

Intraracial Racism, Passing, and the Curryys

One of the most intriguing examples of skin-color racism is found within the black community. Light-skinned blacks have a history of prejudice towards dark-skinned blacks. The most notorious example of this is “the paper bag test,” where black performers were told to hold a brown paper bag against their skin and, if they were darker than it, they had to go to the back of the chorus line. My dad used to tell me about how, in his “all-black” high school, there were two sets of popular kids: the light-skinned ones and the dark-skinned ones, and they did not date each other. When I was a kid, my older stepbrother’s asshole friend used to tease me about how dark I was, constantly putting his arm up against mine. How did this intraracial racism start? As you might expect, it began on slave plantations, where the common practice was for slaveowners to populate the house staff with light-skinned slaves because they considered them more beautiful than dark-skinned ones. This had the effect on dark-skinned slaves that you might expect: jealousy and distrust. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence suggesting dark-skinned slaves would not open up around light-skinned slaves because they were afraid the light-skinned slaves would report back to their slaveowners. As a result, light-skinned blacks were accepted by no one: dark-skinned blacks didn’t trust them, and whites still saw them as “black.”

No wonder they began to pass. As I write this, I am working on an article about one of Thomas Jefferson’s descendants. Many people know Jefferson had six kids with his slave Sally Hemings, but when most people hear that, they assume Sally Hemings was “black.” But she herself was the product of a slave/slaveowner union, and was actually what we would call today “biracial.” As a result, Jefferson’s kids with her were only $\frac{1}{4}$ black, and were faced with one of the most tragic paradoxes in American social history: If no one knew they were black, could they move somewhere and pass as white? At least one did, Eston. He married a white person and so did all his children, and to this day that line of Jeffersons live and identify as “white” people. After the Civil War, thousands of freed, light-skinned blacks did the same thing, moving to cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, and abandoning their black identities. When asked about their families, most would say that their parents had died, and that they had no siblings. As such, generations of blacks cut off ties with their families so they and their children could take advantage of the social and economic benefits of whiteness.

I do not know Dell, Seth, Steph, or Sydell Curry. But I do know that ever since Steph rose to national prominence as the best shooter of all time, none of them have dated or married a dark-skinned person. Google them. All family pictures are as bright as the North Star. Does that mean that they are racist towards dark-skinned black people? I don’t know. I’ve never met them. Does it mean that they might have been subconsciously conditioned enough by the narrative of white superiority to seek intimate relationships with other blacks who would not dilute the purity of their near-white bloodline? If so, they would not be the first. I suppose I will change my mind if either Seth or Sydell marries a dark-skinned brother or sister. Wouldn’t that be a sight to see?