

Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color

Nina G. Jablonski

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RACE AND SKIN COLOR VARIABILITY: BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

The United States census, which gathers demographic information decennially about those living within its borders, has standard categories of race that individuals must choose. Those categories are White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Additionally, a person may choose Hispanic or non-Hispanic for their ethnicity. Yet, many wonder if it is meaningful to be categorized in this manner. There is significant debate in anthropology if race exists. Some believe it exists biologically, others socially, and still others not at all. Many argue whether or not these categories are good approximations for one's ancestry and whether these racial categories are substantive.

Nina Jablonski's most recent contribution to this debate is her book, *Living Color*.

Jablonski goes beyond the normal scope of the debate, where one traditionally chooses to focus on race either socially or biologically. She writes about both the biological and social constructs of skin color around the world. By choosing to write in this manner, Jablonski shows how important it is to understand both the biological and social aspects of skin color and that one cannot be fully understood without the other.

Living Color contains two sections. The first section details biological reasons for skin color variation throughout the world. Jablonski explains the genes that affect the amount of melanin present in populations of both humans and other members of the animal kingdom. Additionally, Jablonski explains the importance of vitamin D for human health and how vitamin D is acquired through regular exposure to sunlight. Furthermore, she details various diseases that occur without regular vitamin D production and historical occurrences of these diseases, as well as detailing intricacies of how different skin cancers occur and how an individual's skin composition can make him/her more susceptible to these cancers.

Throughout the first section, Jablonski traces the evolutionary history of human skin composition and color from the earliest hominin ancestors living in equatorial Africa to human populations living today. There were many evolutionary trade-offs that had to occur in the evolution of skin composition and color as humans migrated and colonized the Old World and much later, the New World. She ties this evolutionary history to the present and how the great

mobility humans have today creates mismatches between skin color and UVR intensity, which can lead to various health concerns. Jablonski even writes about sex differences of skin color in members of the same population and of the same heritage. She details multiple hypotheses, including some of her own, as to why this trend has occurred throughout time and even in other species.

The second section of the book covers a broad range of topics regarding social constructs of skin color. Humans are visually dependent primates; therefore, focusing on any visual differences between individuals is something with an extremely long evolutionary history. Jablonski explains that historically, people did not travel much within their lifetimes, so they rarely encountered others who looked radically different. Yet even in the few large historical population centers such as the Nile Valley, parts of India, and the Mediterranean region where there was greater variability of skin color, there was never the same kind of skin color biases that exist in societies today. It has only been in the last few hundred years, where exploration, colonialism, and the establishment of slavery based on skin color have created the social constructs still ever so present in today's societies, despite efforts to eliminate this kind of discrimination. Moreover, Jablonski explains that the concept of race was not entrenched in people's thoughts until very recent history. Yet there were historical preferences for darker or lighter skin color in various societies, and she details the similarities and differences between societal preferences both past and present.

The range of topics covered in this book is impressive. Jablonski begins with a broad range of topics regarding biological reasons for skin color variability and continues on to social constructs of skin color variability both historically and present day in different societies. Despite the broadness of the topics covered, a layperson to either the biological or social section is able to understand the data presented.

What is most impressive about the book, however, is how easily and simply it transitions from very biologically based data in the first section to more social and historical data in the second section. Anthropology is a four-field approach, one that aims to be multidisciplinary and collaborative. Universities across the country train undergraduate and graduate students alike that anthropology is holistic. Yet, there are sub-disciplines in anthropology for which there is sometimes less collaboration. This can especially be true for biological and cultural anthropologists. *Living*

Color shows just how important it is for topics to be understood from multiple perspectives. The whole concept of skin color variability cannot be grasped without an understanding of the biology; on the other hand, it cannot be grasped without an understanding of the social and historical constructs of the many diverse cultures around the world.

While skin color variation is not always the easiest subject to broach, it is an important one. There are impor-

tant biological reasons for the variations that can be seen around the world. Moreover, there is a long social history of why people think race exists and why the stereotypes present today exist. It can only be from a broad-reaching, holistic perspective such as the one provided by Jablonski that a reader can truly begin to understand the multifaceted topic of skin color variation and how it is perceived by various cultures.