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Audrey Elisa Kerr. *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, DC.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006. xx + 145 pp. $27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57233-462-5.

Reviewed by Sarah J. Shoenfeld

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In *The Paper Bag Principle*, Audrey Elisa Kerr explores the physical markers of class among African Americans and the traditions and lore that have long accorded value to light skin, straight hair, and European facial features. Although she notes in her conclusion that "the fair-toned black elite have been victimized by an unattainable Western ideal" (p. 116), Kerr's study is focused on racial prejudice within the black community. Her discussion of stories and jokes which have served to perpetuate this ideal--and, in turn, African Americans' racialized physical standards for judging each other--provides evidence that oral folklore has played a significant role in maintaining intraracial class divisions. This slim volume's extensive bibliography attests to Kerr's acknowledgment that there are already many studies on African American folklore, and on the significance of color and class, especially in Washington, D.C., but these works do not address the intersection of these two themes. Using D.C. as the site for her research, Kerr addresses rumors and legends about criteria for admission to social organizations, schools, and churches, rather than actual practices for upholding these criteria, of which there is little historical record.

While specific discriminatory policies such as the use of paper bags or combs to test skin color and hair texture cannot be verified, stories about such procedures can. Kerr's interviews, primarily with longtime residents of Washington who attended Howard University, demonstrate that although most of the institutions she discusses may never have had specific membership criteria based on physical features, they did not need to. It was known who was welcome and who was not based on the visible evidence of their membership and on stories about admission. For example, while it is apparently true (based on the testimony of a Howard admissions officer) that Howard once required applicants to include a photo with their application, it is rumor that such photos were used to make admissions decisions. According to some of Kerr's interview subjects, this rumor and similar ones about Washington's Dunbar High School were enough to prevent them from applying to these schools in the first place. Through the sharing of rumors and legends about exclusivity based on color, intraracial segregation has, therefore, been constructed and maintained even by those who have not benefited from discrimination.

Kerr's first chapter looks at music, literature, well-known stories and jokes, proverbs, and folk remedies that have enforced a value system for judging color and hair among African Americans. In the United States, the "one-drop rule" has served to define all persons with visible African ancestry as black, therefore resulting in significant diversity among those considered African American. Origin stories about black people having misunderstood God to say "Git black!" when he was telling them to "git back," or having overslept when God was giving out other colors (pp. 3-4), have not only served to make light of the perceived inferiority of blacks, but cast value on degrees of blackness. Kerr also quotes passages from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature on a figure she refers to as "the tragic mulatto," whose light skin and delicate features "represented the possibility of civility," but whose African blood made her inclined "toward savagery" (p. 5). Black women writers such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset also wrote about the dilemma of the mulatto, whose physical appearance and sophisticated self-determination allowed her to cross racial boundaries, but who felt she was breaking the rules by doing so. Just as these fictionalized accounts of light-skinned women established their protagonists as possessing characteristics that distinguished them from those with darker skin, Kerr cites folk songs that have associated color and hair with specific personality traits and values. One example: "Oh black woman evil: brown skin evil too/Going to get me a yellow woman: see what she will do" (p. 16). Remedies for dark skin, wide noses, and nappy hair were passed down orally and through advertising in black magazines and newspapers into the mid-twentieth century, again ascribing greater value to physical features associated with white people.

In chapter 2, Kerr introduces three "traditions of testing" racial boundaries, and relates stories from cities outside Washington about ways in which hair, skin, nails, palms, soles, ears, teeth, and eyes have been used as tools for carrying out such tests. The first type of test involves whites examining the physical characteristics of suspected blacks to prevent them from gaining passage into white institutions, or, in the case of newborn babies, white families. Segregated white establishments (including Washington's National Theater) were also known, during the 1920s and 30s, for using black "spotters" at their doors to block the entry of African Americans trying to pass as white. The third kind of test, according to Kerr, is the requirement to prove that one's blackness does not deviate from a specific understanding of what it means to be black. The example she provides is that of the fair-skinned African American artist Adrian Piper, who has felt obligated to pass a "suffering test" in order to be accepted among other black people (p. 24). It is in this chapter that Kerr discusses historical lore around paper bag testing, to which she was introduced as a first-year student at Rutgers University. Comparing the skin color of prospective group members to the color of a paper bag was said to be used by the black sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha and at parties held by black students of prestigious schools in the Northeast. Based on rumors and stories told to her, Kerr traces the possible origins of such tests, if they existed, to New Orleans' Seventh Ward, long home to a subsection of the city's population considered to be mixed-race, or Creole, rather than either black or white. (Kerr notes that New Orleans is unique within the United States for recognizing mixed-race persons as having a separate racial status.) Philadelphia, which, like D.C., was home to a very exclusive class of black elites in the nineteenth century, is the other city Kerr has identified as having a long history of legends and rumors about paper bag and similar tests. She emphasizes, however, that stories about such tests are geographically widespread.

In chapters 3 through 6, Kerr focuses on the nineteenth-century development of an elite black community in Washington, D.C., and the institutions that remained associated with this community well into the twentieth century. Some of this history has been well documented by Jacqueline Moore in ***Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920*** (1999) and by Willard Gatewood in ***Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920*** (2000), which devotes its first chapter to Washington, D.C. Kerr's work, however, is particularly attentive to the discourse around color and class in relation to church and club membership, schools, and neighborhood development. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the transformation of LeDroit Park: in 1873, it was "an entirely white suburb occupying one of the most convenient and desirable locations in the city"; by 1917, LeDroit Park was "an all-black neighborhood"; and by the 1940s, it had become "the most fashionable address for black Washingtonians" (pp. 42-44). At the same time, class distinctions among blacks became increasingly impenetrable, based on factors that included skin tone but also education and whether one was a native of D.C. Kerr cites scathing editorials from the ***Washington Bee***, a black newspaper founded in 1882, as evidence of conflicts within the black community regarding the formation of elite clubs and whether well-to-do blacks were responsible for helping improve the lives of the black majority. D.C. resident and writer Jean Toomer, who, says Kerr, "did not learn of his own black heritage until adulthood," organized "literary evenings" in which the topics of "miscegenation, racial ambiguity, and the status of 'near white' Negroes" were discussed (p. 45). Other members of D.C.'s black elite included Dr. Charles B. Purvis and Pinckney Pinchback, both of whom had children light enough to attend all-white schools without being detected, and Harvard's first black graduate, Richard Greener, whose daughter moved to New York as an adult in order to pass as white in a city where her family was not well known.

Kerr's fourth chapter is about the social clubs formed by elite blacks from the time of the mid-1800s to the present. The earliest of these, the Lotus and Monocan clubs, were apparently unabashed in their preference for light-skinned members. An early twentieth-century club called the Kingdom advertised itself "as seeking members who had fair skin, light eyes, thin lips, and high-bridge noses" (p. 57). Kerr notes that clubs such as these, along with the famously elite Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, were known as "blue vein" institutions for their supposed solicitation of members with skin pale enough to reveal their veins (p. 55). Other exclusive social organizations included the Diamond Club, the Orpheus Glee Club, the Pen and Pencil Club, the MuSoLit (Music, Social, and Literary) Club, and the What Good Are We Club, which still exists. The NAACP was also thought by some to discriminate on the basis of color, given the general hue of its membership. The club most closely associated with complexion testing is Jack and Jill, which was founded in 1938 as a social club for children and young adults and remains active today. Kerr concludes that while it is unlikely the club has ever carried out such tests, its "overwhelmingly fair-complexioned" membership lends a degree of authenticity to stories about color-based admission criteria (p. 67).

Kerr's final two chapters discuss color as a criteria for attendance at Dunbar High School and Howard University, and as a factor in choosing where to worship. In the case of Dunbar (originally known as the M Street School), which was founded by the congregants of the city's most elite black church, interviews with alumni who attended in the 1940s confirm that the school favored those with light skin. Kerr notes that "the social experience of the fairest of Dunbar students was marked by their ability to 'pass' in and around Washington, D.C., after school" (p. 84). Many of these students went on to attend Howard, where colorism also thrived. The complexity of intraracial color prejudice is illustrated by a story about the choice of a valedictorian by the university's medical school class of 1887. Black students opposed the nomination, by a minority of white students, of an African American who apparently "[could not] be distinguished from white," because "he was too light to represent the experience of black students" (p. 89). Unfortunately, Kerr does not address the conflict of light skin tone being prized by students who wished to be represented by someone who was visibly African American. Paper bag and other such tests (such as shining a flashlight on someone's profile and rejecting those whose mouth or jaw extended beyond their nose) were said to be used by Howard's sororities, and even its admissions office, but again, these claims cannot be verified. Such rumors are said to have caused darker-skinned female students to confine themselves to their dorm rooms and to not seek admission to certain sororities. "The circulation of stories about paper bag tests in black sororities," says Kerr, "was one of the primary methods of maintaining the elite membership that these organizations sought" (p. 98). Kerr's discussion of color prejudice among male students at Howard is noticeably limited and draws attention to a larger shortcoming of her study: its failure to analyze the role of gender in color discrimination. Attention to the greater impact of color prejudice on women than on men, and to gender-based perceptions of beauty, would greatly enrich this study.

Kerr's discussion of intraracial color prejudice among church congregants is woven throughout the volume, since churches have long served as part of the larger social network necessary for maintaining class barriers. According to Kerr, Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, founded in 1841 by Reverend John Cook, has always been considered Washington's most elite black church. It is the only one believed to have had a door test requiring those wishing to attend to be lighter in skin tone than the church's beige front door. However, a number of churches, including D.C.'s first official Baptist congregation, are rumored to have required that a comb be pulled through the hair of prospective entrants, to keep out any whose locks were considered "too nappy" (p. 106). "For many people," Kerr claims, "it is the black church that is responsible for confirming discrimination, and similarly, the earliest complexion legends hail from religious institutions," specifically the Catholic churches of Louisiana whose predominantly Creole congregations were, according to legend, the earliest to use paper bag tests (p. 110). Kerr's interviewees confirm the elitist nature of some of D.C.'s oldest black churches, with one Fifteenth Street Presbyterian leader agreeing that such tests "could have happened here. It's never been on the books, but it is real" (p. 111).

While enlightening, Kerr's study is in need of more historical context regarding the impact of institutionalized segregation on the attempts of black elites to separate themselves from the larger African American population. The works cited above by Jacqueline Moore and Willard Gatewood cover the critical period of 1880-1920, a period when some of the literature Kerr cites was written. Kerr notes that intraracial prejudice seems to have peaked in the 1890s, the decade in which the Supreme Court effectively legalized segregation based on color. However, she does not refer to the landmark *Plessy V. Ferguson* decision of 1896, or to the increasing number of lynchings in the South, or to Woodrow Wilson's campaign to segregate the offices of the federal government, where much of Washington's black elite had long been employed. Prior to the 1890s, many black elites believed they would one day be accepted among whites as their equals. As they came to realize this would never happen, did the practice of color discrimination by churches, schools, and social organizations become more or less intense? Kerr writes that in the 1920s, well-to-do blacks began forming organizations "for the social improvement" of the black masses (p. 49). Did this represent an effort to reinforce class consciousness by drawing clear lines between the well-to-do providers of charity and their poor, uncultured brethren, or does it indicate a realization by elites that their own fate was bound up with that of all African Americans? While some of these questions may be beyond the scope of Kerr's study, reference to such issues would provide a stronger framework for her work. Kerr also allows vague statements by her interviewees-- that intraracial prejudice was based on the "mood of the time" and "it's just what we do" (p. 116)--to stand in for a more thorough discussion of the political and cultural context in which discrimination based on color intensified.

Kerr might have also provided a more detailed discussion of her methodology, given that this study is based largely on interviews she conducted. She notes the time period in which the interviews were collected (1996-1997 and 1999) and some general biographical features of her subjects, describing them as a cross-section of longtime residents of Washington who graduated from or taught at Howard; who attended one of the city's two high schools "traditionally serving black students" (p. xvii); or who were church members or leaders. However, Kerr does not say how many people she talked to nor, more importantly, does she address how their perspectives are linked to their ages. This is of particular importance as it relates to her discussion of Dunbar High School as a haven for light-skinned blacks prior to 1954, given the demographic shift of the District's public schools since that time. Other local events during the past sixty years (for example, the redevelopment of Southwest Washington and the rise and fall of Marion Barry) have also had a significant effect on class and color dynamics among blacks in Washington. Because Kerr uses her study to draw conclusions about colorism within the black community today, attention to more recent changes in the city's cultural landscape would bolster her case.

Despite its shortcomings, this study is valuable for showing the extent to which oral folklore has served to enforce class barriers among African Americans. Kerr's use of folklore, rumors, and legends as her primary resources makes this study unique and worthy of inclusion among other studies of Washington's black elite, intraracial color prejudice, and African American folklore. It includes an excellent bibliography and a long series of photographs attesting to Kerr's thesis.

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