

THE BACKGROUND

There is much evidence to suggest that a Black woman was the mother of all humankind, and that an African woman is the mother of all humanity, otherwise known as Mitochondrial Eve. She was an East African woman who walked the Earth at an estimated 200,000 years ago. From that time onwards people travelled all over the world and their skin tones adapted to their geographical environment. Nonetheless history has taught us that humans over time have attached all kinds of values to people according to the colour and complexion of their skin.

There have been many terminologies relating to the stratification of skin tones, and many are valued according to their closeness to Whiteness which some view as closer to "civilisation". This concept has been called "Shadism" or "Colourism" and questionable terms have been used such as Mulatto, Half-Caste, Mixed-Race, Quadroon, Octoroon and other even less complimentary terminologies.

The variety of skin tones of those of an African background has created some confusions regarding self-classifications of Blackness and there is a perception that the associations with Europe contributed to these confusions, but the truth is that Africa was always composed of peoples of all kinds of skin tones prior to the associations with Europeans and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

THE BROWN PAPER BAG TEST

This is a term in African American oral history used to describe a racist discriminatory practice within the African American community in the 20th century, in which an individual's skin tone is compared to the colour of a brown paper bag. The term was used to determine what privileges an individual could have and only those with a skin colour that matched or was lighter than a brown paper bag were allowed admission or membership privileges. The test was believed by many to be used in the 20th century by many African American social institutions such as sororities, fraternities, and social clubs. People were barred from having access to several public spaces and resources because of their darker complexion. The test was used at the entrance to social functions wherein a brown paper bag was stuck at the door and anyone who was darker than the bag was denied entry. Brown paper bags will be available for you to take the test yourself if you dare!

The aim of the exhibition is to explore Black people's recognition of their own blackness and complexion and to offer the audience an opportunity to examine themselves, their relationship with other Black people and how society has influenced their perspective on the different shades of colour. The project commissioned a photographer to take photographs of individuals from an African Background of varying skin tones from darkness to lightness. The images will be accompanied by a short text where the subject of the photographs will briefly express their relationship to "Blackness".

Don John

Race & Diversity Consultant and Founder of Black History Month South

www.colourism.co.uk

