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# Teaching The Camera To See My Skin

Navigating photography's inherited bias against dark skin.

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*John Gara for BuzzFeed*

I was 12 years old and paging through a photo album; my memories of the days seemed to fade in the photo's recreation. In some pictures, I am a mud brown, in others I'm a blue black. Some of the pictures were taken within moments of one another. "You look like charcoal," someone said,

and giggled. I felt insulted, but I didn't have the words for that yet. I just knew that I didn't want to be seen as a quality of a dark black that would invite hatred on my skin.

A year later, it was 1988 and the overhead kitchen light burned the dullest yellow as my mother placed four proofs on the table from an Olan Mills photo session. Each wallet-sized print contained various permutations of my little sister, my mother, father, and me. She wanted to know what we thought.

I considered each of the images. I couldn't see my face. "Why do I look so dark?"

"Maybe it's just dark in here." She flipped the curtains upward and wound them around the curtain rod to let the dull winter light in. It didn't help. The clothes were OK — the bright blue vest over a striped blue shirt underneath. The updo wasn't the camera's fault. But my eyes looked like sunken holes in a small brown face, and my pupils were invisible.

"I don't even look like me."

The photos were horrible. Mom was kind of blown out on one side; my father's hair, a scalped crop fro, disappears into a faux marbled background. He's half brown and tan, teeth capturing the strobes' glare.

My mom had saved up quite a bit of money to try to create a pastoral scene of domesticity of our rough and ragged family to give to loved ones. I just couldn't understand how the camera could get us so wrong.

Photography is balancing an equation between light and documentary. Beauty and storytelling. Honesty and fantasy. The frame says how the

photographer sees you. I couldn't help but feel that what that photographer saw was so wildly different from how I saw myself.

*Is that how you see me? Could you not see blackness? Its varying tones and textures? And do you see all of us that way?*



*Photographs by Syreeta McFadden*

By the 1990s, when I began taking pictures, I hated shooting brown skin on color film. The printed results failed to accurately represent my subjects, their shades obscured, their smiles blown out. I understood that some of this had to do with harmonizing the basic components of great image-making from the gear: film speed, aperture, and the ghost we all chase, light.

The inconsistencies were so glaring that for a while, I thought it was impossible to get a decent picture of me that captured my likeness. I began to retreat from situations involving group photos. And sure, many of us are fickle about what makes a good portrait. But it seemed the technology was stacked against me. I only knew, though I didn't understand why, that the lighter you were, the more likely it was that the camera — the film — got your likeness right.

When I picked up the camera, lighting brown skin in the grayscale felt freeing. How is it possible that the suggestion of brown, beige, cappuccino, cocoa, and sable skin was evocative in black and white? Somewhere in the grayscale, we didn't look so off against white skin. The light was kinder. Or at least it was in grayscale that I learned the power of light and the limitations of the gear. I had control. I could capture blackness without producing a distortion of it.

Most photographers — my parents, the Olan Mills studio — didn't have that control. Unless you were doing your own processing, you took your roll of film to a lab where the technician worked off a reference card with a perfectly balanced portrait of a pale-skinned woman.

They're called Shirley cards, named after the first woman to pose for them. She is wearing a white dress with long black gloves. A pearl bracelet adorns one of her wrists. She has auburn hair that drapes her exposed shoulders. Her eyes are blue. The background is grayish, and she is surrounded by three pillows, each in one of the primary colors we're taught in school. She wears a white dress because it reads high contrast against the gray background with her black gloves. "Color girl" is the technicians' term for her. The image is used as a metric for skin-color balance, which technicians use to render an image as close as possible to what the human eye recognizes as normal. But there's the rub: With a

white body as a light meter, all other skin tones become deviations from the norm.

It turns out, film stock's failures to capture dark skin aren't a technical issue, they're a choice. Lorna Roth, a scholar in media and communication studies, wrote that film emulsions — the coating on the film base that reacts with chemicals and light to produce an image — "could have been designed initially with more sensitivity to the continuum of yellow, brown and reddish skin tones but the design process would have to be motivated by a recognition of the need for extended range." Back then there was little motivation to acknowledge, let alone cater to a market beyond white consumers.

Kodak did finally modify its film emulsion stocks in the 1970s and '80s — but only after complaints from companies trying to advertise chocolate and wood furniture. The resulting Gold Max film stock was created. According to Roth, a Kodak executive described the film as being able to "photograph the details of the dark horse in low light."

Kodak never encountered a groundswell of complaints from African-Americans about their products. Many of us simply assumed the deficiencies of film emulsion performance reflected our inadequacies as photographers. Perhaps *we* didn't understand the principles of photography. It is science, after all.

Through experience we adapted to film technology — analog and digital — that hadn't adapted to us. We circumvented the inherent flaws of film emulsion by ensuring that our subjects were well placed in light; invested more in costly lenses that permitted a wider variety of aperture ranges so we could imbue our work with all the light we could; we purchased professional-grade films at faster speeds, or specialty films with emulsions designed for shooting conditions strictly indoor under

fluorescent or tungsten light. We accepted poor advice from white photo instructors to add Vaseline to teeth and skin or apply photosensitive makeup that barely matched our skin's undertones.

*The Guardian* notes that filmmaker Jean Luc Godard was quite vocal, famously refusing to use Kodak film stock in 1977 while on assignment in Mozambique because the product was "racist." And a 2013 exhibition by London-based artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin explored the question of racism in film photography. Using Polaroid's vintage ID2 camera and nearly 40-year-old film originally that they say was designed for white skin, the pair spent a month in South Africa photographing the countryside in an attempt to reveal the camera and film's true intent.

The ID2 camera was used to photograph black people for the infamous passbooks, a tool of racial segregation and enforcement during the apartheid era. The ID2 has a flash boost button engineered to add 42% more light on its subjects. Its effect would result in a deliberate darkening of dark-skinned subjects. Broomberg told *The Guardian* that "if you exposed film for a white kid, the black kid sitting next to him would be rendered invisible except for the whites of his eyes and teeth."

What extraordinary witchcraft that 20th century photography managed to erase or distort us in its gaze!

The absence of our likeness accurately rendered in photographs is one more piece of the construct of white supremacy. Film stocks that can't show us accurately help to control the narrative around appearance, and shapes our reality and the value of our lives in American society. If we are invisible, we are unvalued and inhuman. Beasts. Black bodies accepted as menacing, lit in ways that cloak our features in shadows.

Yet these tricks we tried, using shutter speed, grain, noise, high ISOs to push film to recognize the full light spectrum, often meant sacrificing a smoothness to our portraits. In the analog universe, we're talking about grain. In the digital universe, this effect is noise. The images therefore couldn't offer the same glossy polish that photos of white people so readily displayed.

In his 1997 book, *White*, British film studies professor Richard Dyer observed the following: "In the history of photography and film, getting the right image meant getting the one which conformed to prevalent ideas of humanity. This included ideas of whiteness, of what colour — what range of hue — white people wanted white people to be."

Today, the science of digital photography is very much based on the same principles of technology that shaped film photography. In 2010, one user mockingly called her Nikon Coolpix camera racist. The camera's sensor failed to recognize the particular contours of her face, a message popped on the screen inquiring whether or not the subject blinked, to which she posted a [photo online](#) replying, "No, I'm just Asian." Even today, in low light, the sensors search for something that is lightly colored or light skinned before the shutter is released. Focus it on a dark spot, and the camera is inactive. It only knows how to calibrate itself against lightness to define the image.

If you're modeling light settings and defining the meter readings about a balanced image against white skin, the contours and shape of a white face, you've immediately erased 70% of the world's population. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that the calibration model for color reference models fully shifted away from Shirley to be inclusive of full range of skin tones.

Still, there is behavior in image-making that still needs to be unlearned as noted by filmmaker Ava Duvernay last October in her critique of the production team's lighting of *Boardwalk Empire*'s Chalky White. She told BuzzFeed: "I do not appreciate the way that Chalky White is not lit properly. And that doesn't mean that he has to be over-lit. It means that's a dark brother, and if he's in a frame with a lighter-skinned person, you have to — you don't automatically light for the lighter-skinned person and leave him in shadow."

Then there is Lupita Nyong'o. There's a meme circulating online that reminds me of the Shirley cards. It is of Lupita wearing every color perceived or imagined arranged by shade like a color wheel. Her shades of brown, dark and visible, a new frame of reference. A new frame allowing her specific beauty.



*Photograph by Syreeta McFadden*

I don't know when the first time was I learned that I was ugly. Or the part where I was taught to despise my dark skin, or the part where my mother's friends or old aunts yelled at us to stay out of the sun and not get so dark. I hear this from dark girls all the time. I don't know how we were taught to see a flattened blackness, to fear our own shades of dark. I do know how we accepted the narratives of white society to say that dark skin must be pitied, feared, or overcome. There are overwhelming images of dark-skinned peoples in Western imagination that show us looking desperate, whipped, animalistic. Our skin blown out in contrast from film technologies that overemphasize white skin and denigrate black skin. Our teeth and our eyes shimmer through the image, which in its turn become appropriated to imply this is how black people are, mimicked to fit some racialized nightmare that erases our humanity.

I discovered Carrie Mae Weems' work in my late twenties after I had been searching for wider representations of black women and femininity in photography. Weems' work is a powerful interrogation of black bodies in our culture, often casting herself as an actor in the images.

A 1988 photo series titled *Peaches, Liz, Tamika, Elaine* features the artist dressed in four distinct identities of black femininity. The inscription for the portraits begins, "[...] I mean the images of black women are just downright strange. In some cases the images are so monstrously ugly that they scare me! Indeed, if I were as ugly as American culture has made me out to be I'd hide my head like an ostrich in the sand."

"In some cases like that pickaninny or beautiful African queen mess. These images are so unlike me, my sisters or any other women I know — I didn't know it was supposed to be me. No really, in history, in media, in photography, in literature. The construction of black women as the

embodiment of difference is so deep, so wide, so vast, so completely absolved of reality that I didn't know it was me being made fun of. Somebody had to tell me."

Looking at Weems' photos, I felt the relief of being known.

I only wonder if unbiased technologies were available to us then, could they have enabled an alternative story? If images produced by Western culture represented a wider variety of black and brown identities, images in stock agencies that showed black women in professional settings, or just carefree girls, jumping rope, swimming, camping, with all shades of light highlighting how light changes on our skin, that together we'd reach some accord, some comfortable vernacular about the diversity of beauty and humanness. I wonder if the technologies available to us in those days would have taught me early how to love the richness of my brown skin.

In high school, a white classmate drew a picture of my smile and somehow made me look like a monkey. He'd seen drawings of black people somewhere that exaggerated my jawline, enlarged my lips. I started taking pictures to self protect. I just couldn't bear seeing anymore shitty pictures of me. I didn't want know what I wanted these images to say, but I knew I could make something beautiful.

I did understand that the underrepresentation of images of brown and black people in television, magazines, and film seemed to reinforce perceptions of my humanity. It comes out in conversations like, "I didn't know you guys..."

I began shooting color film again in 2000. The Fuji film I use now still struggles with a bias toward lightness in its color standard. But it does seem to be more forgiving to darker skin. More satisfying are my experiments with cross-processing slide film. It's a process where you develop e6 film, which gives you a positive image, then mix with c41 to get a negative image. Double processing the film stock skews colors, and leaves me with a more vivid range to play and document the world.

I shoot primarily in color now. I've developed skills to subvert the blinkered design of tools that were never imagined for my hands, my face. What the camera obscures is my work to retrieve.

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