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Interviewing the “Father” of Colorism Studies: A Conversation with Dr. Ronald E. Hall

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Abstract

In anticipation of the Journal of Colorism Studies Special Issue and the Inaugural Ronald E. Hall Conference on Colorism, guest editors Dr. Gilmore and Dr. Carpenter interviewed Dr. Ronald E. Hall on his life and research regarding colorism.

A Brief Introduction About the Father of Colorism Studies

As guest editors for the Journal of Colorism Studies, we had the pleasure of interviewing renowned clinician and scholar Dr. Ronald E. Hall in anticipation of the inaugural Ronald E. Hall Conference on Colorism. For those who do not know, Dr. Hall is a professor in the School of Social Work in the College of Social Science at Michigan State University. Dr. Hall has spent most of his professor career as a clinical social worker and academic advocating and researching the global phenomenon of colorism through quantitative and qualitative data. His dissertation conceptualized the Bleaching Syndrome to illuminate the nuances, complexities, and specificities

of skin tone stratification and discrimination among people of color. Dr. Hall's research on colorism comprises more than 300 (co)-authored publications, interviews, and presentations. His notable book credits include *The Color Complex*, initially published in 1992 (revised in 2013). In 2003, Dr. Hall won the Mellen Prize for Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship for the publication of *Skin Color as a Post-Colonial Issue Among Asian-Americans*. His most recent books include *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Colorism: Beyond Black & White* (2022) and the Routledge International Handbook on Colorism: *Bigotry Beyond Borders* (2023).

Dr. Hall's decades-long contributions to the social sciences field regarding colorism have allowed him to give lectures on colorism both domestically and internationally. From Lewiston, ME, Washington D.C., Mumbai, India, Johannesburg, South Africa, to Paramaribo Suriname, Dr. Hall has spoken worldwide on skin color issues. Further, Dr. Hall's expertise on colorism allowed him to testify as an expert witness for the United States' first African American colorism litigation in *Morrow v. IRS*, Atlanta Federal District Court (1990). Dr. Hall's distinguished scholarship on colorism has shaped so many lives and academic careers—so much so that Dr. Donnamaria Culbreth has dubbed Dr. Hall the father of colorism studies. In this interview with Dr. Hall, our conversation transverses multiple subjects, such as: the importance of colorism studies, how understudied colorism is in social science research, its connection to racism, healing from colorism, and the future of the field.

Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Amir Gilmore (AG): Dr. Hall, it's truly an honor to be in the space with you. We are excited to talk to you about your insights—and everything you have brought to the field of colorism studies. My name is Amir Gilmore. I'm an assistant professor in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education at Washington State University. I am joined here by my colleague, Dr. Vikki Carpenter.

Vikki Carpenter (VC): I'm an assistant professor at Heritage University in Toppenish, WA. Heritage University is one of two universities that are on tribal land but are not Indigenous universities. I finished my Ph.D. in Psychology, and my dissertation got me into colorism. It is exciting to meet you and be here with you.

Part I

AG: Dr. Hall, could you introduce yourself and your work in the field to those unfamiliar with you?

Ronald E Hall (RE): Well. I grew up with the trials and tribulations that I usually would expect that an African American might have living in a very Eurocentric culture such as the United States. I do a lot of outside reading, and one of my favorite personalities is the great Albert Einstein. When people think about Einstein, they pay attention to his mathematical facility; obviously, few of us have that gift. What impressed me about Einstein—and I've read several of his biographies- was not his potential in math but his ability to think outside the box. And that's something I thought I could and always have done. It didn't sit well with many of my teachers,

but I was incompatible with studying things I had to study and having people paint reality for me (regarding race). We talk a lot about the issue of race and racism, but I didn't ever see it as race. We speak regarding race, but we act and operate regarding skin color. And I didn't understand why everybody was spending so much time talking about the issue of race.

AG: What do you mean by that?

RH: So, I started writing about the issue of race after I was a clinical social worker in Detroit, Michigan. Most of my clients were African American, and many had schizophrenia and manic depression. When we go into sessions, I want to talk about their support systems and try to help them with life. Somehow, without my input, the issue of colorism always crept into the conversation. This issue of colorism came up so often in my sessions that I said, "Well, I need to be informed about this because I didn't get that much instruction when I was a student." As African Americans, we are all aware of colorism, but virtually nothing is written on it. I needed to understand how colorism could be so life-threatening, and it was hardly unwritten about. So, at that point, I switched from studying schizophrenia, which I thought would be my expertise, to starting and studying writing about the issue of colorism. Studying skin tone complexion, I realize the complexities of those with light and dark skin and the pain and hurt they expressed in session.

(This realization) started to recall many memories from my childhood. I'm a quarter Cherokee Indian, but I look like a "typical African American" person. Now, my father was half Cherokee. My mother is very "African-esque" in her physical features, so no one would ever question whether she was Black. If you saw my father, you would never think he was African American. You would probably think he was Puerto Rican, and he never brought it up. My father was always getting the question: "What are you?" And so, I thought maybe people could look at his wife and look at his kids and never have to ask that question. Had he wanted to, he could have very easily passed...

VC: Wow [long pause]. The issue of color and colorism was ever-present in your own family upbringing. Dr. Hall, how did the phenomenon of colorism manifest in your research?

RH: When I got ready to write my dissertation, I collected a sample of 200 students in South Georgia, and I found a correlation between skin color as an independent variable, skin color and education, skin color and occupation, skin color, and occupational prestige. And it was a projective technique. So obviously, these were students, so they were not in their careers yet. I asked them to project what they expected to be once they graduated, and all the light-complected students expected to make more money and more occupational prestige.

When I graduated from school in the late eighties, I was fortunate enough to be called to testify as the expert witness (on) what would be the nation's first case of colorism involving African Americans. That was *Morrow v. the Internal Revenue Service*, Atlanta, Federal District Court. The case was about a lighter-skinned African American woman from Seattle, Washington, who had moved to Atlanta to work for the Internal Revenue Service. Her supervisor at the IRS was a darker-skinned African American woman from New Orleans, Louisiana. Tensions rose, and one thing led to another, and you had this woman filing suit against the IRS supervisor. The judge

didn't decide in her favor at the case's conclusion. Still, he did decide officially that skin color is actionable, and the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) surprisingly took up that position because they are usually situated based on race.

AG: I am surprised by the judge's ruling myself. Nevertheless, what a tremendous honor being the expert witness of the first colorism case!

RH: Well... Several people misquoted and referenced me as the expert witness for this nation's first discrimination case. And I and I'm a little anal about this. This is not true. There was a professor at Harvard... I won't mention her name. She wrote an excellent article. I think it was the American Journal of Sociology making that point, giving me the credit. I called her, and I corrected her about it. She wasn't happy about that. I didn't tell her this, but if she had done her homework, she would have discovered that the first case of colorism was not (among) African Americans; it was Latinos in 1980. The first case was *Felix v. Marquez*. The issue of color gets studied and overstudied as if it only pertains to African Americans.

AG: I did not know. I stayed corrected.

RH: Yeah. After the case, the media gave it all this attention. You had many people doing news shows. The public needed to be more informed about the facts regarding the case. So, I said, "What I'm going to have to do is I'm going to have to get data collected from other people of color." At the time, I could not get funding from my university, so I used my personal funds to travel the world and collect research. It took me about 12 years to study every major racial population in the world. I facilitated focus groups, and I've collected survey data. I even traveled to a Native American reservation in North Dakota and found nothing I didn't expect to find. But the only difference is each group has their own nuanced way of expressing their colorism. We tend to think, well, it's African Americans specifically. No. If I'm pressed to point to one racial/ethnic group where colorism is most intense, Asians, Asian Americans, and people of Asian descent. When I did my work in Japan, such as Osaka and Tokyo, I'd always go to the libraries and peruse some of the literature. I found books in Osaka—the few I could find in English that trace colorism back to Japan's twelfth century—before Europeans arrived. There is a saying in Japanese culture that "light-skinned compensates for 7 blemishes." If a woman has a cleft palate, club foot, or some other impairment but has light skin, she qualifies as ideal.

VC: So, Dr. Hall, from your research, how would you define colorism?

RH: Hmm...that has been on my mind with all these "experts" on colorism. They are constantly talking about the disadvantages of having dark skin. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines colorism as prejudice against a darker-complected person of color....people of color. That's not true.

Colorism is simply prejudice based on melanin content. It's just that light-complected persons of color have different issues. This is not to take away from the plight of darker-complected people—the social dynamics are just different—they are very contextual. Moreover, we talk about colorism, which usually pertains to women.

I did a small 5- 10-minute interview on a documentary Oprah did a couple of years ago called “Light Girls,” and Bill Duke was a director. I told him at that time he needed to do a documentary that tells the side of what African Americans or men of color experience. In my latest book—I’m in the process of getting it published, called *Reverse Colorism*. I wrote a chapter on Light Skin, pretty boys. If you go back to the antebellum...I am talking about the light-skinned Black men with the green eyes. Those are the guys that all the Black women want. And in professional sports, I got references from people like Kobe Bryant and Draymond Green when you come into the NBA. Or even if you go to the NFL, you have to prove your manhood because you don’t get the same respect that darker-skinned athletes get. Nobody is talking about that.... the average light-skinned brother out here, that’s what they have to go through. They are always immediately disliked or going to be challenged by the darker-skinned brothers...but that’s the reality.

So, I could talk (for) hours. All my life’s work has been dedicated to doing away with this race discourse and changing it to skin color because race is subjective—you can’t quantify it. Skin color is quantifiable. I can measure the amount of melanin in your skin. So, if I say you have X amount of melanin and another person has Y amount of melanin, you can measure that. For instance, you can differentiate race on a survey, but it does not have a mathematical significance. So, anybody can say they are White or Black because it is subjective, but if I say I have more melanin than you, that is simply a measurement.

So, let’s do away with race. Let’s eliminate race from all matters of discourse. I know it’s a heavy lift. But I want to see laws and policies move from race and racism to color and colorism.

We’d be more exact that way.

PART II

VC: What is the importance of studying colorism or color stratification?

RH: Similar to race, but colorism is much more objective. It’s an indicator of the quality of life for a person. Colorism doesn’t pit Black against White necessarily, but you could argue that it pits dark-skinned people against light-skinned people. I use the term called light supremacy. For many people of color, talking about colorism is a taboo subject. We do not want to discuss it publicly, but we know it exists. We don’t want to get into that because that can recapitulate a version of racism all over again. As a clinical therapist, studying and writing about colorism is crucial because if you have a problem, you must confront it before you can resolve it. It is hard to move from the taboo.

They were researchers, Charles Parrish, at the University of Chicago, who looked at colorism like I do. People were talking about colorism back in the 1940s. But I think when the 1960s came along, the issue of colorism kind of “died down” because Black people were talking about Black liberation. However, the case had never actually gone away. If it wasn’t such a serious issue, it would be laughable. For example, the “brown paper bag test” on college campuses, particularly HBCUs. If your date was light-skinned, they got in for free. But if you had a date with darker

skin than a paper bag, you had to pay a surcharge to admit them. It is unbelievable, but that is the reality we created for ourselves.

What is unique about colorism is that it cuts across different racial groups and different nationalities. It also has class implications for many issues that we think of as racial issues. Nell Painter wrote a book called *The History of White People*. I highly recommend that book. She said that when Blacks and Whites arrived in the new world, poor Whites were associated with poor Blacks. Wealthy Whites want nothing to do with poor Whites, and they would rob wealthy Whites. So, these wealthy upper-class Whites, which might have been 2 or 3% of the population, devised a plan to find ways to get working-class, poor White people to identify with them. Sound familiar? So, what did they do? According to Painter? If you were White, you got to carry a gun, testify and trial, or be able to sell alcohol. These are things that non-White people couldn't do. So poor White people no longer identified as Irish, British, or Dutch. Now, they were White. They do not recognize that they have much more in common with poor Black people or poor non-White people of color than the rich White people. Everyone has been carrying on this issue of race; they get lost in it every time. And this strategy has been working for over 200-300 years. It is amazing to me.

Part III

AG: So, as a follow-up, Dr. Hall, is studying color or color stratification more effective, or a better variable to really focus on than race?

RH: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, it is because it's subjective. It's not my opinion. If I say that darker-complected persons are routinely discriminated against more, I can take a measure of that amount. But if I say that Black people get discriminated against, it can be a more complex notion to prove. Look, you have some Black people with the same advantages as White people. Some White people are darker-complected, like Greeks and even some Sicilians. I have not encountered many, but I have met some Italians who have been attacked and are almost as dark as I am. They'll sweat up and down that they are White, but if people did not know them, they would think they are a person of color.

At the end of the day, colorism is just objective.

PART IV

VC: You have given us a lot to think about here! Our next question is, why does color evasiveness and race neutrality remain so much of a mainstay in the social milieu of the United States?

RH: Well, I touched on just a little bit. It's Eurocentrism. What I describe is Eurocentrism, and I'm currently working on a paper for the *Journal of Black Studies* and I'm doing a comparative analysis between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. Eurocentrism is not a new phenomenon. In academia, Eurocentrism is used to direct everything about society—the perspective, particularly the view. And we talk about history, break that up into two words, his story. Whoever has the power gets to tell history the way they want. History has been rewritten to favor persons of

European descent. So, all the atrocities and brutality that occurred when settlers arrived here in the Americas have been flattened.

We talk about this issue of wokeness now; those anti-wokeness people want you to think that Europeans wanted religious freedom, and (when) they arrived here, they made friends with the Natives; they wanted a better life with their children. It didn't happen that way. There was a lot of brutality, sexual exploitation, violence, and stereotypes. If you were to ask 100 people where the scalping comes from, automatically, you're going to get responses of, well, it was obvious the Indians. Scalping started as something settlers did to Indians and what you would do to control the Indian population. If you brought in an Indian scalp, the Government would pay you.

But motion pictures completely reverse that! So, anyone who's not who doesn't read will think that scalping started with Native Americans. Eurocentrism has done a very effective job of getting people to believe that. So, I would say the reason why there's so much paid to the issue of race. Well, that's just a Eurocentric perspective. And I compared that to the Afrocentric perspective. One of the psychological and educational differences between persons of European descent and persons of non-European descent is their perspective on culture. Cultural singularity is a significant phenomenon in the United States. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois came up with the notion and talked about African Americans, which pertains to all people of color. We have this double consciousness; Dolores Norton would call it the dual perspective. So, as an African American man, I have to know how to navigate Black culture because that's who I am. But I also must learn how to navigate Euro-American culture. Because that's where I live. That's survival. If you're Native American or Latino, it's similar. Euro-Americans operate differently because their native culture is the standard culture. So, they will encounter challenges with stepping outside of their cultural norm and understanding or empathizing with other groups. This is not to say that all Euro-Americans have this cultural singularity, but many will face challenges depending on what they learn and experience beyond the standard culture.

PART IV

VC: Switching gears to academic research and publishing. Dr. Hall, despite the evidence of colorism permeating all facets of social life, the attempts to characterize the multi-faceted and complex social phenomenon have fallen secondary to social science research due to the primacy and gravity of race. Why does this continue to persist?

RH: Well, I don't know a lot of scholars who write about colorism around the country. I am sure people are writing and publishing that I am unaware of, but I have a pretty good feel for the field, as I have extensively written chapters and edited books. Most of the scholars on colorism are people of color. The scholars that come to mind are Drs. Margaret Hunter, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Linda Barton, and Dr. Culbreth. Those are some of the people in the trenches doing the work. Dr. Culbreth, I mean, started the first journal on colorism. That's a huge accomplishment; her name must be front and center.

A part of this answer has to do with Eurocentrism. Only a handful of White American scholars are qualified on this topic. As far as I know, outside of Dr. Joni Hersch, the only other White

scholar qualified to speak on colorism is Dr. Wendy Roth—whom I worked with when she was a Ph.D. student at Harvard. Not many White American scholars outside of those two are doing this work. I am emphasizing to make a point because, as it so happens, the people emerging as the experts and leaders in this field are people of color and in a Eurocentric perspective academy that doesn't fit the narrative. I get a lot of calls from outstanding students around the country who want me to be on their doctoral committee. I got a call from a young lady at an Ivy League school. I'm not going to mention the school. I don't want to denigrate her, but she desperately wanted me on her committee. She was also from the ivory tower, so I don't think the other committee members would have been comfortable deferring to a person of color—because that's all they could have done. I would have been the one who would have directed that doctoral committee, and I do not think the committee would have liked that because the Eurocentric narrative doesn't call for it. It must be the Eurocentric leadership. The Eurocentric perspective. Their centered experience and scholars of color would be secondary to that. That's just the cold, brutal truth.

PART VI

AG: Okay, staying on this topic about academia. Dr. Hall, what advice would you give if you had an undergrad or a graduate student studying colorism?

RH: I look at it beyond a profession, but a necessity for life. If I weren't doing what I was doing now, I would still be studying and maybe writing about colorism, though my job would get secondary attention [laughs]. I feel very lucky, very fortunate that I study what I want to study and get paid. I'm eligible for retirement, but I will research colorism as long as possible. If I was retired, my volunteer work would be related to colorism. I feel like I was put on this planet to do this work. Many opportunities have come my way; coincidentally, it's almost like there was a laid out for me. I'm going to be working with a university in South Africa. They contacted me. They want to start a Colorism Institute. They want to be the center for colorism in the world. This isn't just about Africans or African Americans, but about humanity.

Another piece of advice I'd give is to read. Our current political climate is actively working against our biology as humans. For instance, the healthiest offspring are those with the greatest mix of the gene pool—that's just a biological fact. However, there was a time when interracial marriage was illegal because we're such "intelligent human beings." We took something natural, that is, to marry across races, and made marrying within race the norm because "we're so smart." So, I'd argue to get away from politics and try to pay more attention to science. That's what I always try to do. If they're interested in going into this area, I tell them to read, read, read, reread. This is going to be a challenge. But kids should get some of this information as soon as they understand the difference between colors. I mean, Kenneth Clark did this when he did the doll studies. In the 1940's, little girls who were not even old enough to articulate racial differentiations understood which doll was "better." So, they had this notion about color before they could articulate it.

PART VII

AG: Dr. Hall, with Frantz Fanon on my mind, I want to read this excerpt: “I only have one solution. It is to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me.” How and why is colorism an absurd drama that’s staged around all of us?

RH: Colorism is so divisive. The fact of the matter is we are territorial animals. Race was invented to control or limit wealth and access to a quality life. When I think about humans as a species, we look at race almost exclusively as a different species, like a pseudoscience. Historically, society has considered Black people and White people a different race. Even during the Holocaust with Nazi Germany, Jewish people were seen as a different race. We, as people, have this inclination to want to divide ourselves up to control wealth or the quality of life. Eventually, these notions become reality.

In my specialty, a clinical person in social work is to study human behavior. One of the things that has amazed me is this bit that I got from Einstein and its relativity. We don’t have a reality in what we consider reality. That’s something that’s created. To make that point, hypothetically, I decided that I want the sky to be interpreted as or described as green. Now, when you look up, you see the sky is blue. Einstein would say, well, that depends upon the perspective of your observation, and I guarantee you that if I passed the law declaring the sky is green—maybe not this generation, but the coming generation will not only interpret the sky as being green, but they will also argue with you that it’s not blue and you should obviously know that it’s green.

So, the powers that be created race, and we reinforce it. We’ve created a reality for people that we don’t have. We can talk about what is accurate, and that is always going to be debatable and subject to challenge. This is why you have what’s going on politically in this country. Our political divisions are situated in the fact that some people have a different version of what’s real and what’s not. Sometimes, I’m just amazed, but the human psyche is malleable based on power, wealth, and control period.

PART VIII

VC: Dr. Hall, our second to last final question is, what is the future of colorism studies?

RH: In the 21st century, interracial marriages have skyrocketed because that’s the norm. In this digital media age, we can understand people who are different than us versus reading about them or hearing things about them. We have integrated neighborhoods now. We have integrated schools. We have integrated friendships. The “coming” of the future, well, it’s occurring right now. I do not have all the answers, but I think the future depends on us taking a more civilized approach to our life space. We have to recognize that we are members of the same species...and that’s as good a reason for us to stop killing each other. Because I mean, we’re destroying the planet. I can go on a massive tangent about what is happening right now with climate change. At some point, we’re going to be confronted with our own limitations, and getting above and beyond those limitations is going to be contingent upon our ability to get along, and getting along is going to depend upon the issue of color. Confront that. Overcome that, and we’re on our way.

PART IX

VC: Okay, Dr. Hall, our final question is, how do we suspend the damage that color stratification has done to many communities? What does healing look like, and is it even possible?

RH: Well, I think it will be the outcome of the wokeness versus anti-wokeness. This country's political movement promotes ignorance because it's an ugly part of our history. As a country, we must celebrate knowledge and learning over ignorance and dare to confront the most painful historical events. To the letter, the average American has been oriented not to know Black America meaningfully. I was at a conference at Stanford years ago, and I had a private audience with John Hope Franklin. Some might say that John Hope Franklin is alone in his status as a storyteller. He had said, "If you ever had to write the real history, the real story about what was done to Black America. It'd be riots in the street. It is that ugly." There are books continually coming about these atrocities. We must have the courage to confront some of the uglier aspects of our reality. But at this point, "the wound" is obviously very open—so much so that we can't even apologize. Until we collectively confront our history as a country, resolve it, and move on, there will be no healing. Until then, we will continue to sustain the problem. We have to confront it.

Do that. And we're good to go.

AG: Well, I think that's all our questions. Dr. Carpenter, do you have any closing remarks?

VC: No, besides that, this was absolutely amazing. I can't thank you enough for your time. I'm just kind of...soaking it all in.

AG: Dr. Hall. It's been an honor and a pleasure to meet you...you know, as a young Black scholar. Usually, when I read an author's work, I do not have the privilege to converse with them. Many are no longer alive. So, it is truly a blessing to talk to you. We are so thankful for your time.

Notes About the Contributors

Amir Gilmore, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education at Washington State University. His interdisciplinary background in Cultural Studies, Africana Studies, and Education allows him to traverse the boundaries across the social sciences, the arts, and the humanities. Amir's broad research interests are Black Aesthetics, Black Masculinities, Afrofuturism, Afro-Pessimism, and the political economy of schooling.

Vikki Carpenter, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Social Science at Heritage University. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology from Keiser University, her master's in criminal justice from the University of Cincinnati, and her bachelor's from Washington State University. Her research background lies within intersectionality, colorism, and criminality to move research beyond the Eurocentric default to better understand the experiences and intersections of the human experience.

Ronald E. Hall, Ph.D., is a professor in the School of Social Work in the College of Social Science at Michigan State University. His research interests include mental health (individual/group psychotherapy), cutaneous chroma, intra-racial racism, Bleaching Syndrome, and the black male Cool Pose concept. Dr. Hall's social work research interests are colorism litigation, special populations, human behavior, and the social environment. Conceptualizing the Bleaching Syndrome, Dr. Hall's colorism research comprises more than 300 (co)-authored publications, interviews, and presentations. His notable book credits include *The Color Complex*, *Skin Color as a Post-Colonial Issue Among Asian-Americans*, and *The Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Colorism: Beyond Black & White*. His latest book is titled *The Routledge International Handbook on Colorism: Bigotry Beyond Borders*.