

Pretty privilege: A conversation about colorism, femininity, and what it means to be beautiful

By Nyla Moxley, Jana Le and Taniya Guster, with support from Hayden Andersen
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MALLIKA BUBB: People who are ugly, or people who like are not pretty, like, just for, like, societal standards, like, they genuinely do get, like, in my eyes, they they're oppressed, like completely!

TANIYA: Welcome to another RadioActive Podcast. RadioActive is a program where youth come together and produce great radio at KUOW Public Radio in Seattle.

This is Taniya.

NYLA: Nyla,

JANA: and Jana.

TANIYA: Today we will be discussing pretty privilege in relation to colorism and femininity.

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JANA: In middle and elementary school, I was never considered “pretty.” I had lots of acne, and I always wore my hair up in a ponytail.

In high school, my skin cleared up, I grew some curves, and I eventually got rid of my braces. Girls started calling me pretty and boys started having crushes on me. While I’m not proud to admit it, I liked being considered “pretty.”

NYLA: I have conditional “pretty privilege” as a mixed-race woman. This means I fall into some Eurocentric standards and fall short of others.

I have always felt an underlying guilt for complaining about the shape of my nose or my hyperpigmentation because those traits can be traced back to my non-white roots.

I only have pretty privilege in racially diverse spaces where people recognize ethnic features as both attractive and familiar. In white spaces I become acutely aware of my brown skin and curls -- how both of those become demerits in the eyes of others around me.

TANIYA: That was an example of “pretty privilege,” which is defined by Urban Dictionary as...

HAYDEN: “A person who has more opportunities, and becomes more successful in life because of how attractive they are.”

NYLA: Because I’m mixed, colorism simultaneously works for me and against me. My mom is Mexican, Filipino and white. My Dad is Black and white.

As a child I had a few textbook experiences -- being compared to dirt by a girl on the playground and feces by classmates at a Bat Mitzvah. Being a lighter skinned woman of color comes with a level of pretty privilege and privilege in general.

JANA: This is an example of colorism.

HAYDEN: “Prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.”

TANIYA: The things that do make me feel feminine I feel like is being around women like my aunty or my grandmother and I think the way they have given me so much help and inspiration throughout the years.

NYLA: From Oxford, “femininity” is described as:

HAYDEN: “Qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of women or girls.”

NYLA: Femininity is not limited to women though. It’s an attribute that can be applied to anyone regardless of gender identity.

NYLA: Pretty Privilege, femininity, and colorism.

For some, these words are just ideas, but because pretty privilege is centered around Eurocentric beauty standards, it has a disproportionate impact on already marginalized communities like women, people of color, queer folks, and disabled people.

This is Mallika Bubb who is Indian and white.

MALLIKA: How it intersects with like, other identities, like racism, homophobia, stuff like that... Like, if you're like, a person of color, or whatever, but you're attractive. For me at least, like, I feel like you experience less racism than if you're, like, unattractive, and a person of color.

If you're like a lesbian, but you're like, attractive, people see it as like, cool and interesting. But whereas if you're like a lesbian, but you're like, the cargo pants lesbian, people just see it as like an 'Oh...' kind of thing.

JANA: I think one of the saddest things is that if you're a part of one of these communities, it's extremely difficult to unlearn desirability.

My mom, Khanh, is in her late 40s, yet she is still burdened by the pressure to be perceived positively by others based on her appearances.

KHANH: If I don't feel pretty, then I have to take care of myself so I look pretty. Why? So when I go out, people will think oh, look at her, she looks cute...she's nice, she looks okay, she's charming. As a woman, you always want to make yourself beautiful.

NYLA: There's a constant pressure for women to be attractive because they are hyper aware of how it affects the way people treat and perceive them -- it's exhausting. Here's Mallika.

MALLIKA: I feel like being pretty in a lot of ways is kind of, can be a way of like protecting yourself, or if you're part of some of those communities feeling like, oh, you know, if I'm prettier then I can be accepted for these other facets of my identity that that aren't as accepted.

KHANH: Everyone wants to be pretty.

NYLA: Pretty privilege and colorism become somewhat synonymous because colorism is embedded in so many different cultures and how they define beauty.

Here's Mallika again.

MALLIKA: It's very pronounced in India, especially like the marriage like market essentially there. If you're a woman, like, people will literally say like

that, you have to be like this skin tone like this range. There's like words for like, super dark skin and stuff there that they don't have here.

I think for me, personally, I've benefited from colorism a lot, because I'm half white. So like, all of my, like, a lot of my Indian relatives see me as like super pretty because of that.

JANA: My little brother and I used to laugh at our mom before bed because her face would be caked with this white cream meant to lighten her skin.

While many of the women in my life have unlearned some beauty standards, growing up in a Vietnamese family, I realized colorism runs deep.

Here are my mom's thoughts about colorism in Vietnamese culture.

KHANH: I mean, maybe there are some Asians that like having pale skin, they just think that. There are people who are proud of having brown skin as well. But in general, Vietnamese people, they like pale skin, they think it's pretty.

JANA: The beauty standard of pale skin in Asia stems from class disparities. Members of the upper class had the privilege to not work in the sun for long hours and therefore were more pale.

It's easy to have proximity to pretty privilege when you're financially privileged.

I once saw online that you shouldn't dislike your features because they're a result of generations of people falling in love with them. This statement does leave out circumstances where a child is not a result of love, but it does push towards self-acceptance.

TANIYA: For a lot of people, makeup can serve as a shield because it's so heavily associated with femininity. But while makeup can be a creative form of self-expression, it's also something that many women turn to in order to feel more feminine.

I talked to my sister Ramiya about this. Here's what Ramiya does to feel more feminine.

RAMIYA: When my hair is not done, I do not feel feminine at all. I love to keep my hair done. I don't feel like I look my best when my hair isn't done. Or if my nails aren't done, that to me, it makes me like, 'Oh, I'm not

feminine.' You know? Or just having like lip gloss on or a little bit of mascara. I don't feel like feminine enough when I don't have any of those things on.

TANIYA: Here's some advice from our interviewees.

KHANN: A lot of people think why am I not pretty? But for me, I have been given eyes, a nose, hands and legs, everything. Don't think, 'Oh she's so pretty,' and be sad, no. Your parents gave birth to you, so you look like them, and that's okay. It's something to be grateful about.

TANIYA: You are allowed to take the power away from desirability. By accepting the features you have been given, you lean away from the power that attractive features can give you.

RAMIYA: I wish more girls would know they're pretty but they don't have to wear so much makeup to feel feminine.

MALLIKA: My femininity has never had anything to do with like, the way a man has treated me... It's been very much like, an like, internal intrinsic like thing for me. And just feeling like power, like in female spaces and from other women.

I feel like I understand body dysphoria more on like a deeper level in a weird way. Because I like feel like euphoria in my body... I like really appreciate like being like a woman and like having a privilege to be born in like a female body. And being able to like feel that connection and that gender euphoria, like all the time is like such a blessing. And I like genuinely think about it. Like probably a lot for like a cis person.

Probably the biggest thing for me that's helped me think of myself as feminine or reconnect with my femininity is having conversations with people that like, just don't involve men, period.

JANA: Pretty privilege is more than just being attractive. The stories that we shared with you are examples of how pretty privilege impacts individuals. But on a systemic level, it also intersects with racism, gender inequality, class disparity, and *so much more*. Desirability-based oppression affects everyone.

Fixating on how desirable your appearance is can lead to associating the way you look with your personal identity.

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If you're not happy with the way you look, then what does that say about your sense of self?

Okay, this has been kind of heavy... so now for some wise words.

TANIYA: Don't change yourself for other people. Don't try to fit in because you hate the feeling of being excluded. Stay true to yourself and who you are. If other people don't like you don't try to explain why they should. Life is too wonderful to sit there and waste your knowledge on friends who waste your time.

NYLA: Things have only gotten better since I've let go of standards I could never obtain. I've stopped tearing through my curls with a brush, using two mirrors to obsess over my side profile, and instead I now dress how *I* want, experiment with brown eyeliners, pink blushes and let myself indulge in the things that make *me* feel feminine as opposed to yearning for an unattainable and Westernized image of femininity.

JANA: I think the most powerful thing you can do to unlearn the need to appeal to beauty standards and be attractive is to be neutral—not beautiful nor ugly, just neutral. You can just exist as yourself.

[Music fades out]

JANA: Thank you for listening to our podcast! You can find more youth-made audio stories like this one at kuow.org/radioactive.

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TANIYA: This show was produced by Nyla Moxley, Taniya Guster, and Jana Le, with support from our mentor Hayden Yu Anderson. It was edited by Troy Landrum Jr.

JANA: A huge thank you to our interviewees and the RadioActive staff!

I'm Jana.

NYLA: And I'm Nyla.

TANIYA: I'm Taniya. Ok, bye bye!