

WOODS, STEPHANIE J, M.F.A. Weaving Weave (2015)
Directed by Mariam Aziza Stephan 29 pp.

As an artist I frequently disclose memories shared with my mother, aunts and friends to explore the identities of African American women; specifically their relationship to their hair and skin complexion post slavery. My videos, sculptures, and photography explore multilayered issues, such as-what are ways African American women use hair manipulation as a mask to hide their true identities? And, what are the effects of colorism in present day society?

WEAVING WEAVE

by

Stephanie J. Woods

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2015

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Mariam Aziza Stephan

Committee Members

Nikki Blair

Elizabeth Perrill

Amy Purcell

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Sharon Blassingame and Johannes Barfield for their artist support, and assistance throughout graduate school.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
WEAVING WEAVE.....	1
WORK CITED.....	16
CATALOGUE OF IMAGES.....	19

WEAVING WEAVE

As an artist I frequently disclose memories shared with my mother, aunts and friends to explore the identities of African American women; specifically their relationship to their hair and skin complexion post slavery. My videos, sculptures, and photography explore multilayered issues, such as-what are ways African American women use hair manipulation as a mask to hide their true identities? And, what are the effects of colorism in present day society?

Some of my sculptures are wearable, while others are about turning the body into a work of art by painting my own body. These works are accomplished through the use of materials that bear connotations within the African American community and that have become symbolic media for me in my search to understand my own relationship to my cultural history, including: synthetic hair weave, makeup, brown paper bags, and hair gel.

Hair has been an important and confusing aspect of my life since adolescence. I have transformed my hair utilizing many different styles: sew in weaves, braids, relaxed hair, hot comb treatments and locs. I was not aware of the implications that my hair might have, but I did notice how people would respond to different hairstyles in my community.

At Ranson middle school, located in Charlotte NC, I wore my hair in two Afro puffs, while the majority of the black girls at school wore their hair either relaxed or hot combed. During middle school my friends were fascinated with my hair, they would try

to alter my natural hair by braiding, or simply playing in my hair. However my hair was not looked at as a respectable hairstyle, as were styles achieved by those using relaxers and weaves: subjectively my hair was considered unkempt.

The comedian/actor Chris Rock is known for his work dealing with race relations. One of his works is a documentary directed by Jeff Stilson, titled *Good Hair*. *Good Hair* shows Chris Rock interviewing mostly Black Americans about what “good hair” is and takes you on a journey to understand Black American hair culture. *Good Hair* is but a small peak into Black American hair culture, but nonetheless it provides Black Americans and others with information that could be life changing. Importantly, it is a documentary produced both for and by African Americans.

The black hair and identity dilemma does not exist solely in hair; skin color is also connected to hair in African American communities. Historically, if you were of a lighter complexion you were expected to have a finer grade of hair, which is known as “good hair,” the concept that the Chris Rock Documentary is named after. Darker toned blacks were expected to have kinkier hair. Not only is skin color tied to hair but also status and how you are treated inside and outside of the black community. These historical concepts continue to exert power in African American communities.

For example: I am a fair skinned black woman, while trying to fit into black communities in North Carolina during the 1990s, until I graduated high school in 2008, I underwent constant ridicule. Women would say I was “stuck up” or say that I thought I was “all that.” It was very hard for me to make friends with girls that were a darker shade

than me. The constant ridicule by my peers resulted in a childhood resentment of my complexion. I can recall numerous days that I would stare in the mirror imagining myself as darker. I would wonder what it would be like to be “caramel” like my older brother or “chocolate” like the rest of my relatives. Anything would have been better than “light bright,” “red bone,” or “white girl.”

Superficial Tension is a series of photographs question and confronting the effects of colorism on women of color (fig. 1-3). My best friend during high school Laporsha Leake, another fair skinned black women, was curious one day for a class project to see what I would look like dressed up as Oprah Winfrey; in order to do so we used makeup to cover my entire face dark brown. Of course we were joking when we decided to transform our appearance. However looking back the gesture of covering my face dark brown was an extremely powerful statement, which I decided to expand upon. Using the Covergirl Queen Collection, I choose three different shades of brown to transform my face “spicy brown”, “rich milk”, and “golden honey.” In the photographs that are documentation of this performance piece, I have chosen to stare straight at the viewer, like a face off into a mirror with a deep stare. By confronting my own insecurities head-on I challenge the viewer to confront his or her own preconceptions and self-construction.

Ranson middle school was a majority black school. While attending Ranson, the clothes I wore and the slang I spoke conformed to the group norm. However the cultural capital of my middle school was extremely different to the norms I would experience at my high school, Myers Park, a majority white school. According to Prudence Carter in

Black Cultural Capital Status Positioning and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth, Pierre Bourdieu developed his idea of cultural capital to explain how individuals prefer certain cultural signals, such as attitudes, preferences, taste, and styles. In turn, these choices can enable or limit their entry into high status social groups, organizations, or institutions. Bourdieu also believed that schools help reproduce a stratified class system that strengthens the dominant social group's cultural capital (Cater, 2003, 1).

The idea of status plays a large role in how black women treat each other and how they augment their physical features. In 1712, a slave owner named Willie Lynch delivered a speech on the bank of the James River Colony of Virginia. Willie Lynch was a British slave owner in the West Indies. He was invited to the colony of Virginia to teach his methods to slave owners there (Thomas, 2013, 1).

Lynch devised a plan that he believed was sure to suppress blacks, by breaking their own confidence in themselves. He began to divide the slaves by color, making the lighter shade slaves house slaves, and the darker shade slaves field slaves. In his exact words at the speech in 1712 he spoke, "you must use the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin slaves." In doing so he began to exploit, a hierarchy and distrust amongst blacks. This is one example of deliberate manipulation that installed feelings of inferiority amongst darker black Americans and encouraged a need or cultural capital to those who conformed to white ideals of beauty (Thomas, 2013, 2).

During the early 1900s Blacks began implementing the brown paper bag test. The brown paper bag test was a test among upper class African-American societies and families to determine if a black person was sufficiently white to gain admittance or acceptance. A light brown paper bag would be placed next to black Americans faces. If your skin was darker than the paper bag, you did not merit inclusion. If you were lighter than a bag, you were allowed access to an event, which in earlier cases were black churches. Yet sororities and fraternities also used the paper bag test. The brown paper bag test, as well as less explicitly comparisons within communities, had the effect of creating a caste-system within the African-American community (Morrow, 1989, 54).

Brown paper bags were not only tied to skin complexion but also the manipulation of hair, a fact that has added to this material's connotations within my own artistic practice. Once slaves were brought to America hair grooming could not be as high of a priority as it once was in Africa due to material and time constraints. During slavery black women would wash their hair with dishwater because the oil in the water would add moisture to their hair, black American women had to find ways to groom their hair by any means necessary. Not having the appropriate hair-grooming tools encouraged the perception that white Americans hair was better. African American women and men would iron their hair straight to make their hair appear more European and easier to comb. Women were even known to stretch their hair out straight and curl their hair with the same brown paper bags that were used to measure the shade of their complexion (Morrow, 1989, 66).

A combination of personal experiences and historical research inspired me to create two sculptures based upon the shocking details I uncovered during my research. My sculptures are customarily made of found materials, and those materials guide my decision-making process. However, recently I have been seeking out materials that are heavily associated with my personal experiences and research.

The work of Artist Rashid Johnson resonated strongly with my research and had provided me with several ideas. His material choices have many layers to them, such as shea butter, black soap, cocoa butter, and pink lotion hair moisturizer. These materials bring back a lot of memories for me. I remember times my mom and I would go to the African corner store to buy raw shea butter and black soap, for our skin and hair. Also I remember smothering pink lotion in my older brother's hair when I would cornrow his hair. I found that objects and materials have powerful memory agents that induce nostalgia.

Not only did the materials bring back memories of experiences, but also memories of smells and touch. Raw shea butter has a very strong smell that is borderline unbearable. In addition to the smell, it has an oily butter feeling that melts into your hands when rubbed together. Raw shea butter can be used on Black American hair to add moisture, make the hair easier to comb, and stretch the natural curl of the hair.

In *The Brown Paper Bag Test* I decided to use brown paper bags in combination with found materials. The found materials became an armature to convey my struggle with skin color as a child. I began to make flowers out of the paper bags to symbolize

beauty. The flowers were then spray painted with a pearl gloss coat to give them a glitter shimmer. In addition to the flowers, I decided to incorporate a wool texture fiber material to symbolize blown out African American hair; the wool was braided, twisted and left loose. As I began to work with the brown paper bags, I decided to Paper Mache the paper bags over a Papassan chair frame that I found on the curb and deconstructed. The paper began to build up in layers hiding the identity of the chair, and transforming into an egg like form. As I continued to feel my way through the sculpture adding shades of blue fabric in the “Zulu knot” hairstyle for adornment, the piece began to resemble a mask. I began playing with the egg shaped sculpture in relationship to my body. As I began to wear the sculpture with just my thighs down to my feet showing, it appeared as though I was breaking out of an egg. This had many metaphors to it considering the history of brown paper bags, which I consider the birth of segregation amongst American blacks, and the need to conform to European ideals in black American communities (fig. 4).

I also decided to involve the community in the performance aspect of *The Brown Paper Bag Test* sculpture. One day I placed an aid on craigslist looking for black female models to pose for a photo shoot involving the sculpture. The idea behind the piece was to get woman of different shades from light to dark to pose in the same position behind the paper mask sculpture. In the end two African American women were photographed, one a darker complexion, and one a lighter complexion in the same pose. The lighter shade woman wore light gold shoes, and the darker shade model worn the same shoes in black. The two models simplified colorism to light and dark, which are the most popular

ways of describing complexion in black communities, even though black people make up so many shades of color. To dig deeper into my exploration of brown paper bags, I decided to construct another sculpture titled *How to Get Halle Berry Hair* using paper bags as content, in combination with hair rollers, brown wool, and synthetic hair weave (fig. 5).

As mentioned earlier, black women would curl their hair with brown paper bags. In response, I began taking black hair foam rollers that my mother and I would use when I was younger to curl our hair. As a child we would take toilet paper and wrap it around the foam rollers to keep our hair from getting stuck in the foam. I decided to replace the toilet paper with brown paper bags. In doing so, I was merging the past with the present. As I continued developing the piece, the rollers began to take on the form of a crown. In addition to the paper bags that were wrapped around the rollers, I also wrapped synthetic hair weave around the rollers. Next I began to construct an armature that spreads out like a large upside down geometric Afro. The armature was covered with woven wool, the same material I used in *The Brown Paper Bag Test*. As I was making this piece I thought about an article I read by Tonya Jeter and Denise Crittendon titled “*Black hair: a crown of glory and versatility.*”

The Jeter and Crittendon article speaks about the versatility of black hair because of its woolly texture. Due to the stiffness of black Americans hair, many hairstyle opportunities are opened up. The possibilities are endless which offers room for

creativity. One woman in the article would get her hair sculpted into a different hairstyle every week. She liked the versatility her hair offered; some of the hair styles mentioned in the article would go as high as eight to ten inches above the clients head, resembling European wigs in the 18th century (Crittendon, 1994, 3).

Black hair texture does offer a wide range of possibilities. Nevertheless, black women are constantly trying to make their hair appear less kinky by the means described above, gelling down their natural hair texture, or by adding weaves that either straight or resemble their everyday hair texture. This tension between possibility and self-hate of natural hair lies at the heart of my research. I have seen a lot of self-hate among women of color trying to transform, and hide their natural hair.

Throughout middle school my peers and I would gel down our baby hair, the hair at the edges of the scalp, as a way of transforming our natural edges into decorative designs. Gelled down edges not only allowed us to express ourselves creatively, but it was also a way to hide our natural hair texture. For the entire day we were allowed to have “good hair” and be innovative at the same time. My video and wall installation both titled *Gelled Down Baby Hair* use hair gel as their primary medium. In the video I divide the screen into nine frames like the Brady Bunch introductory credits. The frames show the same person repeatedly styling her hair into a single hairstyle. In the video I am rolling, gelling, blow drying, combing, and saran wrapping my hair to achieve this hairstyle. The short film shows the everyday ritual of maintaining and transforming

natural African American hair. Similarly, yet more abstractly, in the wall installation *Gelled Down Baby Hair* I use brown Ampro hair gel, and synthetic hair weave on reflective metallic paper to create a decorative line drawing inspired by recollections of me gelling down my own hair. During the creation of this piece I use a comb and brush on the paper surface as I would on my own skin. The end result has a visually appealing glare from afar but as the viewer gets closer you began to see the ugly truth of how these beautifully decorative designs were created.

Another work evolved from observations of my family. My mother would wear wigs all the time when I was growing up. When I was given the privilege to see her natural hair it would always be a treat. She had the largest Afro you could imagine. She would wake my brother and I up in the morning, that was the only time we were able to see her hair. We would joke about how she looked like a lion, and we were constantly trying to touch her hair. She would explain to us how she could not wear her hair like that to work; she had to look professional, as if her hair was not professional. Upon my request, my mother gave me some of her wigs, which I later used in *How to Get Halle Berry Hair*.

One of the wigs she gave me was made up of three different colors, bronze, dark brown, and black. The wig changed colors in a gradient that complemented the colors already in my piece. I decided to sew the wig onto the front of the sculpture with the back of the wig facing forward, like a face coming out of the crown I made of rollers. The wig

was straight curled hair that became the face of the headpiece. Thus creating a mystery of what or who was behind the wig like a mask (fig. 5).

Masks are one of the most ancient forms of changing someone's identity, and assuming a new persona. A mask can empower a person by concealing or transforming their identity, which allows them to act out hidden parts of themselves or convey secret thoughts to others; mask can even transform a person into a spiritual being. Mask can relieve the wearer of inhibitions and allow the expression of personalities traits that the mask wearer feels unable to express readily. A mask is one of the greatest examples of physical transformation that washes away any evidence of a person's old self to become anew.

I have created a series of hair weave masks titled *Weave Idolatry* made of synthetic weave that inspired the idea of using the wig as a mask. The hair weave masks function as freestanding sculptural objects, as well as performance art props (fig. 6-10). These sculpture address transformation, suppression and creativity all at once.

Hair weave has been a natural part of my existence; During the 90s I would get my hair cornrowed every three weeks with extensions, and wooden beads would be placed on the ends of the hair. It was considered normal to have weave. The possibilities included kinky twist, micro braids, cornrows, or Senegalese twist: all of these hairstyles were considered black hairstyles and it was a widely held opinion that they promoted hair growth.

However, the longer you wore those hairstyles the thinner your hair would get around your edges, because every strand of hair would be pulled tightly into the hairstyles causing stress on the hair. Even though these were considered black hairstyles, they were also a way of transforming, and hiding your natural hair, by making it appear longer. My friends were obsessed with the idea of having long hair; it would seem preposterous to cornrow short weave into one's hair. Weave reflected an obsession with having long thick hair. Weave signifies many levels of status in terms of cultural capital. The longer and silkier your hair's weave was would mean you had more money to take care of your self. If your weave was human hair, as opposed to synthetic fibers, it held even greater status associations. Synthetic weave meant you did not have the funds to buy a higher grade of hair, as well as short weave, or kinky weave. Black natural hair has an extremely tight curl pattern that contracts when left loose. The curl pattern of black hair can appear to be short, thus creating an obsession with having long thick silky hair, to mask the natural appearance of black hair.

I have a love hate relationship with weave, which inspired *Weave Idolatry*. I love the versatility weave offers, but I hate the desire and need for black women to wear weave. It is not a surprise that hair weave has become the modern day brown paper bag rollers used during slavery. Hair weave offers a more dramatic effect of hair manipulation than hair altering tools of the past. Hair can transform your identity drastically to the point where someone can look like a new person, by dyeing their hair a different color, or cutting their hair. I consider weaves to be modern day masks that hide the faces of black

women. The series of synthetic hair weave mask began with a suitcase. I was visiting my friend Johannes Barfields parents, come to find out there was a suitcase full of black synthetic hair weave in their basement. They asked me if I wanted to have some and I decided to take the entire suitcase. I was not sure what I was going to do with it, but I knew it was like finding gold. Before finding the suitcase full of weave I was dedicating a lot of my time to fiber arts, specifically weaving. So the first thing I thought to do with the weave was to, logically, weave the hair. I would weave the hair on home made looms made of multiple sizes of painter's frames. I developed an addiction to weaving hair; it was relaxing but also extremely messy. Everywhere I went I would leave a trail of hair.

After I gathered all the weavings I made, I began sewing the sections together to make a mask. The idea for the mask came from a statement made by my friend Johannes. He said, "I can never tell what some black women look like because they have a new hairstyle every week." This statement, and *The Brown Paper Bag Test* mask mentioned earlier, made me think of weave as a mask, as a form of transformation. The first mask weaving I constructed developed into a mask that was inspired by a hairstyle that was very common to me, the "fake ponytail."

The mask was made of all black hair weave that covered the face, with a long woven piece of hair hanging from the back of the head like a ponytail. I have created a series of five synthetic weave masks that were inspired by different hairstyles. The colors, and forms that the masks evolved into are inspired by different personalities. For

example, one of the masks I created uses: pink, blue, black, and red weave I purchased. The multi colored hair mask was inspired by my childhood hairstyles. I would get my hair braided in two-layered cornrows. The top layers of cornrows were placed in a ponytail, while the bottom layer would hang down. I consider the color pattern I created on the surface of the mask to be youthful and fun.

My aunt Diane's elegant updo hairstyles inspired another mask. She would always wear her hair in an updo that had hair weave stuffed in a bun. As I worked on the hair weavings, my memories of hairstyles developed into abstract forms. The forms would cover the face completely, making the face appear blank, and wiped away. When these masks are placed over the face the wearer becomes blind and stripped of any visual identity.

As a way of documenting the five masks, I formulated a concept for a photographic piece in which the same person would be wearing different masks that transform their identity with each change of "costume." I decide to paint my body black to place more emphasis on the mask in addition to masking my appearance completely for a video performance piece that accompany the artifacts.

Black Americans continue to have a complex and convoluted relationship with their hair. Hair will always be important within black communities because of the history associated with hair and the intense need and struggle to maintain and augment hair. Black women learn as children the importance of grooming their hair. However often

times they are not taught how to properly groom their hair. As Willie Morrows stated in *400 Years Without A Comb*, Black Americans have had to learn how to take back their hair, and learn how to properly take care of their hair. There have been many hair trends over the course of Black American history, which include: hot combs, relaxers, Afros, jerry curls, weaves, and now in the 21st century yet another natural hair trend. My body of work adds to many influential African American artworks, artworks which explore the history and politics of hair, and beauty culture in black American communities:

These are not simply hairdos: these are elaborate constructions, with hair piled high woven with ornaments and shaped like fans, wedding cakes, hourglasses, and halos. Maybe they are crowns, maybe they're altars. Extensions here are used not to showcase length or naturalness. This is hair as textile, fiber art as nothing less than sculpture

-Jones, 1998, 4.

WORKS CITED

400 Years without a Comb. Prod. Willie Morrow. California Curl LTD, 1989.

Videocassette.

Emerson, Michael O, Shelton, Jason E. "2/So Rooted a Past: Slavery and African American Protestant Religious Tradition." Blacks and Whites in Christian America. New York and London: New York UP, 2012. 31-47

Jeter, Tonya, and Denise Crittendon. 1994. "Black Hair: a crown of Glory and Versatility." Crisis 10 (2) (February-March): 7

Ducille, Ann. 1994. "Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference," Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, 6.1 (Spring): 46-68.

The Power of Black Hair. You tube. Chocolate Films, 16 July 2009. Web. 7 Sept. 2014.

Jones, Kelli. 1998. "In the Thick of it: David Hammons and Hair Culture in the 1970s."

Third Text: Third world Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture 44 (Autumn): 17-24.

Leach, Edmund R. 1958 "Magical Hair." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 88: 147-164

Okazawa-Rey, Margo, Robinson, Tracey, and Ward, Janie. 1986. "Black Women and the Politics of Skin Color and Hair." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 14, I and 2 (Spring/Summer):13-14

A Question of Color. Prod. Kathe Sandler. California Newsreel, 1992. Videocassette.

Owens Patton, Tracey. 2006 "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair? African American Women and their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair." *Feminist Formations* 18.2: 24-51

Moos, David. *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization?* Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010.

Firth, Raymond. "8/ Hair As Private Asset And Public Symbol." *Symbols Public and Private*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1975. 262-98

Evans, Curtis J. "1/ The Meaning of Slave Religion." *The Burden of Black Religion*. Oxford New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 17-63

Carter, Prudence L. "'Black' Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth." *Social Problems* 50.1 (2003): 1-21.

Geoffroy-Schneiter, Bérénice. *Ethnic Style: History and Fashion*. New York: Assouline, 2001.

Nunley, John W., and Cara McCarty. *Masks: Faces of Culture*. New York: Abrams in Association with the Saint Louis Art Museum, 1999.

Finkel, Jori. "I Dream the Clothing Electric." *The New York Times*, 31 Mar. 2009. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/arts/design/05fink.html?pagewanted=al>>

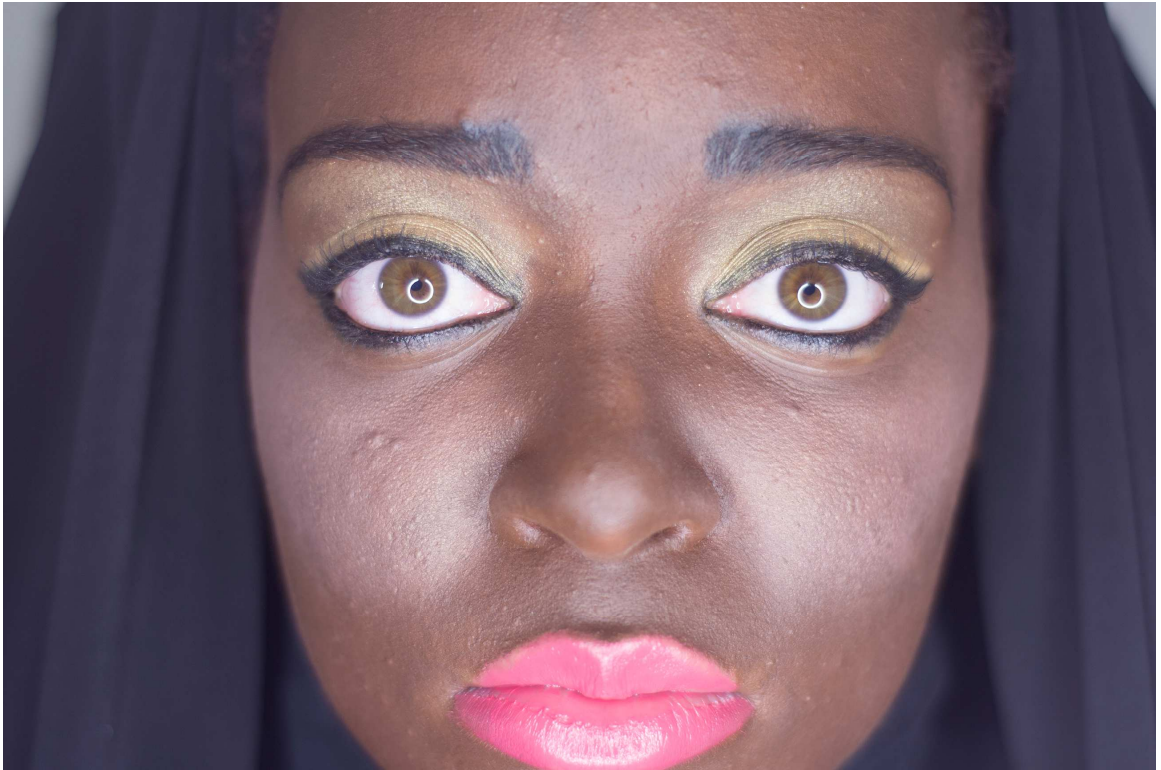
Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Made By Whites For Whites." *White Paper*: 1-16.

Simpson, Lorna, Okwui Enwezor, Helaine Posner, and Hilton Als. *Lorna Simpson*. New York: Abrams, in Association with the American Federation of Arts, 2006.

Thomas, Justin. "Investigative Journalism." *Investigative Journalism JRN-4600*. University of North Carolina at Pembroke, 2013. Web. 07 Dec. 2014.

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

1. *Superficial Tension*, Queen Collection Spicy Brown Makeup, Photography, 2015.
2. *Superficial Tension*, Queen Collection Rich Mink Makeup, Photography, 2015.
3. *Superficial Tension*, Queen Collection Golden Honey Makeup, Photography, 2015.
4. *The Brown Paper Bag Test*, Brown Paper Bags, fabric, wood, Photography, 2014.
5. *How To Get Halle Berry Hair*, Wool, Rollers, Wig, Brown Paper Bags, Photography, 2015.
6. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.
7. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.
8. *Weave Idolatry* Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.
9. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.
10. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.



1. *Superficial Tension*, Queen Collection Spicy Brown Makeup, Photography, 2015.



2. *Superficial Tension*, Queen Collection Rich Mink Makeup, Photography, 2015.



3. *Superficial Tension*, Queen Collection Golden Honey Makeup, Photography, 2015.



4. *The Brown Paper Bag Test*, Brown Paper Bags, fabric, wood, Photography, 2014.



5. *How To Get Halle Berry Hair*, Wool, Rollers, Wig, Brown Paper Bags, Photography, 2015.



6. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.



7. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.



8. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.



9. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.



10. *Weave Idolatry*, Synthetic Hair Weave, Black Body Paint, Photography, 2014.