

Colorless

by
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Introduction

Last summer, I went viral for an AI-generated image. Out of curiosity, I had uploaded a selfie to a website that purported to edit photos using generative AI. I prompted the platform for a “professional LinkedIn photo” based off my original photo. To my surprise, the generated image did not give me a blazer or alter the background, but instead lightened my skin and hair, gave me blue eyes, and altered the shape of my nose. The overall effect was that I appeared white (I am Asian).

The photo garnered six million views on social media, and news outlets such as *The Boston Globe*, *NPR*, and *The Wall Street Journal* covered the incident.

I had both the fortune and the misfortune of being exposed to thousands of opinions about this picture. Many interpreted it as evidence of racism within AI. Others complained I had prompted the platform incorrectly. And this picture, which I had posted on Twitter out of sheer amusement, became a lightning rod for debate about whether or not we should continue the astonishing pace of technological development we’ve witnessed in 2023.

Inspired by my own experience, I wanted to write a story where my experience was heightened to satirical extremes. The year is 2031, and people of color use generative AI and augmented reality to appear white during job interviews.

The narrative is told through journalistic interviews. This framing allows me to examine a multitude of perspectives, but it also allows for a meta-story: the eventually-revealed motivations of Nevaeh, the reporter.

Audio-to-speech transcription of Nevaeh Sinclair's interviews in October 2031

regarding Colorless AI

Jordan Wells

Do you mind if I record this conversation, Mr. Wells?

Go ahead.

My name is Nevaeh Sinclair, and I'm a journalist with the Wall Street Journal. We're covering the rise of Colorless AI, which you started with your college roommate Callum. How did it all begin?

You have to understand I wasn't trying to fix racism. That was Callum's thing. I was twenty. I was trying to impress a girl.

It was September 2024, my junior year. Augmented reality used to be a total joke. Google Glass failed because it seemed creepy. Zuck was pushing his metaverse but it had these uncanny valley vibes. Pokémon Go got big for two seconds? And then Apple launched the Vision Pro that February. I tried it at a hackathon and knew it was going to set the world on fire. Like the iPod in 2001.

And that's when you and Callum started building apps for the Vision Pro?

Sadie—that was the girl—thought I was a loser. I was sick of school and bad at it too. I had this stupid notion that if I got into Y Combinator, the startup accelerator, she'd see something more in me.

So me and Callum, we started fiddling around. Built lots of stuff that went nowhere. The Y Combinator deadline was coming up and we had done jack. In the meantime, Callum was also interviewing for summer internships. One afternoon, after some final round with—maybe BCG? Don't put that in the article, I don't wanna get sued—he walked into our room, scowling.

Well, you must know that story. He tells it all the time. Our early investors ate that shit up.

Callum Yifan Zhang

What inspired Colorless AI?

I grew up in Xinjiang and came to America for college. My mother wasn't sure about me going. This was during the first wave of the pandemic, so she saw some stuff on Xiaohongshu—that's like Chinese Instagram—about hate crimes against Asians. Besides, I'd also been accepted into Tsinghua University.

But I wanted a better life. My province was dangerous for ethnic minorities. Although I wasn't Uyghur, I thought it'd be safer to get as far as possible and eventually pay for my parents to join me abroad. So I came here, majored in management, got top grades, did everything I was supposed to do.

But you still couldn't get an internship?

No.

Why not?

Visa status was an obstacle. But some consulting firms were willing to sponsor green cards. That was my golden ticket to staying here. I spent all of sophomore year preparing to recruit. I was president of the university consulting group. I landed interviews, but didn't receive a single offer.

My last final round was with Boston Consulting Group. It went fine, I thought. And then this ass—sorry—tells me that I'm too much of a FOB.

FOB?

Fresh off the boat. He didn't say it like that, exactly, but I knew that's what he meant. I couldn't hide my accent.

But what if I could?

Jordan Wells

Walk me through how Colorless AI works.

It started out as an AI-powered accent-changing app. Basically, a user would speak, we'd use natural language processing to convert that speech to text, and then use a synthetic voice with an American accent for that text. The technology had already existed for years, but we improved the processing speed so a conversation could sound natural.

We got into Y Combinator and dropped out of school to work on this full time. We sold the technology to support call centers. They employed people in Latin America and Southeast Asia, and Western customers didn't like the accents. We scored some major contracts. Sadie graduated and moved to California for me. Life was good.

But then, in 2026 you were hit with a class-action lawsuit.

Turned out that our tech was being used by overseas telemarketing scammers. People trusted American accents more. Sorry that we made it easier for your dumb ass to get scammed.

Do you not feel any responsibility for selling your product to unscrupulous organizations?

Nah. But Callum felt a little guilty.

At this point, Apple had come out with the third generation of Vision Pro and we saw bigger opportunities than a voice-changing app. So we settled out of court and pivoted. We started building three-dimensional generative AI that would superimpose itself onto the user's

face when using the Vision Pro. We thought maybe we could sell the technology to Twitch streamers, cam girls, what have you.

And then we got lucky—um, maybe *lucky* isn't the right word here—but lockdown happened again and that propelled consumer interest, and people started using the technology in ways we never imagined.

Jeanette Harris

When you first tried out Colorless AI, how did you feel?

It was freaky. I'd used filters before, but this was more than a filter. This was me as a white lady. Pasty skin, skinny nose, paper-thin lips. She was pretty, but she looked nothing like me. It reminded me of a deepfake, except I was deepfaking myself into a different race.

Have you personally gotten a job by using Colorless AI?

This would've been 2028? I had just graduated, the job market sucked, there was a coronavirus resurgence so all my interviews were online. That's when I thought, hey, what if I do this as a white woman.

So I would use the app to make myself look white. I can't say for sure how effective it was—but most of my interviewers were white too, and I noticed that they were friendlier towards me. More likely to give me the benefit of the doubt, laughed harder at my jokes. I don't know. But that's how I got my first position as a human resources associate. The job was remote, so I kept up the facade for the entire time I was there.

Several years ago, you went viral for a series of TikToks encouraging women of color to alter their appearance using Colorless AI. Do you still stand by your advice?

It is wild how much hate I got for that. My entire point was, racism exists so you gotta protect yourself, get that bag. But no, everybody thought I was trying to be transracial. Like some Rachel Dolezal bullshit. Whiteface isn't a real thing, okay?

There were also some comments about how this is upholding white supremacy. Fair enough. I'm not trying to save the world. I just wanted to make life a little better for myself.

Ana Diaz

You run a consulting firm that helps people date using Colorless AI. What motivated you to apply this technology to your personal life?

I was getting gross comments from dudes on dating apps. Maybe because I had just moved to Wisconsin and there aren't many Latinas here. Then I saw TikToks from this woman who had used Colorless AI for job interviews, and I thought, hey, a first date is like a job interview.

Did this approach work?

Last year, I got married to the love of my life, so you tell me.

But wouldn't this create confusion or even anger when you inevitably met up in person?

The right person shouldn't care about what race I am. And he didn't care. But thanks to Colorless AI, I avoided creeps who would otherwise fetishize me.

So how does your consulting firm work?

I thought most of our customers would be women of color, like me. But actually, we get more men, who feel that they are discriminated against due to race. We teach them how to integrate Colorless AI into their romantic life.

And is this successful?

It gets these men more dates, at least.

Cory Peter

Your company made headlines last year when you announced your “in-person only” policy for interviews, unique for the software industry. Why did you enact this rule?

It was getting weird. We’d interview all these great candidates, and then they’d show up to work and look totally different.

But they were the same people you had interviewed?

I mean, they said they were. Everyone was using Colorless AI now, so we couldn’t prove otherwise. And we couldn’t exactly fire them for not being, uh, the race they’d appeared to be.

Did this negatively impact their work performance?

Not really, as far as we could tell. But it just didn’t sit right with me. It felt deceptive, somehow. So we started doing only in-person interviews.

And has that been a successful endeavor?

It’s unfortunate because a lot of candidates don’t want to do in-person interviews, and our competitors don’t have a similar requirement, so we end up losing some good people in the pipeline. Initially, I thought we’d only miss out on the type of person who would lie about their race, but there are other valid reasons someone might not want to do an in-person interview. Like if they live far away, or if they have a disability that makes it difficult to travel.

So perhaps we’ll walk back this policy. I don’t know.

Priya Patel

You raised three million dollars last year for a startup that detects the usage of Colorless AI. What inspired you to start this company?

Look, people say I'm a snitch. Like one of those startup founders from the 2020s, building ChatGPT detectors, which we now know didn't work and got students in trouble over false plagiarism accusations.

But it's not like that. I'm Indian. And I'm proud to be Indian. I'm not going to hide that, and I don't think other people should. Colorless AI isn't fighting against racism. It's letting racism win.

There was a widely publicized incident in which your software falsely flagged someone for using Colorless AI. As a result, her job offer was rescinded.

We have a 99.9% accuracy rate. There are going to be some rare mistakes, unfortunately. And I believe that individual has found another job now.

Some have questioned your company's mission, saying that you will only hurt other people of color who use Colorless AI.

As stated on our website, we are aiming to celebrate diversity and embrace society's differences. Colorless AI encourages people to erase their identities. That isn't something we should support, and the positive reception to Colorless AI astonishes me.

Jordan Wells

You're the majority shareholder in Colorless AI, which is now valued at over a billion dollars. You, as a white man, are the biggest financial beneficiary of a company that was built to help minorities.

What's the question?

Would you agree with that assessment?

Look, I did some research into you, too. Found it weird that a reporter usually on the style beat would be interviewing me.

You have a master's in sociology. Your thesis was on algorithmic racial bias. Makes sense.

Where are you going with this?

And then I learned Nevaeh Sinclair is your married name. You used to be Nevaeh Cole, daughter of Martin Cole.

Martin Cole, who in 2019 spent a week in jail, detained on false charges, due to a mistake in facial recognition software, which reported a photographic match between your father and another Black man who had committed armed robbery.

Don't look so surprised. I'm a CEO in Silicon Valley. I know how to use Google.

This isn't relevant.

Let me ask you this. Are you bitter towards the machine, or are you bitter towards the humans who built the machine? Do you truly think things were *better* twenty, thirty years ago?

Martin Cole

I wanted to chat with you about your experience in 2019. The incident.

That was over a decade ago. Why bring it up now?

Your story is important, Dad. I'm doing an article on this technology that erases race by, well, making everyone white.

Then it's not really erasing race, is it? It's making whiteness the default.

I wanted to ask how you felt about advances in artificial intelligence, given what happened to you.

I don't think it's all bad. Remember the convenience store your uncle used to run? When it got burglarized, the police caught the perpetrator using the same software.

Wasn't that kid white?

Yeah, it's more accurate on certain types of faces.

So that's unfair.

What happened to me was unfair, and wrong, and shouldn't have happened. We all agree on that, I hope. But that doesn't mean this technology shouldn't exist. And, honestly, even if it shouldn't exist, the reality is that it does and is used by police departments all around the country. So we should focus on what we can do about it.

What do you think we should do about it?

I'm glad you're writing this article. We need more voices—different voices. Space for people who look like us. It's easy to criticize from afar, Nevaeh. It's easy to hold onto anger. But I want you to be in the room where decisions are being made. I want you to ensure what happened to me won't happen again to somebody else.

Callum Yifan Zhang

What's your favorite moment from building Colorless AI?

One of my best friends from high school is Uyghur. Some of his family members have been forcibly relocated to labor camps. He makes TikToks about the human rights violations carried out by the Chinese Communist Party. He has millions of followers.

I helped him tweak some settings on Colorless AI so he could hide his identity in the videos. And perhaps this is bad to say out loud, but maybe more people wanted to watch a white guy talking about these horrible things.

So do you think Colorless AI is net good for the world?

In the Valley, people think tech can solve everything. It's a romantic notion, I can see why people become enamored with the thought. It allows for agency in a chaotic, frustrating world where so much is slowed down by bureaucracy.

Let's use body cams to tackle police brutality—but then these body cams conveniently shut off during key moments. Cryptocurrency can protect against hyperinflation in countries with volatile governments—until the cryptocurrency exchange is revealed to be a grift and everyone loses their money.

But what should we do instead? Give up? No solution is perfect, but I've found that people are much quicker to critique any attempt at fixing a problem than to actually put effort towards the fix.

I can't deny that technology perpetuates inequality. There have been so many examples of algorithmic bias. And I don't know if Colorless AI was the right solution. But it's the one I made.

Anything else you'd like to add?

Listen, Nevaeh, you seem thoughtful and well-versed in this space. Your credentials speak for themselves. You may be busy with your day job, but if you ever have free time, or if you get bored with the *Wall Street Journal*, Colorless AI would really appreciate your perspective. We'd love to hire you as a consultant. I think you could help us build a better product for marginalized communities.

