

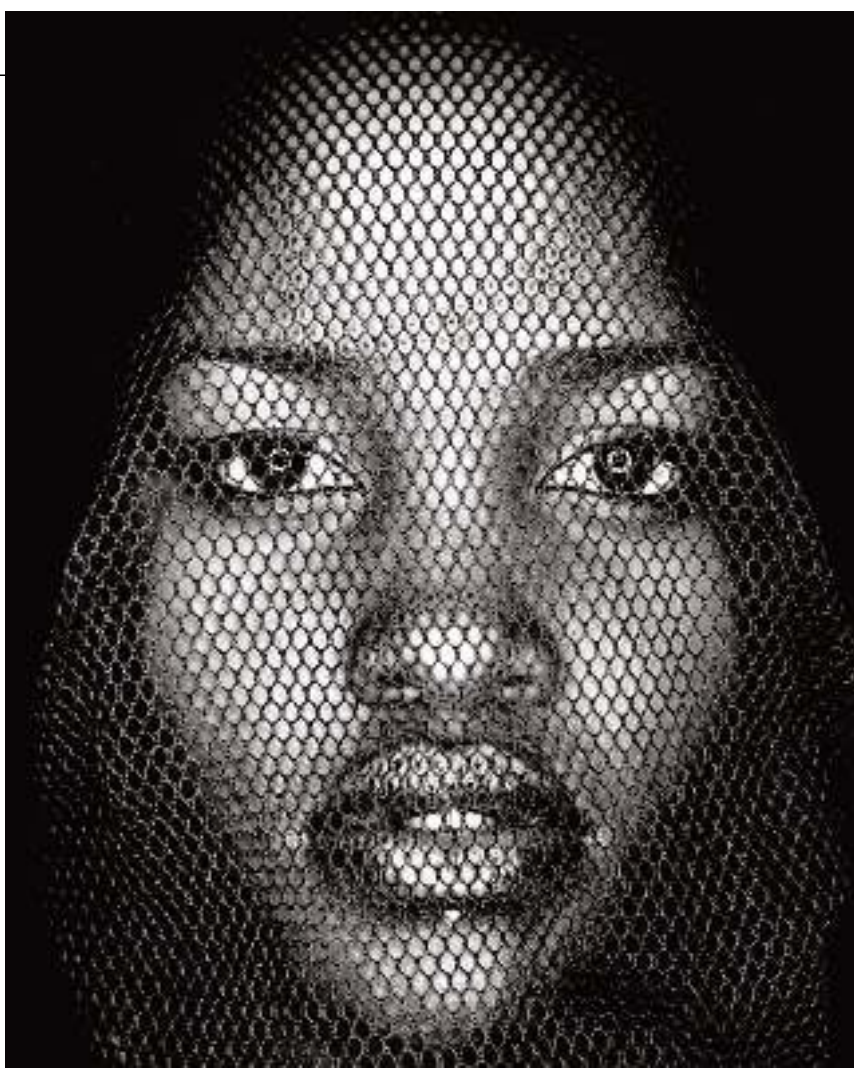
BILL DUKE'S

DARK

INTERVIEWS BY SHELIA P. MOSES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRON CLAIBORNE

GIRLS



LUPITA NYONG'O

BILL DUKE'S DARK GIRLS



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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO
MY MOTHER, ETHEL DUKE,
MY SISTER, YVONNE DUKE HAMPTON,
HER DAUGHTER, NALO,
AND
TO DARK GIRLS EVERYWHERE.



SHAWN MITCHELL

“Sometimes I forget I’m a dark girl because I have so many other wonderful things going for me.”

—LORETTA DEVINE

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WORDS FROM BILL DUKE

I came into this world from the warm body of a dark girl. A very dark girl. She is the one I loved most in this world, my dear mother, Ethel Duke. Her husband and my beloved father, William Duke, Sr., was also dark—dark and proud. Every day of my life I think about my parents, who have gone on to glory. I think about their struggles. I think about our struggle as a family. I think about our darkness.

I grew up in upstate New York in the small town of Poughkeepsie. Our darkness was not welcomed. As a child, I lived with my only sibling, Yvonne, in the comfort of my parents' home and felt loved by them and our extended family. We ate, laughed, and served God together. They made me feel safe.

When I left my parents' home, people were not kind to me because of the color of my skin. The world showed me hatred not only because I was a black boy, but because I was not light skinned.

I was excited like any first grader would be when I put on my new clothes for the first day of school. Clothes that I am sure my parents spent their last dime to buy for me. I was a normal, happy little boy. I did not know that it mattered that the teacher and most of the students were white.

“Stand up and shake each other's hands,” the teacher instructed the students. Not one person touched my black hands. Not one! Then she asked us to stand and state our names. When it was my turn, I stood, but I could not speak. The fact that no one touched my *dark* hands had silenced me.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Duke,” I managed to say.

“Duke. Is Duke your first name or your last name, young man?”

“No, it is Bill Duke.”

Laughter rang across the classroom. On the ceiling. On the walls. My darkness was not welcomed. I sat back down and my normal little world changed. It has never really been the same since then. When you realize others will harm you just because you are not their skin color, life starts to look different.

When my teacher gathered us for lunch, I sat alone. The little white boys were ready to finish the job they had started in the classroom.

“What's your name?” one boy asked another boy, as if I were invisible.

“My name is Duke,” his friend said.

“Is that your first name or your last name?”

“That’s my last name,” the boy answered as they all laughed.

“Oh, I thought it was n—,” another boy laughed.

“No. My name is black n—,” one boy said.

I don’t remember anything else after that. When I was aware of my surroundings again, I was running into the house past my parents. I went into the bathroom, removed all of my new clothes, threw them on the floor, and ran bathwater. I wanted to wash the pain away. I wanted to wash my darkness away. The proud little black boy I used to be was gone.

After my bath I was still “black n—” like the white boys called me at school. I remembered how my mother used bleach to make towels and other linens white, so I thought it would turn me white, too. As I put the jug to my lips my mother stopped me.

“They called me a n—, Mama,” I whined.

As she removed the bleach that would have killed me from near my lips, she began to cry. She knew. She knew my blackness was not welcomed. My little sister ran in and started crying, too. My father did not cry. His face was like stone. He knew that my struggle as a black man had begun. He knew that I was about to walk down the same road he had traveled. He knew I was no longer just his son; I was n— to my white friends. He was hurt to the core of his soul.

That was the day my parents became even more protective of me and my sister. I went back to school the next day holding my sister’s hand, trying to protect her from what would become a lifetime of pain for both of us. My dad went off to work angry, and my mom tucked her heart back into her body and went off to the Dutchess County mental ward, where she worked for thirty years. She worked with the brokenhearted and the unwanted. She knew pain, like her patients’ pain, had come home to her children.

My momma and daddy continued to give us all the love they had. They tried so hard to show us a better world. There were times when they had little to no money to do things for us, not even enough money to go to the movie theater. On Saturday nights we would walk to the local theater and sit down on the sidewalk. That was where my life as a filmmaker really began.

“What do you think that man does for a living?” my father would ask, as a man walked past us.

With Yvonne’s help, I would just make up a story about the person to tell our parents.

“What about him?” my mother would ask.

We would do this for hours. Just the four of us, as a family. We had no money to go inside—besides, our darkness was not welcomed. For years to come we remained close and protected each other with love. My mother and father are gone now, and I have my dark girl sister left to love and to be loved by. I have her daughter, Nalo, who is also a dark girl.

This book is for my mother, but it is also for Yvonne and Nalo and all the dark girls around the world. My mother inspired me to direct the documentary *Dark Girls*. The talks I had with Yvonne and Nalo about their journey as dark girls also inspired me. Watching them be ignored by men because of their darkness made me determined to tell their story one day. When I started the research, I did not have to go to the library or a bookstore. I had lived my life with dark girls.

When I started recording their stories for the documentary, my mother's face was etched in stone with every word they spoke. I could hear her voice saying, "Tell the story, child. Tell the story."

When the documentary was aired on OWN, women from across the country reached out to me to say "Thank you for telling our story." Like many people in the industry, Shelia P. Moses called me after the documentary and said, "You know, that should be a book."

The selection process for the women included in *Dark Girls* was tough. Many women were interested. We used the historical standard of the brown paper bag. The women in this book are darker than the bag, and unfortunately our society still gives preference to those who are lighter. Some of the beautiful women featured here are very dark, and others are just the darkest in their own families.

Dark Girls honors the women society would like to ignore, the ones darker than the paper bag. The impact that I hope this book will have is twofold: First, I hope that the pictures and words will enable young dark-skinned girls globally to see and accept their own beauty and begin to dissolve issues of low self-esteem. Second, I hope to influence the global ideology that perceives whiteness as more beautiful, acceptable, and more meaningful than darkness.

My prayer for *Dark Girls* is to help readers rethink the impact this debilitating and destructive ideology has on our children in the present and will have on our children in the future.

To my dark girls: You are loved. I honor you—and yes, your gorgeous darkness is welcomed on this earth.



TESS WANJUGA



CHIIJMREE WILLIAMS

PRODUCER

Any negative views about me as a dark girl are that person's darkness. The way I view myself is in the light.

I was in the fifth grade at a predominantly white private school when I realized that my skin color was not okay with the other students. When you are ten you just want friends.

I was confused when I realized my white friend could no longer play with me because her mother told her she could not play with black girls. What was even more hurtful was she told our mutual lighter-skinned friend not to play with me, thinking she was white! I cannot tell you how ugly that made me feel.

I carried that experience with me into high school, where the black boys treated me like the little girl in fifth grade did. The young men would ask my lighter friends out on dates but not me. They simply did not want to date the darkest girl in the class. I never told my mother how hurt I was by those boys even when she asked me why I was upset.

Today, I know that I am not the problem. I know that I am not the ugly duckling. Men have a right to their preference, and I have the right to understand my own beauty. I love being a dark girl. My darkness shaped me into the person I am today.



SHERYL LEE RALPH

ACTRESS, SINGER, AND ACTIVIST

Being a dark girl has never bored me. It never will. I am a Haitian woman, and where I come from black is truly beautiful. My native people say it and they mean it. I am grateful for that. I was reminded of how beautiful black really is when I went home a few years ago and had an encounter with a little Haitian girl. She was walking with her mother when she spotted me on the street. She looked at me with her kind youthful eyes and said with disappointment, “Mommy she is not as dark as I thought she was.” That made me so happy! Happy, because I was not dark enough for that baby. How about that?!

I was so proud at that moment. Proud that this small child was happy to be a dark girl. Confidence like that you are born with. I know that for sure because my mother and father put that same power in my soul. They told me I was beautiful all my life, as did my brothers. So that is what I will always believe.

“I wanted the hair! The long silky hair that blew in the wind, that I could flip with the twitch of my neck or comb my fingers through. I was a little dark girl being bombarded with images of beauty in the media that were the polar opposite of what I was seeing in the mirror. However, the shade of my skin was not my issue; I simply wanted ‘the hair.’ Although I didn’t know it then, I was transitioning from innocence to color-consciousness. I was a little dark girl who did not understand and accept my beauty.

“Thanks to my loving and proud parents, my wish for hair that blew in the wind was eventually blown away. Early in my undergraduate years, I went natural. I have been nappy and happy ever since!”

—ROBYN GREENE ARRINGTON



ZULEMA GRIFFIN



RETHA POWERS

AUTHOR

Ninety percent of beauty is between the ears. It's an inside job.

Every day on my bus a group of third grade girls told me that I sounded white. I was in kindergarten and unable to defend myself. I remember when another dark-skinned girl started riding my bus, the little girls shouted, "Darkie! Darkie!" at her mercilessly. She started to cry and I was relieved that I was not alone. A few days later they were back to me. It was like a war zone, only they were using their words as weapons to kill our spirits.

Years later in a different school the same racism came back to visit me one day when the teacher walked out the door for just a few minutes. "Where is Retha?" one of the boys in my class asked. "I can't see her. Retha, would you smile so we can find you." I was eight or nine years old and confused by the boy's mean words as the whole class laughed. I was thinking, *I can see you, why can't you see me*. It took me a minute to truly understand what he was saying, but I knew for sure I was the darkest person in the class. Once I got it I was hurt, because I love my dark skin. I was taught by a dark-skinned mother and women of various hues to love and appreciate our darkness.

When I was ten I read *Song of Solomon*: "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem." The word "but" was a stinger for me over the years; however, I understood it as an acknowledgment that there are negative views of darkness coupled with an insistence on being beautiful anyway. I looked in the mirror and said it over and over again, my negative feelings about my darkness ceased, and I realized I had to insist.

I now have a beautiful six-year-old dark girl. I doubt if she is being teased at school, but it's a possibility. The signs I see are her asking for her hair to be down and not in Afro-puffs. That is her young mind longing for the hair she sees on some of her classmates or princesses. I question her about her request. I hope this will be easier for her and that she will see her beauty and intelligence inside and out—black *and* comely.



ISA SILVERMAN POWERS



DANA NICKERSON

RESPIRATORY THERAPY SUPERVISOR AND STUDENT

I survived breast cancer twice, so being a dark girl is secondary. Having breast cancer put my life in perspective in a way nothing else could have. Breast cancer is *not* a dark girl disease. It doesn't care who you are or what you look like. God has allowed me to beat cancer twice; therefore, what people say about my dark skin no longer hurts me the way it did when I was a child.



A'KIA SHE'KIBA BENBO

COLLEGE STUDENT

My mother told me all my life that I was beautiful and that is what I will always believe. That's what matters at the end of the day—how you feel about yourself and how you see yourself.

Go forth boldly, dark girls. Stay at your best.

“What other people think of this dark girl is none of my business.”

—SHERYL LEE RALPH



ERICKA PITTMAN

“Say it loud—I’m black and I’m proud.”

—JAMES BROWN



KAMEISHA MCGHEE



ENDYIA KINNEY-STERNS

“Dark girls, God is your king; therefore, you are all princesses. And someday you will be queens.”

—ENDYIA KINNEY-STERNS



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