

**Black Artistry, Beauty, Self-Expression, and Community: Stories and Experiences from
Black Barbershops and Salons in Lewiston/Auburn, Maine**

*A work of public scholarship, produced by the professors and students of Africana 100 at Bates
College, Fall 2023*

This essay is an extension of the work of Africana 100 at Bates College. The theme of the course this year is “Seeing and Being Seen” and it focuses on affirming Blackness in a context of anti-Black racism, and white supremacy. The multi-disciplinary coursework for this class led up to a community-engaged project, in which students met and interviewed Black women and men who own and/or run barbershops and salons in the Lewiston and Auburn area. In keeping with the course focus, the goal of this collaboration was to give students first-hand experience with people whose economic livelihoods are intertwined with how Black people are seen and see themselves. As a community engaged project we were especially concerned with reciprocity—what could Bates students do to further the entrepreneurial goals of Black business in Maine. What follows is a collaborative production, highlighting broad themes in the experiences of Black hair care providers. The identification of these themes is not to suggest that these experiences are homogenous. On the contrary, Blackness is not a homogenous identity, and that is especially evident in a state like Maine, and a community like Lewiston-Auburn, which has witnessed major population shifts in the past two decades. While all of the hair care providers we met were Black people, they also had differences of gender, region of origin, racial identity, ethnicity, and country of birth. These differences show how economic, social, and political conditions reflect the modern African diasporic population in Lewiston-Auburn. Through this project we were able to shed light on Black barbershops and salons as important entrepreneurial endeavors that historically have done the vital work of celebrating Black culture and connecting communities by allowing Black people to be seen as beautiful, stylish, confident, and professional.

While some of those who work in Black barbershops and salons in Lewiston and Auburn, like Rosa of Taboo Hair Design, did grow up in Maine, many did not. As a consequence of their diverse upbringings, these people have unique perspectives of these cities. For example, Tyrone, who works at 207 Barbershop, grew up in a low-income neighborhood of New York. He rarely got out into nature and had not explored much of the northeast, but upon moving up to Maine he has developed new hobbies for 4-wheeling, ATVing, and wants to start skiing. The Maine community is one that he wants to connect to more, and feels like there are barriers that need to be overcome to do so. Joe, another barber, spoke about an initial sense of disconnection as a result of the predominantly white community in the area. He felt out of place, but as he connected to the community and more people of color moved to Lewiston, he has embraced the diverse group of people around him. He feels a specific sense of connection to other barbers, and said that they all help uplift and support each other. Others spoke similarly, saying that they have all historically supported each other, sending each other clients and promoting each other to create a network of Black barbers across Maine. We see this network of community and support between Black barbers and hairstylists as a founding of a “third place” in the overwhelmingly white state of Maine.

While Joe felt a sense of connection to other barbers working in the area, not everyone shared this same experience. One spoke, in this sense, about a feeling of separation between the African and African-American Black communities, and they noted how this feeling—which, as scholars like Bates Sociologist Dr. Marcelle Medford have shown, does not necessarily reflect

the complex ways that Black communities from different regions are interconnected with each other—had made building solidarity with other local Black barbers more challenging than it might ideally be. Another hinted at a question about competition, wondering if they had made the right decision to open up a shop in the Lewiston-Auburn area when there were several other shops and salons already in operation.

These stories show how the work of cutting and tending to hair is inherently intertwined with larger political questions about demographics, community belonging, identity, and beauty. Some barbers and salon-owners we spoke with avoided speaking directly about race and racial dynamics, but even in those instances we saw how subtle hints and throwaway comments relate to the politics of being seen, community engagement, safe spaces, brotherhood (and sisterhood), and expression. One of the barbers, for example, said he had never really experienced racism and was primarily just focused on giving nice haircuts. But his comments about helping his client “make a statement” and “look clean” foregrounded the idea that, because haircutting allows for Black expression and being seen, it is (intentionally or not) a form of racial politics even if said politics isn’t explicitly named. Crafting hair in different haircuts is essential to the expression of clientele coming into barbershops. His clients are focused on their appearance, partially because hair is a primary marker of Blackness that can be embraced and amplified by the hairstyling he does. He knows this and considers it his job to give his clients those tools to express their Blackness in conjunction with stylishness and beauty.

As a result of this project, we came to see how the cutting of and tending to hair is, essentially, an overlooked artform. As a form of art, it inspires passion among those who practice it. When speaking to Terry from FreshCutz, his passion for cutting hair was clear in his answers and his voice. When discussing cutting hair and its connection to the community, he emphasizes that his main focus is on the relationships he builds with his clients. In Terry’s view, “people tend to hold a large piece of their confidence and personality to their hair”—His point being that hair care is a means of self-expression that can enrich a community and further bind them to each other. Rosa from Taboo Hair Design felt similarly. She expressed her love for her work and mentioned how she always made an effort to tend hair efficiently and with lots of care in order to have her clients present the best version of themselves to the world. Rosa feels that styling hair “feeds her soul.”

One member of our class experienced Rosa’s artistry and passion directly when he went to her to have his hair done. The following paragraph, written by the student about that experience, shows the complicated ways that identity, expression, community, and care are bound together during a visit to a Black barbershop or a salon:

By the second visit, Rosa and I were connecting on a deeper level. Before braiding my hair we listened to the legend Michael Jackson as she explained how she carefully but quickly weaved and braided hair. It seemed second nature to her. We began to talk about her family, and I could tell she is a loving, caring, devoted mother. Her story was very interesting to me because, like me, she is interracial. I asked if being mixed had ever been or caused any issues in her life, and she told me about a particular time when someone in the shop called her the term “Mulatto”, I wasn’t familiar with the term, so while my hair was being caressed by Rosa I looked up the word. We laughed with Rosa as she told us her reaction to this incident. Her dedication to her customers was evident in her continuous attention to her multiple clients, me included, who were in various stages of their hairstyling. Rosa’s presence at Taboo was like the favorite aunt at a family

reunion, everyone that walked in knew her name and she had a different story to tell me about each one. I really enjoyed these conversations.

Despite the evident importance—to customers and to these haircutters—of this artistry, a number of the haircutters spoke about encountering challenges in their training. A common theme was the failure on the part of local and regional schools to recognize the needs of Black customers and, by extension, Black haircutters. Terry, in this regard, went to barber school in Augusta and was only taught to cut hair with sheers. He did not receive training with clippers and guards of different kinds. Shears are more suited to the qualities of white hair, which tends to be thin, straight, and malleable. Black hair, in contrast, is much easier to navigate with clippers. Although Terry's program has seen some reform and is currently offering more diverse courses that teach haircutters to work with clippers, he also noted that—when he raised the possibility of adding clippers to the curriculum—his idea was rejected.

Tyrone went to barber school in Augusta as well, and he learned how to cut predominantly white hair; however, he noted that upon moving to Lewiston and working at 207 Barbershop, he has struggled to connect with the white customer base. Being a Black barber in a predominantly white neighborhood comes with challenges, because of differences—which he called cultural—that can manifest in communication styles and expectations. He is happy to have a lot of Black customers to work with, but feels like the white community in Lewiston is apprehensive about coming into his shop because they assume the shop is tailored only to Black clients. He wants to break the barriers between different cultural groups in the community to help his business grow. One of the ways he seeks to do this is by refusing to take reservations. By only accepting walk-in customers, he seeks to create an inviting environment for anyone to feel like they can easily connect with him and get a haircut.

As Tyrone's experience suggests, involvement in the Lewiston-Auburn community is as much a part of running these salons and barbershops as helping clients express themselves and “be seen.” In light of themes in our class, we see this involvement in community (and this building of community) as a way of making particularly Black Mainers feel welcome in a predominantly white state. When Joe at Major Cuts got to Maine for the first time, for example, he was faced with overwhelmingly white spaces where he felt like he was consistently the outsider. He mentioned that there was no place for a Black person to get their hair cut by someone who knows how to handle their hair. Now through his barbershop, he tries to embrace everyone who walks through his doors and give them a safe place to exist without judgment. He wanted to create the community that he used to lack and make his customers feel safe and comfortable without having to perform. He described his customers as a “brotherhood” and says they can be completely real with him because “what's said in the barbershop stays in the barbershop.” He is giving his customers a space to let loose without performing for a white gaze and allowing his barbershop to become a “third place,” a safe space for the community.

Shops sometimes went even further than providing a safe space, directly engaging with the community through things like service work, and providing free haircuts to children in the community going back to school. Rosa from Taboo Hair Design emphasized the importance of being active in the wider Lewiston community. She has given a family of foster children free haircuts before they had interviews, supported local organizations that assist homeless Lewiston high schoolers, and led community dance classes in her free time. Daria, of Luxury in the Hood, spoke directly to this broader significance. She called herself “an activist” and “a community creator.”

Style and decor are the first impressions that you receive when entering an establishment like a salon or barbershop. Just by entering the store, you can get a sense of the experience you will have. Is it loud, or is it quiet? Is there music playing, shows in the background, or do voices fill the atmosphere? The salons and barbershops we worked with all have unique design styles and atmospheres that correspond with the identity they want to create for their businesses, the sort of community the establishment seeks to cultivate. Consistent with the motivations of the people who run these shops, a common theme among them was a desire to make customers feel welcome and at home, whether through their atmosphere or décor.

While some shop owners sought to use minimal décor and black-and-white color schemes, others sought deliberately to use the atmosphere of their shops to show their identities. At Taboo Hair Design, a world map hangs with a cheetah pattern and no lines dividing any nations. This poster highlights Rosa's and her mother's belief in a world without division between countries. In addition, Rosa always has music playing. Often Hip hop. The atmosphere in the shop is very welcoming, with signs on the wall inviting people to be themselves. Taboo Hair Design resembled a family atmosphere, and it was clear that Rosa knew the majority of her clients. Rosa and her mother build trust with their clients through jokes, dancing, and talking about their own experiences.

At Luxury in the Hood, a full-service salon in Lewiston, Daria uses her decor to draw connections to her ancestry in Africa as well as her personal beliefs and personality. Daria said her whole shop "has a Black culture theme." This theme was expressed through many aspects in her decor. One of the most prominent examples of this is a bookcase situated directly in view from the moment you step into the shop. Within it is an altar composed of photos of loved ones who have passed, a song bowl, salt rocks, crystals, an Egyptian Book of the Dead, and "Florida Water." Her connections to African countries were visibly present through her artwork. Daria's "Afrocentric" design included paintings from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana that were a mixture of her own travels and gifts. Additionally, Daria wanted to create decor for her shop to add to this theme. Initially, she aimed to represent the theme of her business by using hair magazines to decorate a table. However, she eventually switched to "Black Panther" imagery, as she saw it as an ideal way to reinforce her Black culture theme through one of the most accessible representations of it in recent history. These decor choices are important as they highlight her desire to demonstrate her Black identity in the white environment that is Maine while also creating a space her clients can feel comfortable in.

This essay is only one small glimpse into a thriving industry in Maine. The perspective on race, identity, politics, style, and beauty contained in this essay was shaped by conversations with the work of a range of scholars, writers, and filmmakers in *Africana 100*. A selection of them include:

- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
- *Heavy* by Keise Laymon
- *Redefining Realness* by Janet Mock
- *Brother to Brother*, a film by Rodney Evans
- "Black Hair/Style Politics" by Kobena Mercer, *New Formations* 3 (Winter 1987): 33-54.
- "Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought" by TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Samantha Blackmon, *Feminist Media Histories* (2020): 93-118.
- "[The Hidden Cost of Black Hair](#)," an Economist documentary

- [The CROWN Act](#), a set of bills designed to render it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race-based hair styles

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Daria at Luxury in the Hood, 236 Main Street in Lewiston

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