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Native Born Black: A Collection of Questions

A Thesis Presented

by

Dewayne C. Wrencher

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

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2017

Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Thesis

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2017

A perceived majority of the population in America lacks that shared experience of daily cultural emotional trauma. Those privileges allow them the choice to step outside of their comfort zones and travel within the unfamiliar areas of their consciousness or stay in their blissful reality of conscious ignorance. I don't know if it is my inquisitive personality or my responsibility as a Native Born Black... adult to understand who I am and the society I live in but I do know that ignorance is not an option.

In order to understand something; one has to ask a question. Each work of art in this text starts with a question which subsequently leads to other questions and so on.

Each chapter in this thesis is a critical sociological study with the conclusions displayed as visual works. These artistic studies focus on interpretive questions that help to generate engaging discussions on Native Born Black American identity.

Dedication Page

An everlasting memory

You and I are forever blessed and cursed with having to remember our collective past,
we are the keepers that guard the gates to consciousness,
deciding when to hold information and when to share perspective,
our knowledge is drawn from the last breath of our ancestors like...

Be kind to your siblings, you might not like them but you have to love them,
Never hide your Joy,
Always let your imagination drive your creativity,
and if you want a life of happiness, Appreciate the simplicity,

because we are the keepers,
now and forever,
vowing to leave the memories of our past lessons,
forever stitched in this universal tapestry.

This work is dedicated to the people who taught me to chase after my dreams and seek
knowledge: My mother, Carrie (Cookie), my sister, Danyual (Danny) and all my brothers, Edgar,
Dwight, Jonathan & Jeremy (in order of oldest to youngest).

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Introduction

I remember, as a child being taught how to quickly survey an area and deduce the potential risk of a person's motives. My mother wanted to make sure her children made smart decisions when it came to making friends and trusting people. Since then the behavioral characteristics of people have always interested me. I became so good at reading people I was placed in charge of alerting my family to anyone I considered to be too destructive.

“I recall one young man my mother took in. He was homeless and very angry but his anger was not the issue I had with him. It was his narcissistic attitude and at that time the only word I knew to describe his self-absorbed behavior was selfish. I also knew from past observations that selfish people can do a considerable amount of horrible things and show no concern towards the people they hurt. My family and I worked with this young man, helped to find him a job and got him into housing. Soon after he broke into our neighbor's home and robbed them at knifepoint and set my car on fire. It took me a year to find out why he would do a thing like that. The answer, because he thought it would be funny. Luckily no one was seriously injured.”

Fifteen years later in my undergraduate career I started to question identity and factors that might influence a person's choices. Not having any participants at the time, I studied myself. I used every day experiences and my family's history to try and explain my own identity. However, I quickly realized that there were large chunks of information missing from my family's past, and the general history of Native Born Black... Americans.

Questions are central to my practice as an artist, poet and cultural observer, followed by research and social investigation, these factors help to guide and form my studio practice. The materials I use to create the visual works are comprised of a collection of prints, found objects and poetic wordplay that serve as an aesthetic modifier. Essentially, what you see in this thesis are sociological studies and each work of art is a visual representation of the conclusions reached in my research.



Chapter One

I mean “who am I, today?”

Colored, Negro, Black and now African American, over one hundred years of labels for brown skinned people descendant from enslaved Africans in the American south.

There was little conversation around my childhood dinner table about the above mentioned racial labels. My family and I simply accepted the African American label as a politically correct way to describe Americans with African ancestry but Black is what we called ourselves whenever White folks weren't around. In the many predominantly White communities we lived in, race-based epithets like Black and “Nigga” noticeably caused the majority some discomfort.

When I began investigating these labels I found that most Americans use Black, Colored and Negro to describe skin color, socioeconomic status and African ancestry. “Black, tells you about skin color and what side of town you live on” (as cited in Wilkerson, 1989). In the late 1980's there was an attempt to foster dignity and self-esteem in Black people through a fabricated ethnic identity linked to the continent of Africa with the label, “African American”.

The introduction of the new African American label was an attempt to gain “Whiteness”

through mimicking white racial groups in America. The term gave a portion of American Blacks a sense of pride, dignity and heightened their self-esteem. I felt Mr. Jesse Jackson successfully tricked the American Black population into accepting an ethnic fantasy. “This is deeper than just name recognition” (as cited in Wilkerson, 1989). It is indeed deeper than just a name or label.

Brown and dark skinned people descendant from enslaved Africans in the American south are considered Americans, not Africans. According to *Jus soli* the title is a birthright. However, having to identify with a land that has enslaved, abused and strategically restricted the socioeconomic mobility of people that share a racial/ethnic identity can be difficult for a young Black American person. I know it was difficult for me. I use to cringe at the thought of being labeled an American, especially as a teenager. I felt stuck between two identities both as an American and not an American.

“double consciousness,” a “two-ness” of being an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (as cited in Bruce, 1992, p. 299).

The African American label induced a similar struggle of national identity and a racial identity. There were always places where I could be “Black” and other places where I had to be “American”. So, who am I, today? In an attempt to find an answer, I investigated labels used to categorize Native Born Blacks living in the United States since the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade.



Dewayne Wrencher, *Untitled?*, 2016. Black & White Digital Photography, (20in x 16in).

The book featured in the photograph use to be my personal journal. It is where I kept personal information like my thoughts, ideas and stories. Until, the summer of 2014 when it disappeared while I was visiting Minnesota. Oddly enough, the day I returned to New York to continue my education the book reappeared near the front door of my apartment building. It was resting on a rock, damaged by a week of rain. The words were barely legible and the journal was fragile. I couldn't leave it. So, I kept it in a Ziploc bag to keep the book intact and moist until I got back to my studio and constructed a concept for its use.

The second components to this piece are my dreadlocks (Hair). In an attempt to reconnect to my Native Born Black American identity through an experiment called *Hair Theory*, where I cut off my dreadlocks to start growing an afro. Adding dreadlocks to this image is essentially

taboo. I was always told by my elders to burn any hair I removed from my head. It is dangerous not to do so. My family believed that a piece of your spirit is in your hair and if someone wanted to harm you they could do it easily with a lock of it. A risk, yes but I not only wanted the image to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye but I also wanted to expose a part of my being to make the work seem more human.

Finally, the words. Each letter was scratched into the pages to simulate scarring and the pain of uncertainty when it comes to forming a cultural identity in communities where identity is divided into several parts. Fleeting labels such as “Afro” and “Colored”, still linger in the memory banks of my elders, making them part of my childhood and racial vocabulary. To emphasize the “passing” of those labels I left remnants of identities all over the pages.

“Who am I, today?” was the question that led me to this study. The answer, I am native to America with African ancestry. I am Native Born Black American.

Chapter Two

“Ok, I know that you’re Black but, Black What?”

The African American label attempts to create a common national identity, but people usually end up looking for cultural traditions from Africa to link to their American upbringing. An example of this is the Afrocentric movement in the 1980’s called Afrocentrism. “It is a set of ideas celebrating the African origins, history and character of Black people” (Bay, 2000, p. 501). Afrocentrism is a broad tradition of Black thought throughout history. “The term Afro centric was coined by W.E.B. Du bois in the 1960’s to describe the subject matter of this projected Encyclopedia” (Bay, 2000, p. 502). In this movement there was a call for people to adopt an Afro centric consciousness rooted in African ideals and values. Afrocentrism being a product of the Black power movement focused on replacing negative images of blackness for more positive ones that were better suited for the interest and needs of Black people (Bay, 2000, p. 503).

During the 1980’s Black people all over the country began to revisit the Garveyites dream of returning back to Africa, going back home to a place where they would belong. I mean, can you blame them? I thought in similar ways and campaigned for a year as an undergraduate to travel to West Africa. In December of 2013. I went to Ghana in West Africa where I conversed with other students and community members from areas around Ghana (e.g. Kumasi and Accra) on their interpretation of the African American label. Many of the students told me that the

African American label makes no sense. They saw my group and I as only Americans because that is where we were born. “You are not from anywhere in Africa, you are from America” said Osei Stewart, One of the students from Accra. Which made perfect sense to me. So why are many Blacks myself included perpetuating the use of this false identity?

Throughout my life I’ve seen people who have stood tall and said “I am African American”, when asked to identify themselves. Even though America still has yet to fully embrace the people behind the label.

“Despite the fact that the word Negro has been widely considered offensive for decades, the term remained in our country’s official vocabulary for a surprisingly long time. Only last year did the Census stop listing it as an option, and only earlier this month did the Army officially end the practice that allowed service personnel to be addressed as “Negro” (as cited in Hall, 2014).

Mr. Jesse Jackson’s prediction that the African American label would change the way American Blacks see themselves turned out to be true. A lot of American Blacks used the label to promote themselves as dignified. I used to say, *I am an African American* proudly but for me the proclamation was a defense mechanism, where I disguised hurt to look like pride. The ambiguous label Black is used in a similar way. It gives people a disguise. Native Born Black Americans aren’t the only ones privy to the use of the African American label but the privilege is extended to anyone that looks Black in the United States, especially African and Caribbean immigrants.

Foreign Born Blacks

“The Hart Cellar Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which abolished the racist national origin quota system” (Tillery, 2012, p. 546) allowed for a mass wave of Caribbean immigrants to

enter the United States of America. This greatly increased the total Black population along with the help of two prior waves of immigration. Caribbean immigrants became a substantial segment of the foreign born population in Black communities and have been since the start of the 20th century (Tillery, 2012, p. 546).

The increasing populations of Caribbean immigrants into Black communities allowed for some flexibility when deciding how to identify dependent on the social situation. In America, because of most Caribbean Immigrant's skin color they automatically assume a racial identity, that is in relation to the United States socially constructed race based system. They also have a transnational ethnic identity (i.e., Haitian, Jamaican, etc).

Under the umbrella of Black

If an individual understands that being labeled an African American in the United States gives them a certain likeability, that person could potentially reap social benefits because Black has a negative connotation to mainstream American Whites.

As Erika Hall writes, "Using analytic word count software, we evaluated hundreds of crime reports in major newspapers from 2000 to 2012. We created a custom dictionary to measure the presence of the labels African American and Black, as well of the presence of over 300 negative emotion words (e.g. violent, hatred, and enemy). The use of the label Black was positively associated with a negative emotional tone in an article. We found no such impact for the use of the label African American" (Hall, 2014).

The politically correct African American label can increase a person's perceived socioeconomic status and level of education. Because of those factors, the African American

label could possibly increase the individual's ability to access opportunity for social mobility. But what if you don't identify with that label?

It would seem that Mr. Jesse Jackson did not take in account that individuals with dark or brown skin may not think, act and share similar experiences. In the late 1980's Black Americans were split on the label, African American. Many intellectuals believe it represents the accepting of a difficult past (Wilkerson. 1989).

While other American Blacks were offended by the creation of the label, because they felt "Black Leaders have a lot of nerve speaking for all Black people." (as cited in Wilkerson 1989). "I want to Stay Black", says the 16-year-old Madonna Cliff and I agree with her right to label herself. Do we as people who fall under the umbrella of Black have more labels in which to choose from when deciding how we identify? To find this out I started a small study where I located participants with African ancestry off of Facebook using a post similar to the following:

Hello Beautiful People on Facebook,

I am working on a project that focuses on identity. Specifically, people with African ancestry. I am a portrait artist in my second year at Stony Brook University and I am using portraiture to highlight the significance of cultures under the umbrella "Black" label. All I need from you if you are interested is a little of your time for a few questions and your portrait. This work will help in the exploration of Black identity in a series called *Black What?* This small study will be anonymous. The answers and photographs sent will be destroyed. If you are interested just tag me in an image I can use and type "Yes".

I provided each participant with an example of Hair Theory so they can gauge what the final print might look like and from that open call I obtained nine qualified participants. Those of who agreed to answer a few questions about identity. The most important question I asked and used in the creation of these portraits was; How do you identify?

The answers to the above mentioned question is shown in the ten black and white linocut prints.



Dewayne Wrencher, *Black What?* 2016. (10) Black & White Linocuts, (Gallery installation)



Dewayne Wrencher, *African American*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



3/0

AFRO LATINO

4

Dewayne Wrencher, *Afro Latino*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *American*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Black American*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Black*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Haitian*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Native Born Black American descended from Enslaved Africans in the American South*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Nigerian*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Nigga*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).



Dewayne Wrencher, *Ugandan-American*, 2016. Black & White Linocut, (18in x 24in).

In this body of work, I used ten precut 18 by 24 inch slabs of unmounted grey linoleum blocks for the matrices. Each matrix (linoleum block) was carved during ten hours or more, overnight sessions. It is important to note the visual vocabulary used in *Hair Theory* was used in each portrait in this series of work. While the questions focused on how the participants identified, I concentrated on their outer appearance for the line work. By exaggerating facial features, dress and personal effects, this series of portraits reveals the intricacies that shape Black identity in a racialized society. I used a warm cream rives lightweight paper to add a sense a fragility to each identity. “Black What?” challenged the viewer to see more than just a sea of Black faces but a cornucopia of Black cultures.

Nigga, Ugandan-American, American, Nigerian, Black American, Afro Latino, Black, Haitian and African American were the participant’s answers. After each interview I agreed to answer any questions the participants had for me and it wasn’t surprising that they all wanted to know how I identified? So, I told them. I am a Native Born Black American descended from Enslaved Africans in the American South. Yes, I know it’s a bit long but with the *Untitled* work in chapter one I discovered the label Native Born Black and with *Black What?* I was looking for a more honest descriptive label. The addition of descended from Enslaved Africans in the American South makes this the most accurate descriptive epithet for myself.

Oh and the Nigga label surprised me as well. I thought, why would a person choose to identify as Nigga. The “epithet that generates epithets” (Kennedy, 2002). When I asked the participant he mentioned that Nigga is a label people in his community use all the time and since he was a part of that community, why wouldn’t he identify as Nigga. I then realized that everyone in this study selected his or her identity for the same reason. You see every participant

was American as well. So, why would an American identify as Haitian? It's simple, that is the community where he or she feels they belong.

Now, I am eager to know, if there is a community for people who identify as Native Born Black Americans descended from Enslaved Africans in the American South?

Chapter Three

“How does my hair affect the way people perceive me?”

It was my second year at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse and I was conducting experiments every week because it was more interesting than mundane classroom assignments. During one of my routine days on campus, I couldn't help but notice white people's fascination with my hair. White male and female students would walk up to me and caress my natural curls. Of course, I thought this was *odd* but I was more concerned with why these people felt it was okay to touch me without my permission. I chalked up the first few unwanted touches to my personality and appearance but wondered if having my hair exposed, invited this compulsive behavior. The following week I wrapped my hair in a black scarf. The fear and confusion on people's faces amazed me. I mean, these were people I went to class with every day and most of them did not recognize me. The same people a week ago inappropriately stroked my curly locks. I thought this is interesting and I was curious to know in what ways does a hairstyle affect the way I am perceived in social spaces? That was the conception of *Hair Theory*.

Hair Theory, is an experiment I have been working on for five years. The question of how much does my hair affect the ways in which people perceive me, and influenced my commitment to this long-term study. I used five hair styles in this experiment. The first was straight hair. I used a chemical to relax my natural curls and that process straightened my hair.

Next, a low buzz cut with defined 360 degree waves and the sides tapered. Then cornrows (braids), shoulder length dreadlocks and finally a medium length afro. With each style I had a very different sociological experience.

Relaxed Hair:

The day I relaxed my hair I remember thinking “Damn, today is the day.” I knew of a few warnings when using straightening products in my hair from my mother. She would say, “Don’t scratch your scalp a day before you perm your hair and if it starts to itch that means it is time to wash it out.” There is always a risk when using a relaxer because the "sodium hydroxide will burn thorough your skin" if left on your scalp for too long (O’Donnell & Stilson, 2009). And let’s just say, I didn’t make it to the sink fast enough. When the process was over I had burns all over my scalp from leaving the relaxer in my head a few minutes too long. It was so painful that a gentle breeze across my head would feel like a thousand bee stings, but my hair was straight and that’s all that mattered.

“What sodium hydroxide is doing, is actually breaking down the protein in their hair. If it gets down into the scalp, it’ll kill it at the root and you’ll actually have bald spots there” (O’Donnell & Stilson, 2009).

Walking around on campus and in the city with relaxed hair made me feel like an animal in the zoo. Admittedly, I felt like that most days because people are always staring at Black faces but this was different. The confused looks I got from my classmates, co-workers and random members of the community made me feel like I was in whiteface, playing a role to hide my cultural identity. It was an unpleasant experience. Quick side note though, no one during my relaxed hair stage touched or asked to touch my hair.

Buzz Cut:

The next hairstyle was a low buzz cut with defined 360 degree waves and the sides tapered. You know “A nice clean cut.” The day I got a low cut with the sides tapered, I felt like everyone in my family was cheering me on. I didn’t blame them because we were all sick of the relaxed hair look. At the barber shop I watched my relaxed the hair hit the floor and I felt like a new person was emerging. A younger looking version of myself. I even had spiral 360 degree waves without having to brush continuously throughout the day, but that wasn’t the important part of this experiment.

The important observations came after the cut. In the time I spent with this hairstyle, I was met with more smiling faces than with any other look. I even met my first love. I gained many friends and received more opportunities to talk, perform and lecture. In fact, everything was pretty easy with this hairstyle. However, I was still getting stares from non-blacks, purses nervously clinched in my presence and had to deal with the occasional discriminatory act. I was still a Native Born Black male in America. This hairstyle didn’t change that fact but I noticed I was able to maneuver easily in predominately white communities with a “tamed” style. Although, people told me the look was more professional, the lack of hair made me appear childlike.

Cornrows:

“Is there anyone here that can braid?” One of the difficult things about getting cornrows for the next style was finding someone in a predominantly White community who could braid. Looking around La Crosse for someone with experience doing black hair was already a challenge so to make things easier I just begged my family to braid my hair. Plus, getting my hair

braided was so relaxing. It felt like someone was playing in my hair and that brought back memories of my mother greasing my scalp when I was a child. Things were so simple back then.

That glimpse of the past was the only pleasure I got from this hairstyle because cornrows made my day to day very difficult. I couldn't go anywhere without people visibly tensing up and that forced me to do the same. When I walked down main street or through campus, people would cross the street until they were a few feet away from me than cross back over. I told myself "maybe they needed something on the other side of the street" or "maybe they were playing zigzag." I was obviously grasping at straws because it was only after they noticed me that they crossed the street to avoid any interaction. In fact, having cornrows was the only hair style that elicited strong negative reactions from many people including non-whites. I would start a conversation with people and they would pretend I didn't exist or just walk away. Women would *shoo shoo* me away like I was a dog in offices or classrooms. It was the only time I felt like a criminal. I would say things like "I should harm them since they treat me like a thug anyway." It was my first-hand experience in understanding how self-fulfilling prophecies work. This was a depressing time for me. I lost a little hope in humanity with this style and couldn't wait to move on to the dreadlocks.

Dreadlocks:

I knew the process of locking hair would be long and repetitive but this style took years. When I began locking I looked for any information on the subject I could find. I searched online and asked people I knew with dreadlocks for advice. In 2012, I had the privilege of going to New York and visit Stony Brook university before starting there as a student. I stayed in Bushwick with an old friend and one of my goals while I was there was to find someone in Brooklyn that could give me an *authentic* start to my dreadlocks. They must have seen me coming because I

looked like an easy to scam tourist and was very much willing to pay for Jamaican authentic dreadlocks. The con lady who started my dreadlocks in Brooklyn, put hard *pro styl gel* in my hair. A holding gel that dries out your scalp. Hard *pro styl gel* is one of the worst things to keep in your hair long term. I should have known at that point she didn't know what she was doing. Plus, she made me look like a racist cartoon character from the 1940's. It was awful. Eventually, I ended up starting the locking process myself after asking a Stony Brook professor, how she got her dreadlocks to look so natural. "Wait, how long will these take to grow out, again?"

After giving the locks a few years to grow, I noticed the fear I saw on people's faces during my cornrow phase had eased. I started getting more smiles from people throughout the neighborhood and when I moved to New York, I noticed more people with locks offering me unsolicited advice on my education; best places to live as a student of color and warnings about the existence of the Ku Klux Klan in Long Island. It was like I joined a community without even trying. I was just included. Things were starting to go well for me with this hairstyle and then it happened. It was around the sixth week of my second semester as a graduate student at Stony Brook University. I was sitting in class listening to my Haitian professor talk about how useless Native Born Blacks are in America. Although, this wasn't anything new. This professor had an obvious prejudice towards Native Born Black Americans but on this day he turned to me and asked "Are you Native Born Black?" I smiled and said of course I am. After that day his behavior changed and even though he never hid his bias he would reference statistics in his denigration of Native Born Blacks. I thought finally, some truth I can use.

You see, I have always noticed a need in first, second and third generation Blacks living in America to dissociate themselves from Native Born Black Americans and with my professor's weekly rants I had new evidence to support my theory. I wanted to investigate these dissociated

communities further so I started attending Caribbean gatherings. I barely spoke in those Caribbean circles. I just listened and when people started talking to me in patois, I nodded as if I understood. While I was in those environments I felt like a different type of Black. I even started to enjoy being a special type of Black person and that's when I knew it was time to cut my dreadlocks and move to the last hairstyle. I was starting to lose my understanding of self.

Medium Length Afro:

“Cut, Cut and Cut.” Man, when I cut my dreadlocks, only my ex was overjoyed. The people closest to me, loved the dreadlock hairstyle but it was time for the afro phase in this experiment. I did not tell anyone ahead of time that I was going to cut my locks. I just showed up to family functions, graduate courses and meetings with a short afro. The majority of the people I knew didn't recognize me for about a month. Especially, people I knew on Stony Brook's campus. But I never felt more like a Native Born Black American than with the Afro. With the other hairstyles I felt Black but never native to America. The people I talked to even associated the afro with a Black American identity. There were no “what kind of Black person are you?” stares, no one spoke to me in patois and I didn't feel like I was wearing white face. I felt enlightened, unambiguous and confident in my brown skin with this hairstyle.

Although, I enjoyed having an afro, it wasn't always a positive experience. I noticed first, second and third generation immigrants stopped talking to me without my dreadlocks. People associated the afro with the Black panther party or radical revolutionaries. I had a conversation with someone who told me that my hair was offensive because it represented a hate group. Really? I thought. This person was clearly ignorant but I was happy to be seen as a Native Born Black American anyway. The afro hairstyle was by far the most eye opening experience I had during this hair study.

Creating the Visuals

After I finished the hair theory experiment. I was ready to start creating the image. I understood that each hair style and experience had to be represented in the visual conclusion of this study. In many of my works I plan out every detail of its construction to maximize content and materials used but for this work I wanted to focus more on the experiences I had with each hairstyle.

In order for this to work I began these overnight carving sessions. In these sessions I allowed my emotions to guide the woodcutting tool across malleable unmounted linoleum blocks. While working intensely through the night, I was more concerned with food and sleeping to over analyze the type of patterns used to represent each experience. Using this technique, I learned something new from each carving and increased the fluidity of my creativity because each session was in preparation of the next. So, the linoleum was never too precious a resource to worry about trying out new ideas. I thought, this technique was genius because it combined my love for learning and printmaking.

The matrix and support

The matrix is the “plate, block, stone, stencil, screen, or other means of carrying image information that is ultimately printed onto another surface” (Bill, 2015, p. 8)

I used battleship grey unmounted linoleum for my matrix because it is soft enough to create curvy contour lines and solid enough to hold minute details. The support is paper, cardboard, leather or any surface where the image from the matrix is transferred. Although admittedly an important part of the printmaking process the support in this instance was constantly changing. The support like the line work was provisional throughout the creation of *Hair Theory* versions I – VI. For that reason, I will only focus on line in the following descriptions of the work.



Dewayne Wrencher,
Hair Theory I, 2015.
Black & White
Linocut,
(18in x 24in).

Hair Theory I, was the start of this series of work. I wanted to make sure the eyes stood out in these portraits revealing more of myself to the viewer than just the experiences I had with each hairstyle. The eyes act as mirrors revealing simple truths to the viewer about themselves and the artist. The eyes are the only things in this portrait that are energized but it is difficult to see the five hairstyles and the portrait doesn't look like me. "I must continue."



Dewayne Wrencher,
Hair Theory II, 2015.
Black & White Linocut,
(18in x 24in).

Hair Theory II, I wanted to make this portrait more personal so I added my coping mechanism for dealing with stress, music. The addition of the headphones makes this portrait more authentic. I am going to keep using the headphones in my portraits going forward. Even though I can see the five hairstyles in this linocut I don't understand what they represent or why they are there. It looks better than the first version and I have learned a lot from this carving but I must continue. It is still missing something.



Dewayne Wrencher,
Hair Theory III, 2016.
Black & White Linocut,
(24in x 36in).

Hair Theory III, in this overnight carving session I gained an understanding of how to compose the hair in my portraits. Each lock of hair was strong, massive and flowing but there are some areas where the hair looks so confined. I'll have to change that in the next one. I added the five different experiences I went through with each hairstyle in the line work on the face. I also elongated the neck because pride was not showing in my last two versions of *Hair Theory*. I also included my birthmark on the neck but the line work made it difficult to tell where the face starts and the neck ends. "I need to thicken the strokes that contour the face on the forth version."



Dewayne Wrencher,
Hair Theory IV, 2016.
Black & White Linocut,
(20in x 36in).

Hair Theory IV, is the closest I have come to a complete linocut that embodies everything from the hair theory experiment. The hair was full and spilling off of the page. The piercing eyes provoke the viewer. The portrait looks the most like the artist and the composition is balanced. Unfortunately, I don't get a tightly woven together ancestry from one of the patterns on the face. The birthmark pattern looks too similar to the contour lines on the buzz cut portion of the face. Plus, there is no emotion in this portrait. There needs to be emotion shown in these portraits. "I will focus on those changes in the next version."



Dewayne Wrencher,
Hair Theory V, 2016.
Black & White Linocut,
(24in x 36in).

Hair Theory V, took a turn for the worst. I pulled another all-nighter but this time the work shifted from realistic to more of a Japanese anime esthetic. The work looks too playful. In my attempt at adding some movement to the afro puffs, I placed spirals at the tips. It did not work. But I found a pattern for the birthmark that works with my original idea and I see that clearing out the white areas of the eyes (sclera) make the person in the portrait seem more focused.



Dewayne Wrencher, *Hair Theory VI*, 2017. Black & White Linocut, (Working shot).

With *Hair Theory VI*, I went back through all the linocuts I had done in this series of Hair Theory and comprised all the elements that worked in versions one through five. I used the eyes from the 1st version, headphones from the 2nd, the elongated neck from the 3rd, Hairstyles from the 4th and the line work in the face that represents the different experiences I had during the five-year hair theory experiment in the 5th version of this series.

Emotion in the face was missing in all of the previous versions of hair theory so I focused on adding sentiment in this 6th and final version. Near the end of this experiment I felt guilt, like I had secrets I couldn't tell anyone because it would only depress them. It can be difficult living in a state of disillusionment so, I kept the information to myself until I completed a few versions of *Hair Theory*. Working with each linocut helped me explain how hairstyles drastically affected the way I was perceived as a Black male in America. I even noticed there were hairstyles that had an impact on my current level of success. Take for example the buzz cut. In the above

mentioned text I explained that more opportunities were granted me with that hairstyle. I made sure to represent each experience in the line work on the face but I left one area clear. There was no line work in that area because I felt the most enlightened at that moment in the experiment. I was clear and did not need a mask. There are outlines of a frame around the portrait to symbolize the metaphorical box of limitations that is my perspective. You will see the figure moving out of the box near the forehead and shoulders. That is a visual representation of me understanding a truth and moving past it, but slowly and with caution.

Conclusion

At the end of my 3rd year as a graduate student here at Stony Brook, I have found answers to questions I've been asking myself about Black cultural identity since I was a child. Due to a lack of Native Born Black American history taught in my elementary and middle school classrooms, I didn't know where to start in an attempt to break down my identity. I mean, all I knew about Black American history was that we were slaves that feared the White men and lusted after White women. I remember thinking "that's not me." I was very aware that I live in this skin but did not identify with any of those narratives.

I remember thinking I must be a "tourist" visiting America or I'm a different type of "African American". After my *Untitled* piece, mentioned in chapter one. I noticed that throughout generations of people with African ancestry in America many labels were imposed on them: Slave, Nigger, Colored, negro, Negro, Afro American, Black and African American. The labels were further broken down to include bi-racial Americans. Labels like; mulatto, quadroon and octoroon were used to describe the amount of "Black blood" a person had in them. *Untitled*, help me to understand that I am Native Born Black and the *Black What?* series facilitated my understanding of identity with respect to communities. I then extended my Native Born Black epithet to Native Born Black American descendent from enslaved Africans in the American South as a more accurate description of my American origin. The five year Hair Theory experiment helped me to see "the reason hair is so important is because our self-esteem is wrapped up in it" (O'Donnell & Stilson, 2009). It is an essential part in the construction of our identity.

Now, these are truths I can take back to my family and community. This is why I create, constantly “investigating our past and interpreting history to awaken us to our great cultural heritage, giving us an additional weapon with which to combat racist historical myths” (Catlett, 1975). Catlett’s definition of the Black artist is literally my practice.

My work is about building a dialogue on complex questions of identity. I want viewers to question their current assumptions of reality regarding social differences. Research is key in all of my projects because social investigation helps to guide and form my studio practice, and I continually conduct intensive field research on others and myself. I seek to provoke intensive thought, hoping the viewer looks deeply into the questions and finds some understanding. It is in the understanding of our Native Born Black American past that we will “restore what slavery took away, it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset” (Schomburg, 1925).

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