

A QUESTION OF COLOR

a one-hour documentary film by Kathe Sandler

FULL TRANSCRIPT: 35 PAGES

© 1992 Film Two Productions

A QUESTION OF COLOR

Transcript: a one-hour documentary by Kathe Sandler

Prologue:

Evocative African inspired percussion music is heard. Fade in the following statement of white letters on black background:

(Card one)

It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen.

(Card two)

In this process, we seek to create a world where everyone can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes.

bell hooks

(Card three)

a film
by Kathe Sandler

Opener

SLOW FADE UP TO:

I. On-camera out-door interview with Curtia, an attractive dark brown complexioned woman with straightened hair in her mid-twenties.

CURTIA

...I happened to start dating a guy that was, you know very dark skinned and you know, I thought we made a real cute couple, you know, I was really taken by it all. And he told me later in the relationship... He was from Washington and I was saying that I was going to school in Washington and he should take me to meet his mother. He said, oh no, I could never take you you to meet my mother. I said why not? And he said because you're too dark skinned. She told me don't ever bring anyone into the house that was dark-skinned. Because I'm too dark, he said. And uh... because he was too dark. And that he should get... he should date lighter skinned women, even white women to lighten his, uh, family up.. (LAUGHS) (OFFSCREEN QUESTION: How did that make you feel?) It made me feel lousy, absolutely lousy...

CREDITS FADE UP:

A QUESTION OF COLOR

II. IMAGES:

Driving melodic music is heard.

Close-ups of a variety of African Americans. (people of all complexions, age groups..) as they slowly turn from profile to face camera and make unflinching direct eye contact with screen.

COLOR TERMS

V.O. (male and female voices...)

Ebony, coal black, skillet blonde, tar baby, red, redbone, light, bright and damn near white, high yellow, cinnamon, teasing brown, a whole lot of yellow gone to waste, chocolate, chocolate to the bone, brown sugar, lemon colored, honey, pecan, two-toned liver lips, nose as flat as an Aunt Jemima pancake, good hair, bad hair, tack head, nappy headed, nice nappy, wavy hair, blow hair, bald-headed, blue black.

V.O. (Director Kathe Sandler's Voice comes up above these voices)

Nearly 400 years have passed since the first Africans were brought in chains to the United States. We have experienced slavery, apartheid and institutional racism. It has affected how we see ourselves, our community, and how we relate to one another.

Two women and a man chant the following verse on-camera:

If you light you alright, if you're brown stick around.
but if you're black, git back, git back, git back.

Still photo of myself again, on-location directing my film crew. This is followed by a family portrait with me at eight and family members.

MY V.O. (Director Kathe Sandler)

That's me, Kathe Sandler. I spent eight years making this film about attitudes about color in the African American community. I am a Black American woman from an interracial background. I look White. I identify myself as Black.

III. On-camera in-door interview with myself.

DIRECTOR KATHE SANDLER

I made this film about color in the Black community because -- I started from an individual standpoint of wanting to understand something that had a very dominant influence in my life.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

Cut to: High 8 Footage, as I am being filmed at a table. I joke with the crew, and my voice-over rises above this.

I wanted to see the whole issue as it affected my community... and then create a canvas which people could look upon to understand the experiences of other Black people.

CUT TO:

IV. On camera interview with Curtia again.

CURTIA

I don't think that any black person hasn't one time or another been insecure about color, because it is such an issue, in black, in our community. Uhm, whether you're light-skinned or dark-skinned somehow you've been challenged about it. Somehow you've been either called some kind of a name... from your own people.

Music (Joan Armatrading's "Family") over stills, of a young woman in a 1950s photo, then family stills.

Voice over of Esther Bradley, a woman about 45 years old who is also the little girl in the picture.

ESTHER'S VOICE-OVER

I grew up in a family where...

ZOOM OUT ON:

Photo to reveal Esther in several family shots.

ESTHER'S VOICE-OVER (Cont'd)

...one side of my family was dark, and the other side was light... so with us being brown we didn't fit in anywhere.

IMAGE:

CUT TO:

On-camera in-door interview with Esther.

ESTHER

I had a great aunt who used to come and tell all of my cousins who were light-skinned or who had curly hair that they were pretty, and how cute they were and how pretty they looked but she never said anything to my sister or me. And we always thought we must have been the ugliest kids in the world.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

V. Out-door interview with Wiley, a light complexioned slightly heavy set man, with broad features in his early twenties.

WILEY

This is a White man's world and it does benefit me to be lighter-skinned Black because I'm able to blend in more in a White man's world. I don't stand out as much as say a darker-skinned Black.

CUT TO:

VI. In-door interview with Harriet, a dark-skinned woman in her late forties.

HARRIET

Long before the sixties when I used to hear that statement, "she's dark, but she's pretty." I always wondered about that in my mind. What do they mean, she's dark but pretty. I could never understand that statement.

VII.

WILEY

I prefer lighter-skinned Black women. Then I'm into the hair thing. I like light skin, nice eyes and long hair.

CUT TO:

VIII. In-door interview with Kim, a young dark-skinned woman in her twenties.

KIM

People say they don't have any problems with color, but then there are things that creep into their conversation that just don't jive... You still hear expressions like "good hair" and "bad hair."

We return to Kim's interview again and we see that she is seated next to her younger brother Harold, who is also dark complexioned. (Lower third title reads: Kim's brother Harold)

HAROLD

I've heard myself say that, after we talked to Kathe that time before. I've heard myself say that, and I have to admit...

KIM

But do you feel that way...?

HAROLD

It could be there subconsciously, it could be...

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

KIM

I'll disown you

There is laughter from them both, as well as off-screen laughter.

HAROLD

No it could be there subconsciously. I- I don't know.

CUT TO:

Childhood shot of Kim and Benji.

CUT TO:

HARRIET

(Dark-skinned woman in her late forties from before, who is also Harold's mother. She speaks to Harold as the camera pans to him:)

With you being a dark-skinned man, do you think the reverse can be true? Do you think you can be handsome and be dark?

HAROLD

I don't know. You know I actually never thought about it like that...

FADE OUT AND UP TO:

Sound fades down, and bird sounds chirping come up over this scene. A lake with a man fishing.

Supered lower thirds read:

TUSKEGEE. ALABAMA

Other images of Tuskegee, Alabama are seen...

MY V.O.

For African Americans, color consciousness can be traced to our early beginnings in this country in the South. I went to Tuskegee, Alabama -- a predominantly Black town, which like the rest of the South, emerged from the shadow of legal apartheid or segregation in the late 1960s.

CUT TO:

IX. Mrs. Caldwell, a small, very dark-complexioned old woman inside her small house, moving about with her cane and showing us shots of her family. She is charismatic, alert and has a sense of humor. Her interview is outdoors.

MY V.O.

One of the first people I met was Mrs. Annie Caldwell, a 96 year old resident of Tuskegee. She had

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

experienced racial segregation most of her life, as well as the color divisions in the Black community that were a result of it.

CUT TO:

Out-door interview with Mrs. Caldwell in front of her home.

MRS. CALDWELL (on camera)

You see. I'm real dark, and you're light. We didn't care a thing about mixing with someone your color. They would always think they's better than we was. 'cause our skin were black, and their's was light. But it never did make no difference to me. I know they couldn't go no further with the white than I could.

(She leans forward and whispers:)

Am I doing right?

And we would always keep them straight. "You are no more than me because you are mixed." I would tell them right quick, "you are mixed, and I am straight 'cause I am a Black African person."

MY V.O.

Tuskegee is the home of one of the leading Black schools. Tuskegee University, where Booker T. Washington was its first President. Dr. Benjamin Payton is the University's fifth president...

DR. PAYTON'S V.O.

(* Note -- Dr. Payton has a deep and resonant voice. Photos and images of slavery and post-slavery are edited against his voice-over.)

Among Black Americans the most significant factor in the formation of Black American social class structure was the impact of slavery. Slavery itself divided Blacks. It picked certain Blacks to work in the big house, and certain other Blacks who worked as craftsmen. It had other blacks who worked as drivers who led the field hands, and others who were "just" field hands.

In this setting whites were absolutely all powerful. A white man could have any woman he wanted. The source of much of the variety of colors in Black Americans results from the sexual imposition of White men on Black women. That led to the development of certain opportunities for the offspring of those unions. Booker T. Washington, himself, was sired by a White man and worked in and around the big house. He

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

would listen to what was being said around the table. He learned how power operated as a result of having an opportunity to be present...

DR. PAYTON (continues)

And so its no mystery as to why in the beginning, many of the Blacks who had leadership positions following slavery were those who were light-skinned.

CUT TO:

X. Interior interview with Dr. Payton seated in a high back antique chair.

DR. PAYTON (on camera)

Nobody at Tuskegee University as far as I know ever protested the fact that we've had mostly light-skinned presidents and all who've had light-skinned wives.

I am the first President of Tuskegee University to have a dark-skinned wife...

(See he and his wife strolling the grounds of their home)

CUT TO:

Interior interview with Bobby Davis, a very light-skinned man in his early 30s.

BOBBY DAVIS

Dr. Payton is dark complexioned and let me tell you, a lot of the ladies, the socialites had a lot of problems with Dr. Payton, primarily because he was dark complexioned. They said, he don't look like no University President.

CUT TO:

PAYTON (on-camera)

I am also the first President of Tuskegee University to have as many Ivy League Degrees as I have. I went to Harvard, Columbia and to Yale.

CUT TO:

BOBBY DAVIS

They just wanted a president, somebody that they could identify with and look up to that was going to represent the university to be tall, light and handsome. Instead of tall, dark and qualified.

XI.

MAYOR (on Camera)

You've heard the old saying about the house niggers and the field niggers. Well it really was one of

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

those situations where persons who were fair, who had wavy hair, light complexions, who looked like they were White. Well they were the elite and they thought that way...

CUT TO:

MY V.O.

(over shots of Ford in his office)

Johnny Ford became the first African-American Mayor of Tuskegee, and found that he had to not only overcome White segregation, but also color and class discrimination in the Black community.

CUT TO:

MAYOR (on Camera)

Well there were some who would rather have seen the White mayor continue as mayor rather than me, because I was not one of the class members. I was too dark, or I was not from a wealthy family.

CUT TO:

Stills of the Mayor as a child...

MAYOR'S V.O.

I grew up and was raised on that side of town. I grew up in a shotgun house, no indoor running water or plumbing... heated by a coal stove.

CUT TO:

Shots of the Mayor at a town reception interacting with various people, including Bobby Davis.

MAYOR'S V.O.

And there were those that felt that if a Black was going to be elected Mayor it shouldn't be someone from that quote "side of town."

CUT TO:

MAYOR FORD (on-camera)

And I grew up in that climate here in Tuskegee.

CUT TO:

XII. Card games, etc. In-door interview, with Mrs. Davis, a very proper light-complexioned woman in her fifties.

MRS. DAVIS (on-camera)

You can ask anyone in Tuskegee do they know the Davis family and their reply would be yes.

CUT TO:

(Image of Bobby working at his bank. Behind his desk, with an employee, etc.)

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

Bobby has worked for years at the Alabama Exchange Bank. I am very proud of Bobby...

CUT TO:

BOBBY (on camera)

A lot of people crack on me, or they would comment because I'm light complected and wavy haired and kind of half-way handsome. They make comments like you think you're better than everyone else just because you're high yellow, that type of thing. I don't really let it bother me because I can't help the complexion that I am.

The neighborhood that I grew up in was a more well to do neighborhood and it consisted primarily of lighter complected folks.

CUT TO:

Panning shots of mantle-place images of Bobby's family...

BOBBY (on camera)

We were looked at as uppity type folks and I don't know whether it was because of our money or because of our complexions.

MRS. DAVIS (on camera)

We never thought we were light skinned so to speak. That never came across our minds because this is the color we were born with and I suppose if we were dark-skinned we would still be regarded as respectable citizens.

CUT TO:

BOBBY

Growing up my mother would always make the comment: 'get you somebody that's your complexion... Don't date her cause she's too dark.'

XIII.

RHONDA'S V.O.

(See Rhonda at work at the Tuskegee News with a title: Rhonda Baraka: Editor of the Tuskegee News.)

I never dealt with those people when I was a child because I was raised by my grandparents... They were not a part of that group. they weren't in the same social status. they were not in the same economic bracket..

(Use her grandfather's still over the opener line)

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

My grandmother was married to a very dark skinned man... (on camera) She was very proud of the man she married and

(Rhonda on-camera, a slender, brown-skinned young woman in her early twenties, who sits comfortably on the grass with her knees folded.)

She always taught me that the best thing that a person can do is just to be oneself and that not only means being yourself in terms of the way you carry yourself, in terms of your personality and your disposition, but it also means in terms of the way you look.

CUT TO:

RHONDA

(over shots of kids going into school in Tuskegee.)

I went to a middle school that brought all of the kids together... At that time I began to realize that many of the girls who were very popular

(Rhonda on-camera)

were the light skinned girls with pretty hair, the long hair. Their parents were generally the ones who were well-to-do in the community and I always wondered why was it that the most popular girls in the school were always the light skinned girls.

We see Rhonda at a reception with town officials..

Those are the same people I'm dealing with on a day to basis.

(over footage of Rhonda talking to the Mayor at the reception)

One of the people I was in awe of was the Mayor...

MAYOR FORD

(on camera)

But the fact that now the mayor of the city is Black, he has African features, his hair is nappy... So in a sense it has helped younger people and some older people, as well too, who have thought all along that they were really all right and they were really beautiful, now realize that you don't have to be light-skinned, or have curly hair to be in a leadership role.

RHONDA

I think for Black people to obtain a greater appreciation of who we are as in terms of the way we

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

look, we actually need to go back to Africa, and I don't mean that literally.
(cut to stills of African people)

RHONDA (continues)

I mean we need to look at African people and we need to examine the way that African people look. A lot of the problems that

Cut Back to Rhonda on camera...

we have with ourselves is a result of the problems that White people have with Black people and the way that we look.

I've never seen a Black person born with chemically processed hair. If your hair is naturally curly and you're a Black person, then that's fine. But I have a problem with people who feel that the way they're born looking is not good enough for them to succeed, or it isn't good enough to live up to someone else's standards.

FADE OUT AND UP TO:

Brooklyn street, red brick building landscape.

MY V.O.

From Southern towns to Northern cities, the issue of color pervades our lives...

CUT TO:

Basketball Court. Lower thirds read:
CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN

One on one shots of Keith and Keyonn.

KEYONN'S V.O.

Keith is Shae. I call him Shae and no one understands what I'm saying but me. We're best friends, and we're there for each other.

They begin their rap song: It's Where You Came From...

KEYONN

Awright. Now listen, closely. I want you to remember to bring in the beat, to bring in the bass line when I say sweeten it up, and give me the boom boom boom

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

boom when I tell you to break it down. Good. Now give me the beat. (Keith starts the "beat".) Yo. It's like candy, so why don't you sweeten it up. (Keyonn snaps his fingers.) Alright, here we go. (He begins to rap.)

Lost boys in effect, here to get respect, teaching things not taught in a history text. 'Cause in all my books Caucasians are found, but there's a lack of the yellow, red, tan and brown. The messed up culture that we're living in, people judging people by the color of their skin make some change their hair or the tone of their face. But you are who you are. You can't get rid of your race. so don't try to change your hair so you can get ahead fast. The best way to move ahead is to remember your past. It's where you came from. It's where you came from. (Rap ends.)

CUT TO:

KEYONN (sitting alone in an interview)

Shae is always the cute one. He's the cute one 'cause he's the one with the light skin and the nice hair, and it's like he smiles and gives everyone that little adorable look and it's like Shae is always the cute one. And it has even gone as far as to the point where uhm I'd be trying to talk to somebody and ah, they'd be like, 'yeah, you're cute and the whole bit, but who's the light skinned one?' and it's like, that's rough.

CUT TO:

KEITH

If I should, uhm, be walking up the block and we decide to talk to two girls, the girls are like, 'You're alright but your light skinned friend is cute, you know. And he's got nice textured hair. And he's, you know, his face is so babyish and, you know, you're average because you're, you're just a normal Black kid.'

CUT TO:

Keyonn standing before a mirror, putting contact lenses in his eyes.

KEITH'S V.O.

Keyonn, since I've known him, always tried to change himself. You know, he put's contacts in his eyes.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

KEYONN

He can't identify with that. He can't identify with looking in the mirror saying, 'Am I too dark?'

KEITH

He may feel at the time, you know, rejected. just a little rejection, but yet. uhm he and I are above that. you know. We know that I'm lightskinned and he knows that my hair is a better texture or, you know. a different texture. There's no better. It's just a different texture. And that being in America people like white. People like light.

KEYONN

We don't even discuss it between the two of us and we're best friends. I mean. I know why I don't bring it up. I don't bring it up because I wouldn't want to cause an argument over something like that. 'Cause we're not friends over the color of our skin, we're friends over the people that we are.

CUT TO:

XIV. Keith and Keyonn playing basketball on a court with the rest of their "crew"-- Mel and Barry, who are both dark-skinned.

KEYONN'S V.O.

We'll be hanging out. and we'll make. even us as a group. will make jokes about the tone of somebody.

CUT TO:

Keyonn and Keith sit comfortably in a stairway with Ebony and Veronica. Mel and Barry.

KEYONN'S V.O CONT.

We only judge females on their complexion. It'll be like you look at a person who's real dark-skinned and it'll be like:

KEYONN (on camera)

'damn she's dark.' and that automatically becomes funny. And it's like everybody goes along with it and I know there's been times when I've thought: 'hey that ain't funny, but you go along with it so you don't stick out. You go along with it so you don't be the odd man. It's like everybody else is laughing you might as well laugh, because if you don't laugh it like: 'Well what's wrong with you.'

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

CUT TO:

Keyonn and Keith and their talking.

KEYONN

Y'all got over 'cause y'all was light, bright, and almost white. (He laughs.)

KEYONN V.O.

Keith will says things like the 'damn she's dark.'

KEYONN (on camera)

Because, he is light-skinned and there's nobody walking around saying 'Damn he's light'... cause that ain't a problem! I resent that... I resent that. Sometimes I get to the point where it's like, 'How dare you!'

CUT TO:

Skin bleaching ads of the past laid over a big band brass sound of Duke Ellington's "Laying on Mellow"...

CUT TO:

Archival footage of a 1930s Black Beauty Contest. Black women parade on a circular devise, and then are judged by three Black men, who fight to give the trophy to a light skinned woman with wavy hair.

XIV.

MY V.O.

I often wonder if there are there conflicts between Black women of different complexions because we allow our value as women to be determined by how attractive we are to men, mainly Black men, who are guided by a color conscious standard?

XV. Then we go to Dianne, a relatively light-skinned woman, who has a closely cropped natural hairstyle.

DIANNE

A light skinned woman was a prize, okay...

CUT TO:

A fine art image by Vernetta Honeywood of two young Black girls, one relatively light, the other browner-skinned. Then cut back to Dianne's interview.

I could never understood why I was considered light-skinned. Like walking down the street with a friend of yours who is a shade, just a "hair" darker, and hearing the boys yell out or leer out "Hey light-

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

skinned. I'm talking to the bright one. I'm talking to the light-skinned one."

We hear from Cheryl, a dark-skinned woman in her late thirties.

CHERYL

People expect dark-skinned women to be just um. just grateful to be alive. just "I'm so grateful to be here." You're not supposed to want anything, you're not supposed to have anything, you're not supposed to excell.

DIANNE

You were a conquest.. You weren't a person.

CHERYL

I remember when I was thought of as a little "darkie" like a little Black Sambo, and that was before the advent of "Black is Beautiful." It was hard, it hurt. You had to be smarter, you had to be, um a better athlete, you had to be better than everybody. I'm talking about light-skinned girls, girls who had light complexions. I'm talking about White girls.

XVI.

DIANNE

There's a resentment you face from other black people...

CHERYL

They don't have to be anything but light. You can be unintelligent, you can be ugly, but as long as your skin is light, which kind of relates to being White, it's just okay.

DIANNE

From where I was, it seemed like everyone else could just be a person, but I had to be a light-skinned person.

XVII. Pat, a heavy set, very light-skinned woman, with a very "street" working class style.

PAT

Black people, Black people have called me half-breed, half-White, half-Black girl...

Definitely I get angry when Black people ask me "where are you from?" Or "what are you?"

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

...Yellow, Redbone.

"You Spanish?" No I'm not Spanish.

"Oh no, you're not Black. Oh, you can't possibly be Black."

I get an attitude. Quick I get an attitude. Because what difference does it make what I am? What importance does that play in your life, what I am? It's none of your business.

This girl came up to me out of nowhere. I didn't even know her. "I heard you were talking about me." I said I didn't even know her. She said Well, I better not har it again." And when she said that, I said, "And if you do?" (LAUGHS) Her and I...she threw the first blow and we were rumbling all over that floor, you know, which I don't have a problem with. In fact, that was right up my alley.

The fight stemmed from her jealousy. That was the bottom line, because she was Black, number one. Number two, she was ugly, and three, she has short knotty hair, and she had a problem with my appearance.

They look at a Black person as Black skinned nappy hair and that's it.

See, I don't have a problem with Black men. All my problems stem from Black women.

I believe that the Black man's ultimate goal is to be with a White woman.

And maybe they can't get a White woman, but I'm the next best thing to a White woman to them.

I have never been recognized as White, never wanted to be white, never tried to be White.

You know, because I really wanted, you know, that friendship, that sense of belonging... that I just wanted to be Black, you know.

CUT TO:

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

DIRECTOR KATHE SANDLER (on-camera)

And I think that if you look White, you can catch hostility in the Black community because Black people do resent the way we are treated by White people. And so, if you look like a White person and you're not identifiably Black, you can catch some real hostility in the Black community.

And I caught that a lot growing up. You know, it caused me a lot of pain, a lot of hatred for the way I looked. I wanted to be darker, to have kinky hair.

XVIII. Shots of me and my mother on the cover of Essence Magazine. Hear the clicking sounds of a camera, and the flashes of various takes.

MY V.O.

In 1977, when I was 17 years old, Essence, the Magazine for Today's Black Woman called. They wanted me and my mom to be on their Mother's Day cover. Later there was hate mail from readers wanting to know "Why are you putting White women on the cover of our magazine?"

Meanwhile another drama unfolded. My mother has two daughters and my sister Eve wasn't called for that cover. Why was I the chosen Cinderella? Was it because I looked White and Eve didn't? Was my mom on the cover of Essence Magazine for producing a child who looked White? How did that make Eve feel? In all these years we have never talked about it.

CUT TO:

Slow motion - me walking alone, on a crowded 125th Street in Harlem, shopping district... Camera tracking me in long shots as I walk into camera.

MY V.O.

My pain, my alienation was/is real, but I was/am cushioned by the privilege of looking like a White woman in a society, where images of White women, are used to oppress Black women, in a society where dark-skinned women are denigrated most.

Vertamae Grosvenor, on camera preparing for her performance piece "Skillet Blonde." "Skillet Blonde" was shot with a range of dramatic, stark positions, including extreme close-ups and profiles of Verta. Verta Mae is a dark-skinned woman around fifty, who wears dreadlocks. She has prototypically full West African features, which

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

she discusses in "Skillet Blonde." We hear camera directions from me "Go ahead Verta."

VERTA'S VOICE OVER

I wrote Skillet Blonde in response to all the things I experienced growing up...

CUT TO VERTA (on camera)

(Verta slowly turns her face and looks into the camera as she speaks):

When a baby is born, particularly in the South, people come to see the baby. I'm talking about Black people, they come to see the baby and they ask: How's the baby and they say: It's a Skillet Blonde, meaning the baby is very, very, very dark with African features.

Verta's V.O. is heard over images of little dark-skinned girls playing in slow motion.

VERTA'S VOICE OVER

They are forever commenting on how you look. What they say hurts your feelings, specially when they tell you that you are entirely too dark to wear red. Red is your favorite color.

CUT TO:

VERTA on-camera again

How come she's always grinning and showing her teeth, look like an African with them big liver lips. She'll never be able to get a boyfriend, cause boys don't chase behind no flat-nosed, two-toned liver lipped girls with nappy edges in the kitchen.

CUT TO:

VERTA ON CAMERA (in interview)

I just remember feeling so bad being told that... You don't even know what it means, but you know it means something bad. You... you can't wear red. You got liver lips (LAUGHS) Now really, you think of you know, like a piece of liver, and your lips look like that. So you think not only are you a bad kid, but your hair is bad, your lips are bad, your nose is bad... (Dissolve) and then when you look around, these people who are telling you that you are bad, they look the same way, so you know that they think they're bad. They feel bad about themselves... I mean everyone that I saw and knew had bad hair.

CUT TO:

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

XIX. Image of Varnette Honeywood collage of little girl getting her hair straightened at kitchen stove. Insert closeups of little girl holding her ear, to hot comb, to tilt up from little girl to her mom.

MELBA

My mother would wash our hair like every two weeks and it was like something that took like all day. She had to straighten it with a straightening comb, and we were tender headed children, and sometimes she'd be combing and straightening and she'd nick our ear or our neck, and that was one of the memories I had of my childhood, was going to school with our hair nicely straightened and having these little dark spots on your ear or your neck, where your mother had burnt you, straightening your hair.

CUT TO:

XX. VERTA (on camera)

Or people would say things if you get dressed up, after they've greased you down in vaseline, straightened your hair and everything. She's dark, but she's kind of pretty (LAUGHS). I mean you can transcend all these bad things.

XXI. MELBA (on camera)

There were lots of things that told you that you weren't beautiful. If you were dark, if your lips were full, if your skin was ashy, if your hair was kinky, and I had all these things... full lips, broad nose, ashy skin. And I mean I had all of that.. full lips, broad nose, ashy skin.

XXII. VERTA

You could be light and have those features, and you were still were not good. You were bad.

XXIII. MELBA

I know the expressions that people used in those days. So and so's had good hair or so and so had bad hair.

XXIV. VERTA

You could be dark and have a keen nose and they say, she's dark, but she's got good features.

MELBA V.O.

(over shot of little girl turning double-dutch in slow motion
You can't grow up in an environment like that without it having some effect on you.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

CUT TO:

XXV.

MALCOLM X

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin to such extent that you bleach to get like the White man? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself, from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race you belong to?

KATHLEEN CLEAVER (archival footage)

For so many years we were told that only White people were beautiful. Only straight hair, light eyes, light skin were beautiful. So Black women would try everything they could to straighten their hair and lighten their skin to look a much like White women. And the Black men would let it be known that they thought that White women were beautiful and they would say they didn't want any ugly Black women with short hair this whole thing. But this has changed because Black people are aware now that their own appearance is beautiful, they're proud of it and White people are aware of it too. They want wigs like this (she points to her own large "natural")... Did it. Isn't it beautiful? All right. (laughter from Cleaver and other sisters.)

We hear "Say It Loud -- I'm Black and I'm Proud." Interwoven into these activist images are the aesthetic images of The Black is Beautiful Movement: jubilant, young African-Americans wearing large natural "afro" hair styles, African cornrows, African clothing, etc.

MY V.O.

In the late 1960s millions of African Americans were touched by a mass movement of social and political consciousness which rocked the foundations of traditional color hierarchies and became known as the Black Consciousness Movement.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL (archival footage)

We are all Africans. All Black people are Africans and all Africans are Black people.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

XXVI.

VERTA

In the sixties I felt terrific. This whole African thing was in, and it was like my time had come. You know. And actually, I like the way I looked in African, they used to call it African garb. I just like the African look. I thought it fitted with me. I said these people know what they're doing. Their clothes, everything is designed to embrace the natural complexion, the beauty of the people that wear the stuff. That's it. This is my stuff. Oh and I liked it.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL (archival footage)

Many people would like to deny that they come from Africa, but they can not deny that they came from Africa.

VERTA

There was an expression people used to use, don't wear too much jewelry because you'll look like a Ubangi, and you know what that meant. I mean who wants to look like a Ubangi? Well I liked looking like a Ubangi, and a Zulu, and a Dahomey person.

DIANNE

I had my Afro and I looked like Angela Davis and you couldn't tell me nothing... I'm not just talking about little Afros, I'm talking major raincloud afros.

XXVII.

MELBA

(over a variety of footage of Melba as an anchor woman, with straightened hair, and over corresponding footage of the period)

The 1960s was a very exciting time... Certainly my coming into the news had to do directly with what was happening in the streets in the 1960s.

Narration about Melba becoming one of the first Black women on network news...

MELBA

There were several occasions where people would stop me when I was covering a story to ask 'How come you still wearing your hair straightened. When you gonna start wearing your hair in a natural... Sistuh! (she laughs)

I did not just on my own overnight say 'I'm going to start wearing my hair in a natural. I was really reflecting what was happening at the time. There were

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

people Angela Davis and others who were wearing their hair in naturals and when I saw them it just provided me with a context and an opportunity for me to do the same thing.

Image: Melba on-camera on the news interviewing a hostile White hard-hat official.

NARRATION

Melba encountered resistance from her station for wearing her hair naturally.

MELBA (on-camera and over still photos)
They said with my hair in a natural, I didn't look feminine. that people wouldn't like it and that I had to change it.

Now I had seen the man who was producing the news show I was on take a picture of Kathleen Cleaver. (see slow motion of Kathleen Cleaver) a wire service photo, and she had her hair in a big natural and use his hand to cover her hair... for him. if he removed her hair. then she was an acceptable feminine creature...

See Melba again in news interview in slow motion.

XXVIII.

MY V.O.

Melba Tolliver was taken off the air and threatened with dismissal because she refused to straighten her hair. After a public outcry she was reinstated, and her natural remained.

JESSE JACKSON (archival footage)

The natural hairstyle that you wear means you going to quit being fictitious. Not only in your hair but in your life!

Then we go into positive celebratory still shots of families, couples, etc.

MY V.O.

For nearly a decade, the Movement helped African Americans of all ages, especially young people, reshape our self image and it influenced many people throughout the world.

VERTA

I hear people talking about the 60s and trashing it. And actually saying things like, well in the 60s, when

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

Black was beautiful, it was rough for me, because nobody appreciated how I looked. Well that's a lot of people who are lighter than me saying that...

DIANNE

What I do remember and probably still resent very much is the fact that every light-skinned person, particularly every light skinned woman, or girl that came into the Black Student Union had to prove herself worthy of being in the BSU, okay. As if by being light skinned you were automatically suspect...

VERTA

And actually I don't remember it that way. I remember it as being very liberating...

XXIX.

MY V.O.

The right's rapid rise to national political power had chilling effect on social, political and aesthetic alternatives. As the Reagan era approached, the afro gave way to the gerri curl.

Bring in music video of a rap group performing -- "Helluva Woman."

MY V.O.

The demise of the Black Consciousness Movement halted an important new dialogue around color amongst African Americans. It's loss is felt today.

Image: Young rap artists, including one rapper wearing dreadlocks, sing to and pursue a very light complexioned woman with long straight hair blowing in the breeze.

MY V.O.

While Black consciousness and afrocentricity has powerfully resurfaced without young people in the nineties, we see lingering contradictions as young rap artists sing to a light-skinned woman with "good hair that's real to the roots."

We hear the group clearly:

RAPPERS

She's as cute as a puss in boots with good hair, and it's real to the roots..

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

XXX. We go directly to Karen, a young brown skinned woman in her late twenties who is seated in a Harlem hair parlor, where a hair braider is weaving extension braids into her hair as she is being interviewed. Karen on camera with her hands full of loose extension hair.

KAREN

Basically I feel that getting extensions is to have long hair, and I believe that braids are a Black woman's great White hope maybe.

And I feel this inferiority complex starts when you start watching T.V. from two years old and up... and I know it started at five years old, going to first grade private school and seeing these girls, young white girls with long hair, the two braids, and wanting to know why I couldn't have this.

(IN V.O.)

Growing up watching Martha and the Vandellas, the Supremes, Tina Turner don't forget her. They all wore wigs, where was their hair? Where was my role model for hair? It was missing.

CUT TO:

ROBIN

(a woman in her late twenties with dreadlocks or "African locks")
And I had seen people with locks and I thought, I should really do this. I just felt propelled. It was like I must lock my hair.

Close-up shots of Robin running her fingers through her African locks.

ROBIN (V.O.)

I think African locks represent its a reaffirmation of who you are as an African-American person.

Ad I went to some woman and she put it in these really tight little rolls on my head, and I thought how is everyone else going to react to it? Because I myself wasn't comfortable with it initially.

KAREN

Because of my inferiority complex I don't like to see my edges kinky.

I like to swim a lot in the summertime and I still don't feel comfortable coming out the water with my hair in its natural state.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

ROBIN (on-camera)

I have one relative who told me: 'When are you gonna cut that mess out of your hair? I'm going to cut it while you're sleeping.'

I was called all kinds of names like Buckwheat and Jigaboo.

"Why are you wearing you hair in that style?" or you know, "it's so nappy", or "what are you trying to prove?"

Cut back to close-up of Robin, she is at mirror, styling her locks in tight close-up.

ROBIN (V.O.)

And it's like, why can't I just be who I am? You know, why do I have to opt for straightening my hair? That's not part of me.

But once it started to grow out their whole attitude started to change, and I think its because we like long hair, you know short is not happening.

KAREN (on-camera)

Now this is my natural hair, so why should I be ashamed of that?

Cut back to Robin on-camera

ROBIN

I had to become confident in myself and become really really self-assured about my hair, and learn to really love it and love every aspect of it. I felt that I got stronger each year that went by. I got stronger and stronger in my determination and in letting other people know, as well as to reaffirm it within myself that it's beautiful. And there's nothing wrong with being black, there's nothing wrong with having natural hair.

KAREN

I would like to have dreadlocks but I know I'll be fifty years old before that happens because its going to take time for me to accept my hair, but I know it will take some time for me to unbrainwash myself.

Shots of Karen getting her hair blow-dried, then turning in a mirror to look at the finished version of her hair in braids.

Cut back to Robin close-up of her working with her locks.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

ROBIN

The process itself makes you stretch and grow because you realize that you have problems with you own hair, based on what society has told you is acceptable.

XXXI. We go to Kevonn's home, where his 11-year old brother Kayin dances in the kitchen while preparing breakfast.

Lower thirds read:
Keyonns's brother Kayin

MY V.O.

The racism that we experience in our everyday lives has caused us to be ashamed of the way we look. Has society taught us to hate what is most African about us?

CHERYL V.O.

Turn that fire down. I can smell the, the butter burning.

CUT TO:

XXXII. Breakfast table, where Kevonn, his mom and Kayin are seated.

KEYONN

Father we thank Thee for the food we are about to receive for the nourishment of our body. For Christ's sake. Amen.

CHERYL

That's not funny kevonn.

Kevonn laughs.

KEYONN

I'm sorry. I just never heard of a operation that could make your skin lighter.

CHERYL

Wel, there isn't an operation....

KAYIN

Michael was darker than he actually is now isn't he?

CHERYL

Yeah.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

KAYIN

How'd he get like that?

KEYONN

He injected lambs fluid into his....

CHERYL

Is that what he did?

KEYONN

Yeah.

KAYIN

Lambs what?

CHERYL

Fluid.

KAYIN

From who?

KEYONN

You want to look like Michael Jackson?

CHERYL

I thought. I thought that we had progressed past that. I thought that. you know. it had to do with the content of your character. not the color of your skin.

KAYIN

You could have a light-skinned girl who was ugly and a dark-skinned girl who was cute and they usually pick the light-skinned girl.

CHERYL

Really?

KAYIN

Pretty much.

CHERYL

Keyonn kinda likes light-skinned girls. Name, name three, name three dark-skinned girls. that you, that you dated in the last three years.

KEYONN (counting on his fingers)

My last three girls!

CHERYL

Who?

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

KEYONN

Nicky... Chocolate... Ebony!

CHERYL

There were some others who just, ran in and ran out.
You know.

KEYONN

Angela. Uhm. Rominita.

CHERYL (shaking her head)

Yeah.

KAYIN

Rominita's Puerto Rican.

KEYONN

Alexis.

CHERYL

Yeah.

KEYONN

Uh.

CHERYL

Sarah.

KAYIN

White...

KEYONN (laughing)

I'm just a cross cultural brother.

Everyone laughs...

CHERYL

If you could be lighter, would you? (pause) Look at
his eyes. His eyes say what Keyonn?

KEYONN (laughs)

Yeah.

KAYIN

I don't know.

CHERYL

Yes you do.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

KEYONN

You think people would like you better if you was light-skinned?

CHERYL

You think people like light-skinned people more than they like dark-skinned people, in general?

KAYIN

Some people.

KEYONN

Who would like you better if you were light skinned?

CHERYL

White people?

KEYONN

Female people.

CHERYL

Girls like light-skinned...

Loud offscreen laughter from Keyonn. Keyonn and Cheryl are off-screen heard over the close-up image of Kayin's sad face...

KEYONN

Yeah! That's it! (Makes a lot of noise.) You see the face?

CHERYL

That was it, huh?

KEYONN

You see the face!

CUT TO:

Vogue Mexico with a blonde White woman on cover, Vogue Brazil with a European looking dark haired woman on cover, then Japanese Elle magazine with a blonde White woman. Ominous music is heard...

MY V.O.

Throughout the world, the relationships of power of affect the self image of various people... As a result, a European or White standard of beauty has been imposed on much of the world.

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

We see a montage of women from Ms. Universe pageant, then hear the announcer read the runners ups as they come forward: Ms. Denmark, Ms. Columbia. Ms. India, Ms. Namibia (a White woman), Ms. Namibia wins. Voices come over Ms. Namibia being crowned.

CUT TO:

Asian woman in surgical eye operation.

MY V.O.

Many people of color go through great pains to conform to this White ideal.

We hear the sounds of a man. saying "If she were going to Westernize her eye." We see "before" and "after" shots. My voice over continues..

Thousands of Asian women throughout the world feel compelled to alter the shape of their eyes to better fit a European standard of beauty. Cosmetic surgery is also on the rise in the African American community.

CUT TO:

Street shots and sounds of 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard. Harlem Hospital awning. Interior of Harlem Hospital. We see man in green scrubs in hospital corridor walk into frame.

MY V.O.

Dr. Ferdinand Ofodile, who is Nigerian, is head of plastic surgery at Harlem Hospital...

DR. OFODILE

Essentially there are three groups of Blacks requesting nose surgery. The first group is a group that wants to look more Caucasian.

XXXIII. Images in a news article of Michael Jackson's cosmetic surgery transformation from his image as child with a large kinky Afro and full African features, to his drastically altered "whitened" features, bleached skin and "processed" hair.

OFODILE (back on camera)

...the second group wants to retain their ethnic identity but "refine" their features and the third group who says they don't want to look White, but in point of fact they want their noses to look like a Caucasians'.

CUT TO:

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

DR. OFODILE in surgical room, with Jackie, a dark-skinned young woman.

MY V.O.

Dr. Ofodile demonstrates the kind of changes he would make on Jackie, a nurse who agreed to be his model.

DR. OFODILE

Now Jackie is a very attractive young lady. Her facial features are essentially in balance, so she doesn't need any radical operations to alter the structures of the face. However she can do with a little fine tuning...

(DR. OFODILE, pointing to Jackie's nose, produces a white plastic implant that he positions close to her nose as he speaks.)

Jackie's nose falls into the category classified as African, so in this case the bridge is a little flat and depressed so we will have to build up the bridge. In this case we will insert this implant. This builds up the bridge. This will convert this African nose to an Afro-Caucasian nose and give it a more refined finer features.

(Close-up on Jackie's face who seems tense, at the various descriptions being given.)

While we're at it we may also narrow the nostrils a little bit so that the flair of the nostrils are reduced. and some of this fat under the skin here will be removed. So that when we are finished the nose as a whole will look finer and more chiseled....

(Dr. Ofodile's words are lowered over this, and my V.O. comes up above this. We then cut to slow motion shots of different African Americans walking into camera on 125th Street against percussion music.)

MY V.O.(rises over music)

Only we can overcome our tendency to become agents of our own oppression and transcend the values that have distorted our self image. Only then can we celebrate the rainbow of colors, hair textures and features that are our community.

CUT TO:

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

XXXIV. Campus of Howard University. The Howard University marching band is dancing at their liveliest, camera. Khadijah Diggs, dark-skinned woman with a short natural hairstyle is IDed as Howard's Homecoming Queen in 1986.

KHADIJAH

(Khadijah talks about her African name, pride of her mom, etc. This is intercut with Band/Stadium, lively footage)

KHADIJAH

There were alot of people caught off guard, based on the fact that: Ms. Howard is dark-brown-skinned and she's BALD-HEADED... I've been dark-skinned, very short hair all my life, and I'm very comfortable with that.

Still traditionally, it's thought that Ms. Howard would be fair-skinned with long hair flowing down her back, the kind of image mainstream America would tell us -- this is beauty for Black people and beauty for Black people according to mainstream America is as close to White people as you can get. And I'm about as far from White people as you can get.

Band plays vibrantly and we hear Khadijah's V.O. rise above images of the stadium, the band really rocking to the music.

KHADIJAH

If you walk across this yard you see 50 million versions of beauty and that's part of the beauty of Black people.

CUT TO:

An image of me in Harlem at an African market, receiving a doll from an African market woman.

MY V.O.

As Black Americans, we must challenge the way we see ourselves, so that we can overcome the ways we have been taught...

Cut to Dr. Ofodile and Jackie, Mrs. Davis, Rhonda and the mayor, and others over the following voice over.

...to hate ourselves. We need to honestly and openly discuss color consciousness within our families, within our institutions and amongst one another. We need to overcome our shame about confronting these issues and face the task of healing ourselves as a

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

community. Only then can we collectively change the way we look at ourselves, and the way the world sees us.

XXXV.

KEYONN (V.O.)

Image: Keyonn and Keith on stairwell, talking to one another making animated funny gestures.

It's like a mirror, you'll be laughing at that person.

CUT TO:

KEYONN (on camera)

but somewhere there's someone who's laughing at you. Somewhere there someone who thinks that I'm too dark.

CUT TO:

VERTA

I think we Black people are changing our concepts of beauty, but we still look and see good and bad hair, good and bad features...

WILEY

That these questions peeled off layers of myself. That I'd like to think that I didn't have preferences and I didn't make distinctions, but that wouldn't be the truth. That I found out in your questioning that I did make distinctions, and I do have prejudices... I'd like to think I was one way and I am finding out that there are other sides of me.

CUT TO:

Images of Karen getting the finishing touches done on her extension braids, which has given her the long hair she has admitted to wanting. Her voice over is heard over these images.

KAREN'S VOICE-OVER

I feel like with this interview today it's almost like therapy for myself, because you're actually saying that you're ashamed of your hair. You're not just telling yourself, you're telling strangers...

(She turns her head backward toward the mirror, and her reflection catches her seeing herself.)

and that is not easy to admit, but if you can admit that, that's coming to terms with yourself...

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

CUT TO:

ROBIN

And I think we have to have as many positive words to describe ourselves as possible. I think we need to get rid of all the negative that's been placed on us, and I think we have to start loving ourselves and treating ourselves in a loving way. And that means describing ourselves positively, you know, knowing that anything about us, the fullness of our noses, the fullness of our lips, the coarseness, or, you know, of our hair, as a positive thing.

CUT TO:

Return to color terms sequence and music. Some of the people whose faces are repeated from beginning are saying the terms that describe their color...

COLOR TERMS

V.O. (male voice)

Ebony, coal black, skillet blonde, tar baby, red, redbone, light, bright and damn near white, high yeller, cinnamon, teasing brown, honey colored, wasted yeller, lemon colored, brown sugar, blue black, decan...

Older woman and young boy chant the following on-camera:
The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice.

Cut back to color images, with music, no color terms are heard. My words comes above the music.

MY V.O.

Color consciousness in Black America is a consequence of racism in White America. As we struggle to redefine ourselves, we must also confront the reality that we live in a society that has failed to embrace all of us.

CUT TO:

Black. Then MAJOR CREDITS FADE IN as music continues... (12 SECONDS)

CUT TO:

MALCOLM X

Who are you? you don't know? Don't tell me Negro, that's nothing. What were you before the White man named you a Negro? And where were you and what did you have and what was yours what language did you speak then. What was you name? It couldn't have been

A QUESTION OF COLOR Transcript

speak then. What was your name? It couldn't have been Smith or Jones or Bunch or Powell. That wasn't your name. They don't have those kind of names where you and I came from. No what was your name and why don't you now know what your name was then.

More credits roll as music continues... (15 MORE SECONDS OR SO)

MRS. CALDWELL

I'm proud to be Black because I think that Black is the most beautifulist color you can look at.. I love it Black!

Music continues. Credits roll. Music gives way to beat box sound.

CUT TO:

Keith and Keyonn as they finish their rap piece "It's Where You Came From". break up with laughter as they pal around and give each other a power shake. Keith ends off staring into camera.

CUT TO:

Dip to Black. Final funder list.

THE END

© 1992 Film Two Productions