

THE AMERICAN BLACK BODY:  
MATERIALS, SYMBOLS, AND REPRESENTATIONS FROM  
A PERCEIVED AFRICAN AMERICAN

by

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## ABSTRACT

As a Cape Verdean American, I investigate the idea of what it means to be of the African Diaspora in America. I also consider the experiences of past generations of American black bodies and how their history has molded my world. This series of work began with *Mask Drawing I*, an ink drawing inspired by my own interpretation of an African mask.

Subjected to colorism, the discrimination of a person based on their skin color, my skin was not enough validation for other people to view me as black. On numerous occasions I have had to clarify my identity, nationality and how these things qualify me as black. I was not perceived as black because I did not fit the stereotype society influenced us to believe, that black people all look, walk and talk a certain way. I did not fit because my skin was not dark enough, my hair wasn't the same texture, and my last name was Santos. This led me to question how I present myself versus how other individuals may perceive me. I wanted to create new artifacts that highlighted my experience of blackness in America. Through the abstraction of these artifacts I explore black identities and how they have change society for black people.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am American by birth, but I am Cape Verdean by blood. Cape Verde is an archipelago off the coast of West Africa. The Cape Verde Islands were once under Portuguese colonial possession, used for trading and transporting slaves as well as exile due to the Portuguese Inquisition. As a result, Cape Verde's population became more diverse and eventually interracial. Throughout my life, I have been asked about my heritage, my culture, and where my origins are from. It was easy for me to associate with African Americans. We share the same world, both racially and politically. In the eyes of police, government, society, the education system, and financial institutions we were one and the same. This thesis allowed me to explore who I am, or at least who I perceived to be as a black man in America. My work aims to obscure the line of what is African and what is American, and how this divide defines me. During my first two years as an MFA candidate in the Studio Art and Computer Track program, I made art based on current events, fleeting moments, and my need to address them. I am naturally compelled to address matters that directly or indirectly affect the community with which I am associated. For example, the murders of unarmed black people, or the Flint water crisis in Michigan. It wasn't until the latter part of my second year that I refocused my studio practice, emphasizing experimental processes instead of executing single projects. This approach to my work revealed new and exciting thoughts and ideas that motivated curiosity in myself as well as in the work.

## GOVERNMENT AND THE BLACK BODY

Working around a central theme of law enforcement and government's relationship with underrepresented black communities I decided to talk about Flint, Michigan. Flint was poisoned by its own government. Lead water seeped into every home, workplace, and public school in the area. Flint's water system was changed from the Detroit Water and Sewage Department, whose water is treated and cleaned for safe consumption, to the untreated and already polluted Flint River water. This was supposed to save the state money. The untreated water caused old pipes to leech lead into the water. This ultimately caused a public health state of emergency in the city of Flint. Between six thousand and twelve thousand children were exposed to lead poisoning in the two years since the initial water change. According to the World Health Organization, high blood lead levels are especially harmful to children and pregnant women, and can cause learning disabilities, behavioral problems and mental retardation. Every child in the city of Flint was affected. The water was so bad that in October of 2016 General Motors asked for their water to be switched back to the Detroit water instead of the Flint River because the water was corroding the car parts. The switch was made, and GM's water supply would now come from Lake Huron. Meanwhile Flint was still using the lead poisoned water from the Flint River. This proves that the government is more focused on an industry that makes money for them than the health of its own people. Once a thriving black community now permanently poisoned due to lack of care by its government.

In 2016 Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier created a series of photographs entitled "*Flint is Family.*" Frazier spent five months with three generations of Flint women who both suffer and relentlessly thrive amongst the worst man-made environmental disaster in recent national history. ELLE.com a popular beauty and culture website covered the story.

Mattie Kahn the writer for ELLE.com starts off by introducing Shea Cobb, a mother of a nine-year-old daughter named Zion. The water made Zion sick, and it had been five months since her water turned brown causing rashes on her mother's body. Shea had to clamp her mouth shut in the shower, just to make sure none of the toxic water was swallowed.



*Figure 1: By Author, "Flint", 2016, (Sink)*





Figure 2: By Author, "Lead Water" 2016, (Pipes and Faucets)

From this water crisis I was inspired to create "*Flint*" and "*Lead Water*". "*Flint*" is an installation of a sink and mirror like one would find in any ordinary house, but the sink is filled with orange water to mimic the color of lead poisoned water. "*Lead Water*" is an installation of pipes and faucets. These faucets are a combination of both outdoor and indoor faucets and pipes to better widen the scope of how badly the area was affected.

#### From Baldwin to Me

During the end of my second year, Professor Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz recommended I read James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" as well as Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Between the World and Me." Both men have identical narratives, told through different eyes, in a different world, generations apart. How could this be? Do I not have the same rights as another man of a different complexion? Are we not respected as men? Are we not all created equal? Was everything I

learned about being black in America a lie? These are all questions I had, but now my previous assumptions about the world I live in had been proven in text. All my random stops by police were fueled by racism and discrimination. I was guilty of committing the worst crime in American history, being black. At this realization I asked myself, “What does being black mean to me? Baldwin and Coates’ experience of being black in America are similar to mine but the events happening in those times also dictate the climate in which each author lived.

It was at the age of thirteen the first time a cop stopped me. With maturity came the understanding of why I, like many other black men and women, had been stereotyped. The police officer stated, "We received a phone call of a suspicious man walking around the neighborhood, and you fit the description." I was guilty of walking while black. I could have been Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown or Philando Castile. I could have shared the fates of Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald, Alton Sterling or Emmitt Till. Murdered in cold blood by police.

Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible. (Coates 2015 9)

Furthering my research of James Baldwin’s America, I came across an article from a 1966 issue of *The Nation* where he describes Harlem “exploding” in the summer. Baldwin would get phone calls from Washington D.C in the Spring to ask, “What’s going to happen this Summer?” the real question being if the black ghettos would cause them any problems, would

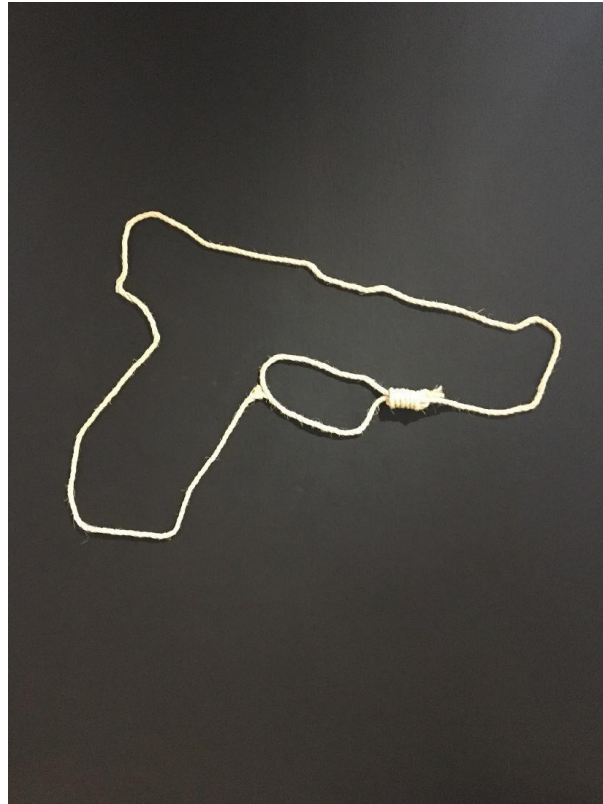
unemployed blacks be roaming the streets all summer, and would that enact a riot. The heat plays an important role in the outrage of a community. Tempers start to increase and patience decreases. James states that to prevent these uproars things need to be fixed first, labor unions need to be accessible to blacks, they need better higher paying jobs. Without these “Then, of course, we will be sitting on a powder keg all summer. Of course, the powder keg may blow up; it will be a miracle if it doesn’t.” (Baldwin 2016). This notion is a recurring theme in America. Lack of support of the black community will always end in unrest for everyone. Baltimore for example, from April to May of 2015 erupted after the death of Freddie Gray who was in police possession. Baltimore was already a vastly underrepresented community. The death of Freddie Gray caused a chain reaction in the community that ultimately started a riot that caused the city to catch fire.

### Lynching: an American Pastime

During my second year of graduate school I created two works of art titled "*Lynch Mob*" and "*Red, Black & Blue.*" Both works were inspired by Hank Willis Thomas' style of combining two images that might not be directly associated with each other but when put into a composition creates a story about the past and present. My work from my first two years deal with the perverse relationship between law enforcement and the black community.

During Jim Crow, blacks were regularly beaten and lynched as a public spectacle and many of these people were affiliated with law enforcement. Those who we entrust to protect and serve have been the foot soldiers in the dehumanization of the black body. In today's age of technology and social media, we have been exposed to the violence and discrimination placed

upon the black community through outlets such as YouTube, Instagram, and in the case of Philando Castile's murder, Facebook Live. The murders of innocent black people by the hand of the law is American history.



*Figure 3: By Author. "Lynch Mob", 2016, 36 x 72in, (Rope)*

In "*Lynch Mob*" I created a noose with rope and used it as a contour line drawing of a police force issued Glock 9mm handgun mounted on a matte black wall. The image of the gun is slanted pointing down at an angle to show that the individual who holds the gun is in a position of power. I try to represent the mutilation of black bodies in American history, from public lynching to public shootings streamed on the internet. The times might have changed but the issue remains the same.

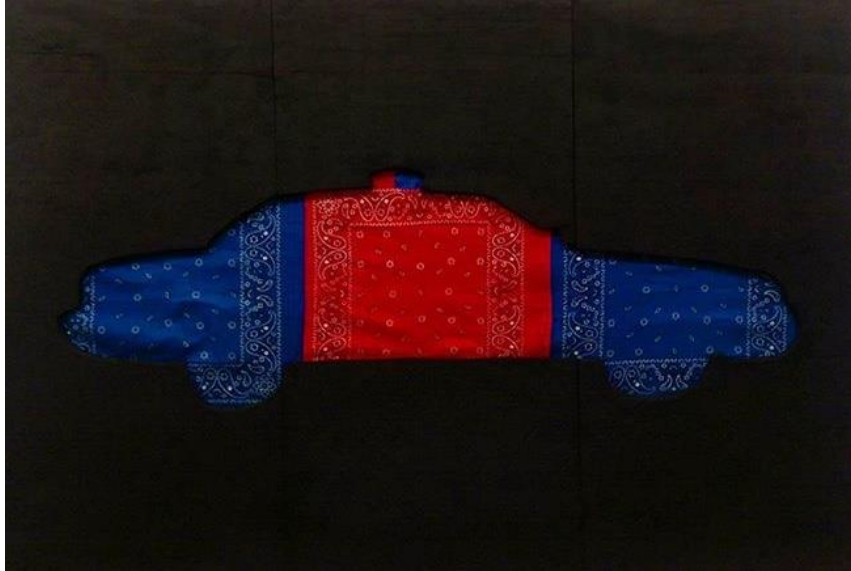


Figure 4: By Author. "Red, Black & Blue", 2016, 36 x 72in, (Bandanas and Plywood)

In "Red, Black & Blue" I chose to highlight the similarities of law enforcement and the popular criminal organization known as the Bloods and the Crips. The Bloods and the Crips started as organizations in Los Angeles, California during the early 1970's that were put in place to protect their communities against police and gang violence. In time the purpose and influences of these protective groups became corrupt. Law enforcement is no exception to this outcome. "To protect and serve" was a popular slogan used by law enforcement, and they were once believed to do so. Corruption in police departments have changed their relationship with the public.

# **THE REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN BLACK BODIES**

## Stereotypes and Archetypes of the Black Body

American history has represented the black body in a negative connotation since its inception. Racial stereotypes and archetypes were fashioned in the American antebellum south. This imagery was not only imposed on black men, black women and children faced misrepresentations of their character as well.

In the early 1900's images of black men were depicted as submissive, carefree, negligent, quick to avoid work, and rejoiced in the pleasures of food, dance and song. Sambo moved through life in the late 1920's when a white man by the name of Thomas D. Rice. Rice brought a new phenomenon to American theater. A self-proclaimed Ethiopian Delineator Thomas preformed in blackface. The name of his routine later became the representation of segregation in the American South.

The Jim Crow dance was formed in the antebellum South on the plantation, dancing for slaves became outlawed in the 1690's. Crossing your feet by the church was considered dancing during that time. Slaves shaped a new way of dancing by gliding and scuffling their feet to move around the law. "Wheel about, and turnabout, and jump just so, every time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow." This dance would later be stolen and used against the slave for the purpose validating slavery. Thomas D. Rice wore ragged clothes and impersonated these slaves on stage. The performance became such a hit in America that hundreds of white men began to do the same. Emulating this exaggerated character dance which became the Jim Crow character. Rice had no intentions of representing the truth about the black body. Never witnessing a free black

person before, or never humanizing them, this representation of blacks was bought by many people in Ohio, Louisiana, and the Erie Canal believing this interpretation to be the truth.

In 1843 a band of blackface performers joined together to create a single group, instead of calling themselves delineators like Rice, they called themselves minstrels. Minstrel shows captivated audiences across America, becoming popular national entertainment. Jim Crow, reflecting popular demand evolved into the singing, dancing, Sambo.

Sambo became the biggest force in the politics of slavery. Minstrel characters mirrored the prevailing belief that slavery was good for the slave. The happy Sambo was proof of this notion it drew upon his inferiority and his willingness to serve. If the slave was happy on the plantation then slavery must be good for the slave.

White Americans were bombarded with the imagery of happy slaves, this implied that the institution must be good if the slaves were happy. Whites in the Antebellum period liked to think of their slaves as Sambo, but they knew realistically that they could not run a successful plantation with Sambos. Sambos are lazy and happy, two of the most contradictory characteristics of slaves. Slaves worked under hard inhumane circumstances, regularly beaten, dismembered and raped. Violence was the motivating factor for the slave on the plantation. This caused a shift in attention from imitating slaves to imitating free blacks in the north. A new character made his debut as Zip Coon.

Coon, a fool attempts to imitate whites, this mocked the notion of racial equality. Zip Coon and Sambo provided a double defense for slavery. On one side you had Zip Coon who symbolized blacks failure to conform to newly found freedom, and on the other you had Sambo who symbolized the idea of happy “Darkies” in their rightful place on the plantation.

With these depictions of black men becoming more popular, the representation of black women evolved as well. The Mammy archetype is a fat, pitch black woman who is happily obedient to her master and mistress. Like the Sambo character she is also docile and loyal. She is seen as the protector of the Big House. Portrayed as overweight and ugly she was not viewed as a sexual being, although she was. If the Mammy character was represented as sexual she would have caused a threat to the mistress of the house and the whole system. Mammy would have been an object of desire by the master of the house, which often happened. The Mammy - and not just in depiction- was also a bed wench for her master. Subservient to the whites, the Mammy was portrayed differently with her own family.

Mammy strikes at two important concepts of gender in antebellum society. She is strong, asexual, and ugly; a woman is supposed to be beautiful, fragile, and dependent. Mammy was presented as the controller of her own people and the males in her own society. This is contrary to American societal norms of the time, where men were viewed as strong and controlling while the women were submissive. This indication represented the notion that the black race is inferior to the whites and would not succeed.

Portrayed as savages without the rule and guidance of whites; freedom for the black man meant that he would revert to his barbaric African ways. As time progressed old stereotypes were adapted to new politics. Before the slaves were emancipated the illusion of happiness on the plantation was a story that was necessary to tell to keep the institution alive. The portrayal of blacks as happy, docile servants made whites think that slavery was good for the slave. Now that freedom threatened their prosperity they must change the narrative to influence the masses that freedom was bad for the slave and bad for society.



D.W Griffith's 1915 film, "The Birth of a Nation" captured the typical characteristics of blacks following the Reconstruction era. Here liberation was viewed as a catastrophic mistake. The end of slavery meant blacks would let loose their wildest desires. Savage negros, portrayed by whites in blackface, were thirsty for white virgins. These images promoted extreme racial violence and justified it. Blacks were a sin to civilization. The savage, brute negro was not introduced earlier because it would have hindered the defense for slavery. If people saw these black caricatures as rebellious savages one could pose the argument that the plantation was not in fact paradise and that slaves wanted their freedom. This dehumanization of the black body validated the depiction of blacks as animalistic creatures.

Black children were portrayed as Pickaninnies. They were depicted as dirty, unkept hair and often stuck in a tree. There was a need to portray black children as animalistic and savage. If they are depicted as animals, it makes it easier to justify an alligator chasing it. Floridian alligator hunters would kidnap slave babies and use them as bait, tying them up in rope and leaving them by the edge of the swamp. At times even skinning them alive. The cries and struggle would attract the large alligators who would eat the babies. The rope would then be caught in the mouth of the alligator and they would then drag it to shore and hit it in the head with a pick axe.

The history of the American black body was conceived in exploitation, tortured for entertainment, and fought for survival with no hope for equality.

## BLACK BODIES IN TWO NATIONS

I was intrigued by the works Hank Willis Thomas created in South Africa and how they deal with blackness, and colorism in Africa. What could a black American have to say about the South African apartheid?

*“While in South Africa he was motivated by classified ads, political logos, magazine graphics and photographs made in South Africa before the openly democratic elections of 1994. Ernest Cole's photographs of the apartheid influenced Thomas' creation of "Raise up". In his piece "Raise Up" Thomas gives us the heads and arms of ten of the thirteen black miners pictured by Cole as they undergo a humiliating medical examination, in the nude.”*

Thomas created a bronze sculpture referencing this photo by selectively editing the original image. The treatment of the black body in America as well as in colonialized African countries were very similar. The dehumanization of the majority for the benefit of the minority has always been at the epicenter of racism against black people throughout the world. As a black American Hank Willis Thomas empathizes with the history of an African country that resembles our own history of being black in America.

As a child, I grew up in a home rich with culture and tradition. Wood carved sculptures and masks on the walls as well as different tapestries that all came from Cape Verde decorated our home. As a result, I had always considered myself African. Not every Cape Verdean has that same mentality. Some of the older generations, due to colorism, still align themselves with the colonizers. I have an uncle that thinks despite what his skin color is that he is Portuguese and not African. He is product of colonialism, disassociating himself from the people who look like him,

and taught to think this way through generations of systematic racism. This colonial way of thinking is part of my understanding of who I am and how we as Cape Verdeans perceive ourselves. Some of us side with the colonizers while others side with the revolution. Cape Verde is a relatively young country, it gained its independence from Portugal on July 5, 1975.

### Masks



*Figure 5: By Author, Mask Drawing Series, 2017 (India Ink, Acrylic, Craft paper)*

Inspired by the artifacts in my house, I chose to address them in the art. These drawings are an adaptation of traditional African masks and American cartoon styles. Researching how black bodies are represented in cartoons I began incorporating specific characteristics, such as the symbols for lips and noses, into each mask with a West African motif as the base to build on.



*Figure 6: By Author, Untitled (from Mask Drawing Series) 2017*

I was inspired by masks from various African tribes, from the Bangangte people in the western part of the Cameroons grasslands to the Ibibio people of Nigeria.

Masks of the Cameroons were intended to be worn on top of the head and does not have eyeholes. These masks were carved for kings and the carvers would be rewarded.



*Figure 7: By Author, Untitled (from Mask Drawing Series) 2017*

This mask drawing is inspired by the Bambara antelope mask. The Bambara are one of the largest tribes living in Mali, numbering at about one million. This mask belongs to a group of animal masks representing an antelope. It is associated with the Kore society of The Bambara people.

I chose to use craft paper to pull from American black history and tradition in reference to the Brown Paper Bag Test. The test was enforced by organizations within the black community to determine whether an individual could have specific privileges; only those with a skin color that matched or was lighter than a brown paper bag was allowed admission or membership privileges in these organizations. Highlighting specific exaggerated features in black cartoon characters, such as eyes, noses, and mouths allows the viewer to make connections to American cartoon styles while still alluding to the African inspired aesthetic.

Locked inside of my apartment, and compelled to make work during Hurricane Irma, cardboard boxes became my material of choice. Cardboard is a material that is viewed as trash in

our consumerist society, this trash material is repurposed into art through my practice. The cardboard material spoke to me and took on a personality of its own, the textures of the boxes revealed something to me. It was a natural progression from craft paper. It started with ink drawing renditions of African masks on craft paper and then eventually they transformed into 3D masks.



*Figure 8: By Author Mask 1, 2018 (Cardboard, Spray paint)*

The Ibibio mask was a point of reference for Mask 1. The Ibibio people are from southern Nigeria. The Ibibio mask is used to instill a sense of terror or fear in the uninitiated. Often the masks contain grotesque and disturbing exaggerated realism. With the Ibibio masks I focused on how they represented the eyes and the nose. I use the same spirals in my cardboard mask as they do in the wooden mask to represent these facial features.



*Figure 9: by Author Mask 2, 2018 (Cardboard, Spray paint)*

The reference for Mask 2 is another mask from the Ibibio people of Nigeria. This mask has a detachable jaw that is fastened in place with leather strips. Still highlighting the facial features of the Ibibio mask, I use the eyes and nose as reference.

The next two masks I created are entitled "Yo, Chocolate!" and "King of No Nation." It was in these two masks that I figured out how to unify the tribal markings and the cardboard together. Artists such as Willie Cole create art inspired by African culture, tribes, scarification, and mark making. Cole burns patterns from hot irons into wood and paper; the burn marks from the hot iron or its steam holes leaves patterns in the material resembling those of traditional African Tribes. I use colored cardboard in my masks to reference African scarification and tribal markings. Willie Cole also thinks of these steam irons as tribes named by their brands. (i.e. Black and Decker Tribe, Sunbeam Tribe, GE Tribe, etc.) He repurposes found materials and creates assembled masks out of shoes, hair dryers, and steam irons. Through the repetitive use of these

single items in multiples he sets up a critique of American consumer culture. My work continues the critique that Cole sets up by making work out of the byproduct of consumerism - the is cardboard packaging. I make art out of repurposed materials as well. My sculptures are made of all the same materials and I do not add a finish on it to stay true to the material.



*Figure 10: By Author, "Yo! Chocolate!", 2018, (Cardboard)*

In "Yo, Chocolate!" I used a Yoo-Hoo Drink box to make the eyelashes and the hair. The lips were made from a red cardboard box. In this piece labels from a Yoo-Hoo box create the headdress. This mask is a celebration of color, chocolate is a reference to the melanin found in the skin of people of color.





Figure 11: By Author, "King of No Nation", 2018, (Cardboard)

"King of No Nation" is made from cardboard and two shoe boxes. I made the head piece from a Nike shoe box and a dress shoe box. "King of No Nation" was very much a reflection of self. A self-proclaimed king who does not fully belong anywhere. It also alludes to the notion of code switching, the ability to change one's persona and demeanor to advance oneself in a workplace or community.

Authentic African art is made with a purpose, whether it be a celebration or a traditional ceremony the masks had a spiritual meaning. The work I was exposed to was kitsch African art that's only purpose was economic stability for an outside group of people. In his 1989 essay "*Black Culture and Postmodernism*" Dr. Cornel West explains how Black culture has shaped

modern society on an international level and has been used as a commodity for White interest. Dr. West states “Black cultural products have historically served as a major source for European and Euro-American exotic interests—interests that issue from a healthy critique of the mechanistic, puritanical, utilitarian, and productivity aspects of modern life.” (Natoli & Hutcheon 1993)

Due to the lack of natural resources on the islands, Cape Verdean economy is heavily based on tourism. Merchants from other mainland African countries, mainly Senegal, migrate to Cape Verde and sell wooden sculptures and trinkets to tourists and send the money back to their families in Senegal. As a kid I thought the masks and sculptures I grew up seeing in my house were real traditional African artifacts. As I grew older I realized they were African kitch art. Mass produced to be sold to tourists as a commodity to profit from.

### Sculptures

Curious about what lives my masks would take on as figures “in the round”. I created a series of cardboard sculptures that were influenced by the African sculptures I grew up around. I infuse abstract African motifs with racist stereotypes and archetypes from American history. *Sam* was the first sculpture to touch on these topics, then came *Othello* and *Jemima*. Continuing with my original motivations these larger-than-life sculptures comment on consumerism, racial identity, racism, and cultural appropriation by Western and European society. Pablo Picasso and many others are famously known for appropriating African art. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art regarding the use of African Art as artistic inspiration, “While these artists knew nothing of the original meaning and function of the West and Central African sculptures they encountered, they instantly recognized the spiritual aspect of the composition and adapted these

qualities” (Murrell 2008). While Oxford Reference defines cultural appropriation as, “A term used to describe the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another. It is in general used to describe Western appropriations of non-Western or non-white forms and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance” (2017). According to this definition Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and their peers are guilty of cultural appropriation; the creation and advancement of the cubist movement was erected from the works of African artists who were never credited.



*Figure 12: By Author, “Sam” 2018, (Cardboard)*

Sam is a representation of the Sambo archetype. The focal point is the mouth, it is a reference to how the Sambo mouth is portrayed in antebellum advertisement. The large

grinning smile is based on the notion that Sambo is a happy, carefree, slave who loves his place on the plantation.



*Figure 13: By Author, "Othello" 2018, (Cardboard)*

Othello, Inspired by the Shakespearean play of the same name. Othello was a Moor and general of the Venetian army. He is described in the play by many negative racial connotations, for example Iago (Othello's junior officer) tells Brabantio (the father of Desdemona, who is Othello's lover) that "an old black ram / is tugging your white ewe" or when Roderigo (a venetian who loves Desdemona) refers to Othello as "the thicklips". In film and in theater, Othello has been portrayed by white men in blackface still alluding to the Zip coon stereotype. Othello is then tricked into thinking Desdemona is cheating on him, he turns into a savage out of rage and kills her and himself. Laurence Olivier won his 7<sup>th</sup> Oscar in portrayal of Othello in blackface. Another example of how the African culture has been appropriated for western advancement and entertainment



*Figure 14: By Author, "Jemima" 2018, (Cardboard)*

This piece is entitled Jemima and she is modeled after the mammy archetype. I take inspiration from West African Motifs and intertwine them with American racial stereotypes and archetypes to create my sculptures. I want to create a dialog for understanding the past, so we can begin to better comprehend one another in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

This work shows the process of understanding how the representation of black people in American history has shaped the way they perceive themselves as well as how others perceive them. I try to understand who I am as a black man in America and how these previous notions of black identity have impacted the world black people live in. By connecting American and African motifs I try to deconstruct my understanding of both identities and refabricate a new sense of self. I wish to show my audience the journey of that understanding, through symbols, materials, and representations of the black body.

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