

A Question of Color

Kathe Sandler

56 minutes, color and black and white, video and film, 1993

California Newsreel

Description

The film begins with a quote: It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen. In this process, we seek to create a world where everyone can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes.

An attractive woman, unidentified and representing the central issue in the film, tells about dating a man who rejected her because she was too dark. His mother, she says, thought he was too dark, and that he should choose a mate who could lighten his family up.

After this story, a chorus of voices names terms for the spectrum of skin colors, as a range of African-American faces in high-shadow lighting turns, one by one, with mildly welcoming gazes, to the viewer.

The narrator, who is the filmmaker, says racism has affected how African-Americans see each other as well as how they are treated. She introduces herself with a black and white photo of herself as an adult. She is, she says, from an interracial background; family photos show her white father and black mother, and their extended family, mostly black. On camera, she says color has been a dominant influence in her life. We also meet the filmmaking crew in this scene, as they are shown setting up the interview. The first woman, Curtia, says color is central to African-American experience. Another woman, Esther, says she and her sisters were brown, and they didnt fit with either the white or dark side of the family, and that they thought they were ugly. Wiley says being light skinned helps him blend into the white world. Harriet says she always questioned the statement, Shes dark, but.... Wiley says he likes lighter skin and good hair in a woman. Dark-skinned Kim in closeup says people dont even quite think about it while believing it. The camera pans out to show that her brother Harold is sitting with her, and he says he catches himself admiring light skin and good hair. She asks him if he really does admire it, and he awkwardly admits that he probably does.

The filmmaker asserts in narration that color consciousness started in the South, with slavery. After establishing shots of urban Tuskegee, she introduces us to Mrs. Annie Caldwell, 96 years old. She says that lighter skinned blacks would think they was better than we were but that she was well aware They couldnt go no further with the whites than I could. After establishing shots of Tuskegee University, the universitys president Dr. Benjamin Payton says slavery itself divided blacks, over historical photos of house workers, field hands, and the famous photo of a slave with scars on his back from whipping. He says white men used black women sexually; a photo of newly freed slaves, showing several light faces of girls, reinforces the presidents

words. Booker T. Washington's father was white, he says; a photo of Washington in closeup, slowly panning out, illustrates his discussion. In the presidential mansion, the president, who is dark, says he is the first president of the university to have a dark-skinned wife. He says that fact indicates their education. Robert Davis says that some trustees and town elite have a problem with him, because he is dark. Payton says he has the most number of Ivy League degrees of any Tuskegee president. The Tuskegee mayor in front of a lake explains that slavery had divided blacks by color, and says that he faced opposition from some elite blacks in town, because of his color. He also says that he was raised in the poor side of town.

Mrs. Davis, seen at a card party in an upscale home, says everyone in Tuskegee knows the Davis family, and that her son is president of the local bank. He says he is called high yellow and faces jealousy. He grew up in a well-to-do neighborhood, and he faces teasing for being uppity. Was it their money or their complexion, he asks? Mrs. Davis says if they were dark they would still be respectable. He, sitting in a French-colonial style chair, says his mother would always tell him to date light-skinned girls. A journalist, Rhonda Baraka, says she never dealt with those people because she had been raised by working people, and that her grandmother taught her to be proud of the way their family looked. She always wondered why light skin and money went together. She always respected and looked up to dark-skinned Mayor Johnny Ford. Baraka says black people need to return to Africa and see the beauty in the way African people look. Our problems, she says, come from white people's attitudes.

In Crown Heights, Brooklyn, kids play on a basketball court. The narrator says color affects American blacks everywhere. Keyonn and Keith are good friends, and do a rap on remembering your past and being true to yourself. Keyonn says that Keith is the cute one because he's light-skinned. Keith says girls just think he's ordinary because his hair is still curly and he's still a little dark. Keyonn has blue contacts; we watch him put them in. Keyonn says he never discusses skin color with Keith, to avoid arguments. He says kids tease along color lines, and that he goes along with it to avoid being different. Keyonn says he resents that white isn't a problem but dark is.

Dianne says that light-skinned women were a prize when she was growing up. Historical footage of a black women's beauty contest accompanies the comment. Dianne recalls that boys would single out the bright one (her) when they would wolf-whistle at a group of girls. Keyonn's mother says darker women are not expected to want anything. Dianne says other black people resent her. Their comments alternate in a counterpoint. Pat, very light, says that she faces slurs from some blacks, and some people say she is not black. It's none of your business, she says. She has problems with black women; for black men, she says, she is the next best thing to a white woman. She has never tried to be white; she just wants to be black, to belong.

Kathe Sandler says light-skinned blacks catch resentment that other blacks feel about racism generally. I caught that a lot growing up, it caused me a lot of pain...I wanted to be darker, to have kinky hair... The camera focuses on a photo of Kathe at 17. She

recalls that Essence put her and her mother on the cover for a Mothers Day issue, and that they received hate mail for putting a white woman on the cover. The camera focuses on the right side of the cover, and on 17-year-old Kathes sweet smile. Sandler goes on to say that her mothers other daughter was not asked to be on the cover. We see a photo of the sister, Eve, with dark curly hair, and the camera pans out to show Kathe on the right side of the photo; this is the same photo used for an establishing shot in this sequence. Why, Kathe asks, was she chosen to be the Cinderella? She says she never talked about it with her sister. Sandler is seen walking on the street with dark people; her narration says she benefits from light skin privilege.

Author Vertamae Grosvenor says people in the South would check out a babys skin color, and use the term skillet blonde to refer to a baby with very African features. She recites her work, Skillet blonde, a collection of comments insulting dark skinned woman. A dark skinned woman, she recalls being hurt by people saying these remarks. She says as a child she knew she was bad, but was puzzled because everyone else looked like that too. Melba, a light skinned woman with straightened hair, recalls her mother straightening their hair as children, and sometimes burning them. Vertamae says people say shes dark but shes kind of pretty. Melba says in spite of being light, she had bad features.

Malcolm X in historical footage asks his audience who taught them to hate themselves and their kind for the way they look. Kathleen Cleaver, in historical footage, says black women always wanted to look like white women, but this has changed...their own appearance is beautiful, theyre proud of it. Historical photos from the 60s introduces the narrators recollection of the black consciousness movement. Vertamae says in the 60s my time had come. She thought the African look fit with her. Stokely Carmichael in a speech says people deny their roots in Africa.

Melba Tolliver, one of the first black women reporters on network news, recalls people criticizing her for straightening her hair. Kathe Sandler says Melbas television station resisted the move to natural hair. She recalls a man looking at a picture of Kathleen Cleaver, covering her hair, and saying not bad. She was threatened with dismissal, but public outcry restored her to her post, says Sandler. In historical footage, a youthful Jesse Jackson asserts that something has changed. Historical footage of a black consciousness seminar follows. Vertamae says light skinned people now say that era was hard on them. Dianne says light skinned people then had to prove themselves.

Magazine covers and ads chart transition from the afro to the jheri-curl. A rap music video shows dark skinned men pursuing a light skinned woman, showing, Sandler says, that problems continue. Karen, getting braids, says this may be the great White hope for black women. As a child she looked at pop stars (Tina Turner, Martha and the Vandells), and had no role models. Karen says she feels inferior, and doesnt like to get out of a swimming pool with natural hair. Another woman with locks says she got negative comments until her hair got longer, and that she had to work on her self-confidence. They continue in a reinforcing counterpoint.

The narrator asks if society has taught us to hate what is most African about ourselves. We go to Keyonns family's apartment, for a meal. The younger brother says he thinks people would like him more if he was light skinned.

Sandler says that a European ideal rules world beauty standards; we watch Miss Namibia, a statuesque white woman, take the Miss Universe crown. Sandler says many people struggle to conform to a white ideal. Cosmetic surgery is illustrated with an Asian woman having surgery for Caucasian eyes. The Nigerian head of cosmetic surgery at Harlem hospital says some want Caucasian features, some want a more elegant but still ethnic nose, and the third denies they want to look Caucasian but they do. He uses his nurse as a model to show how he can transform an African nose into a Caucasian one.

Over slow motion images of faces in an urban crowd, Sandler says only African-Americans can overcome the oppression these attitudes bring, and to celebrate the diversity of the community. A Howard University student, who is dark skinned with short hair, says many people were shocked that she became Miss Howard University.

Sandler is seen shopping on an urban street. She says, over images from the film, that we need to open up a conversation, and face the task of healing ourselves as a community. Other voices from the film say change is happening but the problem is very real. Wiley says participating in the film has made him think about these issues differently. He encountered prejudices he doesn't like in himself. Karen, the woman with braided hair, says the interview has been like therapy. The woman with locks says we need to describe ourselves positively.

Once again we see the faces we saw in the beginning of the film, a range of skin tones, with the chant of names for these skin tones; this cedes to the faces themselves speaking the words. Sandler speaks over the faces, saying that opening up this discussion is part of the challenge of living in a society that has failed to embrace all of us.

Credits begin, interrupted by segments from the earlier speech by Malcolm X. Other visuals punctuate the credits, ending with Mrs. Annie Caldwell says she is proud to be black.

Style/Structure

This is an intriguing, representative film of identity politics. It posits the existence of a community within which people can have a positive identity: African-American. This is a community divided from within, the filmmaker notes, by color and class, which often go together. Skin color also complicates gender relationships, since black men tend to prefer lighter-skinned women. While the filmmaker notes negative aspects of 60s black consciousness, including most importantly its exclusionary quality, she celebrates much about it. She uses Malcolm X as a key articulator of her argument that black people have internalized white discrimination. She decries Eurocentric beauty standards. She wants an African-American consciousness that is

cultural rather than color-conscious.

The film is in essay form. It uses a combination of interview, visual poetry (e.g., the range of faces in a row), historical footage and images, and personal reminiscence. The narrator develops the argument with expositional narrative introducing sections; interviewees provide evidence and depth of experience.

The filmmaker presents her own case as one among many, elaborating her family history in mid-film. She asks questions rather than explicitly drawing conclusions, a strategy that might be considered a feminine approach. Her modest self-revelations function to give her authority to speak on this delicate subject, and avoid potential charges of self-absorption.

The style of oral history and interview participates in a tradition well established in the 1970s among social-issue independent filmmakers. Its visual poetry aspects echo the look established by Marlon Riggs in his pathbreaking *Tongues Untied* (1989), a personal essay on coming to awareness of black gay identity.

Background on Director/Film

Kathe Sandler's first film was the 1982 documentary *Remembering Thelma*, about the late dancer, teacher, and mentor Thelma Hill. She also produced the dramatic work, *The Friends*, in the American Film Institute's Directing Workshop. She received the New York Foundation of the Arts Filmmaking Fellowship twice.

On her website, the filmmaker noted, I have spent the last eight years exploring this lingering internalized racism for my documentary, *A Question of Color*, but, in many ways, I have been making this film all of my life. Everything that has happened to me around color in my family, my community, in White America, and in the world, has prepared me to tell this story. She recounted her own favored position in the family, as the lighter-skinned child, and also her stigmatization by African-American strangers. There were times when, if we could, I believe Eve and I would have gladly exchanged looks, she wrote.

Sandler described the process of making the film as a process of socializing her individual experience; my own experiences were transformed and retold by the many people I talked to and worked with. She also described it as therapeutic, because it compelled me to come out from behind the camera and share my own story... Finally, she explicitly described its political objective: I wanted *A Question of Color* to shed light on a recurring theme in human relations: how oppressed people adopt the ideas that their oppressors use to oppress them. She argued that this topic was particularly relevant to women because our value as women has been determined by how attractive we are to men, mainly Black men, who are guided by a color-conscious standard.

The film was made with the help of other veterans of political filmmaking. The executive producer was St. Clair Bourne, a stalwart of independent African-American

documentary filmmaking who first carved out a career in the 1960s in television, when civil rights groups focused on media access. Feminist film editors Lucy Winer and Kate Davis co-edited it. Cinematographers Michael Chin and Robert Shepard were the principle cinematographers for *Eyes on the Prize II* and *The Great Depression* (PBS), and Shepard also shot two films for Marlon Riggs.

The film was primarily funded by the public television fund for independent production targeted at underserved audiences, the Independent Television Service (Independent Television Service). It received other funds from other public sources, including: the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, The New York Council for the Humanities, and The National Black Programming Consortium. From private sources, the film obtained funds from The D.C. Community Humanities Council (which has some public funds), Paul Robeson Fund/Funding Exchange, American Film Institute, Unitarian Universalists Social Concerns Panel, Women in Film, Art Matters, Harburg Foundation, Beards Fund, Alabama Humanities Foundation, Vogelstein Foundation, Brooklyn Arts Cultural Association, Open Meadows Foundation, Eastman Fund, and the Astraea Foundation.

Production Context

This film was in the first batch of films funded by Independent Television Service, and reflected the services concern to celebrate the ethnic and racial diversity of independent producers while not reproducing the political correctness controversies of the time. Conservatives had seized upon the term political correctness as a contemptuous portrayal of liberal policies of affirmative action, arguing that liberals promoted unfairness and denied common sense with the use of pious phrases and policies celebrating diversity and tolerance.

The film reflects the condensation of civil rights concerns in a solution of identity issues. It heralds the achievements of the black consciousness movement, which articulated the problem of racism and the right to cultural identity. It quickly charts a commercialization of issues around appearance but builds explicitly on the rights claims made in that movement.

Reception/Distribution

The film debuted theatrically at Film Forum in New York, on a double bill with Marlon Riggs' *No Regret*, a profile of several black gay men with AIDS on shoestring budgets. The New York Times reviewer Stephen Holden noted on June 25, 1993 that the films had been produced with low budgets, and concluded: If their scratchy soundtracks, crude visuals and rather haphazard structures make them occasionally hard to follow, their sensible, positive messages about selfacceptance in the face of racism and homophobia resonate strongly. The film aired on public television, often timed for Black History Month (February), in 1994, to positive reviews. *A Question of Color* received the 1993 Best Documentary Prized Pieces Award from the National Black Programming Consortium.

Further Reading:

A Question of Color. Website. [Http://www.itvs.org/external/QOC](http://www.itvs.org/external/QOC), accessed .
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