***Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Colorism: Beyond Black and White***

**Angie Kennedy**

Hello, my name is Angie Kennedy, and I am the Associate Director for Research at the School of Social Work at Michigan State. Welcome to our Research Spotlight, where we profile some of the exciting work being done by School faculty members. Today I am joined by Dr. Ronald Hall, a Professor here at the School. Dr. Hall’s work explores skin color and colorism, both historically and today. He recently published a book, entitled *Interdisciplinary perspectives on colorism: Beyond Black and White,* with Routledge. Today we are going to talk a bit about some of the main themes of the book. Thank you so much for joining me, Dr. Hall!

**Ron Hall**

You’re welcome.

**Angie Kennedy**

Okay, to start out, could you define what you mean by colorism, for listeners who may be unfamiliar with the term?

**Ron Hall**

The way I use colorism, it’s very much similar to racism. But racism is a transgression that’s founded on the basis of your racial category. Colorism is similar, but it’s founded on the basis of your complexion or the amount of melanin contained in your skin. And you know melanin is that ingredient that gives you complexion.

**Angie Kennedy**

I see. So, are there any other ways that colorism differs from racism, that you can…?

**Ron Hall**

Yes. I think racism is much more political. It’s a political construct, and you know it has no biological significance other than what we contrive. Colorism is just a manifestation of differentiation, not only between racial groups, but also within racial groups. And you know race doesn’t really operate within racial boundaries, so you have to have two different races in order for racism to be apparent. But, you could have any ethnic group, any racial group, and colorism will be relevant.

**Angie Kennedy**

I see. In your book you discuss different forms of racism, including primary, intermediate, and tertiary racism. Could you describe these and perhaps offer some examples?

**Ron Hall**

Primary racism is racism that functions between, for example, persons of African descent and persons of Euro-American descent. Secondary racism is a type of racism that occurs among people of color. Maybe a Latino person and a person of Asian descent. And tertiary racism is a type of racism or transgression that occurs between members of the same racial ethnic group. So that may take place between Asians and Asians, or between Latinos and Latinos, or between African Americans and African Americans. And I think the examples, if you consider primary racism, there are so many cases that the numbers just escape me. You have cases of discrimination that are brought in judicial circumstances where you may have a person of color discriminated against and they sue in civil court on the basis of not getting a particular job, not being treated fairly. The tertiary racism, it appears to be new, but it’s not as new as people might think. In 1990, I testified as an expert witness in America’s first case of colorism litigation. And I’m always disciplined about how I cite that case, because I’ve been referred to in the literature as the expert witness for the first case of colorism (which is tertiary racism) in the country, and I’m not. I’m actually the witness for the first case that occurred between African Americans. And that was Mahler [Walker] v. the Internal Revenue Service, where you had a lighter complected African American sue a darker skinned African American on the basis of being discriminated against in her job as a clerk at the Internal Revenue Service. In fact, in fact, the very first case that I’ve come across in the literature was a case involving Latinos, and that was Felix v. Manquez, which occurred a full ten years earlier in 1980. So some of those individuals who reference me simply have not done an adequate review of the literature. And of course there are a number of cases where you have people of color suing other groups on the basis of skin color discrimination, which we might refer to as racism, but they don’t get as much attention, I don’t think. But the case with tertiary racism has pretty much exploded since I first testified in 1990. Because I think a lot of people didn’t know that they could sue on the basis of complexion, and so now that they can sue, the EEOC, for example (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), has taken up a lot of those cases.

**Angie Kennedy**

Interesting. So, tertiary racism, then, is sort of like within-group or intragroup colorism, is what you’re describing.

**Ron Hall**

Exactly.

**Angie Kennedy**

Mm hmm. So you state that colorism has been a taboo topic until recently. Why has it been taboo, do you think, and what has changed to bring it more to the fore?

**Ron Hall**

Well I think it has been taboo because—my perspective, I’ve always said that racism and discrimination is not a Black-White phenomenon. It’s an American phenomenon. Therefore, if you were born and raised and acculturated as an American, you’re racist, you have these racial discriminatory tendencies. And it’s only manifested among people of color by way of colorism. Now I think that a lot of us feel embarrassed to acknowledge that, because if you are a person of color and your complaints about being discriminated against by your Americans are somehow diminished when I can point to cases, when I can point to the literature, where people of color act out the same kinds of transgressions. So I think people are, people of color in particular, are reluctant to bring this into the public domain for feelings of embarrassment. And I think my case, in 1990, allowed this to be discussed in a public forum, so people have more confidence in talking about it, because it’s difficult to deny when we have so much evidence that it exists. And I think what has changed is the issue around colorism has become more prevalent in American discourse. So, there are colleagues that I encounter who have no idea that this is going on, but now, CNN, I did a documentary for Oprah a couple,…in 2015, that put this out into the public domain, and so it’s gone pretty much mainstream. Years ago it just wasn’t talked about.

**Angie Kennedy**

Right. So it sounds like partly it’s just sort of naming it, naming this phenomenon and then that helps then, usher in this conversation about it, or this ongoing discussion about it.

**Ron Hall**

Yes, and publicly acknowledging it.

**Angie Kennedy**

You argue that colorism is a more objective and applicable term, compared to racism. Can you share a bit about what you mean by that?

**Ron Hall**

Yes. Race is a contrived concept, it’s something that, there have been a number of so-called scholars, [who] have decided it was a social reality. And because of their credentials, their status in the social sciences, people accepted a non-fact, as fact. Well, you cannot measure race. Now of course there will be statisticians who will disagree with that, but when you find a person’s racial identity on a survey, for example, there’s frequently categories to designate your race. But what you get from that designation is something called nominal data, and you know that nominal data has no mathematical significance. Which is to say that, if *x* is 1, and *y* is 2, *y* is not twice the value of *x*, because the mathematical significance doesn’t exist. On the other hand, when I talk about complexion or skin color, we’re actually referring to the measure of melanin that one has in their skin. So when you have significant amounts of melanin, that can be reflected numerically or mathematically, and once you get mathematical significance, you can apply colorism to any mathematical methodology in existence. And also, I think being more objective, if you are a person who studies colorism and you’re informed about melanin, then we can draw the same conclusions, where the amount of melanin or skin color is concerned. There are individuals who—and this addresses the concept of passing—there are individuals who will define the same person as being a member of a different race, because it’s subjective, they interpret it differently. So during the antebellum period, there were any number of particularly mixed-race, what’s called “quadroons” or “octoroon” African Americans, who were passing for white. And no one could object to that because it was a subjective interpretation.

**Angie Kennedy**

Right. You have devoted much of your career to studying the importance of skin color and the role of colorism. How does this book fit with all of your prior work, and what do you hope readers will take away from the book?

**Ron Hall**

Well, it fits with my prior work in that I hope I expose the readers to something that they had no knowledge of. I had a difficult time struggling to get publishers, to get journal articles published, because when I started researching skin color, colorism, it was not only a taboo subject, but I think it was considered academic exotica. You know, I would get rejections from journals and they would always say something to the effect that what I was writing about belonged in a specific journal, or a journal that was keyed into something as limiting, that was more limited than what they were looking for. So now that it’s, I don’t think it’s quite become mainstream, but it’s certainly, it’s a lot more mainstream now in 2023 than it was 25 or 30 years ago. And, I hope that anything that I write about the subject has a positive way of informing people who may not have had any knowledge of the existence of colorism. At some point, in the not too distant future, I think this is going to be the mainstay of the 21st and 22nd century, and beyond.

**Angie Kennedy**

So, partly then, it sounds like you just, a goal is just to reach a broader audience, you know, and kind of keep that conversation going, as more people understand.

**Ron Hall**

Yes. Because the more people who are informed and who acknowledge this issue, then the more they are willing to accept it as reality. My next book, which I’m currently working on, is going to be called—I’m trying, I’m debating with my publisher, which is another book with Routledge—I want to call it *The Encyclopedia of Colorism,* but Routledge has already had a title in mind, which I’m debating with them right now; I’ve signed a contract with them. But this will be a book, it’s going to be an edited book, and it will consist of authors from the seven continents in the world. Now obviously, although there are seven continents, there are only six that are inhabited, so we won’t include the Antarctic. But I have scholars from Europe, from Asia, from Africa, from South America, all have signed on to write a chapter about colorism from their national or cultural perspective. And so once this gets out in an international context, I think that will be even more convincing to people who might not have had any idea that this existed in the past. This has always been, but it’s only recently been talked about or acknowledged.

**Angie Kennedy**

Mm hmmm. It’s very interesting, that international perspective, and just the ways probably across continents or countries, that there are similarities but also, you know, differences grounded in history.

**Ron Hall**

Yes. Yes. Yes.

**Angie Kennedy**

Is there anything else that you’d like to add, today, just in terms of your work, or the book, or upcoming projects?

**Ron Hall**

Well, ultimately, what I want to do—and it’s kind of a, maybe beyond my reach at this point, but maybe someone will pick up the ball and carry it after my work—but my goal has always been to *completely*, to *completely* do away with the concept of race. I want us to look at race and consider that something of antiquity. I’d like to be able to pick up a book one day, and go to the dictionary, and look up the term race, and it will only refer to a athletic event, and that will be it.

**Angie Kennedy**

So that all of us sort of move beyond this, what you think of as this antiquated, this term that—no basis in biology—has run its course, and we need to move on.

**Ron Hall**

Yes. Yes. Yeah. Exactly.

**Angie Kennedy**

Well, thank you so much for sharing this work with us, I really appreciate, and, yes, thank you.

**Ron Hall**

You’re welcome.