

SCREENING GUIDE

Discussion Suggestions for the film "Before the Trees Was Strange" Directed by Derek Burrows Guide prepared by Derek Burrows, and Barbery Byfield with Gregory Fried



2017



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Bahamas nternational ilm Festival

a personal documentary by DEREK BURROWS

Our mother's love for us was unconditional But sometimes love is blind

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Introduction

These guidelines are designed for use with workshops and discussions after screenings of the film "Before the Trees Was Strange." The questions are meant as suggestions, not a set script. The sections are organized by issue or topics, and the moderator or discussion leader can choose to use whichever ones seem best for the specific audience. There is no intended order to the topics, although there is some overlap. "What can we do?" might best come last.



"Before the Trees Was Strange" is a personal documentary, a journey of race and identity through a desire to unlock a mystery within the director's family. Derek Burrows produced, shot and directed this film. Burrows began shooting 30 years ago and ended up with over 700 hours of footage that was distilled into 82 minutes. This film is about race, love and forgiveness and finally redemption as the director explores his mother's beliefs about her own heritage.

DEREK BURROWS

Derek Burrows is a master storyteller, musician, filmmaker and co-founder with Gregory Fried of the Mirror of Race project in Boston. Derek's 2016 feature length film, "Before the Trees Was Strange," is currently in the festival circuit and had its world premiere as the opening film at the International Bahamas Film Festival 2016.



RACE

What does the word "race" mean to you? How do you define yourself racially?

In the film, Derek's mother and her sisters were taught that one should stick with one's own kind. His mother did not want her daughter or sons involved with anyone of a race different from the one she identified herself and her family with.

• Have you experienced something like this in your family, and if so, what were the feelings this provoked?

• If you have felt the way the mother in the film did about sticking with your own kind, what were the fears about your children being involved with a person of another race?

• What are your beliefs about race?

In the film, Derek's sister-in-law, Nicolette, makes a statement that race does not exist.

- What do you think about this statement?
- Should we be color blind in our society?
- When we talk about race, what is the end goal in our discussion?

TYPES OF RACISM

It is helpful to realize that racism shows itself in various forms. One is individual or personal racism, which involves one person's own biases, beliefs or behaviors that reflect prejudice against a group. For example: saying that "Asians are just better at math"; using slurs to refer to racial groups; not renting an apartment to someone because of her race.

Then there is institutional racism that has to do with policies and practices that are often so deeply embedded in a society that we do not see them. This is a structural form of racism in which people and systems carry out the policies or goals of racial oppression, sometimes without even realizing it, sometimes even long after overtly racist laws and policies have been abolished. Institutional racism can be in-yourface or very subtle, and it can involve various policies, laws, rules, norms, and customs enacted by formal (government, courts, churches, etc.) or informal organizations (clubs, neighborhoods) that disadvantage social groups and advantage other social groups.

Examples of institutional racism: laws and legal systems that treat races differently (an obvious version of this is stricter punishment for Blacks in the law; a more subtle one would be laws that have the effect of targeting one race disproportionately, such as more severe punishments for crack vs. powder cocaine); rules that enforce "Whites Only" access for public accommodations (hotels, buses, restaurants, drinking fountains, etc.); a school that forbids interracial dating (overt) or hairstyles favored by one race (subtle); aptitude tests that involve examples overwhelmingly unfamiliar to some races; voting rules that make it harder for one race to vote, whether intentionally or not.

- Are you comfortable talking about racism?
- How often do you think or talk about race?
- Do your friends or family share your feelings or beliefs about race?
- Have you ever experienced personal or institutional racism?
- How do personal and institutional racism reinforce each other?
- Do people have a responsibility to change institutional racism, even if they believe they themselves are not racist?

• Is it possible, in a society with a history of racism, for anyone to entirely escape from involvement in personal or institutional racism?

• How can an individual or a society work to end personal and institutional racism?



IDENTITY

In the film, the Burrows family all identify as white, except Ramon, despite the varying shades of skin. When Derek moved to the U.S., he found he was often mistaken for "other" — Jewish, Moroccan, Arab, to name a few.

- Have you been mistaken for "other"? How does that make you feel?
- Why does it feel important to know someone's origin?
- Is it important to know where someone is from?
- How have you been perceived by others?
- Do people often ask you where you're from or what your ethnicity is?
- How do you feel when people are confused by your answer or want more details?

• Why do we even feel the need to ask a stranger or someone we've just met for these details?

FAMILY

In the film, Derek finds out that, despite her insistence that her heritage was Lucayan Indian, his Mother's side of the family actually has African roots. This was a surprise to the family.

- What is your family makeup racially or ethnically?
- What do you know about your family's history?
- Do you think your family would be surprised by the findings of a DNA test?
- Have you researched your ancestry?
- If not, have you wanted to do so?
- May such research cause inter-familial conflicts about what or who they believe they are?
- What do you think you might find if you did research? If you haven't, what are your feelings about what you might find?
- Could what you discover cause anguish, disruption, anger, or even strife in your family?



CULTURE

In the film, various aspects of the cultural life of The Bahamas are depicted: foods, music, dance, as well as family culture at Christmas time.

- In the film, what beliefs or practices define the culture as distinctly Bahamian?
- What things are similar to The Bahamas and to your culture? What is different?





- What are your cultural roots?
- What defines your culture? Food, religion, activities, rituals?

• What other cultures are you drawn to and which cultures confuse you?

PARENTAL LOVE

In the film, Derek and many of the family interviewed identify a strong parental bond and love at work in the family, even when their mother made them uncomfortable or even angry about how she behaved, what she believed, and how she interfered in their lives because of race.

• Have you ever felt that a parent tried to protect you based on racial concerns?

• If a family member has ever expressed a prejudice, how have you responded?

• Have you ever wanted to confront a loved one on their behavior, but didn't want to rock the boat?

• Sometimes love perpetuates racism more than hate. What does this mean? Examples: Racists have friends, family, or colleagues who either agree with them or do not challenge them on their views or behavior.

- If racists feel accepted or "loved" for who they are, does that then mean that they have no reason to change their expressed or implied beliefs? Or their behavior?
- Does that mean that love is as powerful a barrier to change as hate?

• Do you think that love, whether for family, friends or culture, can perpetuate racism and prejudice more than hate?





DISCRIMINATION

In the film, Derek's mother only wanted to protect her children from the prejudice she herself had experienced.

• Have you had a time when you were discriminated against (either based on race, class, looks, community affiliation)?

• Do you remember discriminating against someone?

• If so what are the stories that you would tell?

In the film, Derek talks about how his mother discriminated against her sons' girlfriends and her daughter's boyfriend. His Aunt talks about her parents wanting them to marry their own, which they thought of as white.

- Are there other examples of discrimination that you have experienced or witnessed?
- Why do you think "dating" might bring out some peoples' prejudices?
 What are the prejudices you have in
- your life?

• What boxes do you put people in when you meet someone you don't know? What purpose does this serve, and what opportunities does it close off?

FORGIVENESS

In the film, Derek and Phillip challenge their mother in a loving way, rather than put her down and shame her, so she felt forgiven. That made it easier for her to choose to become the person she wanted to be, which was loving towards Dion's black husband.

- What does it mean to you to forgive someone who has wronged you?
- What does it mean to forgive someone who has wronged someone you love?
- Which is harder to forgive, and why?

You've got to be taught to hate and fear You've got to get taught from year to year Its got to be drummed in your dear little ear You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made of people whose skin is a different shade You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before its too late before you are 6 or 7 or 8 To hate all the people your relatives hate You've got to be carefully taught You've got to be carefully taught

From the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical South Pacific



FOOD

In the film, we see lots of different types of food: peas and rice, macaroni and cheese, conch, fish and coconut tart, to name just a few. These are traditional foods in The Bahamas.

- What foods are important to you from your family life?
- Where do these foods come from?
- Do you still eat these foods today?

Certain cities have a Chinatown, a Little Italy, and the like.

- When we go there to eat, do we care about the people who actually prepare the food?
- Do we want to learn their stories and the stories of their food?
- Why does food play such a major role in many people's identity?





SLAVERY

In the film, the long history of slavery based on race plays a subtle but deep role in the sense of identity for the people interviewed.

• Are you African American, and if so, what do you know about your ancestry?

- How is slavery talked about in your family, if it ever is?
- If you are white, what are your feelings or thoughts about slavery?
- Can you imagine what it might be like to be enslaved?
- Can you imagine what it would be like to be a slave owner?

• How do you think your views on these questions are influenced by having grown up or not grown up in a country that once practiced slavery or that has a history of racism?



LANGUAGE

In English, there is slang that carries a prejudiced history, and people may not even realize this; for example: to "jew down" as a way of describing a hard bargain, or "indian giver" as someone who takes back a gift, or "gypped" as a way saying you've been cheated, etc.

- What does this kind of language do to you when you hear a racial slur?
- Do you think it's fine to use some of these terms that are almost common place?
- In what contexts do you think people are most likely to use slurs?
- Do you find yourself using racial or ethnic slurs?

ERASURE

In the film, Derek talks about "erasure" as both the social or personal practice of rubbing out uncomfortable details from the past, as well as the feeling we may get when we suspect that this has happened and that it has left a hole in our self-understanding.

- Have you ever felt that something was missing from your family story or that of a friend?
- Has something as seemingly innocent or ordinary, like a missing photo, or a gap in a family story or family tree, ever triggered your own experience of erasure?
- Can lying about one's ethnicity be seen as a form of erasure?
- Have you ever chosen to lie about your racial identity or chosen to identify with just one side of mixed parentage?

HOLIDAYS

In the film, Christmas is celebrated a few times. This is one of the holidays people in The Bahamas celebrate that is similar to holidays in other countries.

- What holidays are important to you?
- What distinguishes these from holidays of friends of yours?
- Have your holidays changed since you were a child?
- Do you practice them in your current home?
- In your experience, do these holidays bring people together or keep them apart?

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WHITENESS VS. BLACKNESS

In the film, Derek's mother insisted on seeing her children, her mother and grandmother as white, even though they were somewhat dark. This was due partly to her fears of being seen as dark herself, but largely to the construction of race in The Bahamas. In America, the "one-drop rule" dominated the construction of race for a long time: it was the view that if you had even a single drop of non-white blood in your ancestry, then you were not white. But in The Bahamas that wasn't really the rule. Blackness has been defined by other factors than darkness, such as hair and education and family background and status.

- Who is white, who is black?
- What defines the white-black distinction?
- When you see a person who is dark or light do you define them by race or color?
- Does how that person dresses change your perception at all? For example: A white woman dressed in a suit rather than in rags; a black man dressed in a tux rather than in a jogging suit.
- How often are you aware of the color of a person's skin and how does that affect your interaction with them?

SCIENCE

In the film, Derek takes a DNA test to understand his own racial heritage, and the results of that test have a strong effect on his family. At the same time, one of the interviewees, Nicolette, Derek's sister in law, says that there is no such thing as race, according to science.

- What have you heard about the biological differences between different races?
- Are such accounts plausible or are they myths and fabrications?
- How do these myths contradict themselves?
- How often do they feel hurtful to you?
- What more would you need to know to understand the reality or unreality of race in the human species, in your society, in your family, or in yourself?



LITERATURE, MUSIC, MEDIA AND THE ARTS



In the film, there is a poem that begins "My great grandpa was slave"; Derek speaks to the fact that his great grandmother was most likely the daughter of a freed slave and that when he went to the National Archives in The Bahamas, he found the will of one of his great grandfathers. In that will, Derek's ancestor says he is freeing three of his slaves. That means that in Derek's own family there were enslaved Africans.

- Where have you heard racism expressed in the arts and culture? For example: Little Black Sambo, Aunt Jemima.
- If you know or found out that one side of your family had done terrible things, even far in the past, would you still be able to identify with that strand of your ancestry?
- If you know or found out a bad thing about your ancestors, would it affect how you appreciate the culture and the arts of that branch of your heritage?
- Does our ancestry define who we are or can be?
- How do the arts, from poetry to literature to music, define your ancestry for you?
- Has a work of art or literature ever given you an unexpected or powerful insight into who you are? Into others?

• How has listening to music from a cultural or ethnic group affected how you think about them?

SLAVE NAME

The title of this film comes from a poem by a friend of Derek's in The Bahamas. Pat Rahming is a poet, playwright, songwriter and singer and an architect and lives in The Bahamas.

> My Great Grandpa was slave, i een like it but it so but even slave got history too i got a right to know what tribe they come from where dey live and what dey family name i know dat 'bout da master, da slave deserve da same we history just een startin late, we wasn't always slave an what i wouldn't give to know how my folks used to live before da trip from Africa, before da drumbeat change, before de ol' men cry for loss before da trees was strange i know 'bout king and queen an who succeed da throne i study english civil war just like it was my own an i could trace some English name back to da Norman war yet still nobody wan' me ask what my name was before da chasin and da catchin and da sellin without shame dis een too much to ask for suh i jus wan know my name

Poem by Patrick Rahming, The Bahamas

HISTORY OF YOUR COUNTRY

In the film, there is a brief history of The Bahamas that provides a context for how race and culture intertwine in that country.

• What do you know about your own history or the history of your friends family?

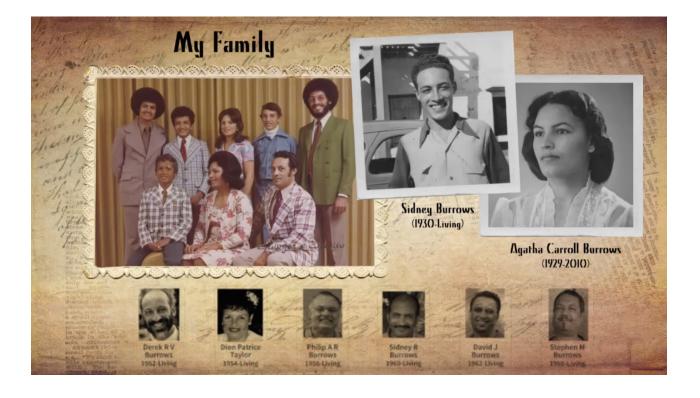
- Are you curious to know more?
- Are there things about your family's history, or the history of friends, or the history of your country or people, that you usually prefer to ignore?
- Can you still love a country or a family if there are ugly aspects to its story?
- Do you think you lose anything by ignoring these stories?



SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF RACE

In the film, it becomes clear that there are different social constructions of race between The Bahamas and the United States. For race to be socially constructed means that its meaning depends on how a particular society comes to define what and who counts as belonging to a particular race.

- What specifics do we learn in this film about how is race constructed differently between The Bahamas and the US?
- What other constructions of race or ethnicity have you encountered or hear about in other cultures?
- How is race constructed in your family, in your culture, in your region, or in your nation?
- When you encounter another people from another culture, do you recognize that they may have a different construction of race in that culture?
- Do you think of race as a construct or a fact? What makes you think so?



IMMIGRATION



In the film, Derek left his home country to study music in Boston, in the United States. That move had a profound effect on his self-understanding.

- Have you ever learned something new about yourself that changed your sense of identity by traveling somewhere you no longer thought of as home?
- What happens when people leave their homeland in search of some kind of freedom (economic, religious, sexual identity) and are expected to learn the language (or at least the dialect or peculiarities of the same language in a different culture) and conduct themselves according to the rules and mores of the host land?
- Do we judge immigrants who don't conform to what we believe is right?
- Do we rely on what we have heard or seen in the media about their group when we interact with them?
- Do we make assumptions about the characteristics of an ethnicity based on our own experiences? For example: The view that Koreans value academic excellence and are better in school.

- If you born in America, where was your family from originally?
- What do you know of how your family came to America?

• If you have only been in the US for a short while, how do you feel as an immigrant or a visitor in a new country?

• What is most surprising to you in the American way of seeing and treating race or ethnicity?

- What do you miss most about your country or your home, even if you are in your native country?
- If you are not American, in what ways is the USA most different from your country?

• If you are American, what do you think would be most difficult for a foreigner to understand about you, your culture, and your country?



RACISM



In the film, we see how the way that a culture defines race can place barriers on how you define yourself and live your life, in public and even in private.

- How are you seen within your community?
- Can you talk about times when you have been discriminated against?
- How has that affected how you fit in to your community or what you can aspire to be?
- Can you address times when you have discriminated against others?
- Do you know or can you imagine what effect that discrimination had on them?
- Is it good to imagine what it is like to be someone from a different race or culture, or do we just project our own prejudices and experience onto them?

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership."[1]

A microaggression can seem unimportant, such as a way of talking or an action that people may or may not intend as harmful, but which conveys a prejudice and belittles the target of that behavior. The impact of a microsaggression may not even be fully realized in the moment, either by the actor or the target of the action.

Some examples: saying things like "I don't think of you as Black" or "I thought all Asians were good at karate!" or asking "But what are you really?"; touching someone's hair without permission, "just to feel what it's like"; moving from a seat to avoid being near someone of a different race, or refusing to shake their hand; assuming that someone thinks like or can speak for all of "their kind," or that they only enjoy food or art or music that "those people" like.

In the film, Derek's mother would suck her teeth when she saw the photo of his brother Philip's black girlfriend. She also spoke angrily about her sons using a pick on their hair by saying, "I hate that picking sound." She also did not allow Derek's sister Dion's boyfriend to come to Christmas dinner. These were forms of microaggression.

What other microaggressions do you recognize in the film? What microaggressions have you encountered in your life? Have you ever used a microaggression against someone, even unintentionally? How can we avoid using microaggressions, if they often are unintentional?

^[1] See Derard Wing Sue, Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons), pages 229–233.

"I had good hair. That's what my family called it. It was hair with waves. It was sleek and lathered down with Brylcreem. The waves didn't even try to escape. They knew better. Mother was in charge of the waves - mine and everyone's. She gave us haircuts - one every two weeks.

As soon as the sun went down, my mother shot through the house. Pictures flew off the walls, flowers leaped in their vases. I was swept up into her wake and marched out onto the patio. The sheet cracked like a whip, up and around my neck. Every hair on my head stood at attention. they tried to look short, they didn't fool my mother. "

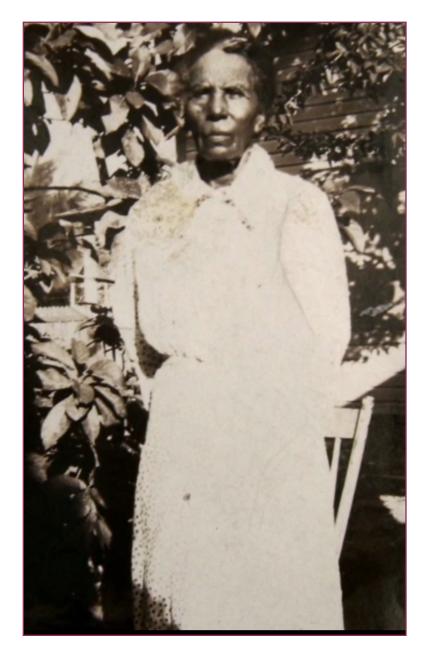


DNA AND GENETIC TESTING

In the film Derek, finally does the DNA test to find out a truth his mother would not have wanted to know. His family was not shocked that they had African ancestry in them but were most surprised that it came from their mother's side.

- Have you had your DNA tested?
- If so, what did you think of your results?
- If not, what would you expect to find? Would you want to have your DNA tested?

FAMILY SECRETS



In the film, the secret eventually discovered is that Derek's great grandmother's mother was most likely the daughter of an African slave. While his mother didn't know this as a fact, Derek thinks she knew more than she let on.

- Are there secrets in your family that you have wanted answers to?
- Do you know secrets about your family that you won't share with friends?
- Have you found out a secret in your family, and what impact did that have on your life?
- How did you feel after finding out?

RESEARCH

Solies of Estate, or Doors de of Staves,	BAHAMAS.	
	RETURN Of the Number of Slaves and Estimated Value thereof, in each Class, in possessio of the Millio of Long Soland on the st day of August, 1834	
TOTAL NU	MBER of SLAVES	uty five.
TOTAL NU	MBER of SLAVES	Number. Number. No Sterling.

In the film, Derek went to the National Archives to find out about his family's history. Derek also went online to various databases to find out information. There are lots of resources available to help find details about ancestry, including birth and death records.

- Have you researched your family history? To whom did you reach out for more information?
- If you have, what did you find? How did you do the research? Did you confirm old family stories? Find new ones?
- How would you go about doing such research, if you have not?
- What do you hope to find?

LOVE AND RACISM

How does loving a racist help keep racism alive?

Humans often do what they do in order to survive.

They hold onto beliefs and actions that they perceive keep them or their loved ones safe. We usually love those who protect us and along with that often goes accepting their negative as well as positive behaviors.

By loving someone who is racist, without calling them out on that behavior, we give them permission to not change thereby allowing racism to thrive.



THE FILM

- In two weeks, what do you think you will remember about the film?
- Did anything surprise you in the film?
- Did anything surprise you about yourself in watching or reflecting on the film?
- How has the film changed the way you think or feel?

Our mother loved us and fiercely tried to protect us from the things she feared. Our mother's love for us was all encompassing and unconditional. Our love for her was forgiving but sometimes love is blind.

What can we do?

In the film, Derek finally went along with his sister Dion to confront their mother about her racism. It was only then that they were able to begin dealing with something they had allowed to go on for many years.

• Do you have anyone in your family that you want to say something to about their behavior?

• Do you have friends who may make racists comments that you wish you could address?

• What would you like to do the next time you witness a micro-aggression?

(It is recommended that rather than confront the aggressor if they are a stranger; you simply stand next to the victim to let them know that what is happening is not acceptable and that at least one person is witnessing the act and standing with them against it. It is unlikely that in public an aggressor will suddenly see the light and ask forgiveness, but at least you can let the victim feel protected by another person's presence and offer them support after the incident, such as making a phone call, waiting until a friend comes, bringing comfort in a small way, such as some water or coffee, or just listening to them talk about the incident.)

• If a micro-aggression or outright racist language or act happens with someone close to you, how would you address it?

• If you are invested in a relationship you want to keep (as opposed to one with a stranger), what would that change in your reaction and approach to the problem? Rather than calling someone a racist or prejudiced, which would provoke them to put up their defenses, would any of the following phrases be helpful?

"So, do I understand you correctly, that you think all black people are loud?" "You don't trust anyone who looks Arab?"

"In your experience, women are pushy?"

"I wonder what's happened in your life that you have these beliefs?" "Tell me why you think this."

"How do you interact differently with people in these groups?"

If someone insists on keeping their beliefs, there may be nothing you can do, at least for the moment, but if their actions are harmful to you or a loved one, you do have the right to ask that they at least change their behavior. If they cannot do so, you can rightfully say that it no longer feels good to be around them when they act this way and that you will simply walk away or no longer engage with them during that behavior.

We cannot change other people by merely wishing it, but if they are motivated to change, they can. Fear of losing someone (a loved one) or something they value (such as their status) can motivate them to examine their beliefs and behaviors. Shame can also motivate. Necessity (I will lose my job if I don't change) can motivate. Forgiveness (as in the film) can also motivate a change in someone who is ready.

What can help people to examine themselves and to change is knowing that they will be forgiven and that they will not be alone if they give up old prejudices and behaviors (some people remain in hate groups because it gives them an identity, a purpose, a sense of belonging). Sometimes, as in this film, all someone needs is to be called out, gently but firmly, to realize that their behavior is harmful to someone they love, and so probably to others as well. Most of us are driven to do our best, to be our best selves, to take care of ourselves and those we love; given a mirror we might all see things we would like to change about ourselves. Love can do, and undo.

What would you like to do next?



The Magic Mirror Tempts Lily's White Daughter (1951)

fine comb slide through your hair You could pass say the mirror slide through your glory you could pass and if sun don't see your skin have little white babies you could marry some white man if the sun don't see You the fairest of them all your skin

Fair is foul Ruth tell the mirror I don't want white right ain't all it seem no longhair glory I don't want no whitebread man l want Momma rainbow babies and if the sun don't see my skin then my eye don't see the sun foul is fair she tell the mirror take back your filthy air

But they will take you say the mirror they will let you in they front door you don't need no paper bag test you got whiteness on your side and they will take you in they parlour they will take you in they bedroom they will seat you at they table they will walk you down they aisle and you could pass why you don't pass say the mirror fine comb slide right through your hair

a woman who don't care about no hair no white skin save the Ruth say I is Saviour and no white skin save Momma Lily death come knocking no fine comb save my darling brother and when he bleed anyhow and his blood run red just like a black man bleeding and he dead iust like a white dead and so my skin and hair don't man mean nothing and comb don't resurrect the dead and skin return to blind earth just like blood roll to the if the dirt don't see no difference why should I ground

And then Ruth break the magic mirror

Poem by Nicolette Bethel



BEFORE THE TREES WAS STRANGE

a personal documentary by DEREK BURROWS

Our mother's love for us was unconditional. But sometimes love is blind.

produced by DEREK BURROWS edited by INDRANI KOPAL executive producer BARBERY BYFIELD FELIPE ITURRALDE GREG FRIED

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