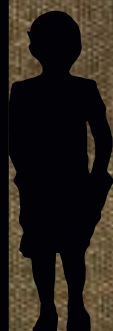


I'M TALKING
TO THAT LITTLE
BROWN
GIRL
THIS IS FOR HER



Little Brown Girl

**ESSAYS ON THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK WOMANHOOD
IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION (OR VICE-VERSA)**

ALDRENA L.R. CORDER



LITTLE BROWN GIRL: Essays on the Influence
of Black Womanhood in Visual Communication (or
vice-versa)

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design in the Graphic
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why am i doing this?

Because God has not given me a spirit of fear
Because this is the scariest thing I've ever done
Because someone is waiting for me to tell my story
Because I'll be stuck here forever if I don't

Because for so long, I've been taught (commanded at times) not to think of myself first
Because I must validate my own self-worth
Because greater is He who lives inside of me

Because this will give me the courage to step beyond the safe zone into something riskier, but greater in the end
Because is the hardest thing I've ever done
Because it's time to honor myself.
Because I have to stop being afraid of showing who I am, then celebrate
Because the God I know and love has so much more for me

Because I need to know who I am recognize the power within, embrace my own awesome, and stand on my truth
Because there are many sides to my story to tell

Because graphic design is more than just pushing pixels. More than just making things look pretty
Because I deserve every chance I'm not giving myself
Because the power of art

Because I love storytelling
Because I refuse to continue to live in the fear of my own potential any longer

Because I have to stop being afraid
Because this is my form of empowerment
Because I never do simple well
Because this'll be the first step of stepping into my glory
Because I have to stop rejecting the prophecy spoken over me

Because I am not one single story

Who am I talking to? Who is this for?



I'm talking to that
Little Brown Girl.
This is for Her.
Me, You, Them.

Introduction

Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a presentation at a TED Talk, recounting how she came to find her own voice in writing. She talked of how she realized that looking through the others' one-dimensional lens as they wrote stories about her own culture caused her to miss out on the appreciation of her own heritage. It was only when she discovered other Nigerian writers that she came to understand that it was up to her to share her own story, write the stories that she knew:

"Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books...I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized."¹

This shift, she admits, caused her to realize the dangers of taking in a single-sided story and making that the whole story of a person, culture or movement. She warned that

by showing “people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, [they become just that.]”² By only telling a singular story, the power of that people is taken away. She tells us, “It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is ‘nkali.’ It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.”³

Adichie proposes that real power lies in the ability to make a story about a person the definitive story of that person and admonishes that we do not start with “secondly” when telling someone’s story. She states, “Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”⁴

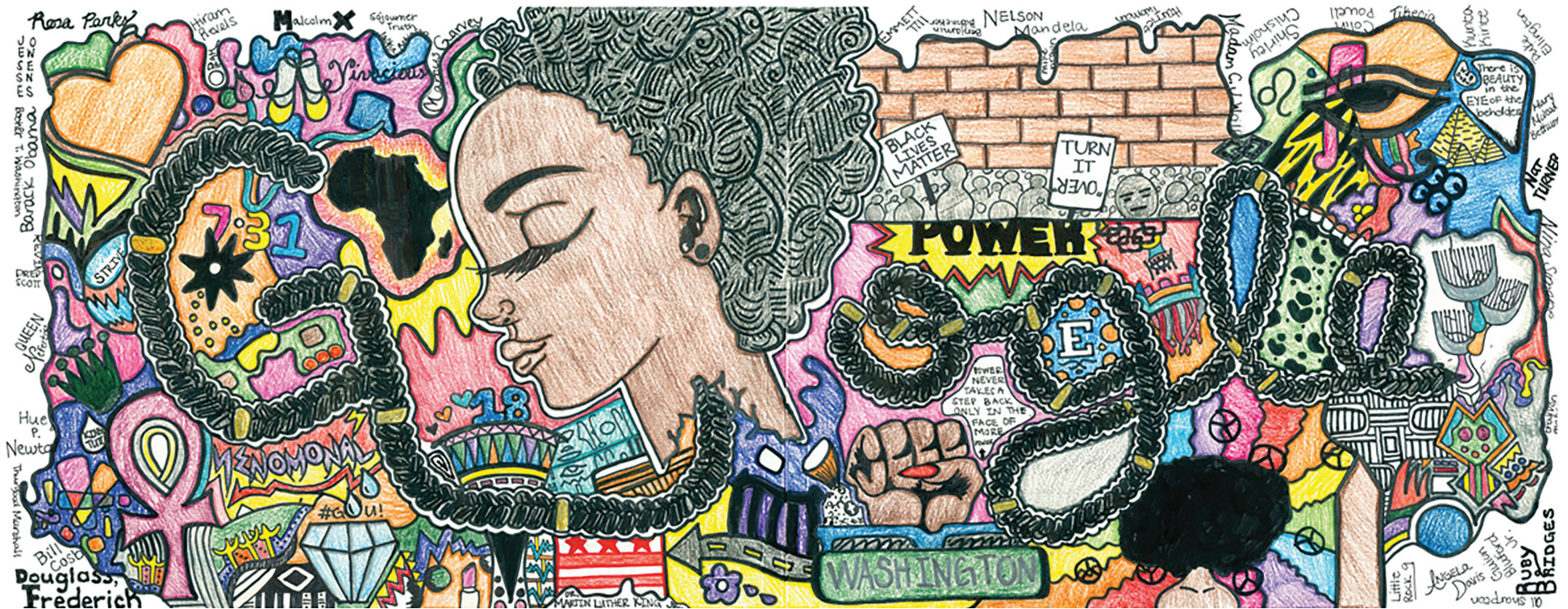
Little Brown Girl is a response—a series of essays and stories based on my personal experiences as a Black woman in America—essays and stories that reflect the subject matter of hair, skin, respectability and self-love. This work does not begin to encompass all of what being a Black woman is and means, nor does this work speak to every Black woman’s experience—for we all don’t experience our Blackness the same. This project is a reflection of more than just one side—my way of

“It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power”

taking care not to start with “secondly” in mind. It is the springboard of my life-long journey to uncover and reveal the many sides to this complicated story—my personal thoughts, feelings, and responses to such things through my use of art and design through visual communication.

PERSONAL VOICE IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Little Brown Girl demonstrates the vital role that personal expression and visual communication play in the Black community. Visual art, music, dance and social media are used to express personal feelings and thoughts about everything from everyday living to protest in major social and political issues.



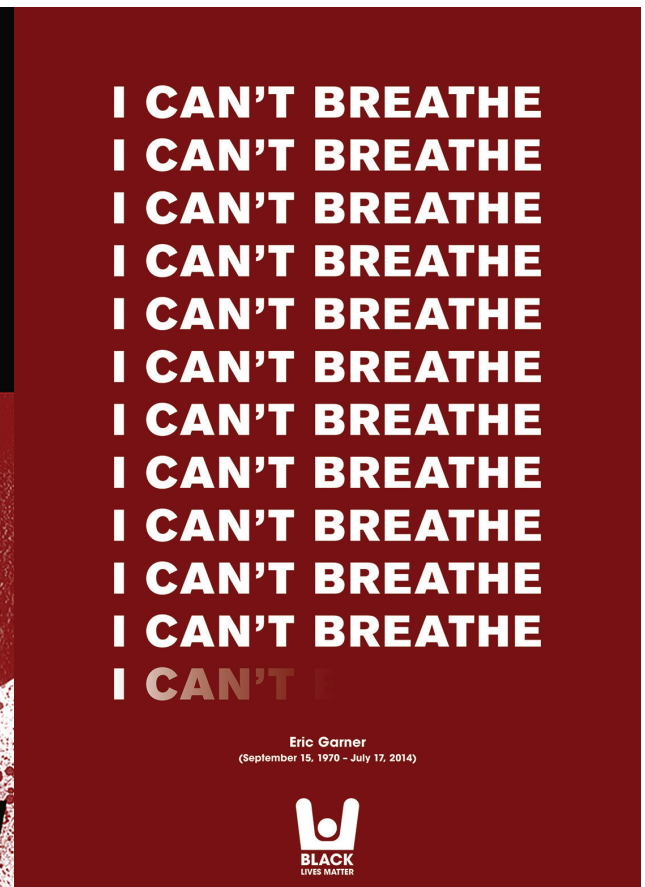
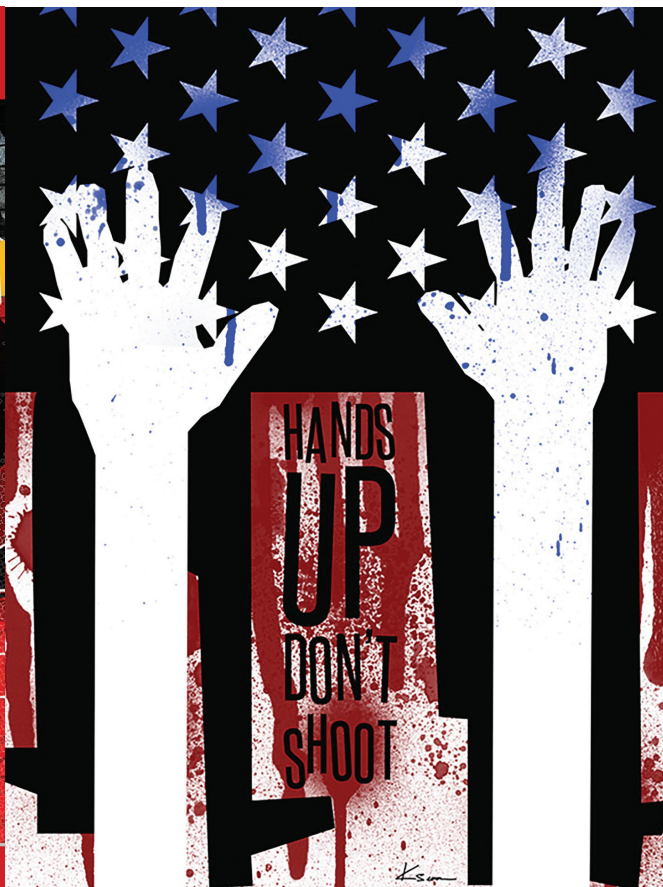
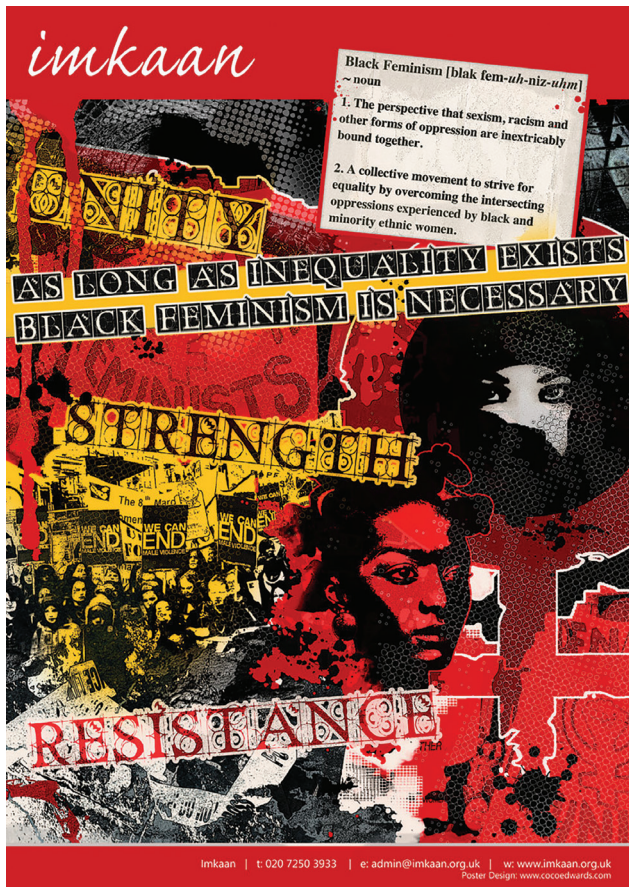
Top: Winner of the 2016 Doodle 4 Google contest, Akilah Johnson's work celebrates Black culture, heritage and Black womanhood. Photo credit: Google blog. ©2016.



Bottom left: As part of National Day of Action for Black Women and Girls, a dozen bare-breasted women protest to bring attention to the Black women victims of police violence. Photo credit: Julie Carrie Wong. ©2015.



Bottom Right: During a protest rally, a young woman places tape over her mouth as a symbolic gesture. Photo credit: Carl Juste, AP ©2015.



Blogger and author Sarah Wendell writes, “We live in a culture online that increasingly prizes the visual, not just in terms of communicating beyond text and comprehension, but in how our visuals are promoted for us. Facebook and Twitter both amplify visuals over text, and for greater ‘reach’ anyone wishing to promote anything must rely on the visual, and specifically on a visual that combines representation and expression. People share things for two major reasons: [one], it’s an expression of how they feel, and [two], the item shared makes them look good because they shared it in the first place.”⁵

When I began my journey at Vermont College of Fine Arts, I struggled with sharing my own personal story. I could not see the value in it. I wasn’t so much concerned with who deserved to hear my story, but with whether or not if I had a right to share. At the beginning of my third semester, I was given the challenge to write

Left: Poster design for Imkaan, a UK-based, black feminist organization. The “Resistance” Designer Coco Edwards. <https://imkaan.bandcamp.com/merch/black-feminism-series-resistance-a3-red-poster-equality-a3-purple-poster-and-respect-a3-yellow-poster>

Middle: Artist Benjamin Storie creates this print in response to the shooting death of Michael Brown. ©2014. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/19546461/Hands-Up-Dont-Shoot>

Right: Designer Greg Banbury’s poster in response and protest of the death of Eric Garner, who died when an officer placed him in a choke-hold during an arrest. ©2014. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/21853587/Eric-Garner-I-Cant-Breathe-Poster>



my autobiography—to share whatever I wanted about my life. I grimaced at the thought but obliged. Then I was asked to create posters about any subject of interest to me. I rejected the idea at first, but the more posters I created, the more I realized I had much to speak about. I was finding my own voice again—and remembering that design was how I could make my voice be heard.

Taking a creative, visual approach has always been my way of responding. For as long as I can remember, I've been creating and making things in some way, shape, form or fashion. I remember times in school when I didn't just want to write book reports or papers. I had to make something to go along with what I was trying to say. For my ninth-grade world history class, a report on a famous ancient war was assigned. We could be as creative as we wanted. I cannot remember the exact details, but I chose to tell the story of this war by writing a story about two young girls on opposing sides, except I envisioned them as good friends. They wrote letters to each other detailing how the war affected them and those around them. I then translated the letters into Greek so that the reader, my teacher, would get the full impact. It wasn't enough to just write the story, I wanted her to have some sense of what the letters might have looked like; how the girls may have actually been writing at that point in time.

In middle school, I gave a history report on the Trail of Tears. Instead of just reading the usual paper report in

Left: Part of the poster design series, this piece was created in response to the social injustices against young, Black males in America—particularly the alarming number of arrests and imprisonment. Designer: Aldrena Corder. ©2016.

front of the class, I created a “television” that illustrated pivotal scenes that lead up to that fateful event. I used a cereal box, a long roll of paper, and two dowel rods to make my story come to life. With a twist of the rod, my scenes advanced while I read my report. For another class, I presented a book report on Thomas Rockwell’s *How to Eat Fried Worms*. A 3D boy made of out of construction paper sat at his cardboard desk, eating his yarn “worm” as I read a scene from the book.

I can recount many other instances where I chose art as my vehicle for my voice. It’s easy to understand how I fell into the world of art; why I use design as a means to make a living. These impulses to visually communicate ideas and to illustrate subject matters were evidence of my desire to make things more easily understood to others. These ways of working were signs of my signs of my future in graphic design.

I belong to a long line of makers—making and creating is in my blood. My paternal grandfather was a master brick mason, whose work can be seen throughout Historic Charleston. My grandmother was a masterful seamstress and quilt maker whose exquisite attention to detail rivaled no other. My own father is a creative person, as well. My mother’s side is not lacking in creativity either, with talented musicians, actors, dancers and artists. I come by my gift honestly.

Visually communicating through art and design is my way of storytelling. It’s my natural response to events; how I cope with matters that are lighthearted or serious

in my life and the world around me. Why do I choose this method of communicating? Because creating digitally and crafting with my hands come to me more easily than writing. I’m able to quickly express emotions, thoughts and feelings—even when the words have yet to be formed and make their way onto paper. Creating helps me to better process and synthesize my own understanding of people, places and things. It’s my way of experiencing and sharing that experience. In this way, I’m recording and preserving the present and the future. These reasons are why I go the extra mile to illustrate, document and animate history—to remember myself, when I’m in my twilight years and to give future generations of Black women a sense of Black womanhood in early part of the 21st century.

This thesis, this document, is my way of capturing the here and now. This *Skin I’m In* asks what does mean to be judged by others as well as one’s own race by the lightness or darkness of skin. What are the ramifications that follow? Through *Better than Good Hair*, I’m revealing the complex emotional struggle and celebration of a Black woman’s hair and my own personal journey in learning to love it, no matter what. Finally, *On Loving Blackness and Black Womanhood* discusses how loving one’s own Blackness is a political and personal choice. Why some folks—even with talk of unity and togetherness—perceive this as a threat. This thesis is my time capsule—a collection of personal thoughts of what it means to a Black woman, presently, and my responses through design and other means of visual communication.

END NOTES:

1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TED, October 2009, accessed May, 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.
2. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story"
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Sarah Wendell, comment notes to author, June 19, 2016.

This temple ^{right here.}
A curvy
and sensual
playground ^{for the} one
she ^{consecrated} it for.
A place of
comfort
& pleasure
^{for the} one she adores.
fearfully ^{wonder} & fully made
by the One she faithfully
There is no reason ^{worships} to ever
is ^{what} beautiful Joy ^{forsake}
her ^{majestic} vessel ^{lovingly} bestows.

Celebration of Her Body is part of the poster series that speaks the joy of female body. Aldrena Corder. ©2016.



THIS
SKIN
I'M IN

SEPTEMBER 7, 1987.

I was eagerly anticipating the world premiere of Michael Jackson's new video, "Bad." The last time I saw Michael perform was in his music videos and specials from his *Thriller* album. As were many fans, I was totally mesmerized and in love with him as a master musician and performer. I just knew that whatever he was following up *Thriller* with was going to be grand. My parents were letting me stay up to watch, and they watched, too. If memory serves me correctly, the sitcom *Alf* on was pre-empted to air the much-anticipated video. And so it starts, my heart pounding ready to see what magic was going to unfold. As the first part of the short film starts, I'm looking for the Michael from *Thriller*. The scene opens with this fair-skinned student named Darryl. "Ok," I said to myself, "That's nice. Where's Michael?"

Later in the video, he's talking to a classmate about his experience at school as they board the train home for the summer. "Enough with showing this light skinned guy already," I thought, "where's Michael?" Seriously. I get excited and impatient looking for him to appear on the screen.

It's not until the scene in the subway station, where "Darryl" finally cries out, "You ain't bad! You ain't nuthin" and the music starts, and he starts singing that I finally realize THAT. IS. MICHAEL! I watch the rest of the video in utter amazement, not because of the beautiful choreography or costumes, but because I just could not reconcile that Michael's voice was coming out of this much lighter, surgically-altered face and bleached body.

The signature moves and unmistakable voice were there, but the brown Michael from *Thriller*, that little boy from the old Jackson 5 videos I watched was gone. My Michael was gone and replaced by this phony. All I could think to myself was, "Why would he do that? What was wrong with the way he looked before? Why would he want to be a White guy?"

Earlier this year, rap artist Lil' Kim released a photo via social media, showing off her brand new look. I thought of how I felt when "White" Michael debuted on *Bad*, and immediately I felt an overwhelming sadness for her. Yes, this alternate Kim is pretty with her milky skin and blonde tresses. but. But. BUT wasn't she beautiful before? Didn't anyone tell her how naturally lovely her brown skin, Black nose and hair were before? That she didn't have to "fix" anything. Maybe they did, but maybe she didn't believe it because she had already internalized that Black beauty was no match for the mainstream media's version of beauty. Maybe she couldn't hear the affirming words of "your Black is beautiful" over the voices of the Black men who told her she wasn't light enough, then leaving her for her lighter-skinned counterparts. In a *Newsweek* interview, she lamented, "I have low self-esteem and I always have. Guys always cheated on me with women who were European-looking. You know, the long-hair type. Really beautiful women that left me thinking, 'How can I compete with that?' Being a regular black girl wasn't good enough."¹

My heart aches not only for her but also for her young daughter who will undoubtedly be looking for herself in



Lil' Kim, "The 'Queen B' of Hip Hop," shocked fans when she posted pictures of a remarkably lighter version of herself on Instagram®. Photo credit: Lil' Kim, ©2015.

her mommy. What will this do to her psyche? Will she pick up on the fact that Mommy didn't love herself enough, that she had to change who she was? Will Kim allow her own daughter to alter her looks so dramatically that she is unrecognizable to herself? Or, will she see her daughter as an opportunity to teach the lessons of Black self-love she, herself, did not learn growing up? Still, I found myself asking the same question as I had all those years ago, "Why does she want and CHOOSE to look white?"

“Being a regular black girl wasn't good enough”

COLORISM

According to *On Dark Girls*, an article published by the Association of Black Psychologists, Dr. Cheryl Grills defines colorism as “a form of oppression that is expressed through the differential treatment of individuals and groups based on skin color. Typically, favoritism is demonstrated toward those of lighter complexions while those with darker complexions experience rejection and mistreatment....”² While colorism primarily refers to skin color, it also encompasses physical characteristics that are related to skin color, such as eye color, hair texture and color, and facial features.³ Grills argues that the persistent exercise of colorism, which is directly related to racism in the US, affords light-skinned Black people preferential treatment over darker skinned Blacks in just about every

area of life including income, education, housing—even marriage. Subsequently, it's an internalized form of racism.

Colorism in the US can be traced back to the times of European colonialism and the plantation system of enslaved Africans. The separating of Africans from the same tribes and families began long before they were sold to plantation owners. This system of division was used as a precaution to reduce the likelihood of a revolt and feeling of solidarity among each other. This color caste system began to emerge as early as 1662, as evidenced by the state of Virginia enacting one of the first laws based on mixed race. In 1662 law decreed that a child's legal status would be based on that of the mother⁴. In other words, children born to slave women were legally considered to be slaves themselves—even those children who were fathered by their White slave owners. Sometimes the children of White slave owners were provided more favorable roles within a plantation, as a slave's skin color was frequently a determining factor as to what type of work was assigned to him/her. Darker-skinned slaves were tasked with working out in the fields, while lighter-skinned slaves were usually given more preferential assignments in the house. Slave owners usually preferred light-skinned slaves for housework because they looked more like the slave owner, while dark-skinned slaves were perceived as more threatening⁵. One important fact is that while light-skinned slaves were more likely favored as house workers, they did not receive fair or privileged treatment. Slave women, especially, suffered maltreatment at the hands

of the plantation owners' wives, for they resented their sexual involvement with their husbands—though it was rape on the part of the slave owner. The wives' misplaced resentment and anger often resulted in whipping of the female slaves and sometimes murder of the babies born to them.⁶

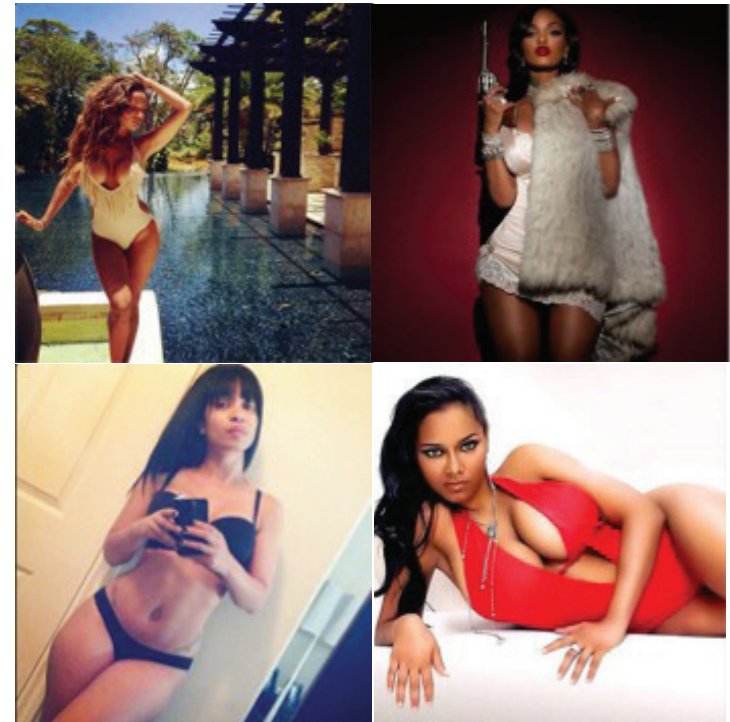
At the end of the Civil War, and after Emancipation, some light-skinned Black Americans began to experience and gain better socioeconomic status. Up through and into the early 20th century, many light-skinned Black Americans assumed leadership positions within the Black American community. Preferential treatment was given to Blacks based on differences in skin color, hair texture and physical appearance—not only by Whites, but also among Blacks themselves. White women were often equated with purity and innocence, while black was seen as evil and depravity. “White women were idealized as all things virtuous (piety, deference, domesticity, being passionless, chastity, or being clean and fragile), Black women were cast as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty⁷.

Throughout the early part of 20th Century, many Blacks were administered the “paper bag” test, which stated that any Black American whose complexion was darker than the paper bag was denied entrance to certain clubs and university organizations. Many of today's sororities and fraternities within historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have a history of instituting this rule. Sadly, places of worship were not exempt from this practice. Some Black churches' doors were painted light

brown, signifying that those darker than the door were not accepted or welcome. Other churches would hang a comb at the door as a symbolic reminder that only those Blacks with hair texture closest to that of Whites were welcomed inside to worship.⁸

The late 1960s and 1970s saw a decrease in the fixation with light-skinned Black Americans. With the emergence of Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and Black Power movement in the 1970s, the opposite occurred—the dark-skinned Black American was glorified and elevated. Sentiments like “The darker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” saw dark-skinned men and women as being purer and having more Blackness. However, as these decades drew to a close, the persistence that “lighter is better” started to reappear.⁹

Rap, hip-hop and R&B music videos of the 1980s and 1990s were proof of the discriminatory and stereotypical images of the Black woman. In her book *Sister Citizen*, author Melissa Harris-Perry points out that hip-hop’s degrading role of the “video vixen” was usually one of “silent, scantily clad figures who writhe willingly behind male artists.”¹⁰ A Google search of “video vixen” will yield thousands of images of said women, with many things in common—one being they are almost always light skinned with European-like hair. For instance, a 2014 article on VH-1’s website entitled “The Hottest Hip Hop Video Vixens of All Time,”¹¹ showcases fifteen Black and Latina women seemingly deserving of the title. True to Perry’s description, they were all “scantily clad” and in provocative poses. They also all possessed one unmistakable feature—all were light skinned.



Clockwise, Top: VH-1 Video-Vixens Erica Mena, Lola Monroe, Karrine and Esther Baxter help perpetuate a mythological definition of Black Beauty.
Photo credit: Getty Images.

Colorism within the Black community against Blacks still persists today. For many, having light skin is still perceived as having an easier time at life with better jobs and more money, while having darker skin is equated with laziness or having a threatening nature. Grace Williams writes “many Black Americans perceive dark-skinned Black Americans as more lower class, less educated, criminal, thuggish [and as a result], [many] dark-skinned

Black Americans [experience] self-hatred because of their skin color and the perceived lack of economic opportunities resultant of this.”¹²

SKIN LIGHTENING, SKIN BLEACHING AND THE MEDIA

On Dark Girls author Cheryl Grills, Ph. D. outlines the far-reaching effects of colorism on the psyche, mental health, and communal relationships on Black women in particular. She discusses how self-esteem, the perception of beauty, education and even economic opportunity are affected by the internalization of colorism attitudes. Certain risk behaviors are also associated with taking on colorism attitudes. Studies have shown that Black girls internalizing colorism attitudes have exhibited higher sexual risk and substance use behavior.”¹³

Skin bleaching is another important risk behavior. While skin bleaching mostly fell out of favor in the US after the Civil rights and Black pride movements, it is reaching new heights in many other parts of the world, including Central and South America, Asia and India. Skin bleaching has become extremely popular throughout the Caribbean and Africa, despite serious and negative health effects, including mercury poisoning, permanent thinning of the skin, premature aging of the skin, increased risk of skin cancer, and skin infections.¹⁴ Grills argues that this is partly due to the US media’s portrayal of Black women, which contributes to the multi-billion dollar industry.

How did this affect me personally? I remember my maternal grandmother (who is light-skinned) making derogatory remarks about darker skinned Blacks. Her

comments would baffle me because her own children’s skin colors —my aunts and uncles—ran the gamut of chocolate, pecan and goldenrod. Once my cousin brought her new boyfriend (now husband) to meet her and the extended family. Grandma said to her “I don’t know why you want somebody so dark and ugly.” At the time we just dismissed it as “crazy old woman” talk, but perhaps colorism was playing out in this scenario. Despite Granny’s occasional and hurtful comments, I never experienced this type of treatment within my immediate family. My parents never made us feel that one was more special than the other based on skin color. However, it’s hard to escape the constant barrage of mainstream media without internalizing some of that message.

ENLIGHTEN ME

Back in middle school, my friends Shannon, Stacey, Nikki and I were talking about ways we could lighten up our dark skin—especially the knees, elbows and blemishes from acne. Those areas of our bodies would be the crustiest, darkest spots that needed tending to. We lamented how we desperately wanted to have that even, brown skin tone without interruption or reminder of how dark we really can get. To have blackened knees or elbows was, in essence, not cool in our 13-year-old world. It didn’t reflect what I thought, at the time, was considered beautiful or what we perceived what the boys wanted—nearly flawless skin. We kicked around various remedies to our dilemmas: pumice stones, cocoa butter and citrus juices were just some of the ways we heard we could lighten and even our dark skin tones. Then, Ambi skin cream and soaps were

introduced into the conversation. Ambi products boasted its effectiveness in lightening and evening skin tones and, in some instances, totally eradicating the appearance of the darkest of skin.



Ambi? Yes! We were all on board with giving it a try. One of the girls tried it out on her knees and within a few weeks, we noticed remarkable difference in her complexion. She tried the cream. Well, I just knew I had to try it now. I had really bad acne that left dark spots on my forehead and cheeks. I needed this cream. I needed to get rid of the ugly evidence and scars of puberty. The problem for me would be convincing my mom to buy something

that certainly was not a basic necessity in our large family's world. If this cream was not going to feed my large family, there was no need in asking her to spend part of Daddy's paycheck on it. I would have to buy this stuff with my own money. Luckily, I had some babysitting money that needed spending. I don't remember exactly where I purchased the cream but, I remember the package's design. The tube was in a long, rectangular box. It was a shade of brown that closely resembled the complexion of my skin (think hot chocolate). "AMBI" was set in a sans serif typeface that resembled something of the 1970s era, all caps and peach in color. The tube had the same design, but was made of some sort of metal (perhaps a thick aluminum). I was excited to finally have this life-changing instrument in my hands.

I snuck away to the privacy of the bathroom and locked the door. I opened the tube and took a whiff of its contents. It smelled like harsh chemicals desperately being masked with fake roses. It was awful! I squeezed the tube and placed a small amount on my fingers. The instructions warned to use a little at a time and avoid getting into the eyes. "This can't be good," I thought to myself. Right before I applied the cream to my blemishes, a wave of shame washed over me. I can't explain why, but, for a fleeting moment, I felt that maybe I was trying to do more than just remove the blemishes. Words from my grandma's sermon began to echo in my mind, "Love what God created! Don't destroy what God create. You betta love yourself as you are." For a brief moment, I almost threw the tube away and just let nature take its course with my

skin. But then the lure of wanting to be perfectly perfect in appearance and curiosity got a hold of me and I let the wave of guilt and Granny's self-love lecture pass through. I wrinkled my nose at the smelly cream, then applied to all my blemishes. Then, I rubbed a generous amount on my knees and elbows. I repeated this ritual every day for a few weeks.

The results were moderately good. My acne blemishes were seeming to disappear and my darkened knees and elbows were lightening as well. Feeling all lightened up and guilt-free, I began to ask myself. "What if I applied this to my whole face?" I could lighten up my dark face and be light skinned like some of my friends and family members. So without considering the consequences, I applied a small amount on my entire face—except for the area around my eyes. Remember, the label warning about the eyes. I did this for a few more days and started to notice a difference. The skin on my face was indeed getting lighter.

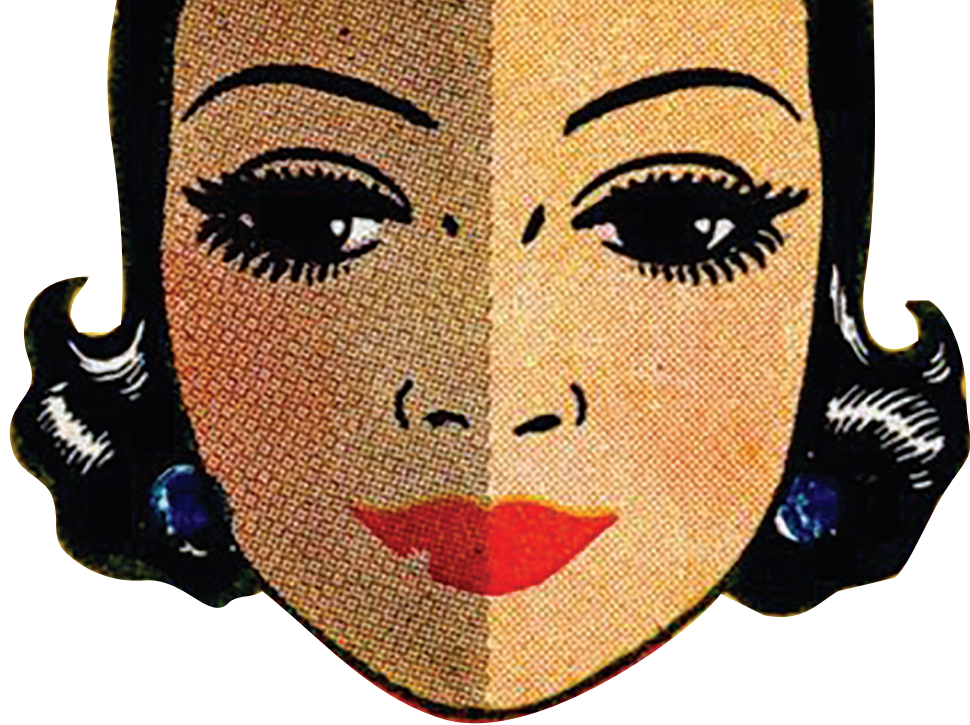
There were a few surprises I discovered with this event. First, I was surprised at how well the product worked on me. Even though I had tested it out on my knees and elbows, and had seen some results, I didn't really think it



would actually work anywhere else. It worked very well. Secondly, I was surprised at how little attention others paid attention to the changes that I felt were major. This realization led me to think that maybe they didn't care as much as I thought they did about my skin color. I had blown this into something bigger than it actually was in my head. So this desperate attempt change myself into what I perceived as perfection was really for naught: I did not like the results of my enlightening experience. My face had lightened a bit, except for the areas around my eyes.

While the shift in tone wasn't too dramatic, it was noticeable enough to me to feel like a raccoon. My close friends noticed it, too. At that moment, that guilt returned. The voice of my Granny echoed loudly in my head, as I stared in the mirror at my noticeably uneven, bandit-looking skin. I felt ugly and even more ashamed.

I was sad and upset at myself for trying to alter my skin. At this point, I had a choice to make. I could keep using the cream to try to even out the damage, or stop using it all together and pray for my skin to return to normal. I threw away the almost empty tube and prayed. I didn't realize that the effect of the melanin-altering chemical was long lasting. Not just physically, but, also, emotionally for me. It would be years before my skin would start to look less blotchy. However, even today if one looks close enough, you can see where around my eyes are still raccoon-like.



Light is Right

A Visual Essay

"Skin-bleaching creams go by many names: skin lighteners, skin whiteners, skin toning creams, skin evening creams, skin-fading gels, etc. Essentially, they are creams regularly applied to the face or body that purport to 'lighten,' 'brighten' or 'whiten' the skin. They are marketed as beauty products available to women to increase their beauty by increasing their whiteness. The skin bleaching industry is thriving around the globe, particularly in Third World, post-colonial countries."

—Margaret Hunter¹⁵

LITTLE BROWN GIRL

36

The following is a brief survey of American (and some international) ads for products that perpetuated the myth that lighter is better, including ads that date back as far as early colonial times to present:



both in a box for \$1, or three boxes for \$2. Guaranteed to do what we say and to be the "best in the world." One box is all that is required if used as directed.

A WONDERFUL FACE BLEACH.

A PEACH-LIKE complexion obtained if used as directed. Will turn the skin of a black or brown person four or five shades lighter, and a mulatto person perfectly white. In forty-eight hours a shade or two will be noticeable. It does not turn the skin in spots but bleaches out white, the skin remaining beautiful without continual use. Will remove wrinkles, freckles, dark spots, pimples or bumps or black heads, making the skin very soft and smooth. Small pox pits, tan, liver spots removed without harm to the skin. When you get the color you wish, stop using the preparation.

THE HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

that goes in every one dollar box is enough to make anyone's hair grow long and straight, and keeps it from falling out. Highly perfumed and makes the hair soft and easy to comb. Many of our customers say one of our dollar boxes is worth ten dollars, yet we sell it for one dollar a box. THE NO-SMELL thrown in free.

Any person sending us one dollar in a letter or Post-Office money order, express money order or registered letter, we will send it through the mail postage prepaid; or if you want it sent C. O. D., it will come by express, 25c. extra.

In any case where it fails to do what we claim, we will return the money or send a box free of charge. Packed so that no one will know contents except receiver.

CRANE AND CO.,
122 west Broad Street,
RICHMOND, VA.



Opposite Page: Valmor Products Co.'s Lucky Brown Cosmetic products claim to lighten and brighten brown skin. Designer: Charles C. Dawson. Source: <http://www.afrobella.com/2013/02/03/black-makeup-history/>

Left and above: Crane and Co.'s "Black Skin Remover" ads boast lightening of black skin to that of a "peach-like complexion" after using their Wonderful Face Bleach. Circa 1800s. Source: Ask Me About My Hair blog August, 2016.

This Skin I'm In

37

He never came near me until...



I discovered Nadinola

—THEN HE DISCOVERED ME!

Give romance a chance! Don't let a dull, dark complexion deprive you of popularity. Don't let oiliness, big pores, blackheads cheat you of charm. Chase away those bad-complexion blues with NADINOLA Bleaching Cream. Nothing—absolutely nothing—will improve your skin faster, in more different ways!

Contains wonder-working A-M! This remarkable moderated ingredient of NADINOLA works deep down within the skin to brighten and lighten it, combat blackheads

and externally caused pimples. Soon your skin feels cleansed and cleared, smoother and softer, glowing and glamorous.

Effective but oh, so gentle! NADINOLA acts so positively yet is so kind to your skin that we guarantee you will be delighted with its results. There are two types—one for oily skin and the other for dry skin. Choose the type that is right for you. Buy it confidently, use it happily. NADINOLA, Paris, Tennessee.

NADINOLA
BLEACHING CREAM

Just one jar will make your complexion brighter, clearer, lighter and lovelier.



FOR OILY SKIN
Nadinola Deluxe is non-oily. Brightens skin, lessens shine at the same time. 75c to \$2



FOR DRY SKIN
The original Nadinola is enriched with Sea Cucumber oils to relieve dryness. 25c to \$1.25



"He used to duck me, now he dates me
...and it all started when I started using Nadinola"

Nadinola often spells the difference between going out on the town or not of the evening. Because Nadinola Bleaching Cream can bring you a lovelier complexion. And a lovelier complexion can attract more like a flower attracts bees. This is mostly because of A-M, Nadinola's special moderated ingredient.

A-M turns the trick! This special moderated ingredient is the secret of NADINOLA's success. Each application of Nadinola puts wonder-working A-M to work. It lightens and brightens your complexion. Helps to overcome embarrassing big pores, blackheads and other surface blemishes. Soon your skin

becomes another and softer to feel, lovelier and closer to look at.

Choose from two equally effective types of NADINOLA. One is for oily skin, one for dry skin. Each gives the same dramatic results. And each is guaranteed to bring out a lighter, brighter you—use your money back. Pick up NADINOLA at your store... then watch romance pick up in your life. NADINOLA, Chattanooga & Tennessee.



FOR OILY SKIN,
Nadinola Delux is a non-oily formula. Brightens skin, lessens shine at the same time. 75c to \$2

FOR DRY SKIN,
The original Nadinola is enriched with Sea Cucumber oils to relieve dryness. 25c to \$1.25

NADINOLA
BLEACHING CREAM



Wonderful things happen
when your complexion is clear, bright, Nadinola-light

Give romance a chance! Don't let a dull, dark complexion deprive you of popularity. Don't let oiliness, big pores, blackheads cheat you of charm. Chase away those bad-complexion blues with NADINOLA Bleaching Cream. Nothing—absolutely nothing—will improve your skin faster, in more different ways!

Contains wonder-working A-M! This remarkable moderated ingredient of NADINOLA works deep down within the skin to brighten and lighten it, combat blackheads

and externally caused pimples. Soon your skin feels cleansed and cleared, smoother and softer, glowing and glamorous.

Effective but oh, so gentle! NADINOLA acts so positively yet is so kind to your skin that we guarantee you will be delighted with its results. There are two types—one for oily skin and the other for dry skin. Choose the type that is right for you. Buy it confidently, use it happily. NADINOLA, Paris, Tennessee.

NADINOLA

BLEACHING CREAM

Just one jar will make your complexion brighter, clearer, lighter and lovelier.



FOR OILY SKIN
Nadinola Delux is a non-oily formula. Brightens skin, lessens shine at the same time. 75c to \$2



FOR DRY SKIN
The original Nadinola is enriched with Sea Cucumber oils to relieve dryness. 25c to \$1.25

"He loves me...
he loves me not...
he loves me..."



3

WHY DEPEND ON DAISIES? Be sure with
a bright, clear complexion!

There is no surer way to lovely skin than with NADINOLA Bleaching Cream. Nothing will improve your complexion so many ways, so fast!

Contains wonder-working A-M! This marvelous, moderated ingredient of NADINOLA penetrates the cells to brighten and lighten dull, dark skin... fade weathered blotches... combat oily skin, blackheads, externally caused pimples.

Two types of NADINOLA: For dry skin, buy regular NADINOLA. For oily skin, get NADINOLA Delux. Both fully guaranteed! NADINOLA, Paris, Tenn.



NADINOLA BLEACHING CREAM



THE NICEST THINGS HAPPEN TO GIRLS
WITH LIGHT, BRIGHT COMPLEXIONS!

Has your phone quit ringing lately? Perhaps your complexion is to blame. Is it dark, dull and unattractive? Then for goodness sake, do something about it!

See for yourself how quickly NADINOLA lightens and brightens your complexion, lessens blackheads, makes your skin feel softer and smoother, look clearer and lovelier. There are 2 kinds of NADINOLA—both fully guaranteed. Get NADINOLA right away!

The original, famous Nadinola Bleaching Cream, oils, 25c and \$1.25

FOR OILY SKIN
Nadinola Delux is a non-oily formula. Brightens skin, lessens shine at the same time. 75c and \$1.25

FOR DRY SKIN
The original Nadinola is enriched with Sea Cucumber oils to relieve dryness. 25c and \$1.25



NADINOLA BLEACHING CREAM

JUST ONE JAR IS GUARANTEED TO IMPROVE YOUR COMPLEXION

Ads for Nadinola Bleaching Cream lightening products frequently featured a happy woman greeted by a suitor or caressed by her lover, who is seemingly only attracted to her after using the product.

1. Ebony Magazine, June, 1960. Photo posted on Flickr (1960 Black History Viewed Through Magazines album) by Vieille Annonces.

2,6. 1950s. Nadinola ad. Photo posted on bleachingofskin.com. Originally seen on Pinterest.

3. Ebony Magazine, January 8, 1959. Photo posted on Flickr (1959 Black History Viewed Through Magazines album) by Vieille Annonces.

4. Ebony Magazine, November, 1959. Photo posted on Flickr (1959 Black History Viewed Through Magazines album) by Vieille Annonces.

5. Ebony Magazine, January, 1960. Photo posted on Flickr (1959 Black History Viewed Through Magazines album) by Vieille Annonces.

Successful people use **AMBI**

THE BEST SKIN LIGHTENING CREAMS IN THE WORLD
FASTEST ACTION
AMBI

1

2

*
add sparkle to your life with
lighter, clearer skin

Join in the fun! Brighten up your life! Your skin will come alive, and you will too, when you start using Dr. Fred Palmer's Skin Whitener, an exclusive formula for a lighter, smoother, lovelier complexion... and a happier, more youthful you.

Easy and pleasant to use, containing effective ingredients repeatedly prescribed by doctors for skin care and for removing unsightly discoloration from hands, elbows, and knees. Also recommended as an aid in eliminating blackheads and refining enlarged pores. This treatment has been proven thoroughly effective by women of all color tones the world over.

Try it...
for an exciting
new you.

Dr. Fred PALMER'S
SKIN WHITENER

If not available in your

LOOK LIGHTER
LOOK LOVELIER

DEAR HEART

WITH HYDROQUINONE
AND VITAMIN C

**COMPLETE SKIN
LIGHTENING
TREATMENT**

THE LIGHTER YOU LOOK
THE LOVELIER YOU LOOK

**DEAR HEART
DOES IT**

3

4

Check the skin.

You're looking at what AMBI can do for a face. It can get rid of dark spots, ashiness, blotches—the works. AMBI conditions and softens your skin, too. And blends it into just one beautiful, glowing tone all over.

ambi. SKIN CREAM. Where beautiful skin is coming from.

There are 3 AMBI formulas: for normal skin, for dry skin, and for oily skin. Try the one for you. And watch what happens.

Nicholas

5

Laboratoire Mergers
ACTIF POUR VOTRE BIEN-ÊTRE
Suisse

Nerola
Whitening

SANS ACTIFS
CHIMIQUES ABRASIFS
SANS PARABENS

• unifie et éclaircit la peau
• hydrate l'épiderme

Soins
éclaircissants
Visage & Corps

6

NUUL KUKK
Black is so Beautiful!

www.nuulkukk.com

Message à l'initiative de l'agence Optima, de agences.com et du photographe Stéphane Touraie



1. Vintage AMBI Skin care ad claims success only belongs to lighter skinned people who use their products. Source: Pinterest
2. Dr. Fred Palmer's Skin Whitener ad circa 1967. Source: https://www.buzzfeed.com/copyranter/20-of-the-most-racist-vintage-ads?sub=2420079_1361031&utm_term=.ykYvplLv#ugxOZQWQO
3. Dear Heart Skin Lightening Treatment cream. Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/sa_steve/2791264678/in/set-72157606389427177/
4. Ebony Magazine, August 1977. Source: Google Books.
5. International ad for Nerola promises to lighten skin without harsh chemicals. Source: Pinterest
6. Anti-skin bleaching campaign in Senegal. Source: <https://yoknyamdabale.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/4009/>



1. Zuri cosmetics, made exclusively for women of color, prominently feature Black women of varying skin tones. Circa 1979. Source: Pinterest

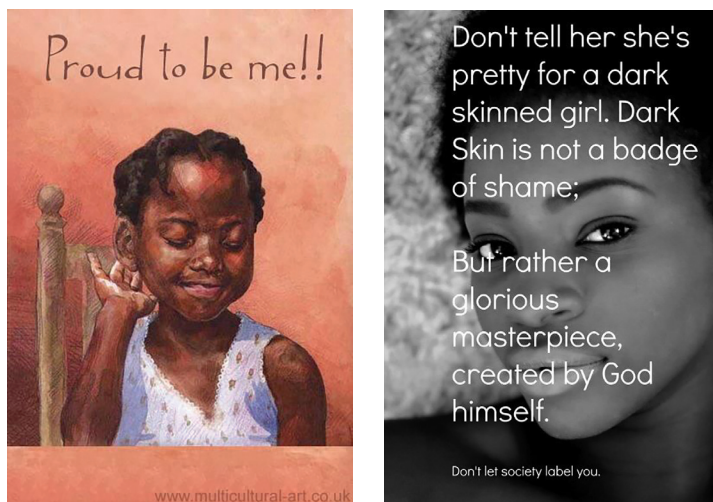
2. Not to miss out on the Black pride movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Nadinola changes its messaging to "Black is Beautiful." Source: vintageblackglamour.tumblr.com

3. Noxema Skin Care ad celebrating "the most beautiful skin in the world." Circa 1969. Source: vintageblackglamour.tumblr.com:

4: Considered one of America's top authorities in fashion and beauty industry, *Vogue* features Michelle Obama, whose body is often scrutinized by the media, on its cover numerous times. Photo credit: *March Issue* (left) by Annie Leibovitz; *April Issue* (right) by Reed Krakoff.



For years, fashion and beauty industries have cashed in on the insecurities and low self-esteem of Black women, telling them that lighter and whiter is more beautiful and acceptable. It was an industry standard to have products, ads and publications feature only fair-skinned Black



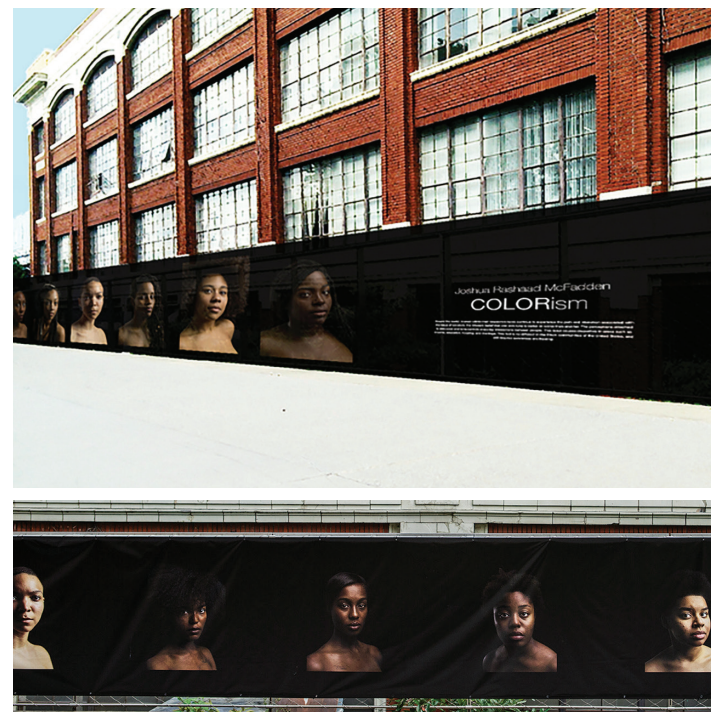
Left: Self-love poster features a young, dark-skinned girl content with herself. Unknown artist. Source: www.multicultural-art.co.uk.

Right: Meme speaking to both an audience with potential colorism bias and a dark girl to reject biases. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/makeupforblackwomen/photos>

women, as ad and design agencies and photographers perpetuated the myth that dark skin was hard to light and photograph. However, a rise in Black pride and loving dark skin challenged that myth and helped to usher in an era in which it is hard to escape #blackgirlmagic. Seeing more Black women of all shades being photographed and on covers of fashion beauty magazines.


In 2015, photographer Joshua Rashaad McFadden created *COLORism*, highlighting issues among Black women. McFadden is a graduate student at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), and his 200-foot photographic

installation, located on the Atlanta BeltLine Eastside Trail, featured several women of different shades of brown. The piece was “designed to combat and bring awareness to the issue of colorism in the African American community by promoting a more positive self-image for all women of color.”¹⁶



COLORism installation by Joshua Rashaad McFadden ©2015. Source: <http://beltline.org/2015/11/05/art-on-the-atlanta-beltline-feature-colorism/>



 Mukii's young niece wishes she were American and white, admitting her discomfort with her dark skin every time she sees her reflection in the mirror. *Yellow Fever* by Ng'endo Mukii ©2015. Scan QR code to watch.

Blogger Tima Samad highlights the thesis work of Kenyan filmmaker Ng'endo Mukii. The critically acclaimed short film, *Yellow Fever*, explores the effects of European beauty standards on African women and highlights the reasons why darker skinned women resort to bleaching creams to lighten their skin, and addresses how certain ideals of beauty standards are passed down through generations.¹⁷

Mukii combines illustration, photography, stop motion, as well as live and animated action to tell this story.

My Double Consciousness addresses my personal struggle with the issue of being perpetually aware of my ethnicity and the pressure to put a metaphorical White mask to hide the Black part of me, then having to remove said mask when in the company of my own kind. There is this constant, internal war of not feeling free enough to be “Black” around my non-Black friends and colleagues; then, having to be told by some in my own community that I act “too White.”

There was a certain familiarity to how I felt about this project versus how I felt when applying the Ambi cream to my face when I was younger. I felt hope and shame the first time I deliberately tried lightened my skin—attempting to go from black to white. However, this time, it was about expressing a struggle in keeping my Blackness and the relief of taking my “White” face off, as well as letting my true self be revealed.

The photographic piece, accompanied by a short video documenting the process of removal, prompted questions about code-switching and the internal wrestling matches that many Blacks have. The piece also resonated with others as they, too, could identify with having to play a certain part when in different surroundings and situations.

What was also particularly interesting with this experiment were the reactions from my family (we shot this at my parents’ house) when I was in the makeup and

hair. My children did not understand why I wanted to be “peach.” My daughter kept asking me why I was wearing the funny hair and makeup. She kept her distance until I took the makeup and wig off. My son then proclaimed how he liked “brown mommy” better.

While a traditional graphic design poster may have gotten the idea across, combining imagery and video more accurately conveyed the slow and deliberate act of removing this mask, and in this way, made the work more personal and intimate.



Stills from *My Double Consciousness* video where I removed my “White” face and hair to reveal my true brown skin and natural hair. Photography by Alisha Hicks ©2016. Scan QR Code to watch video.



THIS SKIN I'M IN

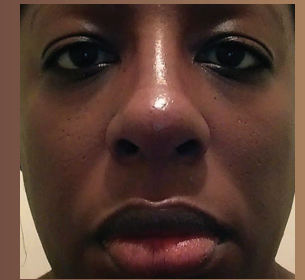
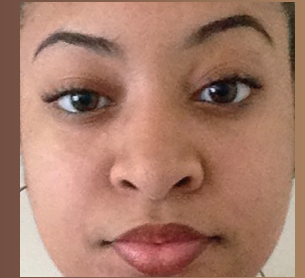
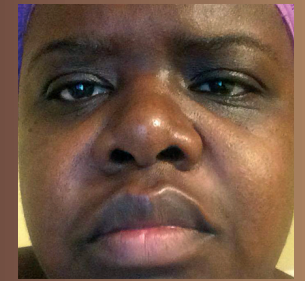
A shared experience



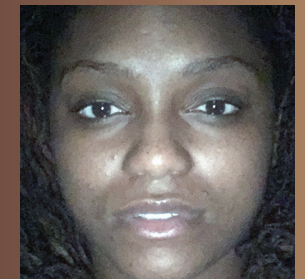
JAHA K. “Both of my parents are dark skinned. I’m brown. I remember playing for long hours in the sun hoping it would darken me up... a conversation I overheard an aunt having with my mom, ‘You sure that’s her daddy?’ ...‘She doesn’t look like either one of y’all and she’s brown. Both of you are dark...’ We had just moved to SC from NY. My dad stayed behind in NY ... Because of that conversation I tried to get darker because maybe my aunt was right and my dad thought I wasn’t his. I wasn’t light, I wasn’t dark...”

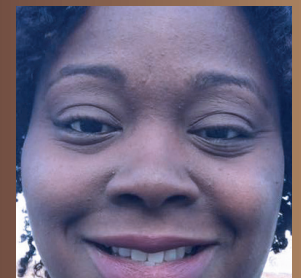
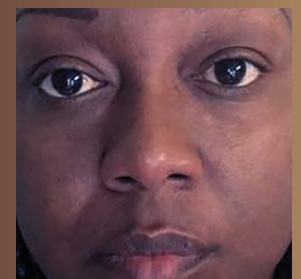
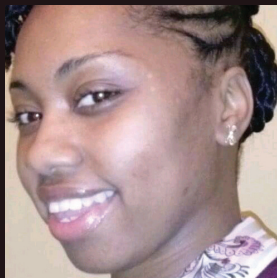
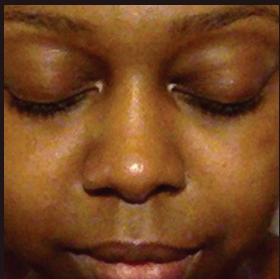
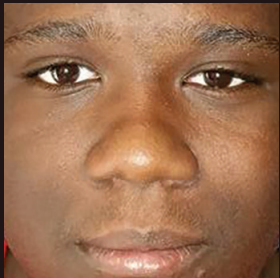
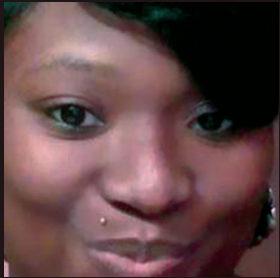
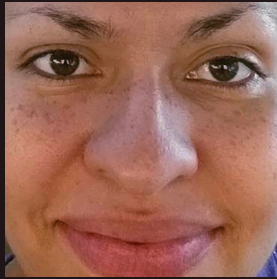


I asked several people to share how colorism within the Black community has affected how they view themselves and others. Participants were asked to take an unfiltered selfie, and comment with a personal story about the lightness or darkness their own skin. The responses were overwhelming, and some very personal. Below are excerpts from some of the stories shared. The full stories, along with the selfies can be read in the booklet included at the end of this publication.

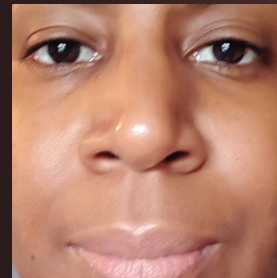
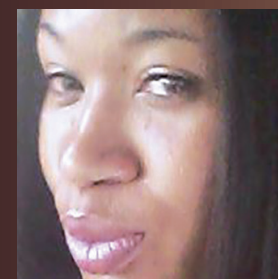
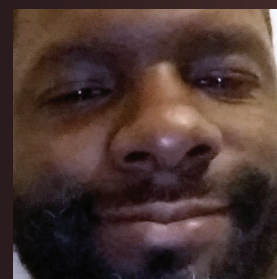


LATISHA F. “... I identify our son as Black. My son, when asked, identifies himself as White... He does not think that one color is better or worse, good or bad, pretty or ugly. Indeed, he tells me I am pretty and how much he loves me all the time. Nevertheless, it feels like a rejection of my Blackness that he identifies as White.”





DAWN B. "I can say that growing up, I had insecurities, but the darkness of my skin was not one of them. I was blessed to have a mother who ferociously protected my positive self image."



STACEY H. "I have this love hate relationship with my skin. At times I was made to feel as though I were the darkest, most unattractive thing on the planet. I used to buy makeup in the darkest shades. Now that I'm older, I realize that my darkness and skin is desirable...."

ENDNOTES

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- This Skin I'm In Project* stories and photos submitted by:
 Acacia T.B., Adrianna H., Alisha H. (Anekqua H.), Amy M.,
 Birma G., Aquilla H., Dawn B., Della B., Jennifer G., Laquisha
 T. (Lamont T., Lamont Jr., Aden T., Jaheim T.), Jaha K., Keya
 T., Kimberly S., LaRisha P., LaSonya R., LaTisha F. (Thomas
 F.), Micah J., Minga P., Montreal R., Pierre B., Shennice
 C., Sierra T., Silas M., Stacey H., Sonja W., TaKwanda L.
 Taneisha G., Vanessa M., Ronella N., Ruki R., Tasheka A.C.,
 and Tonya W.

BETTER THAN

Good Hair

Good hair means curls and waves
Bad hair means you look like a slave
At the turn of the century
It's time for us to redefine who we be

You can shave it off like a South African beauty
Or get in on lock like Bob Marley
You can rock it straight like Oprah Winfrey
If it's not what's on your head, it's what's
underneath, and say

Hey (hey)
I am not my hair
I am not this skin
I am not your expectations, no (hey)
I am not my hair
I am not this skin
I am the soul that lives within...

Does the way I wear my hair make
me a better person?
Does the way I wear my hair make
me a better friend?
Does the way I wear my hair determine
my integrity?
I am expressing my creativity...

Excerpt from "I am Not My Hair" by India.Arie,
*Testimony: Vol. 1, Life & Relationships*¹



Internal Battle by Keturah Ariel. Painting on wood. Date unknown.

I keep circling back to this notion that a lot of Black women believe—that in order for a Black woman to be considered beautiful and professional, she has to have long, straight (or loosely wavy) hair. That any natural, kinky or coily hair must be straightened and not have any resemblance to an African heritage. A Black woman is considered to have “good” hair if her coif exhibits these traits. There is no shortage of hair products and tools to straighten, loosen and relax those naps; sew-in or cover up with a wig to achieve the look of our European/Caucasian counterparts. Alternatively, a major natural hair



“if we allow our hair to simply grow out of our heads in its natural state, most people will assume that we are making a social and political statement.”

movement is in full swing. Ample supplies of natural hair care products from creams—used to help enhance natural curls and tame friz—to oils, which are used to keep a moisturized, shiny look, are available. The hair weaving industry has solutions as well—faux locs, braiding hair, afro and curly wigs adorn the shelves of hair stores, waiting to help to achieve look of Black and African pride.

Black hair is a billion-dollar business, and companies—Black and non-Black owned alike—are cashing in on Black women’s desire to straighten it out or wear it in its natural state. Big name businesses such as L’Oreal and Revlon market hair straightening products, while natural hair bloggers and naturalistas such as *Curly Nikki*’s Nikki Walton give extensive expert advice on maintaining natural hair. According to a 2014 article in the *Huffington Post*, the Black hair industry was projected to reach \$761 million by the year 2017. Taking into account the weaves,

extensions, wigs, independent beauty supply stores, distributors, e-commerce, styling tools and appliances, the projection rises is closer \$500 billion.²

I cannot adequately describe how overwhelming it is to walk into a hair store and have a selection from, literally, thousands of products on the shelves. I remember once, entering a store to purchase hair for a sew-in—as I gazed upon the vast selection of human and synthetic hair, a wave of panic and inadequacy washed over me. The wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor offering was too much for me to bear. I was so overcome with the inability to select a brand, style and length of my weave. I had to leave the store while tears welled up in my eyes.

No matter which way one chooses to style her cottony tresses, there is, for some, the pressure and guilt of feeling like a “sell out” for wearing one’s hair fried, dyed and laid to the side; however, wearing hair as an afro,

braids or in a naturally curly state is often translated as a political statement. Being natural also carries the misconception of not being professional enough, adding the pressure to mimic the looks of our sisters of European descent—which is pushed by mainstream media as more acceptable.

But what does the way we wear our hair really say about us? What assumptions and stereotypes are presumed by ourselves and others when hair relaxed, long and straight, braided, in locs or in a kinky ‘fro? Is the way we wear our hair a personal expression, political opposition or both?

“Black women’s hair is both personal and political,” author Melissa Harris-Perry writes. “For most black women in America (although not all), if we allow our hair to simply grow out of our heads in its natural state, most people will assume that we are making a social and political statement. If we allowed our hair to simply grow out of our heads, many of us would be barred or fired from our jobs. If we allowed our children’s hair to grow similarly, many of our children would be dismissed from their schools.... Most non-black folks fail to grapple with the profound implications of living in a society that institutionally requires an entire group to intervene so utterly in its own bodily reality and sanctions so heavily those who refuse to conform.”³

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK HAIR

Black hair has always been used as a form of self-expression and communication—especially for Black women. Authors Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps

trace the historical and cultural significance of Black hair, dating back to early 15th century Africa. In *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, the authors share how certain styles functioned “as carrier of messages, especially in West African societies. In some cultures, a person’s surname could be ascertained by examining the hair because each clan had its own unique hairstyle.”⁴ The aesthetic quality of the hair was just as important as social significance of an African woman’s hair. A woman with long, thick signified that she had a “green thumb” in raising healthy children as well as bountiful farms. Hair that was unkempt usually meant something was wrong. Some societies such as the Mende or Wolof saw unruly hair as a sign of loose morals or even dementia.⁵

It was believed that a person’s spirit was nestled in his or her hair, and because of this, hairdressers were held in high regard. They were seen as the most trustworthy person in society.⁶ To a Mende, the offer to braid someone’s hair was seen as a gesture of friendship. For the communities of Ghana and Senegal, the only people allowed to braid or style hair were the griots and iron workers. “Anybody who is working at creating life with dead material like melting iron and making it into something new... those are the people who have the exclusive right to work on people’s hair.”⁷

Hair was of great social, spiritual and economic importance and, to an African, hair was a vital way of communicating and a great source of pride. Shaving was the equivalent of taking away someone’s identity and most

African cultures considered it a crime. During the 1600s, at the rise of European slave trade, captured Africans' heads were shaved as one of the first steps taken to erase her or his cultural ties, thus altering the relationship between the African and their hair. "Arriving without their signature hairstyles, Mandingos, Fulanis, Ibos and Ashantis enter the New World, just as the Europeans intended, like anonymous chattel."⁸

Once on the plantations and farms, slaves were expected to work in the fields growing cotton, tobacco and rice. Punishments for slowing down were cruel and severe. As a result, slaves had no time to tend to their hair. Braids and styles that once took hours and sometimes days to create were a thing of the past. Ironically, the way a slave wore her or his hair indicated what part of the plantation they worked. Slaves in the fields wore scarves or kept heads shaven and wore straw hats as protection from the sun and as shame to hide the devastating effects of hair and scalp diseases. Slaves who worked in closer proximity to the Whites styled their hair to imitate the owners' hairstyle."⁹ Some slaves, however, consciously chose to wear their hair out as a symbol of defiance and to fight for individualism. Some runaway slaves would wear their hair unkempt, even though it went against the African aesthetic. The styles "were a way for Black people to assert their individuality and humanity in the repressive slave culture."¹⁰ Like with colorism, slaves internalized messages of natural hair as being ugly and hair that emulated that of their owners as being good. These divisive biases were then passed down to their sons

and daughters. By the time of emancipation, the notion of having light skin and "good" hair had been deeply ingrained, which would affect how Blacks treated each other for years to come.

The arrival of the 1960s brought about the biggest change and attitudes toward Black hair. During the mid-sixties, more Blacks began wearing afros as an alternative to wearing straight hair—it was a sign of the new, celebrated Black aesthetic. "The very perception of hair shifted from one of style to statement. [Blacks and Whites] came to believe that the way Black people wore their hair said something about their politics."¹¹ Hair was now either a symbol of integration or a cry for Black power.

The late 1950s through the 1970s ushered in chemical creations such as lye relaxers, and hair care products and tools such as afro sheen and the straightening comb. Madame C.J. Walker, the first Black self-made millionaire, used before and after pictures of herself to market her products to Black consumers. While she was known for a variety of Black hair care products and tools, she is most credited with developing hair straightening system known as the Walker system, which consisted of the hot comb, hand brush comb and her Wonderful Hair products. The lye relaxer as it's known today was perfected by George E. Johnson's Ultra Wave hair relaxer—a mixture of lye and petroleum. White owned businesses such as Revlon and Clairol, that once deemed Black hair unprofitable, soon got in on the big business of Black hair, acquiring smaller Black-owned businesses.¹²



Madam C.J. Walker. By Scurlock Studio (Washington, D.C.) (photographers). [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

As the 1980s approached, the Jheri Curl (originally invented by a White farmer Jheri Redding) made a huge impact on the scene. Redding's invention was not intended for Black hair, but self-taught inventor Willie Lee Morrow modified the process to work on kinky hair, marketing it as the California Curl. The California Curl helped to knock down the popularity of natural hair style among Blacks,

but Jheri Curl would become the popular term for all perms.¹³ By the late 1980s, Johnson, who once enjoyed the lion's share of the Black hair market, saw the increasing infiltration of White-owned businesses, who were even copying the packaging design of Black-owned products. The American Health and Beauty Aids Institute (AHBAI) was founded in 1981 to encourage consumers to "buy Black." *The Proud Lady* symbol was designed by Richmond Jones to display on authentic Black hair products. *Ebony*, *Essence* and *Jet* magazines refused to publish ads for Revlon products in support of AHBAI.¹⁴



The Proud Lady symbol designed by Richmond Jones in 1981 urges customers to buy from Black-owned businesses.

As the 1980s drew to a close and the 1990s approached, the Jheri Curl fell out of favor as consumers decided that stained clothes and the expensive upkeep were too much of a burden. The 1990s brought a renewed interest in returning to natural styles. *Essence* magazine led the charge in "Reclaiming Our Culture," urging Blacks to live a

more Afrocentric life. Black and White owned businesses were not too far behind, cashing in on the new trends. Hair weaves also saw a boon in business. By the late 1990s, “1.3 million pounds of human hair valued at \$28.6 million were imported from countries like China, India, and Indonesia.”¹⁵

Today, Black hairstyles run the gamut of natural, chemically processed, weaves and extensions. Surprisingly, the distribution of ethnic hair care products is dominated by Asian companies, representing at least 45 to 50 percent. Though Black hair products and accessories are dominated by non-Black companies, most Blacks feel more comfortable with having a Black stylist or barber. In that regard, Blacks dominate in the styling of Black hair.

Having experienced both extremes of the Black hair spectrum, I recently had conflicting feelings and emotions transitioning from chemically processed to natural, back to processed, then returning to natural again. Telling my own story about my hair journey, against the backdrop of the history of Black hair as a form of expression—and in some ways oppression—seems important.

MY HAIR JOURNEY

Plaits, cornrows, pigtails, twists, braids, Jheri curls, press and curls, hair beads, hair ties, roller set, twist out, extensions, weaves, afros, relaxers, blowouts and wigs—you name it, I’ve worn all of these styles, and more, at various points in my life. There were times I wore particular styles with beaming pride and confidence—those were times I felt my hair was the prettiest.

BASIC BLACK HAIR TERMINOLOGY:

Relaxer or Perm (short for permanent): A process by which kinky or curly hair is chemically relaxed to create straight styles.

Hot Comb: A heated metal comb used to straighten hair without chemicals.

Weave: The addition of purchased synthetic or human hair to one’s own naturally grown hair. Can be sewn, braided or crocheted onto the hair.

Extensions/braid: Hair braided or crocheted on to hair to add length.

Sew-in: Hairpieces/bound together on at the ends (tracks) and sewn into braided hair.

Natural: Hair that has not been altered in any way by chemicals (non-relaxed hair).

Locs (not dreadlocks): Twisted or braided hair that is uncombed so that strands of hair coil around themselves “locking” into place.

For instance when I was little and my head was adorned with colorful hair ties and barrettes; or when I was older and wore it long with relaxers or sew-ins. You couldn't tell me nothing when I shook my head to listen the sound of the barrettes clanking together, or when I ran my fingers through the long synthetic (or sometimes human) tresses attached to my head. Processed and straightened hair was good to me, until it wasn't. More on that later.

However, there were also times when I felt ashamed, frustrated and embarrassed to have Black hair. The process of keeping up with maintaining the Jheri Curl falls into that category. Special shampoos and conditioners, gels (curl activator) and sprays, which were always too smelly, had to be applied daily. Failure to keep up would result in dry, broken hair. Put too much spray on, and clothes would be stained because of "the drip." This was way too much for me to handle. When Michael's hair caught fire during the filming of a Pepsi commercial, that pretty much ended my stint with the "juice." Thank goodness. As horrible as I felt for him, I thankfully used his demise as my way out of Jheri Curl land.

Throughout high school, I bounced between braids and relaxers. I continued the same processes during college. Most of the angst I felt about my hair was due to the process of finding time style my hair myself, or finding someone I could afford to do it for me. Then, I had an overwhelming desire to have thick, long flowing tresses, and frequently was disappointed when that look could not be achieved without the aid of extensions and relaxers. I was not aware of any social or political meanings others

may have read into my hairstyle. Reasons for altering my hair was due to the fact that I simply felt my own hair was not good enough or pretty enough.

My decision to go natural wasn't really a decision at all—I had no choice. My hair had a love-hate relationship with the lye and no-lye relaxers to which I was subjecting it. Years of chemically treating my hair began to take its toll. When I was pregnant with my first child, my hair began to break off in chunks. I finally had to stop relaxing my hair and cut it. I wore weaves and wigs to partly to cover up the patches where my hair had badly broken off. And, partly, because I didn't want to seem too political or "unprofessional" with my White co-workers. I resented having to learn how to care for my hair in its natural state, despite the fact of how healthy and thick it was becoming as a result of going natural. Over time, I began to love the versatility of my own natural hair. Braids, twists, afros and the occasional blowouts and silkening were fun to experiment. When my daughter was born, I paid closer attention to my attitude about my hair. She was watching—even at such a young age, I wanted to make sure she was comfortable with her own hair. And for that reason, I decided to stay a "naturalista." That is until one day I saw a relaxed hair style and the call of the "creamy crack" lured me back.

I called my stylist and made an appointment to relax again. She didn't fuss and was actually excited for the chance. "So many of my customers want the natural look, I don't get to do many relaxers." I half expected a lecture, but she was positive and reassuring. However, days



Clockwise, left to right: Badly damaged from chemically straightening and coloring; getting the relaxed, damaged hair cut off; All the relaxed hair on the floor; Starting over with a new cut. Photo credit: Aldrena Corder ©2016.

leading up to the appointment I felt guilty for abandoning my promise to my little girl to keep it natural. With the first application of lye on the relaxer brush, I felt as though I was betraying my true inner beauty. If my hair could talk, she would scream, “WHHHYYYYY are you doing this to ME?” I brushed it off, though, as my just being nervous about such a major change. The cut was fly and I was in love with tamed coif. “Now remember you have to touch up the relaxer every six weeks and come in about every two weeks for treatment and conditioning,” advised my stylist. Just like that, I remembered one of the reasons I left the relaxed world behind— the costly upkeep. I started to miss my natural, cottony hair. Before I even left her salon, I had decided to return to the natural world. My hair agreed as it rejected my choice by breaking off again. It was time to re-start this journey, but this time, I would have to cut it really low and that made me more than self-conscious.

I took my son to get his haircut and when the stylist was done with him, I sat in her chair and asked for the big chop! My husband did not initially want this to happen, but when he saw the final cut, even he had to admit that the new style, for me, was right. The kids loved it because now more than ever before we looked more alike. I told my daughter I was cutting my hair so I could look like her. She beamed with pride. “Mommy,” my son said, “we look like twins now. I like your hair like mine.” Surprisingly, I fell in love with this new me. With every stroke of the buzzing trimmer, I felt a wave of freedom and liberation. I was cutting more than damaged locs off, I was freeing myself

of what I thought good, pretty hair should be. This time, when I wear my hair natural, straightened, weaved or braided, I'm doing so because I want to experiment with a new look. I'm not doing this out of pressure to be someone I'm not or trying to cover up. For the first time in this hair journey, I did not care and felt totally at peace with myself and my natural hair. I am, indeed, NOT my hair!

SONYA CLARK AND THE HAIR CRAFT PROJECT

“Hairdressing is the first art made of fiber. The more elaborate the hairstyle, the more hat-like it becomes. These pieces play with fusion of hat and hairstyle. They reside in the grey area of wigs, hairstyles that seem to have taken over the hat, and hats that replace hairstyles.”—Sonya Clark

In her recent piece, *Hair Craft Project 2014*, artist Sonya Clark partnered with local stylists in Richmond, VA to create braided styles and patterns using paper and string. Then using her own head as the canvas, the styles were created in real form. The piece is a celebration of the ingenuity and creativity of Black hair.¹⁶



Sonya Clark's *Hair Craft Project* explores with patterns and textures of Black hair. ©2014.

Dyed, Fried and Laid to the Side

A Survey of Black Hair Advertisements



HEY! With your bad SELF-USE Mystery of Black and be bad as me!

James Brown

HOLDING SPRAY 1.75
NATURAL SHEEN 1.75
SHAMPOO 1.00
NATURAL GROOM 1.25
COLOGNE 3.50
AFTER SHAVE 2.50

Mystery of Black
HAIR CARE
Cannolene product

James Brown uses Mystery of Black, so you know it's great!
On sale at your favorite cosmetic store.

Cannolene COMPANY
Atlanta, Georgia 30311

1

2

Keep your Curly Act together.

Introducing Four Great **Classy Curl™** Curly Care Products. Keep your curly look looking curly with Classy Curl Curly Care Products. **Classy Curl Conditioner/Detangling Shampoo** gently cleans while it detangles your curls. **Classy Curl Protein Moisturizing Conditioner** keeps your curls bouncy and healthy-looking.

Classy Curl Oil Sheen and Comb-Out Conditioner leaves your curls naturally glowing, and easier to comb. **Classy Curl Activator** reactives your curls for a fresh new performance every day. With Classy Curl Curly Care Products, it's easy to keep your curly act together.

Classy Curl. In a class by itself.
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3

LONG AID K7
Available at leading drug and department stores

All your hair problems have one answer...

Nu-Nile

CREME PRESS

- SMOKELESS
- GREASELESS
- WATER REPELLENT

The only Creme Press that needs no help. NU-NILE Creme Press is a complete hair preparation, conditioner added, that takes the place of old-style pressing oils.

Absolutely Smokeless — Non-Drying

Nu-Nile SMOKELESS CURL CREME

A totally new formula that holds waves and curls in place longer, protects and preserves hair from perspiration and water.

At Stores and Cosmetic Counters

4

If your Draglitz does not have NU-NILE, write to: **PRODUCTS CO., 569 Jackson Ave., Jersey City, N. J.** Manufacturers of NU-NILE Hair Dressing Pomade—"the big yellow can."

5

DARK & LOVELY

COLOR SO TRUE. COLOR SO YOU.

Reveal and set the beautiful color of your hair. Dark & Lovely hair color. Your new hairings in 15 vibrant shades from jet black to honey blonde. So easy to use with the simple, beautiful application. You found, every woman of color that you see. Dark & Lovely hair color. For the look of your life.

1. 1970s Mystery of Hair ad featuring James Brown. Posted on *Found in Mom's Basement* (blog). September 14, 2014.
2. Classy Curl styling products. *Jet Magazine*, December 17, 1981. Source: [vintageblackads.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/vintageblackads).
3. Ad for Long Aid K7 scalp and hair treatment cream. Circa 1967. Source: [Pinterest](https://www.pinterest.com).
4. Nu-Nile Creme Press and Curl Cream ad. 1950-60s Source: [Pinterest](https://www.pinterest.com).
5. Dark & Lovely Hair color ad. Circa 1992. Posted on *Found in Mom's Basement* (blog). February 4, 2015.

"A model's hair must be extra lovely."

1

"That's why I tell our famous models to use DIXIE PEACH"

Says **ELIANA BROOKS**, new supervising director of the glamorous Negro cover girls at New York's leading agency for colored models.

"It's my job to make sure our girls always look their best," says this well known expert. "Their hair must be soft, silky, lustrous—'camera-perfect' all the time. I tried all kinds of hair dressings, and I finally chose Dixie Peach because it is delectably light and fragrant, yet so extra rich, with special lanolin. My experience proved that Dixie Peach can make any woman's hair extra beautiful."

Also try the new Dixie Peach BERGAMOT Hair Dressing Conditioner! Finest quality, biggest jar for only 39¢

19¢ and 39¢

Professional Size 100

Summit's Afrylic*Wigs

**Processed exclusively for Summit by the makers of Kanekalon*

It's about time, isn't it? Today you can buy lipstick, nail polish, make-up creams and powder made just for you. Today you can buy hair conditioners, eye colorings, shampoos and hair sprays made just for you. (And we thank you for buying so many from us.) But why can't you buy a wig made just for you? You can.

Because we went to the people who make Kanekalon—one of the world's largest manufacturers of wig fibers—and asked them to create a fiber specifically for a Black woman's wig.

The result is Afrylic—a high quality modafrylic fiber that is specially processed to give your wig just the right body... just the right curl... just the right sheen. In fact, Afrylic looks so natural, we've created three different wig styles to choose from. And all of these stretch wigs are wash-and-wear for easy care.

You'll find our exciting new line of Afrylic Wigs at your beauty salon, wig shop, or department store. It's been a long time coming, but it's finally here.

A wig that was created to make the Black woman even more beautiful.

Summit's Afrylic*Wigs

**Processed exclusively for Summit by the makers of Kanekalon*

2

Kila Kitu

afro sheen

to the NATURAL

EVERYTHING

3

afro sheen is "everything" in South Africa. Afro Sheen's new building hair spray is something a building spray should be. It keeps your natural beautiful hair looking all day, even on damp weather. And it holds without being sticky or stiff. Afro Sheen Building Hair Spray has no tar or alcohol. It's the only hair spray that doesn't have active proteins to improve the condition of your hair and make it easier to manage. To make your natural something is should be, use Afro Sheen Building Hair Spray. And don't forget the other hair products from Afro Sheen: Afro Sheen Shampoo, Conditioner & Hair Dress, Combs Luv.

afro sheen is "everything" in South Africa. Afro Sheen's protein enriched Building Hair Spray is just the correct addition to the beautiful Afro Sheen family. When it comes to products for the natural, Afro Sheen has Kila Kitu.

afro sheen is "everything" in South Africa. Afro Sheen's protein enriched Building Hair Spray is just the correct addition to the beautiful Afro Sheen family. When it comes to products for the natural, Afro Sheen has Kila Kitu.

Reflections on softness

4

Soft lights do a lot for a woman. Warm her skin, soften her features and give her a kind of tender glow. Soft lights are great for hair, too. That's why there's Ultra Sheen Conditioner and Hair Dress. Just a touch gives your hair the gentle glimmer and the glow of moonlight... or of candlelight. Ultra Sheen Conditioner and Hair Dress—some of the gentlest products.

BE THE WOMAN YOU WANT TO BE.

5

How many ways can one woman look? Stylish and sophisticated. Smooth and sleek. Or a little bit wild. You can change your hair style as often as you change your mind. With Ultra Sheen Permanent Cream Relaxer. And after all, isn't that what dressing your own hair is all about?

ULTRA SHEEN PERMANENT CREME RELAXER.

"Take chances with 'DRY SCALP' itching... DRY, BRITTLE HAIR with CRACKING, SPLIT ENDS... UGLY, LOOSE DANDRUFF? Not Me!

I use Sulfur-8... because it starts to work instantly* to give relief!"

6

Sulfur-8 you start to get relief from these troubles... FAST! It's more wonderful than plain sulfur! Better than plain lanolin formulas too! You cannot expect such results from any mere hair dressing. Sulfur-8 contains "poly-sulfides"—the strength of sulfur, a "SUPER-SULFUR" that's easier to absorb and faster-acting too! Sulfur-8 is rich in lanolin!

You start to get relief from these troubles... FAST! It's more wonderful than plain sulfur! Better than plain lanolin formulas too! You cannot expect such results from any mere hair dressing. Sulfur-8 contains "poly-sulfides"—the strength of sulfur, a "SUPER-SULFUR" that's easier to absorb and faster-acting too! Sulfur-8 is rich in lanolin!

MADAM C.J. WALKER'S

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ACTIVE INGREDIENTS: COPPER SULFATE AND PRECIPITATED SULPHUR QUICKLY PERFUMED IN OINTMENT BASE.

M.D. BY: M. MADAM C. J. WALKER MFG. CO. INDIANAPOLIS, IND. PRICE 50¢

7

Sulfur-8

HAIR and SCALP CONDITIONER

Rich in LANOLIN and SUPER SULFUR

ACTS FAST

8

POSNER'S BERGAMOT

CONDITIONER

MILLIONS of Satisfied HEADS

There MUST be a reason!

8

POSNER'S BERGAMOT

HAIR CONDITIONER

WATER REPELLENT

8

Recommended by Beauticians Everywhere!

Ask for the Jar with the Star!

At drug stores and cosmetic counters

- 1962 ad for Dixie Peach pomade Photo posted on Flickr by classic_film.
- Summit's Afrylic Wigs circa 1971. Posted *The NuBik* (blog) Art and Design Vintage Black Ads album www.iamthenublack.com.
- Kila Kitu Afro Sheen. *Ebony Magazine*, January 1972. Source: vintageblackads.tumblr.com.
- Ultra Sheen Hair Dress ad. *Ebony Magazine*, December 1971. Source: vintageblackads.tumblr.com.
- Ultra Sheen Permanent Cream Relaxer. *Ebony Magazine*, April 1970. Source: vintageblackads.tumblr.com.
- 1950s ad for Sulfur 8 Hair and Scalp Conditioner. Source: Pinterest.
- Madame C J Walker's Wonderful Scalp Ointment tin. Source: *You + Me Equals* (blog).
- 1950s ad for Bergamot Hair Conditioner. Posted on *Found in Mom's Basement* (blog). Sept. 11, 2014.

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PREPARATIONS
for the HAIR

Worth more than it costs

The cultivation of the genius of Mme C. J. Walker is her wonderful creation for dandruff and falling hair. In fact, it invigorates dry and lifeless hair, stimulates circulation, thereby causing a new growth.

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Mme. C. J. WALKER'S inventions are real because they restore and beautify the hair without injury to the scalp and are used and admired by thousands of hair dressers, beauticians, throughout the country. Known as the Walker Hair Dressers, having a diploma from the Lela College of Hair Culture which signifies Mme. C. J. Walker's system.

There is nothing imaginary about the Ultra-Quickly Restoring Preparation. None genuine without Mme. C. J. Walker's seal and signature.

We have gone to a great deal of expense to put these preparations on the market. The Walker Trade Mark as a guarantee that you are getting Mme. C. J. Walker's Preparations which are "worth more than they cost."

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2

Dark & Lovely
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NATURELE

YOU HAVE A RIGHT
to unstoppable
CURLS THAT DEFY SHRINKAGE

ALL-DAY CURL ELONGATION FROM 6 ANTI-SHRINKAGE
RECIPIES THAT HYDRATE AND STRENGTHEN WITH MANGO OIL AND
DANDRUFF MILK. NOW GET CURLS AND CURLS THAT WON'T BACK DOWN.
NEVER SHRINK FROM WHO YOU ARE.

SOFTSHEEN/CARSON

3

Let beauty go to your head...
Capture a beachhead.

On ship or shore, pomper extra dry hair with new tcb Comb Out Conditioner and Oil Sheen. It moisturizes beautifully. Adds softness, luster and manageability.

These products are available at tcb's.

4

Raveen
HAIR AND SCALP CONDITIONER

The tremendous bit of Raveen can light up a room.

Now bring your hair out of the shadows and into the light with Raveen. With just a touch of Raveen, even dull, tired hair fairly springs to life. Raveen is fragrance. Your hair feels softer, more satiny. Looks more radiant. Behaves beautifully from on hand down. So, start glowing, girl. Spend a moment or two with Raveen every day and dazzle them.

Register one \$1. Economy size \$2.50.
Manufactured by Supreme Beauty Products, 438 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60605.

Raveen and Duke.

5

1. Peace Comb \$1.50

5. Lift/Fold Pik \$1.50
(Specify Black handles or Red/Green handles)

1. Wig styler \$6.99

Duke.

has everything it takes to get it together and keep it that way!

DUKE SHAMPOO, especially formulated for the natural to leave hair manageable, softer.

DUKE HAIR CONDITIONER helps relieve dandruff and dry scalp, conditions deep with long-lasting results.

DUKE EASY COMB, for tangle-free combing. Lets you style and condition easily.

DUKE NATURAL HAIR SHINE, NEVI and **IMPROVED**, adds lustre, keeps your natural looking alive all day. We've added extra ingredients to keep it that way.

Get it all together with Duke

6

7

Coarse Fluffy Curly Kinky Happy Frizzy Thick Soft

EMBRACE YOUR ROOTS

Shea Moisture
ESTABLISHED 1912

ORGANIC RAW SHEA BUTTER & ARGAN OIL REPAIR & TRANSITION KIT

7. Embrace Your Roots, Shea Moisture Design by Anna Wilder ©2015. www.anna-wilder.com/shea-moisture.

1. Advertisement for Madam C.J. Walker's hair and skin products. *The Crisis*. January, 1920. Source: vintageblackads. tumblr.com.
2. Dark and Lovely's Au Naturele hair products for "unstoppable curls." Source: Google
3. TCB hair products. *Jet Magazine*, September 10th, 1981. Source: vintageblackads. tumblr.com.
4. 1970s ad for Raveen hair cream. Posted on *Found in Mom's Basement* (blog). June 6, 2012..
5. 1970s Raveen and Duke styling combs ad featuring Richard Roundtree. Posted on *Found in Mom's Basement* (blog). September 11, 2014.
6. 1970s Duke styling combs ad for men. Posted on *Found in Mom's Basement* (blog). Sept. 11, 2014.
7. *Embrace Your Roots*, Shea Moisture Design by Anna Wilder ©2015. www.anna-wilder.com/shea-moisture.



HOW HAVE I RESPONDED?

Inspired by Ms. Clark, I wanted to take a stab at creating a “hair” project of my own. Instead of using real hair, however, I used yarn to create styles and textures of black hair. Coincidentally, yarn is used as a method of styling hair as well. Using a yarn needle, I stitched the patterns onto window screens. A traditional approach in graphic design (poster, ad, etc.) toward this subject matter, again, did not seem strong enough for the message I wanted to convey. Like Ms. Clark, I wanted to celebrate the beauty of Black hair and styles, but I also wanted to address Black hair as a form of expression, combating stereotyping and tackling the great natural vs. processed debate.

Hair style screens celebrating and challenging what beautiful hair means for Black hair. Photo credit: Aldrena Corder ©2016.



I have personally struggled with my own hair and have felt many times my natural, nappy head wasn't good enough for the mainstream. It took a while, but I love my hair in any state she's in—straight, braided, curly, short, long, etc. However, I'm deliberately keeping my own hair in a natural state to show my daughter that her black, cotton-like tresses are beautiful. Perhaps if I start her off now, she will be confident in loving herself and her hair and by extension herself.

In my efforts to see if my intentions of instilling a love for Black hair were paying off, I conducted a short interview with my daughter about her hair. She's only three and a half, so the talk wasn't that long or extensive. And, of course, we were in the bathroom combing our hair as we talked:

I like your hair, Anjellah. It's very pretty.
thank you

Do you like your hair?
uh huh

What do you like about your hair?
i like my hair in braids

You do?
mmm hmm

What else?
rubber bands and twists

Oh yeah? Do like you headbands?
oh yea!

Do you think your hair is beautiful?
mmm hmm

What do you not like about your hair?
not being combed

Do you remember that book we read?
(referring to bell hooks' *Happy to be Nappy*)
mmm hmmm

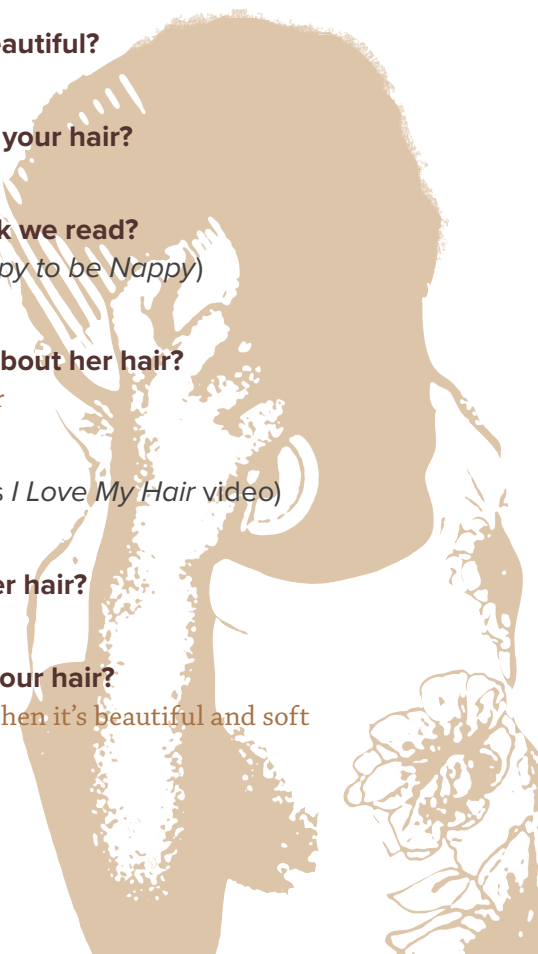
What did the little girl say about her hair?
i don't know. i don't remember

What about that video
(referring to Sesame Street's *I Love My Hair* video)
oh yeah

What do you think about her hair?
yes

What do you like to put in your hair?
soap and water. i wash it and then it's beautiful and soft

It's beautiful and soft?
yes. can i comb it now?



ENDNOTES

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Opening spread photography by George Fulton, George Fulton Studios. www.georgefulton.com



ON LOVING
BLACKNESS
AND BLACK WOMANHOOD

THE BRIDGE POEM

by Donna Kate Rushin¹

I've had enough
I'm sick of seeing and touching
Both sides of things
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody
Can talk to anybody
Without me Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks
To the Ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends' parents...

Then
I've got to explain myself
To everybody

I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Forget it
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps
Sick of being your insurance against
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people

Find another connection to the rest of the world
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your human-ness

I'm sick of reminding you not to
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self
On behalf of your better selves

I am sick
Of having to remind you
To breathe
Before you suffocate
Your own fool self

Forget it
Stretch or drown
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses
I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful

i must be the bridge to nowhere
but my true self
and then i will be useful



In her book, *Black Looks*, bell hooks recounts how she tried to interject that, in a White supremacist culture, loving blackness was dangerous. Using the main character Clare from Nella Larson's *Passing*, hooks asserted that Clare's loving herself as a Black woman, after years of passing as White, ultimately resulted in her death. hooks notes how the class largely ignored the prompt to discuss Black self-love and focused mostly on the opposite—Black self-hatred.

"They wanted to talk about [it], to hear one another confess (especially students of color) in eloquent narratives about the myriad ways they had tried to attain whiteness, if only symbolically. They gave graphic details they attempted to appear 'white' but talking a certain way, wearing certain clothing and even choosing specific groups of white friends."² At the chapter's end, she concludes that Blacks cannot value "ourselves rightly without first breaking through the walls of denial which hide the depth of black self-hatred, inner anguish, and unreconciled pain."³

I've been thinking a great deal about my own definition of Blackness. My personal interpretation of what it means to Black, measured against others' interpretations and expectations, as well. Not just Black folk, but, what non-Black folk think as well. I think a lot about what markers make me distinctively tied to the Black race. Hair. Melanin. Speech. Body. Attitude. How much of this do I choose to put on like a mask? How much of this is thrust upon me? What I accept or reject ultimately defines who I am as a woman—A Black woman.

Here's what I worry about—appearing to be a modern day Sambo putting on a performance act. Smiling and joking and "dancing" about issues that are very serious and personal to me. How do I express the deep pain and angst I have about the state of Black America? The dread I feel when it's time to release my babies completely out on their own—preparing them for what may await them. Have I experienced the blatant racism and bigotry that so many others have? No. *Maybe*. There have been times when my authority and decisions have been questioned. When I get elevated to a position of authority, I have to fight to still be included in the meetings. There have been, at times, questioning of my knowledge, confidence and ability to handle my own, as well as others', workloads. So maybe then the answer should be "yes."

The problem with having so many white friends is there is no place to express the anger and frustrations I have about issues surrounding the Black community and womanhood because of the fragility of some White feelings. Or being seen as that "angry Black" woman when trying to express those feelings. The problem with having so many Black friends is that some are not really engaged in what's happening in our society or not willing to talk openly about it. We gotta whisper and talk in secret about the things that upset us—so as to not make anyone uncomfortable. But recently, I had a revelation. I'm not here to make *anyone* feel comfortable about my existence.

But, how much of this is internal and how much is real or valid? Growing up I, for some reason, always had this cloud of shame that I carried with me. There was actually

a time when I was ashamed to have extra melanin. I would try and hide behind my “White” speech. I tried to straighten my hair and lighten my skin. Many days I feel as if I’m living a double life, having to translate for both sides. Sometimes feeling guilty because I made “something good” of myself, while others didn’t fare as well. When I speak my mind at meetings—offering a different, opposing, non-mainstream point of view, I risk being excluded from future conversations. However, if I stay quiet, I torment myself with failure to speak up or fear of being labeled as “angry black woman.” I never allowed myself to be angry about stuff. Really truly upset.

I have totally fallen in love AwesomelyLuvvie.com, a blog on Black culture, politics, all things tech, social issues and Hollywood. Luvvie Ajayi, the author of the blog, exudes such love and passion for her Nigerian heritage and pride about being Black, it’s hard not to join in the self-love. Her recent post⁴ about being unapologetically black and not having any “dambs to give” about hurting White feelings. She doesn’t bash her “melanin deficient” brothers and sisters, but she lays out how she is a lover of the Black race and will not, cannot, be ashamed. I immediately identified with this post and got my life at the same time. My real “me” identified and screamed “AMEN!” with every line.

After reading, I realized just how beautiful my Blackness is and that I had to stop waiting for others to give me permission to love and speak up for myself. And in turn, I have to teach my children to love themselves and the brown skin they’re in.

“I am not here
to make anyone
comfortable about
my existence”

I am here to stand in my truth and speak from those spaces. I wrestle daily with pride and shame; confidence and self-doubt; love and hate of myself. I didn’t know that I wasn’t supposed to love myself or think I was beautiful or even think I was worth a damn because of my skin color until someone of another race, whose skin had less melanin than mine, told me. Until the media, television shows, and print ads marched in and showed me that Black love, self Black love, was wrong and abnormal—against mainstream.

I have to take care of myself first. I have to tend to the matters of my own heart. I have to love myself, my Black self, and not be apologetic about it. I have to address all the things beautiful and unpleasant. I have to give myself permission to be who I was created to be and share that. I must acknowledge, recognize, validate and love me.

I am mother, human, woman, sister, aunt, daughter, wife, child of God, friend, artist, dreamer, maker, teacher, confidante, lover, homemaker, chef, critic and, at the same time, not just all of these things—I'm still so much more. I'm not happy all the time, but I still find joy. With this renewed love for Blackness, drawing upon lessons from my own experiences and women before me, I see it my personal duty to reach back and pull all the little brown girls up with me.

A Love Letter to My Daughter

(Click to read)

A Letter from My Mother

(Click to read)

A Love Letter to My Daughter
My Darling Girl,

The day your Daddy and I found out who you were going to be, my initial reaction was not immediately of joy, but of fear. My mind raced toward the future. A future to where I was worried you would be covered by the labels and stereotypes people (our own and outsiders) had pre-manufactured for you. I was sad because those labels are hard to shake off, break out of and destroy. Especially if you believe them. I had for the longest believed what others negatively put on me, and I didn't want the same for you. But I brought my mind back to the present moment, in the ultrasound room, where we were viewing you on the screen while inside my belly. I decided that I would pour as much power into you before you were born, and teach you to take your own power from the time you draw your first breath until I breathe my last. I'm going to raise a queen.

My love, you are royalty and fearfully and wonderfully made. You are a rare gem. You belong to a strong people. You have running through your veins the blood of artists, musicians, singers, leaders, preachers, teachers, designers, mechanics and cooks. You are part of a people who make extraordinary things out of the simplest of objects. Our tapestry is woven with the most beautiful shades from the darkest of midnight to brightest of the Northern star. I tell you this not to be intimidated or even feel like you cannot measure up, but to let you know the power of your lineage. Hear and remember the stories. Draw upon them.

There will be people who will tell you you're not light enough or skinny enough. That your hair isn't straight or long enough. They'll try to have you forget that you're a goddess in your own right. That your brown skin and short curly hair aren't beautiful. Sometimes your own kind will try to make you ashamed of unique beauty, your beautiful brown skin. For a little while, you may try to forget, cast aside and deny your own shine, desperate to fit in their definition of Black Beauty. You'll even ponder what it would be like to be the "other."

You may change your hair, the way you will walk and talk. And like the Mixed Up Chameleon, you'll take on everything else, not feeling like yourself, and that which made you uniquely beautiful and powerful will get lost for a while. Until what's inside you, the God-given power, will cry out to be free. Remember then, my love, how precious you are. How lovely your brown skin and your black cottony hair are. Call upon your lineage, your heritage, and draw your own strength and burst with your Black pride. Be beautiful and proud. Rise up, little goddess, and discover then claim who you are. Remember you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Seize your power and take on the world.

Love,
Mommy

My Dearest Drena,

While watching my grandchildren play, especially Angjellah who looks exactly like you at that age, I began to reflect back over my life; remembering you ~~as~~ a child; full of wonder, love and anticipation; and how God's overshadowing Grace^{has} brought you through so many wonderful, most precious times; uncertain and hard times, and all the avenues that has brought you to this phase of your life.

To you I want to say: you have a gift - a gift of knowing what to do when the odds and situations are not in your favor - you constantly remember too not just look what's not right - but at all possibilities - to project a positive outcome by "First" asking God for guidance and what direction ~~then~~ having the patience to take it a step at a time, by faith, until the goal has been met!

I see myself in you in many of your talents: the honor you have in doing things the right way - you're experimenting with recipes & then coming up with different creations (very delicious) meals - the making (sewing) of variety of clothes for your daughter - the Love & appreciation of fine music; your singing has develop beautifully as you continue to be energize by being a part of the choir; most importantly your love for Art has increased

to a place of excellence. For Art is
your God-given talent. Your inner eye brings
forth the creation of beautiful pictures
and magnificent designs.

You have become the woman you are
today, I believe, because of the
strengths, boldness, and few weaknesses
inside of me. That I have passed on
to you. My being that role model of faith,
unfading love; projecting role of a wife
and mother ~~that~~ ^{was} built and maintain
in my life - ~~placing~~ ^{giving} it to you. Learning
through Christ, all weakness ~~can~~ be
conquered.

I am very proud of all your accomplish-
ments; - at work - church - home - in
education. Most of all the birth
of my two ~~active~~ and curious grand
children, who are a reflection of your
lasting in your love.

My child. Continue to excel - reach
the pinnacle of all God has planned
for your life - let nothing, I
mean nothing, hinder you from being
"the head not the tail" for "You
can do and obtain all things through
Christ" always "Stay strong in the
Lord in the ~~Lord~~ power of His might"
I will ~~always~~ ^{forever} love, support and be
there for you no matter what may
come!!! Loving you Always.

Love, Mom



HOW DO I RESPOND?

I started working on a book based on the letter to my daughter. The images are a combination of scanned fabrics and photos set in collage form then printed on fabric to reinforce a tactile quality. I wanted to convey sense of a personal pride and handcrafted feel, while also paying homage to our family's history of making. More importantly, I wanted to visually convey the message of self-love and love of others no matter the shade of their skin. This project is a combination of textiles and technology and graphic design. Since my daughter has not yet learned how to read, my use of imagery plays a vital role in conveying that message. Using rich, earth-toned colors is part of that. My book (along with the letter) is my way of fighting back, visually reinforcing and instilling that love and pride.

Conclusion

In *Double Consciousness in Design*, designer Chris Jones touches on the struggle to enjoy Blackness as a designer while muting that same voice to express the thoughts of his design clients. Jones expresses his concern for the lack of Black faces in places of prominence like conferences, recruitment pieces and top design agencies. He notes his struggle to boldly speak to issues that affect the Black community (education, poverty, politics, etc.).⁵ During an interview with *Revision Path* podcast creator Maurice Cherry, Black designer Sarah Huny Young brings attention to the fact that the majority of her work has a specific perspective to it, with Black culture and other people of color in mind. “I don’t want to be a soul-less design zombie,” she says. “I’m proud to design work that has this level of Blackness to it. I don’t want to tone down my Blackness...I’ve never been asked ‘hey can you make that more Black?’ but my work, the projects I’m drawn to, certainly has the Black culture and experience in mind.”⁶

As a Black design professional, there are times when I feel compromised between these two spaces—proud to be Black, yet carefully hesitant to boldly speak on issues. Where I am as the only Black design professional in a predominantly White setting, I am acutely aware of what my influence as a person of color could mean when I am tasked to design an ad or brochure for members of the legal community and the public we serve. Oftentimes,

I feel that I was always “on” and performing, having to put on a “White” face because that was the professional, acceptable way to be—not too ethnic, not too Black. In this environment, I saw little opportunity to express my love for Blackness or general concern for issues affecting people of color. Working in this way proved to be too stifling and limiting for me as a professional and as a member of the Black race.

All of the stories and experiences I’ve shared in this book, I carry with me in my professional and personal design practice. That little brown girl lives with me as I’m selecting images for websites or interviewing for interns. I especially speak up for the applicants of color and, at the very least, I’m planting thoughts to disrupt the tendency to hire someone who looks just like everyone else. Like, Ms. Young, I deliberately choose to design for individuals and organizations that are part of the underserved communities in my city.

The graphic design profession itself suffers with being a White, male-dominated industry, with a noticeable lack people of color particularly Blacks and Hispanics in positions of prominence despite the population being more diverse than ever before. Hoping to make a change, I serve on the AIGA National Task Force for Diversity and Inclusion where it is part of our mission to highlight the importance of and great need for diversity and inclusion in the design profession.

My need to visually respond to issues affecting Blacks and people of color or just celebrating the beauty of Blackness

reaches far past the traditional conventions of graphic design. This is why I make, with my hands and use other means of expressing myself visually. Because my story does not have a single side to it—my responses don't either.

A Letter to the Little Brown Girl

Hello, Love

I'm writing to give you some advice, knowing what I know now. Trying to recall the lessons I wish you had learned and just letting you know how much you've grown and learned to accept yourself as you are. What lessons do I hope I've learned?

One. Though you are confident in some things, others will mistake this as being the strong, Black woman and seemingly arrogant. Let them, because you cannot convince them otherwise. People gon' think what they think about you. Truthful or not. Real or imagined, they will perceive you and receive you as "other." You cannot allow this to keep you from boldly stating what you know. I know many times you worry about being labeled the "angry black woman" if you speak up. Sometimes you will and sometimes won't. Speak out regardless and don't second guess yourself when you do. Pray twice (often) and speak once. Do things only you can do.

Two. You are not your hair and your measure of womanhood or Blackness is not predetermined by what style you choose to adorn on your crown. Remember that time you asked Cynthia if you needed to change your braids to something more mainstream before that big client presentation? You were worried that your "black" hair would offend potential clients and affect your company's chances of winning that bid. Yeah. What the hell was that? Who told you that your beautiful braids would be too much for them? And why did you take on that myth and shame yourself? Your hair is beautiful whether you wear it short, long, twisted, braided, Bantu knotted, weaved or relaxed. You don't have to explain to anyone—not even your husband—your desire to change up the way you present your hair. Throw away that adage of a "woman's hair is her crowning glory." It simply is not true. Not to you anymore. Remember you are who you are because of God's glorious love inside you. Not because of a hair piece. I want you to know how proud of you I am for cutting your hair and freeing yourself from that "struggle." You have never been more at peace than you are at this very moment. The moment you let the tresses fall, the less stress you've become. Just hair.

Three. You have within you the blood of musicians, craftsmen (and women), builders, perseverance of these wonderful people. Just like you told your own daughter about her heritage in this fame and the Black race, the same is true for you. If you did not exist, she would not be here. Why do you sometimes speak as if you're not part of

this great ancestry? Do you realize you discredit yourself by not recognizing and claiming your part? You are incredible, beautiful Black woman. Don't ever think otherwise.

Four. It's okay to love rock, R&B, rap and country and gospel and house music all at the same time and still be Black. It's not ok to shame or explain away your reasons for the soulful music. No one is taking away your so called "Black" card because of those things. Love your contemporary Christian music and techno at the same time. You're not betraying your culture because of what you sing or to what you listen.

Five. Dear Drena, knowing what I know now about your friendships some should have never happened, some were really based on how good you could make them look by being the only chocolate person they really know. And it's ok to admit the tension it causes you sometimes when issues involving social injustice —particularly race— arise. Those same friends could not be found to offer that kinship when you desperately need to express concerns as a Black woman. Not all of your friendships with other races make you feel lonely or isolated, but the majority of your close friendships don't involve Black persons (save your family).

Six. I wish you knew growing up that standing up for yourself is not an act of defiance, but more saying no to personal injustices. You're telling them "hey, I have something to say, and like it or not, I'm going to say it."

Seven. I want you to know that you're raising fine individuals to love themselves and their beautiful brown skin, but what they see in your actions and speech toward other Blacks will speak volumes about loving their own race. Saying things like "ratchet" or being "niggerish" doesn't put us in a good light. Be careful of what you speak of your own kind. You and your children (and non-Blacks) are listening. Remember that line from India.Arie's Get It Together "... the words that come from your mouth, you're the first to hear...." What are the words coming from my lips? What am I hearing myself say?

Love, Me



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Colophon

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