

# Context of Colour

The  
consequences  
of  
skin  
tone  
in  
society

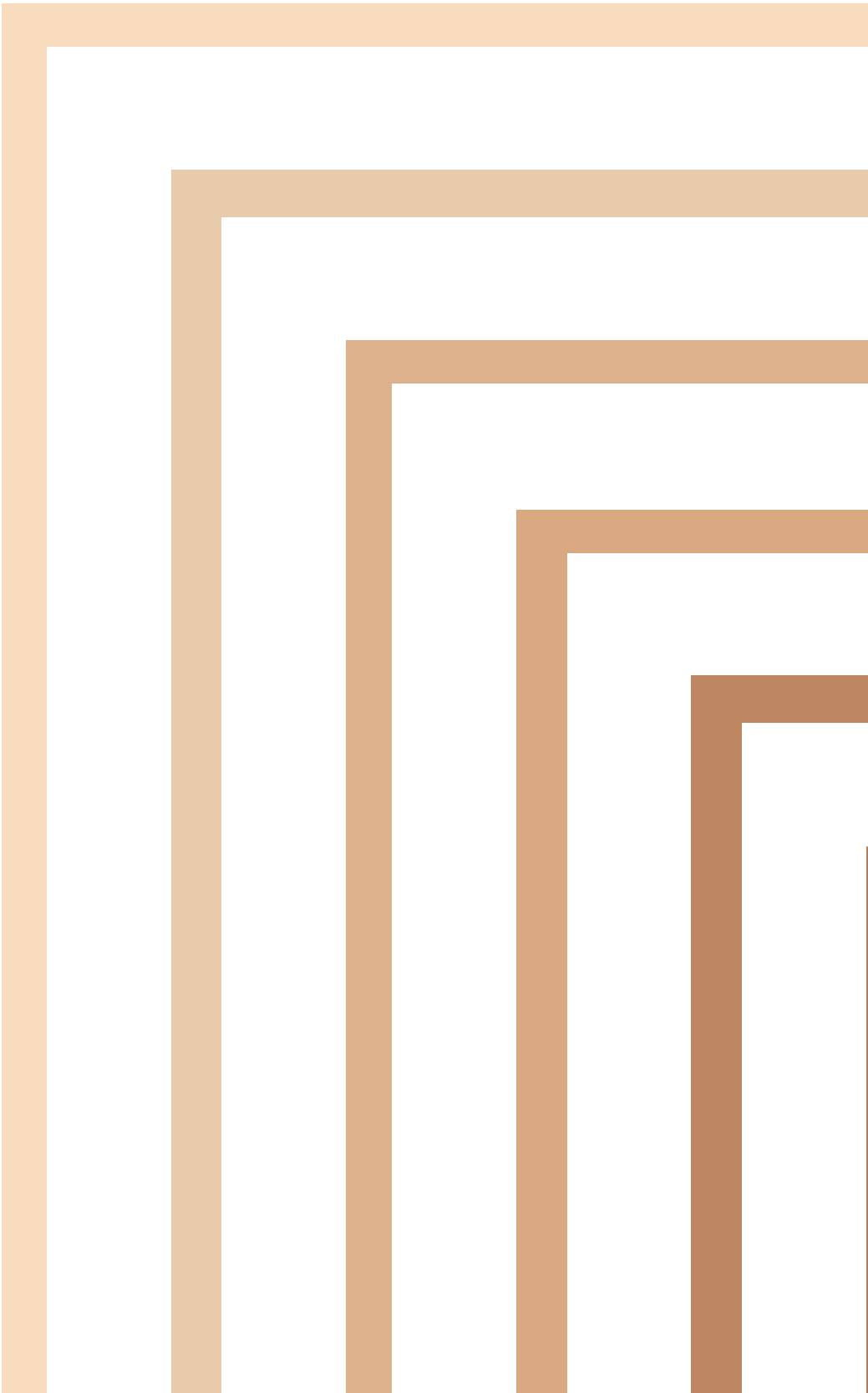
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# Introduction

Imagine walking down a busy buzzing street in Amsterdam filled with a vast variety of faces and every time a person starts to look at you, you immediately and purposefully smile an extremely wide and warm smile. Just to reassure these strangers that you are indeed friendly and mean them no harm. Imagine feeling the need and pressure to do this everywhere you go without exception. This is actually the daily position of a young Middle Eastern man.

Despite the fact that it is 2016 and that we are all aware of the world's great diversity, the colour of your skin can still have a profound and serious affect on your life.

In this essay I attempt to shift the perspective about discrimination and racism, trying to process how it has affected and continuously affects others and myself in our day-to-day lives. Seeking out complicated and ever relative conversations and thinking, to make us all aware of what we are consciously and unconsciously doing and what is truly happening around us.

“The most forgiving people I have ever come across are people who have suffered. It is as if the suffering has ripped them open into empathy.” *-Archbishop Desmond Tutu 1996*





I was born in South Africa, with a Dutch heritage acquired from both sides of my family; my maternal and paternal grandparents were immigrants from the Netherlands to South Africa. This resulted in me having roots in two countries. The warm Highveld and beaming sunshine of South Africa, as well as the flat land of 'poffertjes' and tulips, the Netherlands. Growing up in South Africa, diversity was un-escapable. Diversity in status, income, culture, religion, appearance, language, education, beliefs, opinions, and everything imaginable, was something I was in constant contact with. Living in this Rainbow nation I was brought up with the belief that we are all equal.

“Love your fellow mankind as you love yourself”.<sup>1</sup>

Yet at some point in my life I experienced, as I imagine most of us experience, a moment when I was not fully accepted, purely for being different than expected. I still remember my first encounter with prejudice, I was four years old and we had just moved to the Netherlands for a short time. Our neighbours were constantly staring over the fence, questioning us in disbelief about how we could be white. If we were truly from Africa why were we not black? Strangely enough, after nearly twenty years this innocent but ridiculous question still has not changed. After spending most of my life in South Africa I moved back to the Netherlands, to again be greeted by, “But you’re white?” and, “Isn’t it terribly racist and dangerous living in South Africa?”

When I was younger I merely wondered about these things and then thought it was probably just the way life is. The strangest thing I recall from being a Dutch-Afrikaans child in South Africa was that I was always a bit perplexed about why during the festivities of the Dutch holiday Sinterklaas there were always white people dressing up as black people. Why didn’t they just ask the actual black people to play the character of ‘Zwarte Piet’? This led me to think more and more about discrimination and racism in my own life and the lives of others. Suddenly I was more aware of what was happening around me and how I perceived and thought about it.

Today I am quite outraged that I have friends who can’t go through a conversation without disrespecting and blaming black South Africans for how bad their own lives are going.

# Personal Perspective

I'm disappointed that my own father, after twenty-six years of employing Patricia, a dear loving woman who I regard as part of my family, would merely call her "the maid" and not by her name.

I am ashamed for clinging to stereotypes and clasping my wallet tighter when a black man walks too closely behind me.

I am shocked that when I search online for pictures of skin I am overloaded with images of only white skin tones.

I am devastated that even in the Netherlands, such a forward moving country, there are still some members of the government screaming "Minder Marrokanen".

I am broken-hearted that the effect of race and colour is still too powerful in our world.





Your warm red soil pulses through my feet  
I can feel your ancient spirited beating through every vein  
The constant vibration of all your creations  
And serenity of your vast embracing sky  
You live deep in my soul, where ever I may stride  
Mother Africa I am your child

Despite having such a strong European ancestry, I view and feel myself to be African; a white African. To many people this might come across as absurd or even disrespectful, but it is my truth. Yet in some instances I do relate to the Dutch/European lifestyle and can easily adapt to the way of living here in the Netherlands. At the same time a black American might also strongly identify with being African regardless of the fact that they have never set foot in Africa itself.

Through time and history humanity has become categorized in 3-5 basic races. We are classified either of Asian / African or European decent; Yellow, Black or White. Somewhere between these specifications we believe we belong. Visible traits have long been a way of classifying people to specific races. Facial features, cranial shape, teeth and most commonly skin colour has determined race for many centuries, although scientific studies conducted to pin point race on a biological scale have failed. According to the documentary: Race –The power of illusion “Genetically we are the most similar of all species. Only 1 in 1000 of our nucleotides that make up our genetic code is different, one individual from another. There is a more vast difference between species of fruit flies than between our so-called races.

“No human groups were reproductively isolated long enough to develop a genetically distinct path, a unique and distinct species. All modern humans have the same biological structure and the same capacities.”<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately it has been proven that the human race is one species. Essentially this has great value to mankind. We are all capable and deserving of equal fairness towards each and everyone.



# Colour and Culture

## The Same But Different

Yet our designated race has a profound impact on how we go through life. “Race along with other social identities like gender, class, religion, impact our lives and how we experience and act in the world, how others experience and act towards us.”<sup>2</sup> So how can race, without being biologically sound, still be real and influence our lives so drastically? Can race be culturally real?

“What you believe to be true depends on who you believe yourself to be”<sup>3</sup>

Heta Patel, an Indian-British artist stated that; “We learn who we are by copying others.” Culture is simply taught. “We are not born with culture. We acquire culture as an integral part of development within one or more human communities.”<sup>2</sup> As babies we all start out the same. We acquire culture by looking to our parents, guardians and later on figures of authority for guidance and structure. Depending on your background, surroundings and teachings, your thoughts, ideas, ideals, opinions, morals and goals can differ greatly. “Even though we are presented with the same physical reality like sound – we do not perceive it similarly. Rather what we perceive is structured by what our language has thought us to notice.”<sup>2</sup> For example there is a Nutricia advertisement presently circulating in many stores that says, “Mama, die, die, die”. In Dutch, the advertisements original language, it simply means “Mama, that, that, that”, yet when read in English the message comes across as much more sinister. Examples like this cross-language homograph help to show that what we perceive certainly depends on what we are taught. “If this is true for sound perceptions, it is equally true for other senses.”<sup>2</sup>

The 1936 book: *South African History for Natives*<sup>4</sup>, states that, “The Bushmen were the most uncivilized and backward people that South Africa has known.” Today, in 2015, we are taught the opposite; that Bushmen are a complex and deeply rooted people. Leonard Thompson wrote in his *A History of South Africa*, “They lived in a kind of material plenty because they adapted the tools of their living to materials which lay in abundance around them and which were free for anyone to take, or to materials which are at least sufficient for the needs of the population.

Hunter-gatherers had the time and energy for subtle and complex aesthetic expression in rock art and in music.”<sup>5</sup> These examples clearly showcase the difference in thinking of what we are taught to believe and perceive as true. Yet both of these statements at some point in time were equally accepted. I experience this duality in my daily life on a more subconscious scale. In our western culture it has become normal to hear racial comments or jokes, such comments can even be unintentionally racist or harmful. Like the author from the article *I Was Raised As A Racist* stated; “Over time, those stories and even dumb jokes, begin to shape how you actually picture other cultures. Those thoughts are taking root and establishing themselves as an actual moral foundation. When a 6 year old kid makes a racist comment, He’s repeating something he heard that made an adult react in a positive way.”<sup>6</sup> We adapt to our surrounding social culture in an attempt to be accepted. The reason for this is that essentially we all just want to belong. And the easiest way to belong is to place yourself in a similar structure to that which you were taught to accept as normal. Most of us can automatically relate to the ethnicities and cultures that we grew up with and later tend to still live between those social boundaries.

“There are many more human cultures than human races, since the first are to be counted in thousands and the second in single units; two cultures developed by men of the same race may differ as much as, or more than, two cultures associated with groups of entirely different racial origin.”<sup>7</sup>

At this time ‘belonging’ to a specific ethnicity has inevitably become part of our culture; something that is firmly embedded into our brains and thinking. “Race is an idea that evolved over time, that has a history, that has been constructed by society to further certain political and social goals.”<sup>2</sup> So if race is merely a structure put in place by society; Would you be willing to switch your skin colour?









# I Used to be Black

Isn't it absurd that something that you have absolute no control over, could determine and affect your life in a drastic way?

After a trip to The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg South Africa, I discovered that this is exactly what happened to thousands of people In South Africa's Apartheid era. Racial classification was assigned by the state of South Africa to each individual, without his or her consent or having any say about which race they belonged to. This led to friends and families being forcefully separated, since different race groups were not permitted to be together.

In 1985, the government allowed the citizens of the Republic of South Africa to freely be re-classified. This resulted in 1167 people changing "colour":

702 coloureds turned white  
19 whites turned coloured  
1 indian turned white  
3 chinese turned white  
50 indians turned coloured  
43 coloureds turned indian  
21 indians turned malay  
30 malays turned indian  
249 blacks turned coloured  
20 coloureds turned black  
2 blacks turned asian  
1 black turned griqua  
11 coloureds turned chinese  
3 coloureds turned malay  
1 chinese turned coloured  
8 malays turned coloured  
3 blacks turned malay  
No blacks became white,  
and no whites became black.







Yes or No. These are usually the two options we are brought up to believe we have. Right or wrong, good or evil, acceptable or not acceptable, black or white. The knowledge or conviction of what is right or wrong is constantly being applied to our daily lives, this has also become the norm for racism.

The reality that racism is looked at as either existing or non-existing is absurd, yet it is what is happening today. For instance, in the current debate about 'Zwarte Piet' the Dutch equivalent of Santa's helper, it seems that most people are either on one side of the issue or the other. Zwarte Piet is equal to blackface and the dehumanizing of a specific 'race' group, or he is only an innocent jolly festive character connected to childhood and tradition.

Degrees of racism surround us every day. It has and will never only be isolated to clear and giant attacks like the Apartheid, Slavery or the Holocaust of Hitler's perfect race. Subtle attacks are equally common, yet these assaults are usually overlooked or accepted as "normal" or non-racist behaviours. Statements like: "I'm not a racist, I have a black friend." or "You don't act like a normal black/white/Asian person." Even jokes like "Why aren't there any Albert Heins in Africa? Because the women can't carry a shopping cart on their heads." aren't seen as racist. But also have a significant impact on the receiver of these words or behaviours.

## Cause And Effect

Variations of these attacks materialize both physically and mentally. This became ultimately clear to me while reading the heart-shattering book from Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull. The book is a narrative on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that took place after the end of Apartheid. The first hearings were held in April 1996, where countless victims and perpetrators told their overwhelming testimonies in search for amnesty or merely answers for their broken souls.

"When I opened the door... there was my closest friend and comrade... She was on the doorstep and screamed: "My child, my little Nomzamo is still in the house!"...I stared at her...

# Gradients of Racism

she died later that day. I pulled out her baby from her burning house... I put her on the grass... only to find that her skin stayed on my hands. She is with me here today.”

Mr Sikwepere: “I feel what – what has brought my sight back, my eyesight back is to come back here and tell the story. But I feel what has been making me so sick all the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now I – it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story.”

“Captain Jeffrey Benzien has not come out with the whole story, says Peter Jacobs. Benzien admitted that he has shocked Jacob with an electric device in the nose, ears, genitals and rectum. He also admitted telling Jacobs; ‘I’ll take you to the verge of death as many times as I want to.’” “When nothing was found, he pushed his finger up Pedro’s anus. Then he took a broomstick and told Pedro: ‘I’ll find the letter, even if I go up to your stomach.’ Pedro, just released from an institution for alcoholics, testifies in tears before the Committee. Benzien emphatically denies that he ever used a broomstick. He looks quite shocked when the claim is made. He denies it, over and over.” “The first issue raised by the victim’s’ advocate is the textbook definition is post traumatic stress: it can only be experienced by a victim. And the fundamental characteristics of the victim is a feeling of helplessness, intense fear and powerlessness. Surely Jeffrey Benzien cannot be classified as a victim?”

To me these examples strongly illustrate how the physical intertwines with the mental, and how strongly these assaults resonate in each individual. Anyone that comes in touch with racism becomes a victim. It becomes an un-escapable consequence or experience that has a lasting impact on our being. “Spiritual murder is a worse inhuman violation than a messy physical murder. At least a murder victim rests.”<sup>2</sup>

A spiritual execution can often also be a result of our own doing. Viewing a situation from only one standpoint can never have a truly positive outcome. For example, there once were two Ashanti princes Aquasi Boachi and Kwame Poku who were brought from Africa to the Netherlands in 1837 to receive education, as part of larger negotiations. Being taken from their homes and mothers at such a young age had a significant impact on their emotional coping skills. Kwame responded by resenting everything the new Dutch world had to offer. Aquasi responded by seizing every ounce and opportunity this new world had to offer whilst rejecting the entirety of his old life in Africa. As a result of being one of the first encounters with black ethnicity for the Dutch people, Kwame recognized and experienced serious discrimination, whilst Aquasi disregarded these assaults. Only when these two men were older did the consequences of these emotional traumas start to show their serious affects. Kwame eventually returned to Africa but was scorned from the Ashanti kingdom, his homeland; in desperation and at loss of belonging somewhere he committed suicide. In time, Aquasi also realized that he indeed was treated differently; “They see the exterior and it is so different, that they don’t look any further.”<sup>8</sup> His emotional suffering later resulting in an isolated and remorseful life.

“It is not so much the deaths, and the name of the dead,  
but the web of infinite sorrow woven around them.”<sup>2</sup>

## Processing through Threads

“We are the children of spider Anansi  
And the whole world is our web,  
Love, lust and lot,  
Brings us to the furthest places,  
Anywhere we go in this world web  
There are threads to grasp  
And threads to let go”<sup>8</sup>

— *Ashanti song from the two prince’s childhood*

Through my entire process of working with racism and discrimination’s different outcomes, I myself had to grasp and let go of many prejudices.

Every thread is a new way of processing it all until I get to my ideal situation. I try to translate this mixture of viewpoints and guilt in a woven form, similar to an Ashanti cloth. To me people are like woven strips. In the same way as the warp and weft of a material, everything we are and do is intertwined and connected. Each strand of yarn has importance and consequence. By weaving multiple single strips, all with a unique and different pattern I am representing individual people. Because these strips are self-made just as our own lives, each strip has flaws and mistakes purposefully left in to emphasize their human-like qualities. To illustrate them as a collective I decided to make all strips the same length and width. The length is 164 centimetres, the worldwide average height of both male and female combined; the width is 10 centimeters inspired by the width of woven Ashanti strips. All are tinted a slightly different grey, representing each individuals faults and wrongdoings. However, from afar, all strips appear identical, accentuating that we all are equal in our guilt. Any damage done can't always be immediately seen but is inevitably always present. Each individual strip is then hand stitched together to the next with blood dyed yarn, symbolizing the loss, anger and pain we all share as a result of any form of racist onslaughts.

Each woven strip a person  
Each person to his own  
Each a gradient of guilt  
From afar all the same  
All connected by the pain

In actuality the “definite” lines of right or wrong are utterly blurred. “These things don’t just fall squarely at one or another polar position, but somewhere on the wide range of hybrids between them.”<sup>9</sup>

“He was just a person who, like the rest of us at that time, didn’t know what was right, but did know what was wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe we should all be constantly aware of these gradients of racism in our daily lives. As all degrees are equally dangerous and permanently scarring.









# Scars of — ism

Dear humble cup in my hand  
So ordinary and plain  
None the less I fill you up and use you  
To the extent of every day

I've seen many other identical  
Spread all across the globe  
Some used in high-end places,  
and some just at a standard home

All essentially equivalent  
Made relatively the same  
A containing body  
And occasionally an ear  
You vary in shape and size  
As well as colour and feel

Yet unfailingly you all arrive at the same place  
Dropped from the hand  
With a big KA-BANG  
Or just a tiny near-invisible scrape

Shattered on the floor  
You fear the consequence that awaits

The pieces are being gathered  
And stuck gently back into place  
Often it appears a painless task  
Often it is Not

I continue to use you  
Yet when I gently touch you  
I still feel the break  
Even if undetectable to the eye  
You have inevitably been damaged  
You have been broken beyond perfect repair  
You are forevermore fragile to the core.





“To know where we are going,  
we have to know where we are;  
to know that we have to know where we came from.”  
– *Filipino version of an Oceanic proverb*

To me it is clear that each of us has a strong and unfailing sense and need to belong. This desperate requirement to have a ‘space’ where we experience feeling accepted and connected. Belonging is one of our basic human necessities, and we often obtain it through the sensation of sameness. This sameness regularly materializes in our families, it is the environment that we grew up in and are comfortable with. Family members also often share in visual likeness. For example, I share the same body structure as my sister; from behind we are often mistaken for each other. My sister also has the same eye colour as my father and he has that of his father. The realization that someone shares something that is truly your own makes us feel included in something bigger. Yet sometimes the search for these common qualities appears elsewhere. I was told a story about an adopted Ugandan boy who’s new family and surroundings consisted of only wealthy white Americans. Regardless of his loving and stimulating environment the moment he was in contact with another black person he would become overjoyed and form an immediate liking to this new person. This other person has a resemblance to himself and somehow these similarities make us feel more linked to others, it gives us a perception of understanding. Suddenly we can put ourselves in another person’s shoes, because in a sense they are the same shoes.

## Humanity’s Family Tree

Despite the superficial differences between all ethnicities we all share one family tree. Through DNA, the blueprint of life, we can trace back our movements to the very time and place of our existence as modern humans. There are two sets of different genes we can use to follow our way back to our origin. Mitochondrial DNA: the Eve gene, and the Y chromosome: the Adam gene. “These two sets of gender-linked genes are passed on unchanged from generation to generation with no shuffling, and can therefore be traced right back to our ancestors.”<sup>10</sup> This resulted from the many findings by numerous geneticists and others like Charles Darwin who each proclaim that all humans have a common ancestor from Africa.

# Origin of Mankind

“The modern human family had originated as a single genetic line in Africa within the last 200,000 years, and not as multiple separate evolutionary events in the different parts of the world.”<sup>10</sup> The Out of Africa theory has been proven through the help of thousands of volunteers, people from all across the world today. 99% of the reconstruction of our ancient gene trees has been made with these volunteers’ DNA through geneticists’ personal research as well as the ever more popular ancestry sites like; National Geographic’s The Geographic Project, ancestry.com, myheritage, 23andme, rootsforreal and countless more.

## Our Link, My Link

Astonishingly, geneticists were able to trace back our roots to a group of people still alive today, who are direct descendants of our earliest ancestors. The Koi-San, the Bushmen. “Everything predicted by their blood seems to be written in their faces. It’s like looking at a composite model of every face around the world. The eye shape of east Asians, the high cheek bones of Mongolians, the mid brown skin that can turn darker or lighter.”<sup>11</sup> This hit very close to home for me. The Bushmen being a fellow Southern African people, I have always had a striking sense of attachment to them and their world. Meeting them as a child, when the only thing they truly desired on their long journey was water; their tranquillising sounds of speech and song always in subtle tones and clicks; and their inspiring deep connection and respect to the earth and all fellow creatures. This was part of the world I grew up in and a part that I have always carried with me.

During a recent visit to the Origins Center at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa I discovered another great link between the Bushmen and myself. In their remarkable rock art there were lines painted between their other astounding figures and drawings; threads of light, invisible threads connecting the realms. Passing from consciousness to the spirit world.

“The San people believed that there were passageways linking our world to the spirit world. Some painted images appear to enter or exit the cracks and crevices in the rock surface as if through a veil between two worlds.”<sup>12</sup>

## Woven in my Skin

The moment I glance down I can recognize this structure of inward lines and grooves in my own skin. A skin weave that covers my entire body. A balance between the seen and the unseen, where the real world appears in our actions and the spirit world in our thoughts and unconsciousness.

After I saw the Bushmen's invisible weaving art I started creating a woven structure to simulate the coexistence between our inward and outward being as well as our coexistence with others. I felt the need to materialize this structure as a physical form to be able to relate to the mixing of different ethnicities and the result of it. I used a gradient of skin tones from light-pinkish-beige to intense-dark-brown to fabricate the dense weft that resembles skin. Although it appears as an entwined single yarn, every strand of yarn is separate and independent in colour and texture. This resulted in a melange, a "melting pot" effect on the entire piece; suddenly I can't distinguish the single from the many. Together the separate skin tones have interlinked and formed a new whole. This balance of the individual and the collective reminds me of the African notion of Ubuntu- 'I exist because of you'. It is the humanist philosophy where in the benefits of union and working together far outweigh the individual and single. To me this notion is strongly reflected in my weave and I can see the usefulness of such thinking and behaviour not just as a sound collective entity but also by making the single individual belong to something greater than itself.

In the deeper unseen seams of the weave I used flexible red wire as the warp. It is completely concealed from sight unless one physically manipulates and pushes aside the multi-coloured weft, just as with actual skin. The red wire symbolizes our sameness in the biological and psychological sense. I see it as the blood that rushes through our veins, as well as the emotions and sensations that we all cherish and struggle with every day. This skin forms around my body just as the yarns surround the wire. Unlike the coloured exterior, the wire and our insides can be moulded by our own will. I am convinced that we can manipulate and shape our own choices and beliefs. I presume that every one of us has the ability and responsibility to continuously make the effort to determine our own lives, regardless of our inescapable skin colour.

DNA links us all together as brothers and sisters in humanity. I believe we should treat everyone the same way. With the same empathy and respect as our own. As equals.









# Equality in Diversity

Single strand of yarn  
So delicate and alone  
You stand apart from the others  
In nothing else but tone

You aspire to be so mighty  
To form a immense whole  
Yet in solitude there are no answers  
For you cant move forward on your own

Go seek out others being different  
From what you call your own  
For variety brings you onward  
To things new and transformed

Together might not be simple  
As the path is still unclear  
Balance and understanding will be required  
In order for all to move the same

Despite all the contrast  
Combined you become secure  
There is a power in the masses  
That nothing else can ensure

Let Us, the diverse people unite again

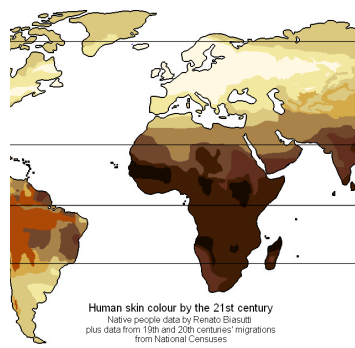
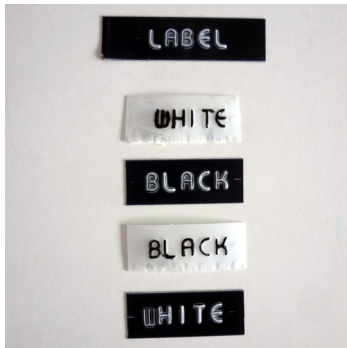
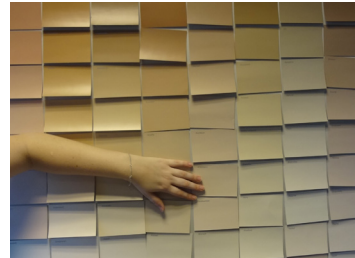
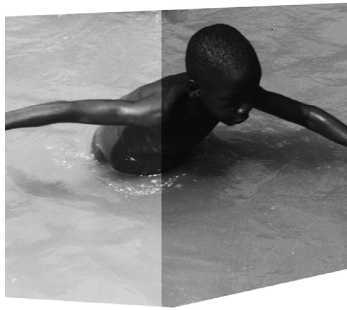








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7	16			25	34
8	17			26	35
9	18			27	36



Caucasian skin close up

Unknown artist

Apartheid. Palestine  
2004 and Youth day  
1976 South Africa

Von Luschan's  
chromatic scale 1927

To Photograph A Dark  
Horse -Broomberg &  
Chanarin 2012

Bushmen doll test  
- Self 2015

Segregation sign in  
South Africa 1976

Proposal for Skin  
Transplantation  
- Roy Villevoeye 1993

Colour clasification  
- Self 2015

Origin centre  
- Johannesburg South  
Africa Date unknown

Label me -Self 2016

Stilllife  
-Sara Morris 2012

The Clarks' doll  
experiments 1940

Colour clasification  
- Self 2016

Skin colour map by  
the 21st century  
- Renato Biasutti





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Zwart alst roet; Sunny Bergman  
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Hetain Patel: Who am I? Think again,  
Spencer Wells: Building a family tree for all humanity,  
Andrew Solomon: How the worst moments in our lives make us who we are  
Cradle of Humankind – Maropeng, RSA  
Apartheid Museum – Johannesburg, RSA



