal of pale skin” on consumers, especially women. The fixation on white skin is also apparent on some Chinese beaches where female bathers don full body suits and “face-kinies”—brightly colored rubber face masks with holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth, which are designed to protect their skin from the sun in a culture that has a “terror of tanning.” Face-kinies, popular in China, can also be purchased for day-to-day use to shield one’s face from the sun’s rays. Even beauty pageants in China glamorize pale skin, and, according to Gary Xu and
Susan Feiner, they reinforce “the standardization of beauty features based on Anglo-European norms”\textsuperscript{56} and an “imitation of whiteness.”\textsuperscript{57}

Some argue, however, that as in Japan, whitening in China is not about mimicking Eurocentric ideals. Ye Tiantian, blogging in 2015 about her own experiences with colorism, says that for her, it is not about imitating white people: “It is true that I cannot represent all of the consumers in the skin whitening market, but I am pretty sure that I and most of the people I know buying these products are not trying to make ourselves look like white people. We don’t want to

Figure I.3. A Chinese woman wears a face mask or “face-kini” in Lhasa, Tibet. Face-kinies are primarily produced in China and are designed to protect one’s face from the sun’s UV rays. Source: Shutterstock.
be white,” but adds, “I cannot tell you for sure that it has nothing to do with white privilege.” At least, she posits, that is not the whole story behind the skin-whitening market in China. Chinese women have been lightening their skin for centuries, and the practice dates back to the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), when having a white complexion was seen as noble and aristocratic. Even today, people lighten their skin because they do not want to be perceived as poor. Light skin implies social status, and scholar Evelyn Yeung further argues that even the consumption of whitening products “can be a display of wealth. . . . [b]ecause cosmetics are considered luxury items,” signifying to others one’s disposable income in China’s growing consumerist culture. Rae Chen, who describes herself in an op-ed as a “light-skinned Chinese woman,” similarly views colorism in China as more of a “status symbol than a racial one,” though she admits that, regardless of the motivation, the message remains that light skin is superior to dark.

Other Asian societies prize light skin not simply because of its link to social class but because of their colonial roots and history of European conquest, when Caucasian standards of beauty became embedded in the psyches of the colonized. In 1952, French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, argued that colonization has had a deep impact on the human psyche, and Pal Ahluwalia further explains that “the effects of colonialism permeated the black body and created a desire to wear a white mask, to mimic the white person in order to survive the absurdity of the colonial world.” Performative whiteness was arguably a survival technique for the oppressed and a tool for the upwardly mobile to access status, and in postcolonial Asia, perhaps aspirations for whiteness have lingered.

This colonial legacy can be seen in the ways in which whitening products are routinely advertised to the masses. In the Philippines, the mass consumption of skin-whitening products is, according to Joanne Rondilla, a reflection of its colonial history (the Philippines was colonized by Spain and then the United States for over four hundred years) and the controlling images of the media, such as television, film, magazines, and the Internet, which, even today,
idealize light skin and Western standards of beauty. Companies advertise how their product will “whiten” skin and promise that their product will make one’s skin “pure,” “fair,” “white,” or “translucent,” literally calling upon European standards of beauty. Other key terms in whitening advertisements—“flawless,” “radiance,” “purify,” “brightness,” “clarity,” “luminous”—according to Rondilla, “imply a Eurocentric beauty standard that is imposed on Asian and Asian American women” (emphasis added). This beauty standard is further reflected in the use of light-skinned Asian models (often multiracial with white ancestry) and even European models who are the face of whitening products in print and commercial advertisements across Asia. From 2011 to 2013, for example, Caucasian actress Emma Watson, of Harry Potter film fame, was the face of Lancôme’s advertisement campaign for their Blanc Expert skin-whitening serum, which was advertised in Asian markets. She received widespread criticism for her role in advertising the product, though Caucasian women have long been employed to market skin whiteners to Asian women across Asia.
Vestiges of European colonization are also evident in the Philippines in marrying practices wherein darker-skinned Filipinx are encouraged to marry lighter. Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard describe this practice of “marrying up” as a way to access social status and power, but also whiteness itself.66 One interviewee explained, “My father suggested I have children with my White ex-boyfriend so he could have mestizo [multiracial] grandchildren. I think years of this colonial way of thinking and all the American propaganda has made it so that my father (and most other Filipinos) think that everything ‘American’—White American—is superior.”67 The preference for whiteness is even seen among those of Filipinx descent living in America. Professor of psychology Kevin Nadal describes situations where he witnessed multiracial black-Filipinx Americans being teased or called “egots” (a derogatory term for black people), while multiracial white-Filipinx Americans were praised for their light skin and white heritage. According to Nadal, many Filipinx Americans are proud of their identity, though they still carry a “colonial mentality” in which all things Western and white are seen as superior to anything Filipinx.68

In India, too, centuries of European colonization have left an indelible mark. In Bollywood (India’s multi-billion-dollar film industry), the light, near-white actors and actresses who grace the silver screen are not reflective of the brown masses. The blue and green eyes and light skin of Bollywood’s elite reveal a society that is obsessed with lightness, though historians are divided over why. For some, the obsession is rooted in India’s caste system, a rigid form of social stratification rooted in Hinduism that dates back centuries.69 Jyotsna Vaid, professor of psychology and women and gender studies at the University of Texas at Austin, explains that the Sanskrit term for “caste” also means “color,”70 and historians have long speculated whether colorism is deeply embedded in Indian culture and Hindu religion. Indeed, dark skin in India is frequently associated with the lowest castes and connotes dirt and evil.71

Assistant professor of law Neha Mishra argues, however, that while the two lowest castes, the Shrudras and the Dalits, are indeed
the darkest-skinned people in India, linking skin color and caste is a gross oversimplification. There are varied degrees of skin tone in most castes, and skin color is more location-specific than caste-related; those in the northern regions of India tend to have lighter skin than those in the south. Moreover, Jyotsna Vaid contends that there is “nothing in the ancient Vedic texts or religious scripture to suggest a favoring of lighter over darker skin,” and Lori Tharps similarly challenges the notion that colorism has ancient roots in India when she observes that “there are Hindu gods and goddesses with dark skin who have long been considered both beautiful and benevolent, crushing the theory that in India dark skin has always been associated with negative characteristics or inherent evil.”

For many historians, Indian obsession with light skin is unequivocally linked to, or at the very least exacerbated by, centuries of British colonization—when Europeans held power, status, and esteem over their darker subjects. British colonizers made “invidious comparisons” between light-skinned and dark-skinned Indians, asserting that the former were more attractive and intelligent than the latter, and they empowered lighter-skinned (and sometimes part-white) Indians during their rule, further elevating lightness and whiteness in colonial India. According to Tharps, the British granted them prestigious positions in government, industry, and education, while those with dark skin were left with menial jobs, often in roles subservient to their British masters. Accordingly, Tharps writes that “whether or not a belief system that favored light skin over dark was already in place before colonization, the British took a giant step in institutionalizing colorism.”

Though British rule ended in 1947, the preference for all things European arguably remained, including European physical traits such as light skin, and this preference is clearly evident in modern India. “Fair” and “lovely” are terms that are nearly synonymous and are forever linked in India’s most popular whitening cream by the same name. Skin whitening is big business in India, and its ubiquity is seen in the glut of whitening products on the market, from face creams and soaps to deodorants that whiten dark underarms and feminine washes and creams that lighten brown nipples and
vaginas.\textsuperscript{78} The national obsession with light skin is further reflected in the multitude of advertising billboards that use European models to advertise Indian products to Indians in India,\textsuperscript{79} the creation of Facebook apps that allow users to lighten their skin color in profile pictures (such as one marketed by Vaseline in 2010),\textsuperscript{80} and even in the practice among some Indian couples of seeking Caucasian egg donors so that they can have light-skinned, blue-eyed babies through in-vitro fertilization (IVF).\textsuperscript{81} Seeking light-skinned donors seems to be a trend according to some IVF specialists in India, and one father who conceived a daughter via IVF with a Caucasian donor egg reveals at least one reason why: “There is no denying that it is easier to get fair girls married.”\textsuperscript{82}

In South Asian cultures where arranged marriages are common (such as India, but also Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka), parents often seek light-skinned partners for their children. Hence, as with African American women (described earlier), light skin, especially for South Asian women as compared to men, is an asset and is just as valuable as, or perhaps even more valuable than, one’s educational background and social class. In fact, a survey of nearly twelve thousand Indians by the online Indian matrimonial site Shaadi.com reveals that in three north Indian states, light skin is the most important criterion when choosing a mate.\textsuperscript{83} Further, in an analysis of marital advertisements that appeared in India’s Sunday Times on a single day in 2013, skin tone for prospective brides was mentioned 40 percent of the time, though it was never mentioned in ads for prospective grooms, illustrating the gender asymmetry in colorism in Asia. Moreover, of the ads for females that described skin color, none included terms that indicated dark skin, but rather they used terms such as “fair” and “rosy.”\textsuperscript{84}

Just as in South Asia, skin color is valuable social capital in South Asian American marriage markets. Growing up, my parents subscribed to the India Abroad, a popular newspaper that serves the Indian American community. Out of curiosity, I often sat at the kitchen table scrutinizing the matrimonial section, where Indian parents placed ads similar to those in India for their sons and daughters in hopes of finding them suitable mates. To make
their adult children sound attractive, parents advertised their children’s prestigious educations, high-status jobs, good family values, caste, and, quite often (especially if they were advertising for their daughter), their “fair,” “light,” or “wheatish” skin color. In the marriage market among South Asians, fair skin, or skin that is the color of wheat, is an indicator of beauty and represents tangible “symbolic capital” for women in marriage negotiations.85 Some recent examples of matrimonial ads:

NI parents seek alliance for daughter 1979/5’4’ slim/very fair accomplished hotel professional in Florida, can relocate. Send bio/photo. (India Abroad; ad placed on May 4, 2018)

Hindu Punjabi parents seek suitable match for beautiful, fair, slim, and homely, 5’6”/1980 US born and raised MD daughter. Email Biodata/Pictures. (India Abroad; ad placed on May 21, 2018)

Aristocratic reputed Hindu Business Family, settled US, over 30 years; seeking educated, well-placed, business professional for their very fair and very beautiful, US citizen daughter 31, Graduate. Email: bio/photo. (India Abroad; ad placed on June 8, 2018)

Men’s ads do not typically advertise their skin color, yet they don’t hesitate to ask for light-skinned brides.86 For example,

Seeking fair attractive girls 32–35; for USA born handsome groom Height 5’10”. Operating a multi-million dollar investment/management business. From well-established family. Email/photo/biodata. (India Abroad; ad placed on May 25, 2018)

Social activist Fatima Lodhi, who was raised in Pakistan, describes the pressures to whiten her skin because of those who told her, “No one will marry you.”87 As in other parts of South Asia, Pakistani women face intense social pressure to have light skin—what author Maria Sartaj calls a “hideous complexion complex” suffered by the entire nation, but suffered most of all by women. She observes that
dark Pakistani women, like herself, are mocked and devalued, and argues that dark skin is treated like a “disease” in Pakistan. Clearly, Pakistan is not alone.

Furthermore, the literature on colorism typically focuses on skin color, though colorism can also be extended to include other traits that approximate European notions of physical beauty. Blue eyes in Asia are prized, and this was made quite obvious to me growing up. My north Indian great-grandmother had blue eyes, as do many of my second and third cousins, many of whom live in India, and this has become a source of family pride, probably because of their uniqueness amid millions of dark eyes (let’s face it, blue eyes stand out there), but conceivably also because of their connection to whiteness. Some of our family conversations: “Perhaps one of our ancestors is European?”; “Maybe a great-great uncle was from Germany or Eastern Europe?” In my family, there was great interest in and even excitement at the thought, and certainly Eurocentric features, such as light eyes, are adored. I was not immune. I, too, wanted the light blue eyes that were so coveted in my community and in my family. If my great-grandmother had them, and my white mother had them, why couldn’t I?

Eye shape and nose shape also matter, and their importance in many communities is arguably tied to colorism. Eyelid tapes and glues, which claim to create an extra fold in the eyelid, are heavily marketed across East Asia. Even a plastic set of “eyelid trainers” can be purchased that are designed to create a double eyelid presumably for those Asian consumers with creaseless monolids. I found a pair online for under twenty-five US dollars on Amazon that advertises, “Just like to wear glasses, take 5 minutes one day, one month can get beautiful double eyelid!”

Surgical alternatives are more invasive, permanent, expensive, and perhaps more controversial. Nonetheless, cosmetic surgery is booming in parts of Asia. South Korea, for example, currently has the highest rate of plastic surgeries (per capita per year), outpacing both the United States and Brazil. Two of the most popular procedures in Asia include nose jobs (rhinoplasty) to narrow the nose and make it project more (usually with silicone implants or
cartilage grafted from the ear, rib, or septum) and eyelid surgery (double blepharoplasty) to give Asians an extra fold in the eyelid—something present in nearly all Caucasians, but only naturally found in about 15 percent of East Asians.92

While these surgical procedures may invoke images of “white-worship,” many women argue that these surgeries are not about looking Western at all.93 New York Magazine’s Maureen O’Connor, who is Chinese and white, argues that these phenotypic modifications are not about “hiding one’s race or mimicking another” but about attaining particular aesthetics popular in Asian cultures. According to Dr. Robert Flowers, a white surgeon and a pioneer in blepharoplasties, Asian patients do not want to be white—they simply want to be “beautiful Asians.”94 In fact, O’Connor contends that those who believe eyelid surgery is about erasing one’s race are usually white themselves, and she asks, “[I]s that a symptom of in-group narcissism—white people assuming everyone wants to look like them?”95 Similarly, writer and journalist Euny Hong, in a 2013 op-ed in the Wall Street Journal,96 writes about her own eyelid surgery and
argues that “Asians, for the most part, get the surgery for themselves and for each other—not to approximate a Caucasian appearance.” In fact, she notes that after her eyelid procedure, none of her non-Asian friends (including her white friends) even noticed—and she did not seem particularly concerned when they didn’t. For Hong, the surgery was not about or for them.

Likewise, many cosmetic surgeons (like Dr. Robert Flowers above) argue that these surgeries are about attaining Asian standards of beauty, not mimicking white women. Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard, however, challenge this interpretation by pointing out that these so-called Asian beauty standards “just happen to coincide with the way they perceive White women to look.”97 Is it merely a coincidence that what Asian women deem beautiful happens to mirror Caucasian standards of beauty—such as double-lidded eyes? Rondilla and Spickard argue that “in fact, it has everything to do with such beauty standards,”98 and they claim that the cosmetic-surgery industry profits from the idea that Asian women must correct their ethnic features. They further point out that the popularity of cosmetic surgery in Asia happened, in part, because of colonialism. Local populations, particularly women, were influenced by Western notions of beauty introduced by their Western colonizers, and it was during this time that they first began seeking plastic surgery in large numbers.

Whether these tapes, glues, gadgets, and surgeries are about attaining whiteness is highly debatable, though undoubtedly Western standards anchor beauty culture in parts of Asia—and most certainly in the United States. In 2013, Chinese American talk show host Julie Chen revealed the pressure she felt to surgically alter her features—not from her Chinese American community but from white Americans. She underwent eyelid surgery in her twenties to look less Chinese after a (white) news director told her that she would be more appealing to American audiences without her “Asian eyes,” and a prospective (white) talent agent warned, “I cannot represent you unless you get plastic surgery to make your eyes look bigger.”99 Pressure to fit into white-dominated American society may only compound the issue of colorism for Asian Americans.
The Voices of Asian American Women

In this book, Asian American women, with their own stories and in their own words, describe their experiences with skin-color privilege and discrimination both within their respective ethnic communities and within American society. Few books examining skin color focus exclusively on Asian populations and, unlike previous books on colorism, mine focuses exclusively on women because the research suggests that while Asian/Asian American men and women both feel the effects of skin-color discrimination, it is women who bear its brunt—especially because of the link between skin color and perceptions of beauty and femininity. A conversation with my father just before my wedding illustrates this. In the weeks leading up to my winter nuptials, I decided (for the first time, I might add!) to tan at a local tanning bed—yes, yes, I know, cancer-wise, not a particularly wise decision. But, I did it. After the first tanning session, when I returned home quite pleased with and proud of my burgeoning brown color, my father asked, rather exasperatedly in fact, “Why are you tanning?!?” Well, it was December, and whatever deep color I had gained in the summer had now faded to my natural yellowish-pale tone. I matter-of-factly replied that I did not want my skin to match my white wedding dress as I sauntered down the aisle—to which my father then asked, rather perplexed, “Indian woman are always trying to get lighter, why are you trying to be darker?” Undoubtedly, colorism is more salient for women as compared to men, and I cannot picture our conversation happening between a father and son. My younger brother did not tan before his wedding, though I cannot imagine anyone commenting on it if he had.

I focus on Asian American (as opposed to Asian) women because those of Asian ancestry living in the United States conceivably face compounded pressure for light skin (and other European physical traits) because of (1) the cultural importance given to these traits in their respective Asian ethnic communities, and (2) the added pressure towards whiteness in a white-dominated society. Perhaps Asian American women feel less constrained...
by colorism as compared to Asian women given that they are geographically and, in many cases, generationally removed from their ancestral countries of origin and Asian cultural pressures. In fact, Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard find that first-generation Asian immigrants “have more (or at least more overt) colorism issues” than Asian Americans born in the United States.  

Undoubtedly the pressure for light skin and Eurocentric traits is more covert for Asian Americans, but I argue that the pressure is strong in the United States as well. According to law professor Trina Jones, the color hierarchy in the United States (as in Asia) privileges light skin, and in the American context, “lightness is associated with intelligence, honesty, industry, and beauty, while darkness is associated with laziness, immorality, criminality, and ignorance.” Moreover, Asian American women, like all women in the United States, are routinely bombarded by images of white models and actors on American television, Internet sites, magazines, and billboards. A quick online search of “beautiful women,” for instance, reveals mostly white faces, and *Vogue* covers through the years typically feature white women. Celebrities who grace *People* magazine’s “Most Beautiful People” covers are almost always white—rarely are they women of color, and never have they been Asian American in its near-thirty-year history. In American society, Eurocentric traits are the gold standard of beauty.

Like the women included in this book, I have grown up in two worlds: one, Indian American, where light skin is clearly valued over dark, and Eurocentric traits are favored (my younger brother has light blue eyes and, believe me, I have never heard the end of it); and two, American culture, where I grew up surrounded by white faces in school, in my community, and in the films and television shows that I watched (and still watch). Even I, mixed-race with an Indian father and a white mother, with light skin, dark brown eyes, and brown hair, who is often read as white, went through a phase when I wanted the traits of the white women in my fashion and teen magazines, such as light eyes and light hair. Perhaps pressures for lightness and whiteness would have been more pronounced for me had I been raised in India surrounded...
by endless advertisements for whitening creams peddled by near-white Bollywood starlets. However, I know that I and many others experience comparable pressure right here in America, even if the message is more veiled than the overtly racist and colorist ads across Asia that shamelessly promise consumers that their whitening product will address all of their “whitening needs” (Estee Lauder’s CyberWhite) or reveal their “true inner fairness” (L’Oreal’s WhitePerfect). This blatant messaging is rare in America, though the lesson is nonetheless the same. Just as girls and women in India and other parts of Asia are taught the value of light skin, I learned that whiteness is the epitome of status and beauty in American society.

An important caveat: Growing up, I loved when I was tanned. I thank my South Asian ancestry for my ability to quickly achieve a deep golden hue in summers, something that was enviable to many of my white friends. Tanned skin is considered attractive in American culture, and this is something that clearly differentiates the United States from most of Asia; however, tanning cannot be likened to skin whitening. Scholar Sriya Shrestha describes what she sees as a false equivalency between tanning and skin-whitening.

Figure I.6. An online search of “beautiful women” on the popular search engine Bing reveals mostly Caucasian-appearing women. Source: Nikki Khanna.
practices, noting that this “false parity” ignores the power dynamics that make light skin desirable for people of color. Light, white skin is powerful and is associated with increased opportunities and privilege; tanned skin, though a beauty norm in the West, does not hold the same power. Social advocate Sabina Verghese further describes tanning as a “social luxury” for white women. While her own dark skin tone has been used by others to gauge her worth, beauty, and intelligence, white women “maintain a sense of privilege” and do not endure “backlash that comes with having dark skin tone.” I, too, can tan to achieve an aesthetic popular in the United States—like other light-skinned women, I am praised for my temporarily browned summer skin and, at the same time, remain relatively insulated from cultural judgments and negative stereotypes about my darkened tone.

Moreover, white women may tan at the beach or apply darkening lotions for a “healthy glow,” but whether any of them would trade their white skin for good is another matter altogether. Comedian Chris Rock, African American, said it best in his 1999 standup routine: “There ain’t a white man in this room that would change places with me. None of you. None of you would change places with me, and I’m rich!” Perhaps this is because light skin along with racial whiteness in the United States is associated with intelligence, wealth, national belonging, and citizenship, and impacts access to opportunities. Despite the tanning culture, Sriya Shrestha argues that “white people want to be white.” Just as in Asia, light skin is esteemed in the United States, and Asian American women must simultaneously manage the Eurocentric pressures both in their Asian ethnic communities and in American society at large.

Scholar Eugena Kaw describes an additional pressure felt by many Asian American women that goes beyond merely trying to conform to Eurocentric norms for the sake of beauty: Asian American women may also alter their looks (their skin, hair, eyes, and noses) because they feel they must “conceal the more obvious forms of their ethnicity in order not to stand out and be targeted for racial stereotypes.” According to race scholar Mia Tuan,
Asian Americans are often seen as “forever foreigners,” even if their families have been in the United States for generations. Their foreign-sounding names, language, accent, facial features, and/or skin color mark them as “other.” Writer Rae Chen, herself light-skinned, describes her experiences growing up in Canada and observes that her darker-skinned Chinese friends and family experience comparatively more micro-aggressions and racial profiling, which has made schooling and job hunting difficult for them. Hence, some Asian Americans may lighten their skin, slim their nose, or modify their eyelids to “shake off [their] perceived otherness” (as did talk show host Julie Chen, described earlier) as a strategy to blend in and evade bias. In Julie Chen’s case, surgically altering her eyelids conceivable opened job opportunities in American broadcasting that may have otherwise been closed to her. In fact, she admits that her career “did take off” once she had the surgery.

My own experiences growing up in the United States have been largely shaped by my gender, my race, and, most importantly, my skin color. I am a mixed-race woman and light-skinned. I look back at myself standing in the Indian market as a kid, checking my skin tone next to the seven shades of the “expert fairness meter” printed on the Fair & Lovely package, while smiling to myself. I am embarrassed at that memory, and at both my understanding and misunderstanding of colorism. Like most people, I had no word for it then. I knew light skin was favored, but I did not recognize as a child what that really meant—what it meant for me, and what it meant for my darker-skinned family members (such as my father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) and for other Americans of color with dark skin. Only as an adult do I understand colorism for what it is—a repressive, sexist, and racist practice that disadvantages much of the world’s population. The intent of this book is to give voice to Asian American women—of all shades and hues. Skin-color discrimination directed towards and found among Asian Americans is understudied and, to some extent, missing from current discussions of colorism. My hope is that this collection of essays will, first and foremost, be a collective platform for women
to share their own stories in their own words, and, second, draw attention to both the varied and common experiences of Asian American women in the twenty-first century to inform what we know and understand about colorism among these communities.

Plan of the Book

The book is divided into six distinct sections, and each section reflects a theme related to colorism. In the first section, “Colorism Defined,” the authors introduce the concept of colorism as it pertains to their lived experiences as Asian American women. Through their stories, they explain how they learned about the significance of their skin shade and its association with class, wealth, intelligence, beauty, and femininity. Through their stories, they also explain how the meanings connected to skin color are deeply embedded in both American and Asian cultures, and they reveal the chief source of these messages—mass media and family, often mothers and grandmothers. One college student describes pressure from her Indian mother to “maintain” her light skin and the conflict it has caused between them; her story mirrors mother-daughter struggles shared by many women throughout the book. Moreover, the authors describe the pressure to conform to beauty norms, especially as females, and how they came to understand the shared and sometimes conflicting definitions of beauty in America, Asia, and Asian America. According to one writer, her dark skin is seen as “deviant” in Japan and among Asian Americans, though she contends that it is viewed indifferently, and sometimes even positively, in America.

In Part II, “Privilege,” authors examine their own privilege, or lack thereof, as it pertains to the color of their skin. The contributors range widely in skin color, and for some women, their skin color is an asset, though for others, it is a social liability. The literature suggests that possessing light skin is valuable, though the authors in this section reveal that privilege is shaped not only by the particular tone of their skin but by the context in which they are viewed. Because colorism is global, their skin
color takes on different meanings depending upon location—for example, what may be privileged in Asia, may not be in the United States.

The privilege that they experience is also dependent upon the ethnicity and race of the audience before them. Colorism runs rampant within and between communities of color, and as a result, one’s skin tone may confer benefits with some ethnic/racial groups while proving disadvantageous with others. One multiracial woman, for instance, describes experiences of adulation and praise for her light skin when among African Americans, though at the same time, she feels skin color discrimination by Asian Americans. Moreover, colorism crosses Asian ethnic groups and typically privileges lighter-skinned Asian ethnic groups over their darker-skinned counterparts (for example, privileging East Asians over South/Southeast Asians), and several contributors describe the hierarchies among Asian ethnic groups based on skin color and its implications. One woman, who (as she says) “embodies the stereotype of an Asian American” because of her light skin, evades much discrimination in America as compared to her darker-skinned Asian American counterparts. Thus, through their essays, the writers in Part II show that privilege can be situational and fluid, conferring advantage in some contexts, while simultaneously disadvantaging them in others.

In Part III, “Aspirational Whiteness,” the essays address the value placed not just on light skin but on whiteness itself, and the meanings attached to whiteness in Asia and in America. Through their narratives, the writers reveal that some Asian Americans strive for whiteness because, for them, it is equated with American assimilation and success, upward mobility, and sophistication, and the authors in this section describe the different ways in which they attempt to access whiteness in contemporary American society. Whitening products are one strategy to obtain whiteness, though for darker-skinned South and Southeast Asians, whiteness may be comparatively more elusive. According to one contributor, fellow South Asians may access whiteness digitally through the use of light-skinned
emojis to represent themselves on social media. Another writer notes that in lieu of whiteness, some darker-skinned South and Southeast Asian Americans aspire to the American stereotype of “the Asian”—the light-skinned, successful East Asian—which, at least according to her, is “the next best thing.”

While previous sections explore the privilege of light skin and the value placed on whiteness, Part IV, “Anti-Blackness,” addresses the anti-black sentiment that exists in America, in Asia, and among Asian Americans. Here, authors describe the ways in which anti-blackness rears its head in their lives, and its connection to colorism. Within their communities, just as in the United States, blackness is juxtaposed in direct opposition to whiteness and is associated with a litany of negative stereotypes. Their experiences reveal that anti-black racism is intimately entwined with an aversion to dark skin in their Asian American communities, and they write about their own experiences with anti-blackness in their respective cultures. One contributor, for example, describes how anti-black narratives inform creationist stories in Pakistani culture (i.e., religious stories of how God created the races), and others in this section explain what anti-blackness means for them personally as a multiracial Asian/black American or mother of a multiracial Asian/black child.

In Part V, “Belonging and Identity,” authors describe how their skin color affects their perceptions of belonging and sense of identity with their Asian American communities. Skin that is perceived by others as “too light” or “too dark” influences whether they feel as though they fit in with their ethnic group. One woman, white-skinned with blonde hair and born with albinism, explains how she feels “invisible” to her Indian American community, while another woman describes how her dark skin often precludes acceptance by others in her Chinese American community. Other Asian Americans make assumptions about the race and ethnicity of the authors included here, and in some of the essays, writers describe their frustrations when not recognized as members of their ethnic communities. According to one woman, her multiracial
background, her ambiguous phenotype, and the relentless barrage of “What are you?” questions have given her the sense that she is not “really Asian.” For these women, their bodies defy ethnic/racial stereotypes—as constructed by Asians, Asian Americans, and the American media—and through their narratives, they challenge these one-dimensional, narrow images. Accordingly, they argue that there is “more than one way to look Asian.”

The final selection of essays in Part VI, “Skin—Redefined,” features women who write about their journey towards self-acceptance and their embrace of their skin shade. They describe colorism in their lives (as in Part I) and, most importantly, they challenge the “light-skin-is-beautiful” mantra, often in direct defiance of mothers, grandmothers, friends, and society in general. For most of the women in this section of essays, this has been a decades-long process of acceptance and reclaiming of their skin; one woman writes, “The color of my skin will no longer define me.” Another writer delves into some of her more painful experiences growing up with dark skin, though as an adult, she looks back to her “road of healing” and her evolving perception of her own worth and beauty. Another describes the “reprogramming” that is, as she describes it, a “constant work in progress,” and all the women in this section describe how they are challenging the messages of their youth. For two of the women in this section, this is a labor of love for the next generation—their daughters.

Rather than being predetermined by me (as the editor), these six categorical themes grew out of a careful analysis and reading of the essays—even of those essays that did not ultimately make it into this collection. The words within each contributor’s essay ultimately guided the overall organization of the book, and each essay reflects the fundamental theme of its assigned section. Readers may observe some degree of overlap between themes in the essays, as colorism is complex, and these essays reveal that, for many women, these six themes are connected in intricate ways. Additionally, each collection of essays begins with an introduction that describes and unpacks the theme of the section.
The Contributors

This collection includes personal narratives by Asian American women aged twenty-two to sixty-two of varying ethnicities, including Filipina (six women), Indian (five), Chinese (three), Pakistani (two), Vietnamese (two), Cambodian (one Cham, one Khmer), Japanese (one), Bangladeshi (one), and Pacific Islander (one). Two women describe themselves as multiethnic—one as Chinese/Filipina and another as Taiwanese/Chinese. It is important to recognize that the term “Asian” is a social construct that refers to those who have ancestry in Asia or the Asian subcontinent. I rely on current federal classifications of race (currently used by the US Census and defined by the Office of Management and Budget in 1997), which formally define “Asian” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.” This racial category, like others, is not based in biology, nor rooted in shared physical characteristics (e.g., certainly people of India look different than those from Japan); rather, it is a socially constructed category employed to lump together diverse groups of people for political purposes. In fact, my Indian father did not think of himself as Asian when he first immigrated to the United States, and even now, I am not sure he sees himself as such; for many South Asian immigrants, such as those from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, for example, only after years exposed to American race politics might they identify as Asian or Asian American. Nonetheless, I rely on this definition as a practical tool with which to delineate whose stories would be included in the book. Though varied in culture and physiognomy, the women included (or their ancestors) come from a similar region of the world, even if that expanse is quite large, and together they share the cultural embeddedness of skin-color discrimination. In addition to the varied ethnic backgrounds of the contributors, five identify as multiracial—as Japanese/white, Japanese/black, Chinese/black, Chinese/white, and Korean/white. For multiracial
Asian women with black or white ancestry, colorism can be particularly pronounced, and their stories add further nuance to our collective understanding of colorism. Their white or black ancestries are tied to a plethora of stereotypes and hold meaning in both Asia and the United States, further complicating onlookers’ interpretations of their skin shades. All contributors are also American citizens and were born and raised in the United States, with the exception of two women—one is a Japanese citizen but has been a US resident for seventeen years, and the other is Indo-Canadian but has lived on and off in the United States for more than twenty years.

Despite the variability in the backgrounds of the contributors, there are two notable commonalities that traverse the experiences of the majority of the women included here. First, though it is rarely revealed in their essays, it is likely that most, though not all, of the contributors are heterosexual. Because colorism is often intertwined with marriageability (i.e., light-skinned women are advantaged in the marriage market), the male gaze is, at times, implicitly invoked in stories about skin color. Some women feel objectified by men because of their light skin, or, conversely, shunned by them because they are dark. In fact, Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard’s work suggests that there is considerable pressure for women from a heteronormative perspective; one respondent in their 2007 study, a Cambodian American woman, describes the lyrics of a popular Cambodian song: “The man in the song sings out and he says that ‘You’re dark and you’re not that attractive because you’re dark.’ Then the woman goes . . . ‘Yeah, I’m dark but I could be a good wife.’”

Light skin acts as currency in the marriage market, and consequently colorism is deeply embedded in heteronormative culture and remains a calculable asset in heterosexual relationships, especially for women. The woman in the song is perceived by the man as unattractive because of her dark skin, and she attempts to counteract his appraisal by telling him that she could be a “good wife” to him. To what extent LGBTQ people feel this pressure from potential partners remains unknown, though certainly this is an area ripe for inquiry.
Second, the majority of the contributors are middle-class. Their class status is particularly important given the potential protection it confers; privileged backgrounds arguably mediate their experiences with skin-color bias and, to some extent, lessen its impact in job and marriage markets. Dark skin is assessed as a liability in Asian cultures, though those with high status may find that their education, high-status occupations, and money offset its weight. Though they are not immune to colorism (as their stories clearly reveal), readers should recognize that women from less privileged backgrounds may have more pronounced adverse encounters with skin-color discrimination. This fact cannot be overstated. The intersectionality of skin shade and social class undoubtedly affects the experiences of Asian American women.

Despite these shared commonalities, the women included here vary in ethnicity and, for some, race. They range widely in age. They are mothers, daughters, sisters, undergraduate and graduate students, writers and storytellers, scholars, and activists—all with diverse interests, occupations, and life stories. For more information about each contributor, biographies of each are included at the end of the book.

A Final Note

This project was a labor of love, and perhaps the most personal project that I have worked on to date in my professional career. Skin-color discrimination is a contentious issue in many Asian American communities (including mine), as well as in many other racial communities across the United States and around the world. This book was challenging to write because I worried throughout the process of writing and editing that I was “airing dirty laundry”—exposing something that many are not particularly proud to openly talk about—especially with those outside of our communities. Many of us, as scholars, as activists, and as Americans more generally, may be open to discussing white supremacy and racial inequality in America, but we may be more hesitant to talk about the bias that happens in our own
communities and sometimes even within our families. However, colorism parallels racism in many ways, and we must be willing to bring it to the surface, name it, point it out, and most importantly, talk about it with each other and others.

As a mixed-race woman, I also struggled with how much to include of my own personal story because I grew up, to some extent, on the periphery of the Indian community. I was raised in a multiracial family, in a white suburb, and primarily attended predominantly white schools. For these reasons, I was shielded in many ways from colorism. Also, because of my light skin, I am privileged in America and in the Indian community, and I did not want my experience to take up too much space in the book or take away from other women’s voices—especially from women who have been the most disadvantaged by colorism. Having said that, however, I wanted the book to be a wide platform to give voice to diverse women—including those of varying skin shades (light and dark), different Asian ethnicities, and even varied racial backgrounds. Because of my own multiracial background, it was particularly important for me to include the stories of multiracial Asian women because I knew that their experiences would add further understanding to the politics of skin color.

Finally, I thank every woman who contributed an essay to this collection. Sharing personal stories is not easy, and even more difficult is writing about our families in ways that do not always cast the most flattering light. Even for me personally, I struggled with how much to share and how much I had a right to share, given that some of my stories involved not just me but also my close family members. No doubt, each contributor had to make difficult decisions about what she felt comfortable sharing with the world and what she would leave out. I hope that when reading the book, readers recognize the vulnerable position that each woman put herself in (and sometimes her family members) in order to tell her story. Each woman is bold and brave, and I am thankful for their contributions—all of which are beautiful, powerful, honest, thoughtful, and, most importantly, graciously allow us an intimate view into their lives.

To each woman who contributed to this book, thank you.