

## Black New Yorkers: For biracial filmmaker, film helps heal painful past

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Filmmaker Octavio Warnock-Graham grew up in the small Ohio town of Maumee. Born to a white mom and raised in a predominantly white community, Warnock-Graham's childhood would have been that of the typical white suburban kid. The only problem was Warnock-Graham isn't white.

The product of a brief relationship between his father, an African American reporter, and his mother, a white theatre worker, while the two were working in Washington D.C. during the late 1960s, Warnock-Graham's mother never told him his biological father was Black.

"I grew up being racist," said Warnock-Graham who returned with his mother to their Midwest hometown, she married and had children. With olive skin and wavy hair, Warnock-Graham looked little like anyone his family.

"I hated myself, ten years ago; I hated who I was and who I wasn't," said Warnock-Graham, sitting in the AmNews offices. A graduate from City College's film program, Warnock-Graham's master's thesis was a short film about confronting his mother concerning the identity of his biological dad. Called "Silences," the 20-minute film won the \$5,000 prize for "Outstanding Documentary" at the Angelus Student Film Festival this past October. The 37-year-old describes the documentary, which took two years to complete, as the process of "coming out of the racial closet" after years of hoping that his deepest fears were not true.

"I really wanted to be that child with blond hair and blue eyes because that would have made me more acceptable," said Warnock-Graham, who recalls his boyhood home as being one of those intolerant towns where he remembers the consensus was, "being a nigger is bad, being a faggot is bad. We're going to use niggers and faggots as whipping posts."

Warnock-Graham became one of those whipping posts, enduring bullying and social ostracism in school. After high school, he left Maumee to study directing at SUNY



*A young Octavio Warnock-Graham*

Purchase, and upon graduation remained in New York to work as a gaffer and technician for television and theatrical productions.

A desire to tell stories led Warnock-Graham to enroll at City College's Documentary Writing and Producing Masters of Fine Arts program. Ironically, it was the story he didn't want to tell that became his master's thesis.

"It just tore me up inside," said Warnock-Graham, who was compelled to find out his biological father's identity. At points the prospect was daunting. "I was afraid of being rejected. In a way I felt I was rejected already," said Warnock-Graham, who received the greatest amount of encouragement from his adopted father. The filmmaker finally united with his biological father in San Francisco.

"Meeting him was the end of the journey," said Warnock-Graham. According to Warnock-Graham, meeting his father gave him "a sense of completion to who [he] was." Warnock-Graham's film also won "Best Documentary" for the 2006 Cityvisions film festival, sponsored by City College of New York.

At this point in his life, Warnock-Graham seems to have come to terms with his multicultural heritage. "I'm proud to be Black, I'm proud to be white, I'm very comfortable walking both sides of the race line," said the filmmaker, who when asked his racial identity on application forms checks boxes for both Black and white.

"I've never been in the position where I've felt I had to choose," said Warnock-Graham, who enjoys an ongoing relationship with his biological father, and plans to travel with him to the South to meet the Black side of his gene pool. In the meantime, future documentaries the filmmaker is considering include the history of day workers of color in white 'sundown towns' and a film on standup comedians.