“THE BIGGEST COLORED SHOW ON EARTH”: HOW MINSTRELSY HAS DEFINED PERFORMANCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY FROM 19TH CENTURY THEATER TO HIP HOP

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“THE BIGGEST COLORED SHOW ONE EARTH”: HOW MINSTRELSY HAS DEFINED PERFORMANCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY FROM 19TH CENTURY THEATER TO HIP HOP

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ABSTRACT

This senior thesis seeks to answer the following question: how and why is the word “minstrel” and associated images still used in American rap and hip hop performances? The question was sparked by the title of a 2005 rap album by the group Little Brother: *The Minstrel Show*. The record is packaged as a television variety show, complete with characters, skits, and references to blackface. This album premiered in the heat of the *Minstrel Show Debate* when questions of authenticity and representation in rap and hip hop engaged community members. My research is first historical: I analyze images of minstrelsy and reviews of minstrel shows from the 1840s into the twentieth century to understand how the racist images persisted and to unpack the ambiguity of the legacy of black blackface performers. I then analyze the rap scene from the late 2000-2005, when the genre most poignantly faced the identity crisis spurred by those referred to as “minstrel” performers. Having conducted interviews with the two lyricists of Little Brother: Rapper Big Pooh and Phonte, I primarily use Little Brother as my center of research, analyzing their production in conjunction with their spatial position in the hip hop community. In this project, I discuss the overt continuation of minstrel history within the imagery and music in rap performances. I posit that Little Brother’s *The Minstrel Show* provides a window through which to study the complication of the word minstrel, and its associated imagery, in the African American hip hop community. As Little Brother’s conscious critiquing of the critique is unpacked, questions of authenticity, identity, representation, and memory, are discussed.
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I owe huge gratitude to Phonte Coleman and Thomas Jones, aka Rapper Big Pooh, for taking the time to speak with me about the influence of minstrelsy on their work as well as sharing their personal views on their album, their audience, and their success. I hope that y’all enjoy the result of this project, and that you plan to continue producing art for a long time to come. Besides my enjoyment of it, your work contributes significantly to American culture and history.
There has long been controversy within and without the Negro race as to just how the Negro should be treated in art—how he should be pictured by writers and portrayed by artists.

-W. E. B. Du Bois

Whoever said that coon was me?

-Zev Love X, KMD

I think we could have made the same record and again, if you just put it in different packaging it becomes a hit, you know what I’m saying, cause most people don’t get the packaging anyway.

-Phonte Coleman
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INTRODUCTION

We’d like to welcome you to everything there is to know/This is our life, this is our music, it’s our minstrel show.¹

The line above was not dug up from an archive chronicling early American history. This melody was not recorded on a black and white camera during a song and dance segment of a 1920s blackface performance. These lyrics are not from a twenty-first century comedy show. Rather, the chorus of this song introduces Little Brother’s 2005 sophomore album The Minstrel Show. Against a backdrop of Yazarah’s harmony reminiscent of a 1950s variety show like Dick Clark’s American Bandstand, Chris Hardwick, the white host, introduces the three members of the Durham, North Carolina based band: Phonte, Big Pooh, and 9th Wonder.²

After meeting at North Carolina Central University, Phonte Coleman, Thomas “Big Pooh” Jones III, and Patrick “9th Wonder” Douthit joined creative forces to create the hip hop group Little Brother in 2001.³ They recorded their first full length album, The Listening, with independent record label ABB Records in 2003 which The Source nominated for Independent Album of the Year.⁴ After a 2005 mixtape Chittlin Circuit 1.5, Little Brother released The Minstrel Show in September of that year to critical acclaim and anticipation.⁵ Although commercially the album did


² Chris Hardwick is a comedian, radio and television personality. Previous UPN radio host (1999).

³ General biographical information on the group can be found on sites like Wikipedia, Genius, and in individual interviews cited throughout this project.


not excel, selling only 18,000 copies in the first week, Little Brother maintains a prolific underground presence, especially on college campuses. In fact, their discography made them “international hip hop legends, in the span of just eight years.”

When narrowing my research questions for this thesis, I followed threads of masculinity and authenticity in southern culture and specifically, how those ideologies manifest in rap and hip hop. My introduction to Little Brother came in the summer of 2016 with “Watch Me,” the band held intrigue with their defunct, underground status and their style impressed sounds of “real” hip hop. Realizing the shock factor intended by naming an album *The Minstrel Show*, I sought to learn why Little Brother would construct their album using a model rooted in racism. Curiosity regarding how and why the hip hop community uses the word minstrel in the twenty-first century led me to study the development of the word “minstrel” from a descriptor of a performative art to a weaponized critique of representation one hundred and fifty years later. This thesis seeks to answer the question of how and why Little Brother utilized the historic script of the minstrel show in conjunction with other interpretations and memories of minstrelsy, and how their album contributes to the socio-cultural landscape in hip hop today.

When discussing an art form developed one hundred and fifty years ago, it is important to clarify the definitions as they are applied in my thesis. Minstrelsy refers not only to minstrel shows, but more broadly to the makeup, stereotypes, and characters depicted in these shows. More

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6 Phonte Coleman, interview by author, phone, March 27, 2017. Underground hip hop, in this thesis and generally, refers to unsigned artists or artists on independent labels. Their alternative or socially conscious styles typically do not see radio play.


8 Lynn, 2010.
specifically this includes: the practice of blackface or blacking up, in which actors would rub burnt cork on their face and draw on exaggerated lips, wear large white gloves and shoes too big for their feet; the stereotypes of laziness, gluttony, and content with servitude; and characters like a dandy, a sambo, or a coon.\(^9\) In the past, minstrelsy and minstrel shows were humorous skit shows with song and dance.\(^10\) As the popularity of the performances grew, and the number of minstrel troupes increased, both black and white audiences enjoyed the lively show and comic presentations. As time went on, and especially after the Civil War, black performers took the minstrel stage as well; in order to enter the market, they, too, had to “black up” for shows.\(^12\) These troupes became wildly popular, and some travelling minstrel troupes made celebrities of their black performers and made them a decent living.\(^13\) While there was some pushback against the severely racist presentation of black Americans these “Ethiopian delineators” employed, blackface minstrelsy stuck, and impacted American culture for centuries to come.\(^14\)

Although the practice of blackface dropped off more-or-less for good in the 1950s, it did so against a backdrop of an American popular and consumer culture where characters like Sambo and Mammy reigned supreme.\(^15\) Exaggerated, racially coded depictions of black Americans were

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\(^11\) Ibid.


\(^13\) For example, Bert Williams’ whose role in minstrel history is discussed in Chapter II.

\(^14\) A fully cited discussion and analysis of this and the previous statement can be found in Chapter I.

used to sell everything from tobacco to pancake mix to white Americans as black consumers were routinely ignored by retailers.16 To further add to the compounding issue, television became the American form of mass media, and the representations of black Americans were few and far between. Shows like Andy ‘n Amos and The Beulah Show borrowed from minstrel scripts past, but in some ways were able to subvert the script they had been given.17 Children’s cartoons, on the other hand, allowed for a violent treatment of “black” figures and continued the constant attempt by media producers to present these negative stereotypes as funny.18 In this thesis, I will employ theory from Stuart Hall and Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, as they maintain strong theories regarding message consumption, the role consumers play in production, and how much the media is also the message, among other salient theorizations.19

With awareness of this performative history so readily consumed by white Americans and in the wake of the Harlem Renaissance and Reaganomics, hip-hop was born in the 1973 Bronx.20 Rap followed soon after, but the development of hip hop, and the differentiation between the two art forms, where it can be made, matters in this project’s terminology. While the two forms overlap significantly, often coexisting, I present the following as the distinction between rap and hip hop, a differentiation made with help from academics and historians in the field:

Hip hop is a distinctly black art form, even thirty years after its creation, with a surrounding culture: emceeing and DJing, graffiti art, and breakdancing make up the tenants of the art. Technology grew through record players to sample machines and 808s, and naturally, rap developed with hip hop as MCs and others began to recite over the breaks. As time passed, hip hop came to be reminiscent of the original creativity and social consciousness that defined the movement in the seventies and eighties. The conscious rap developed in response to President Ronald Reagan’s trickle-down economic policy that slashed social programs and villainized the black citizens who benefitted from them as lazy and gluttonous. Seventies hip hop leaders were the likes of Afrika Bambaataa, who sought to reconcile Bronx neighborhood gangs through music; or Grandmaster Flash who, with his Furious Five, directly addressed poverty and the psychological struggles of growing up in the ghetto. Then, rap became popular. Rap burst onto the pop culture scene at a record pace, surprising many and frightening parents and legislators along the way. As music in the 2000s left behind deeper messages to boast about the material consumption, bitches and hos, and gang violence, many in the community who believed these lyrics perpetuated negative stereotypes of African Americans called for a distinction of this sort of music from hip hop.

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21 Ogbar, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop, 118.


23 Ogbar, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop, 90.


26 For a discussion on how the United States government has responded to rap, see US Congress, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Stereotypes and Degrading Images, 110th Congress, 1st Session, September 25, 2007.

Therefore, the rap and hip hop community that I refer to in this project is broad. Primarily I am referencing a curated selection of hip hop artists, rap artists, music producers, music critics, magazine editors, and online message board contributors. During the early 2000s, message boards, specifically that of Ahmir “?uestlove” Thompson’s *Okayplayer*, provided direct access to artists and fueled the perpetuation of the underground rap music scene.28 Other sites like Soundclick and YouTube allowed for artists to put their music online to be consumed and shared without the aid of major record label companies.

The new style of rap music developed in large part to be defined by southern rap.29 Late to the game, southern rap appeared to contribute lower quality music than the genre-defining east and west coast productions.30 Yet in 1994, the Atlanta based hip hop duo OutKast broke onto the scene with a debut album that certified platinum.31 After releasing *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* in 2003, winning a Grammy for Best Album of the Year, and selling 10 million copies, southern rappers had their foot in the door.32 But then, other Georgia artists like Lil Jon and Lil Wayne found guaranteed commercial success with dance hits, catchy hooks, and easy sells to radio stations.33 This cultural demand for consumption ushered in what I refer to in this project as the *Minstrel Rap Era*, starting around 2004, and ending, for the scope of my project, in 2007; further

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30 Westhoff, 9.

31 Westhoff, 8.

32 Westhoff, 8.

33 Westhoff, 243.
research can and should be done to investigate how the art form and attitudes in the community have shifted. It was during the period from 2004-2007 that you see a concentration of negative decoding of over exaggerated rap performances from hip hop artists and black citizens. The avid consumption of these over-the-top songs and the presence of even worse viral Internet videos only further concerned critics.\textsuperscript{34} Though the use of the word \textit{minstrel} has changed significantly since the nineteenth century, the lasting imagery remains consistent; memories of blackface, exaggerated lips, bulging eyes, large hands, and toothy grins all contribute to the disdain for or perception of minstrel rappers today.\textsuperscript{35}

In true twenty-first century fashion, the battle against minstrel rap was waged online. Questlove of The Roots spearheaded the community conversation on his innovative \textit{Okayplayer} message boards, and publications like \textit{XXL Magazine} and \textit{LA Weekly} called out specific artists in their publications.\textsuperscript{36} These multi-sourced discussions of modern black performance art collided to create the \textit{Minstrel Show Debate}, centering around the understanding that representations of uneducated, shuckin’ and jivin’ black performers only reinforce negative stereotypes already so prevalent in American society.\textsuperscript{37} Confounding the negative portrayal of black Americans, many


\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ethnic Notions}, 1987.


\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ethnic Notions}, 1987.
minstrel rappers face accusations of “selling out,” and trading quality of artwork for contracts with major record labels, because of their primarily white audiences and producers.  

It was in this context that Little Brother released The Minstrel Show. In my thesis, I argue that Little Brother’s 2005 album The Minstrel Show provides a window into the complicating of the concept of minstrelsy and its role in the African American hip hop community. That is, I believe their album purposefully and consciously uses the word minstrel to further examine the ambiguities present in the modern production of black performance art. The following are underlying assumption behind the significance of this album:

First: no image we consume today is completely original. Every piece of culture - food, toys, music, television - has a history and a memory, even if we consume it unawares. It is this historical point of view that upset many in 2006 when rapper Jibbs’s song “Chain Hang Low” sampled the minstrel “Zip Coon” song. Multiple iterations of “Zip Coon” now exist, and Jibbs reported no knowledge of this racially charged past; he most likely knew the sample as the ice cream truck song. Second: minstrel song and dance, rooted in (self)-degradation, provide the sonic foundation of American pop culture. Therefore, every modern performance black bodies

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carries historical weight. And while that should not overshadow originality, the implication of our past must be deconstructed and properly addressed. **Third**: the twentieth-century characters that blossomed beyond the roots of old minstrel shows, like that of a mammy, pickaninny, coon, dandy, and uncle, were sold exclusively to American whites. As mammies pushed pancakes and pickaninnies peddled dolls, large parts of society normalized these depictions, and for many a bitter image of the black body was internalized. And **finally**: the language that individuals and communities use has power; it can be supportive or subversive. Whether by weaponizing words like “minstrel” or “coon” or including inside jokes, the force of language matters.

In engaging with the academic literature surrounding this topic, I found a variety of viewpoints as well as interests that intersect with my own. They all provide a solid interdisciplinary background for my project to grow from.

There is no shortage of examination into the continued impact of minstrel shows on many facets of our society today. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar’s 2007 book *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture of Politics and Rap* first introduced me to the academic use of the term *Minstrel Show Debate* (MSD), which he couches in discussions of race and perception of America. His work sufficiently presents both sides of the debate, championing Questlove as a supporter of authentic and real artistic performance. In terms of audience, Ogbar takes his research and analysis further than I can in this project. He reports on how artists who speak up against white consumption of their art

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43 Bernstein, 16.


themselves have audiences that are primarily white! Specifically, he brings up The Roots fan base demographic, which he reports as the same ethnic makeup of people you would expect to find at a Korn concert. From this, I extrapolate that the Minstrel Show Debate is: producing art that white audiences enjoy is okay, but purposefully marketing yourself as a degrading caricature to be consumed by white audiences is not. However, nothing is ever so black and white. Questions of intrigue that sprouted for me when reading this were: how much can an artist control his audience? How do an artist’s expectations and reality line up after a piece of work like an album is released? How much can the artist do effectively encode his message before sending it to the masses for consumption? And what happens when the coding arguably intended for white consumption is largely enjoyed by African Americans? Luckily, in my research project I had the pleasure of interviewing Phonte of Little Brother and asked him some of these questions about audience and expectations that contradict with reality, the answers to which I share in Chapter III. Both 9th Wonder and Phonte also have published interviews where they answer similar questions specifically about The Minstrel Show, a highly-anticipated album which unexpectedly faced serious controversy upon its release and failed to perform to the expectations associated with a major label drop. Ogbar discusses authenticity and its role in the rap and hip-hop communities. He posits that there are two markers of authenticity in modern day black performers: race and place. In studying histories of hip hop, as well as listening to and analyzing the lyrics on most soundtracks, it is clear that Ogbar is correct in using these two terms as the building blocks for a


hip-hop “cult of authenticity.” The two can be of equal significance, a reasoning that has justified Eminem’s prominence and acceptance in the rap community: Eminem is white, but his tumultuous upbringing in 8-Mile, Detroit grants him authenticity. Ogbar also uses these authenticity determinants to explain the emergence of gangster rap as a hyper-conflated attempt at being real. In fact, NWA, the original gangster rap group with the tagline “World’s Most Dangerous Group,” gained their popularity and success from writing songs that compiled multiple people’s experiences into one to make one, undefeatable, indisputable gangster. Ogbar’s analysis, then, provides solid groundwork for me to expand the work understanding authenticity by using space and race to analyze the production of a southern rap group and their twenty-first production of a minstrel show.

In his article, “Pearly Whites: Minstrelsy’s Connection to Contemporary Rap Music,” Kareem Muhammed presents a similar research question to my own: in what ways does contemporary rap mirror minstrelsy? He even uses Little Brother’s *The Minstrel Show* as an introductory case study for his thesis statement. I agree with his conjecture that Little Brother’s album contributes to the “historical continuum” of black representation in America by highlighting the Western value-oriented and often white-consumer-driven status of rap music. He presents an original term, the Rap Industrial Complex (RIC), in a neoliberal context; the injustice of the RIC is that record labels and media outlets fail to reinvest profits made from this facet of black culture in the communities they came from. However, his work differs from mine in that his article is

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51 Ogbar, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 321.
52 Muhammed, 309.
53 Muhammed, 308.
more sociological and quantitative, and he explicitly confines his research to the 2006 season of BET’s *Rap City*, which excludes most underground or independent artists. In my work, I go beyond the analysis of Little Brother’s music video and investigate their choice of the word “minstrel” as an album title and its recurrence throughout the record’s content. Muhammed argues that once black Americans countered the destructive psychological agenda of mainstream society by celebrating blackness, but with the advent of minstrel rap, “the black people responsible for creating the culture lost [their] agency and resistance in the interest of commerce.”54 Yet I argue that since they sat as audience members in 1840s blackface performances through today, black Americans maintain agency in their culture. One example I analyze is Lil Jon, an educated man who actively uses minstrel imagery in his public persona, which consistently generates hit pop songs. Muhammed deposits the conclusion that there is “at least latent connection with minstrelsy” within the RIC, but I argue minstrel history pervades rap and hip hop culture, both consciously and unconsciously.55

Spike Lee’s 2000 film *Bamboozled* provides a stark example of minstrel’s continued relevance in modern culture.56 The story, at once dramatic, absurd, humorous, and tragic calls on its audience to realize the persistent prominence of damaging racial stereotypes against blacks in America. *Bamboozled* is an important grounding film for minstrel history in the past twenty or so years as it literally welcomes the millennium with a variety show stocked with Mantan, Sleep’n Eat Fetchit, tap dancing, and blackface. The main character Pierre Delacroix pitches the wildly offensive television program to prove that racist jokes on television can go too far, yet falls victim

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54 Muhammed, 309, 317.
55 Muhammed, 311-2.
to his own creation in more ways than one as his monster becomes the most popular show on the air and he is shot to death. Viewers watch black and white audience members alike howl at the supposed-to-be-degrading performances on stage and wonder if this represents the true state of race relations in America. The movie is a crucial launching point for understanding how blackface imagery and the memory of minstrelsy has shifted over the course of the twentieth century as it indubitably resonated with many who watched the film. From *Bamboozled*, the leap is not far to the prolific *Chappelle’s Show*, a short-lived television series which not only affected our culture’s feelings towards minstrel history on a huge scale by bringing it to light, but also helped create positive attitudes towards our new-age rappers as well.\(^\text{57}\)

Another contributor to the discourse, Dr. Eric Lott asserts that at that time, blackface performance released a sexual repression in white males. In *Love and Theft*, Lott focuses on deconstructing how and why the black body is appropriated and consumed by white performers in blackface minstrel shows. He contends that emotionality reigns alongside a desire to be black, and a perceived opportunity for sexual freedom, however ironic that may be. Targeting the sexuality involved in a desire to inhabit another body and the phallic shape of the illustrated instruments, Lott refers to the Virginia Minstrels’ sheet music cover as a “masturbation fantasy.”\(^\text{58}\) Providing another explanation for the enticing nature of blackface, Matthew Frye Jacobson argues in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, that minority white groups (particularly the Irish and the Jews in the famous case of Al Jolson) donned the darkie persona in order to gang up against black


Americans and effectively return their own status as “other.” That is, by being “not black,” non-Anglo whites claim a normative, unmarked status, the dominant, and therefore preferred racial categorization. My work can benefit from an understanding of the white desire that led to the practice of blackface, lending options to the question of why minstrelsy is so easily commodified in American culture. However, I focus most closely on black blackface performers who took the stage after the Civil War, how black performers found new roles in twentieth century entertainment, and how rappers utilize this history and memory in their performances today. In this way, my thesis can also uniquely contribute to the conversation in trying to approach an answer as to why don blackface when you are already black? What control does the dominant culture have over decisions of agency like that in black bodies? And how can black performers use their positions to either support or subvert stereotypes?

W.T. Lhamon, Jr. provides a different approach to the historical creation and popularization of minstrelsy in America with his book Raising Cain. By tying blackness and the demarcation of white faces with burnt cork and soot to the biblical Mark of Cain, Lhamon roots American minstrel history in her religious history, which if generally accepted would forever earn minstrelsy a spot in American canon. Lore, he explains, “composes the basic gestures of all expressive behavior, from moans to narratives, signs to paintings, steps to dances.” The gestures become “tokens of membership” that are “fetishized” and hardened into culture in a way that stereotypes alone cannot. The example he describes how the eel dance that inspired Jump Jim


60 Jacobson, 91.

61 Lhamon, 69.

62 Lhamon, 69.
Crow now manifests itself in hip-hop culture. Through my research and analysis, I can expand on his lore cycles and their purpose of “circularity” and “self-authenticating ‘truth’” to examine not only why a minstrel show has a place in a 2005 hip-hop production, but why the group may have chosen for it to be there. An interesting point Lhamon makes in terms of American society and culture is the position that lore’s circularity only presents itself as closed off from other groups:

“In fact, the circle of lore works like a valve to regulate the entry and exit of content. Because one group’s lore overlaps and catches on another’s, the turnings of lore are not smooth. Its ends do not meet exactly, and it spirals, ovate and lopsided in time. Because its axis wobbles when it turns, lore never returns to the same place. Every group’s member must adjust their lore cycle constantly. They prop it up. They adjust for slippage. What they sustain is alive in its stresses and constantly moving, always becoming something else. Lore moves in a cycle, therefore, not a circle. Lore moves and returns. Patterns of lore rise and fall. They sustain complex meaning over time, but they do not enforce the past exactly. Rather the turns of a lore cycle convert the dead hands of the past into living presences that deviate from what went before. There are surprises in living lore.”

This definition of lore cycle perfectly sets up and supports my thesis statement and objective of my research. Minstrel has not maintained a straightforward definition, or only acted in one role in the last one hundred and fifty years. Rather, it has evolved from a descriptor to a critique, some may even say a weapon depending on how harshly it is used. This project seeks to understand how a Minstrel Show Debate fits into the current socio, cultural and political landscape through tracing its lore cycle through history.

Finally, a source that I draw a lot from is *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop* by Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen. This book, published in 2001, follows the word and practice of minstrelsy from its roots in 1843 to today’s hip hop scene. While this book has been a great resource, I look forward to adding to the conversation by focusing on the spatial and cultural

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63 Lhamon, 69.

64 Lhamon, 71.
significance of a southern rap group’s ownership of an album called *The Minstrel Show* and by engaging directly in conversation with the history and memory of minstrel, going beyond the boundaries of the Minstrel Show Debate and looking at (black) American culture, identity, representation, and lore cycles.

This thesis contributes uniquely to the conversation of language, history, memory, and identity because of its focus on language and performance. Beyond the utility of the word minstrel, I look for shifts in American memory and lore cycles that either changed or failed to change in a way that we must continue to grapple with this past so many years later. In American culture, “minstrel” has occupied three major usages. The first is as a descriptor for an art form; the second as a parent word for other offensive racial terms like “coon,” “Sambo,” or “Amos”; and the third as a direct insult or pejorative for black performers. As I study Little Brother specifically, I think it is important to consider that for an all-black, southern rap group to release an album titled *The Minstrel Show* is not just a subversive or re-appropriative act, but something more. The import of messaging and performative identity with *The Minstrel Show* increases because it is an original product with original content. After presenting the completed album to Atlantic, this previously underground rap group pushed this record out on a major label; they not only do not want Americans to forget this sordid past, they will not let them. The significance of Little Brother’s widespread critical acclaim and unequal commercial response is discussed, as well as the consideration that the group may have been ahead of its time.

Below, I have outlined my methodology for this research project. I would like to note that women are purposefully excluded from my research and analysis, mostly because minstrel performers in the variety shows were men and filled women’s roles in drag, and because of the

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65 9th Wonder, interview by Justin Hunte, 2014.
masculine history and culture of rap and hip-hop. This is not to discredit women rappers or remove them from this narrative; to include gender studies in this project would have caused it to escape the parameters of this project. Many works have been done on the gender politics of hip hop, which can perhaps contribute to an extended version of this project. Also, outside of a brief discussion of white rapper Joe Scudda who is featured on *The Minstrel Show*, I will not be comparing white and black rappers. As outlined above, hip hop is an African American and black art form. White rappers are few and far between. Also, many people can rap over music. Where there are few white rappers there are fewer hip hop artists. The collaboration and competition between white and black rappers would be an interesting way to expand this project through further research, especially regarding overlapping lore cycles and collaborative projects.

The scope of my thesis spans across three centuries, from 1834 to 2005 with a unique lens of looking at reviews and critiques as a source of analysis. I have chosen two bookends, Dan Emmett’s *Virginia Minstrels* 1834 performance and the 2005 release of Little Brother’s album, *The Minstrel Show*. These two bookends were chosen because of their direct use of the word minstrel, and the impact they had on American popular culture at the time. Both use “minstrel” explicitly in their advertisements and performances, and due to their popularity and critical acclaim, have been consumed by a wide, culturally significant audience. Because of these characteristics, these two instances are worthy of investigation of how the language of minstrelsy has changed regarding the authentic performance of African American identity over time. Leading questions in my research are: what is the utility of the minstrel story line for the performers and the audience in both ends of the history? Where are there markers of authenticity, and is

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authenticity performed? I investigated images of African American portrayal across the spectrum of those two dates, realizing that some 20th century portrayals were necessary to provide a smooth transition between the two bookends.

From preliminary research, my hypothesis was that the word “minstrel” and its derivatives have been used three different ways: as a descriptor for a form/genre, as a term of critique, and as an insult or pejorative for black performers. Upon further research, I have found evidence that supports this hypothesis, but that as a term of critique it acts as an umbrella term to house other more descriptive and culturally relevant insults like “coon,” “Sambo,” or “Amos.”

When researching Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels, I looked specifically at his 1834 performance in New York City. I looked at this performance particularly because it is oft cited as the first word of the use minstrel to describe a theater performance in America, and because it perfectly coincided with the birth of theater as a mass medium in society. The novel availability of theater at the time allowed the popular form at that time, minstrelsy, to explode across the nation. I looked for primary sources regarding this minstrel show in the form of advertising pamphlets, song lyrics and program cover art, but focused on newspaper reviews. Specifically, I looked at historically black newspaper reviews to understand the African American reception of minstrel shows at the time. In analyzing the results, I have found that generally the minstrel shows were liked by many, scorned by a few in both races.

This became particularly interesting when later newspaper reviews led me to discover the presence of black blackface actors, especially in the antebellum period. While I was not expecting this development, I embraced the discovery because it allows for a clean comparison between minstrel actors and rappers today because of their shared race. Black minstrel troupes made significant money continuing the characters borrowed by whites decades ago. This is significant
to my research because my research question focuses on cultural exchange and the balance of social power played out on stage by both white and black performers.

In 2005, Little Brother’s album decrying minstrel behavior in the music community was not about white performers, but rather about black performers and their depiction of their own race. To study the significance of an album with this title and its potentially subversive nature, I studied album reviews by *The Source*, and *XXL*, for critiques from other artists and those outside the industry. I also watched music videos from artists such as Killer Mike and Little Brother that called out minstrel behavior, to contrast them with videos like “Chicken Noodle Soup” and “Fry that Chicken” that directly pander to dated African American stereotypes, analyzing the imagery and language used in the songs and videos. I read interviews with other members of the rap supergroup NWA, specifically Dr. Dre and MC Yella, about how they believed they were expressing authenticity, not an exaggerated caricature. I also looked at the rap group East Side Boyz which hosts the most notorious minstrel rapper Lil Jon as its front runner, and is supported by Big Sam and Lil Bo (Sambo).

To support my argument of Little Brother’s cultural significance, this thesis is split into three chapters. The first, “The History and Development of Minstrelsy,” traces minstrelsy from its first introduction into American culture up until around the year 2000. The story begins in the nineteenth century with the first use of the word minstrel, the ensuing popularity of minstrel shows, and the advent and height of black blackface performers after the Civil War. To understand how the word changed in the one-hundred and fifty plus years since its arrival in American theater to be a prevalent and persisting cultural tool, twentieth century popular culture is examined as well to provide background and analysis on references and images used today.
The ambiguities clouding the consistent use of the word minstrel are explained in the second chapter, “How and Why Hip Hop Critics Turned to Minstrelsy.” Here, the relevant hip hop and rap music videos are explained, dissected, and their content and reviews are discussed in the context of the lasting cultural power of minstrelsy. The question that guides this chapter is: how the community of critics uses the terminology of minstrelsy to review lyrics and personalities. The impact of online portals like Okayplayer and community magazines like The Source and XXL are discussed.

The third chapter, “Little Brother and The Minstrel Show,” utilizes the historical context and academic arguments laid forth in the previous two chapters to analyze the intent and effect of the album. Specific lyrics and allusions are analyzed. The structure of their album, including skits, the feature of a white rapper performing in blackface, and a white host, is analyzed. The importance of southern heritage is continued. And the interviews that I conducted with Phonte and Big Pooh are included.

The paper concludes with suggestions for further research and a consideration of how the research contributes as an American Studies research piece to the field. My thesis is in large part historical, but it contributes to American Studies because it looks at and considers cultural components like agency, identity, and performance. It tracks an evolution of a concept over time and puts it in conversation with our modern socio-cultural landscape. When reading this thesis, I hope you take away: the malleability of historical events and memory of cultural performances as well as the realization that culture changes, and we must stay nimble. Furthermore, this project hopes to point out the technology of power in American cultural systems. Little Brother pushed the envelope with culture and affected our collective conscience. The interdisciplinary method
allows me look at a large period and play with collective memory and collective amnesia using film media, musical production, television, sociology, psychology, and economics as sources.

In my paper, I take an interdisciplinary approach in analyzing how Little Brother fits into the period of the early 2000s in the rap and hip hop community as well as the American culture. I argue that they purposefully complicate the discussion surrounding minstrelsy in the community. And I specifically analyze their album as this tool and the implications of its distribution by a major record label.
CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF MINSTRELSY

The Americanization of the word “minstrel” occurred in 1843. On February sixth of that year, Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels premiered on stage at the Bowery Amphitheatre in New York City in blackface and cemented their place in American cultural history.\(^\text{67}\) Previously, the word “minstrel,” originating in early thirteenth century France and used in French and English, could be found only in reference to European-American variety shows.\(^\text{68}\) Emmett did not coin the term “minstrel”; rather he contributed a rebranding of the dormant descriptor to refer to a budding form of entertainment in the American South: blackface. Blackface emerged in 1820 when George Washington Dixon and his troupe were the first to practice blacking up on stage.\(^\text{69}\) White actors applied burnt cork to their faces, leaving clean skin around their eyes and mouth to give the appearance of grossly exaggerated features representative of negative stereotypes associated with blackness.\(^\text{70}\) Emmett and his troupe borrowed this practice from the “Ethiopian Delineators” of years past.\(^\text{71}\)


\(^{69}\) Nathan, Dan Emmett, 49.


\(^{71}\) Nathan, 83.
Emmett’s introduction of blackface minstrelsy came at a particularly fortuitous time in American history for performers. The Virginia Minstrels’ performances in New York coincided with the growing accessibility of theater, and as theater became more economic for American constituents, theater became a mass media in that it was the first “mass culture” shared by a more significant and inclusive portion of the population. And as more people saw the show and enjoyed it, so the practice of blackface spread. Through song, dance, and storytelling, Emmett’s minstrels took over America’s imagination as television would in the next century. Political scientist Diana Mutz posits that “what media, and the national media, in particular, do best is to supply us with information about those beyond our personal experiences and contacts, in other words, with impressions of the state of mass collectives.” This is what makes mass media like theater, radio, television, and movies important.

The remnants of minstrel characters that we see today comes in large part from the stereotypes were presented in jest, but also as truth and were consumed as so. A historical analysis of Dan Emmett’s minstrel shows describe them as “straight up faux anthropology, done as theater.” In members of the audience that were either from country areas or poor urban areas, the representations of black Americans were ignorantly accepted as truth, a process which W.T. Lhamon refers to as the Yokel Effect. Minstrel actors did not dissuade these less-educated or less-exposed Americans from believing it was all a show because they valued this misinterpretation as proof that they had done a good job and, ironically, were accurate in their portrayals.

72 Lhamon, Raising Cain, 58.

73 Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 510.

74 Delmont, Nicest Kids in Town, 158.

75 Taylor and Austen, Darkest America, 37.

76 Lhamon, 174.
Blackface performances developed in the time of slavery, and told a story of a lazy and happy servant. By the time blackface performances were becoming popular, abolition was a major national conversation. In a country that was struggling with the juxtaposition of a free society and an economy based on the backs of slave laborers, painting the slave as a happy, content servant assuaged many white headaches. “Borrowing” like this is crucial to the character of minstrelsy. The most poignant example of this is the development of Jim Crow, the first minstrel character to quickly gain notoriety. Around 1830, T.D. Rice was inspired by the movements of a black man named Jim Cuff, who danced and performed tricks in exchange for pennies. Inspired by the money-making potential in this performance, Rice coerced Cuff into giving up his clothes so Rice could perform a genuine representation. Perceived as comical at the time, the ensuing theatrics eventually entertained thousands and shares responsibility with Emmett for launching the art form into popular culture. In the development of this story you find cautionary use of language, even before blackface vaudeville was considered unpalatable. For example, in the discussion of Cuff, the original story has him being “persuaded” to remove his clothes and give them to Rice. In another iteration of the story, written in the same century, he removed his clothes

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81 Lott, 24.

82 Lott, 24.

83 Nathan, 31, 135.

84 Lott, 24.
for a “slight consideration.” On the surface, this seems to imply that borrowing of a cultural art form, of a way of dress, of a livelihood, and of a skin tone was acceptable by the public. After the Civil War, stealing was a more delicate word, and one whose connotations were to be avoided.

Otherwise, and especially at its peak the decades right before and immediately following the Civil War, the entertainment was perceived as humorous; the jokes could be enjoyed by both upper and lower class whites. However, there was another element that academics purport, especially Eric Lott and Matthew Fred Jacobson. They essentially argue two points about the white attraction to blackface performance. The first is the release that blackface provided. Under the burnt cork, the white actor could experience relief societal restraints on display of emotion and discussions of sexuality—it was a mask. Second, the prevalence of European immigrants on the stage was particularly significant. The minstrel stage was generally dominated by Irish immigrants. Irish immigrants were in many ways discriminated against by other whites in America during this time. However, when they wore blackface, they were solidifying the growing racial divide in America: white and black. When the Irish were making fun of and perpetuating black stereotypes, they were doing so as white performers, allying themselves with

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85 Lott, 41.
86 Lott, 41.
87 Lhamon, 58.
88 Lott, 27.
89 Lott, 27.
90 Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color, 121.
91 Jacobson, 4.
92 Jacobson, 121.
the dominant culture. In his work, *Blacking Up*, Robert Toll argues that blackface enabled the restriction of demographic diversity in America when non-Anglo immigrants attempted to fit in with “legitimate white Americans.” This is discussed in a later section in this chapter in regards to Al Jolson, the Jewish blackface performer. Complicating of fabric: black man takes Irish name to impersonate the impersonator impersonating himself. The story of Al Jolson is particularly important in American history because of how invasive it was. In his 1927 movie *The Jazz Singer*, Jolson plays a Jewish man looking to make it big through putting on blackface productions. Again, you see ethnic whites trying to fit into the larger white culture by alienating themselves from the blacks. And when *Jazz Singer* came out, Hollywood was the dominant force in popular entertainment: 26 million Americans went to the movies every week.

Blackface performances were not favorable among every crowd. Many recognized the damaging stereotypes that the characters actively enforced and spread. In an August edition of *The New York herald*, it was noted that the Virginia Minstrels were banned from performing in blackface in Canada where the Mayor Toronto said, “I will not allow any exhibition which shall mimic the negroes—poor, inoffensive citizens.” There was resistance in the black community as

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93 Lhamon, 42, 57.
94 Toll, *Blacking Up*, 34.
96 *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Alan Crosland (Warner Brothers, 1927), iTunes.
well, particularly among abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass who argued that minstrel performances “feed the flame of American prejudice against colored people.”\textsuperscript{100} He continues,

> It is something gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race. But they must cease to exaggerate the exaggerations of our enemies; and represent the colored man rather as he is, than as Ethiopian Minstrels usually represent him to be. They will then command the respect of both races; whereas now they only shock the taste of the one, and provoke the disgust of the other.\textsuperscript{101}

Douglass’ sentiments echoed both blacks and whites who saw the deleterious performances for what they were.

Similarly, James Trotter a black man who grew up free, essentially compiled a musical encyclopedia in 188. He spoke fondly of the Georgia Minstrels professional ability as entertainers. However, in his text he wrote a disclaimer stating:

> “That these performances consist, for the most part, in a disgusting caricaturing ostensibly of the speech and action of the more unfortunate members of the colored race, but which are really made to reflect against the whole; that these public performances do much to belittle their race generally, around and keep alive in the breasts of other races a feeling of contempt for it; and that these effects are greatly enhanced when colored men themselves engage in such performances, as they thus give “aid and comfort to the enemy.””\textsuperscript{102}

There is strong evidence that the educated blacks of this time were passionately opposed to the practice of black men putting on black face, as if they weren’t already black enough, a pattern of request that we see of black men in the one hundred and fifty years to come.


\textsuperscript{101} Douglass, 1849.

With that said, there was a black audience for many minstrel shows. During the time of
slavery, and even after slavery, theaters were segregated. However, in many venues, blacks were
present in high numbers. Historically black newspapers like the New Orleans Daily Creole,
provide examples of the community enjoying the performances. For example, one review claims
that the Christy Minstrels (a group of blackface performers) had the viewers “laughing with the
loudest at the queer actions, the funny sayings, and the merry songs of these jolly sons of
Camus.” The Southern Opera House reminds its readers that “The public of New Orleans knows
the merit of the performance of the minstrel troupe.” Here are examples of the community not
only accepting but enjoying performances of blackface minstrelsy as they travel across their town.

After the Civil War, African American performers could perform on stage. In order to
take advantage of the commercial success of minstrel shows, many also donned blackface, making
themselves even blacker to play the traditional minstrel characters. In 1865, Charles Hicks
introduced the Original Georgia Minstrels, the first black blackface minstrel troupe. According
to Trotter, this troupe was funny and authentic because they were all “real colored men” (emphasis

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103 Woll, Black Musical Theater: From Coontown to Dreamgirls, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1989), 114, 236.
108 Trotter, 270.
Besides the humor in the shows, there is evidence that in watching and participating in blackface performance lay the opportunity for black Americans to work for and against racial stereotyping. One example of this is sharing hidden jokes and fostering a sense of community through these interactions. The presence of black minstrel troupes in the latter half of the nineteenth century is significant, then, in terms of cultural production and lore cycles as they pertain to performance, appropriation, and subversion. Running into the middle of the twentieth century was a black minstrel troupe called the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. They were branded as “The Greatest Colored Show on Earth” and traveled the country until the 1970s, a tagline that inspired that Little Brother who marketed their Minstrel Show album as “The Biggest Colored Show on Earth” [Figure 1].

(* * *)

What shifts occurred that changed minstrel from a categorization of performance to an umbrella term for negative or lazy representations of black Americans, especially on television? Of course, the characterizations in question are lazy and negative; luckily, social progress and expanding intersectional interactions contributed to a growing discomfort with blackface so that by the Civil Rights Era it was generally eradicated, though it did take that long for whites to forgo the practice of blacking up. Even in the 1880s they were moving away from the “cruel race-

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109 Trotter, 272.
110 Lhamon, 6.
111 Taylor and Austen, 6.
113 Trotter, 272.
hatred” of the “plantation act.” However, I would like to highlight some specific socio-cultural and even economic points of transformation in this redefinition and renouncement of the past.

Before we got to a shared denouncement of minstrelsy by black Americans at the millennium, the following affected the cultural understanding of the word and practice: Birth of a Nation changed the previously non-threatening minstrel skit, the exaggerated black images developed in the past half century were used as labels for products packaged almost exclusively for white consumption, and cartoons passed racist tropes onto children of the next generation.

The 1915 film Birth of a Nation sought to strike fear of black Americans in the heart of whites. Unsettled by threats to their political and economic dominance, the producers and supporters of the film wanted to portray the newly enfranchised black man as savage, predatory, and dangerous. Beyond the sordid intentions of this film and its influence on the inception of the terrorist Ku Klux Klan, the narrative presented subverts the minstrel tradition. It eschews the “harmless” characterization of the docile dunce for fear mongering, adding an even more deleterious layer to the racialized practice of blacking up.

A stark inconsistency and ambiguity in minstrel imagery is the continued usage of the traditional characters even in the face of this presidentially sponsored re-branding of the blackface performance. An example of this, and another reason that minstrel became so negatively thought of in the black performance community is the commercialization of the imagery. Prior to the turn of the century, blackface performances could be, and often were, enjoyed by both white and

\[114\] Trotter, 272.
\[115\] Birth of a Nation, directed by D.W. Griffith, Film (1915).
\[117\] Taylor and Austen, 8.
\[118\] Ethnic Notions, 1987; and Strausbaugh, Black Like You, 273.
black audience members. Historically, the black consumer market has been overlooked.\textsuperscript{119} Besides the fact that there are fewer African Americans in the country than whites, their buying power has generally been considered by producers as not as important for sales (despite evidence that proves the contrary).\textsuperscript{120} Rather, their faces, distorted by exaggeration, sold pancakes, oatmeal, cream of wheat, even became figurines that decorated homes [Figure 2]. Because the minstrel show had become such a well-known and recognized part of popular culture, marketing specialists and corporations began to use the exaggerated depiction and imagery of African Americans for their products’ labels, or as the product themselves, like Aunt Jemima; the familiarity of whom continues to sell pancakes today [Figure 3].\textsuperscript{121} However, just as Muhammed argued the issue with the Rap Industrial Complex lay in the fact that whites profited from black art and returned nothing to the community, so did the use of black imagery in the twentieth century take “an influx of exploitable labor and the development of new markets to achieve its profits.”\textsuperscript{122} In Marlon Riggs’ film \textit{Ethnic Notions}, University of California Berkeley professor Larry Levine says, “when you see [these images] over all parts of the country persisting over a long period of time, they have to have meaning. They obviously appeal to people - appeal to the producer, but they appeal also to the consumers.”\textsuperscript{123} This means that whites wanted these depictions of black Americans in their homes. As Hall explains in “Encoding, Decoding,” the audience is the producer, and what the audience wants to see is produced and subsequently consumed.\textsuperscript{124} The implications of this are

\begin{itemize}
  \item 119 Weems, \textit{Desegregating the Dollar}, 117.
  \item 120 Weems, 117.
  \item 121 Witt, \textit{Black Hunger}, 22.
  \item 122 Witt, 30.
  \item 123 \textit{Ethnic Notions}, 1987.
\end{itemize}
significant. Hall also argues that it is difficult to differentiate symbols from reality. Arguing as he does in the 1990s, he confidently purports that this differentiation is even harder to make when the symbols are on television. I would posit that the acknowledgment of the difference between symbol and reality can also become particularly hard to discern if the symbols inundate your home. Therefore, that these products were designed and packaged for white consumption took advantage of a racialized history and compounded the product-consumer relationship between the black community and white.125

On top of that, dolls like Raggedy Ann or Topsy Turvy juxtaposition of black and white allowed the dramatization of black African features to find a foundation already in the early stages of childhood.126 Raggedy Ann dolls, while white, perpetuate images that could not exist without a history of purposefully marketing blacks in a specific, negative, animalistic way.127 As Robin Bernstein, author of Racial Innocence, lays out in the premise of her book, “fragmentary images or gestures often linger, altered yet recognizable, in the culture of childhood after they have receded or even disappeared from adult culture: one century’s proverb becomes the next century’s nursery rhyme.”128 In the case of minstrelsy, “Zip Coon” becomes the song that ice cream trucks play as they drive down the street.129 Another important example of this is cartoons, which most

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125 Weems, 117.
126 Bernstein, Racialized Innocence, 18.
127 Bernstein, 8.
128 Bernstein, 7.
easily allowed for an over-exaggeration and brutalization of black figures.\textsuperscript{130} Technicolor cartoons portrayed mammoth mammy figures or untamed and reckless sambo children.\textsuperscript{131} As cartoons progressed into the sixties and seventies, animal characters removed the direct association with “black” behavior and allowed their animators and voice actors to return to minstrel roots. Examples include: the Scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz, Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Heckle and Jeckle, the nanny on Tom & Jerry, and there are more.\textsuperscript{132} This is important because “children’s culture has a special ability to preserve, even as it distorts.”\textsuperscript{133} And it is this narrative lens of children's toys and children's television programming that allowed minstrelsy to continue in the magnitude that it did in the twentieth century. And it was through childhood that another three, four, five generations memorized a minstrel script.\textsuperscript{134}

Riggs argues that three main points were enforced through black stereotypes perpetrated and perpetuated in twentieth century culture.\textsuperscript{135} The first is that black is ugly, which he argues was made true by the “total distortion of the black image.” The second that blacks are savage, and third that blacks are happy servants. No doubt, these images influenced America’s gut level feelings about race and created a political landscape that could not be ignored when looking at twenty-first century sonic and economic productions.

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\textsuperscript{131} Sammond, 3.

\textsuperscript{132} Bernstein, 19.

\textsuperscript{133} Bernstein, 19.

\textsuperscript{134} Bernstein, 7.

\textsuperscript{135} The following paragraph is derived from \textit{Ethnic Notions}, 1987.
When televisions became commonplace in households, the opportunity for black characters on screen expanded, though not by much; in addition to limited black characters written in the show, their script remained similar to that of minstrel characters. A famous show was *Amos ‘n Andy*. *Amos ‘n Andy* was actually derived from a blackface radio show hosted by two white men.\textsuperscript{136} This show was important because it was the first show to have an all-black cast.\textsuperscript{137} Though this could have been positive opportunity for representation, the minstrel depiction of racialized laziness and ignorance led to major NAACP protests that first cancelled the show in 1953 then removed it from syndication in 1966.\textsuperscript{138} Because of their more recent appearance in American popular culture, Amos and Andy naturally contributed to more modern feelings towards minstrelsy. In discussing the show decades later, Bill Cosby brought up a reason for stopping minstrel performances by black actors that would remain relevant for decades more to come: “we don’t want white people laughing at it.”\textsuperscript{139}

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The interactions of the twenty-first century with the memory and performance of minstrelsy will be largely discussed in my next two chapters. However, there are a few moments and pieces worth pointing out for context.

Comedian David Chappelle produced and acted in the hit television series *Chappelle’s Show* that ran for almost three seasons from 2003-2005. He used his platform to discuss race

\textsuperscript{136} Taylor and Austen, 145

\textsuperscript{137} Taylor and Austen, 156


relations in America, with series of skits that have gone down in popular culture history. This is in large part due to his candid take on racism and racial stereotypes, as well as hilarious quips and one-liners. As Taylor and Austen report in their book *Darkest America*, the current state of affairs was blurry:

But what Chappelle and other contemporary performers draw upon is the more complicated history of black minstrelsy. Since emancipation, black performers have alternately embraced, exploited, subverted, and turned stereotypes inside out, quite often becoming tremendously successful with both black and white audiences in the process. Black crowds enjoyed early black minstrel shows without shame; black blackface vaudeville stars like Bert Williams were heralded as dignified geniuses; and black performers like Mantan Moreland and the comedian-filmmaker Spencer Williams were able to lead dual performing lives, fulfilling cartoonish minstrel-inspired stereotypes for white Hollywood audiences that drew harsh criticism from the black intelligentsia while presenting almost identical performances that felt unproblematic in productions for black audiences.140

Chappelle often used his platform as a famous comedian to subvert relevant stereotypes, and to alleviate the tension around race relations in America. *Chappelle’s Show* Season Two (2004) rated high and reached an average of 3.1 million viewers a week; *Chappelle’s Show* Season One DVD holds the record for best-selling DVD of a television series.141 And his show, in reaching such a significant part of the population, served a purpose. As Michael Eric Dyson says of Chappelle that he “illuminates the idiocy, the sheer lunacy, of racial bigotry,” and in that way, shows America the oft ugly truth about themselves.142 And since Chappelle had “complete creative freedom,” the agency was completely his. In addition to the benefit of viewing his product as uniquely original

140 Taylor and Austen, 3.


and unfettered, Chappelle could arguably avoid any issues with the encoding or decoding of a
message by himself or his audience members.

With all that said however, the reaction he received to one skit pushed him away
permanently. He was replaying a bit called “The Stereotype Pixies” (which aired on
Season Three, The Lost Episodes in 2006 years later).\textsuperscript{143} In the “Black Pixie” episode,
he portrays himself, and the black pixie who stands on his shoulder and encourages
racially stereotypical behavior. In the black racial pixie skit, he dons blackface and tries
to encourage Dave Chappelle (also playing himself in the skit) to order the fried chicken
on a flight. The racial pixie is dressed like a stereotypical minstrel character, with white
gloves, a uniform, and a white hat. He shucks and jives and speaks in a stilted manner.
When Chappelle played the clip back, the prolonged and condescending laugh of a
white staffer bothered him and stuck with him. Similar to Bill Cosby’s comment about
Amos ‘n Andy being too funny to white people, so Chappelle found himself in a place
where he no longer felt like his art was reaching the right audience in the right way. It
was because of that moment that he left behind \textit{Chappelle’s Show} and a $50 million
dollar contract.

Moving into a time where the entertainment is still developing and therefore
can be studied for years to come in a changing socio, cultural, and political landscape,

\textsuperscript{143} Dave Chappelle, “Stereotype Pixies – Black Pixie,” (clip from \textit{Chappelle’s Show}), June 16, 2006,
uncensored.
it is important to remember that the “foundation of American comedy, song, and dance was laid down by white and black minstrel stage legends.”144

As society progresses more agency resides with black performers and the ownership of blackface minstrelsy contributes to an uneasiness over modern cultural expression. This navigation of lore cycles leads to the Minstrel Show Debate, which in faulting rappers for perpetuating minstrelsy makes many assumptions about inheritance and representations. It is my hope that through this chapter I have helped illustrate that “whichever approach is taken, the black minstrel image remains inescapable, something that every black performer, critic, and thinker has to reckon with.”145

144 Taylor and Austen, 4.
145 Taylor and Austen, 12.
CHAPTER 2
HOW AND WHY CRITICS TURNED TO MINSTRELSY

The popularity and influence of hip hop grew faster and larger than probably anyone expected. Just six years later, in 1979, the first commercial hip hop record came to stores when The Sugarhill Gang released the single “Rappers Delight.” Within five years of that, in 1984, RUN-DM.C.’s self-titled album was the first rap album to go gold and their next album, King of Rock, was the first to go platinum. The Grammy’s added the category for Best Rap Performance in 1989. In 1999, The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill won Grammy’s Album of the Year. By 2005, rappers were regularly charting Billboard Top 100s.

When studying the commercial success of rap and hip-hop, a distinctly black art form, in the context of minstrelsy, it significant to understand the consumer demographics of rap albums. During this time, producers used the Nielsen-Soundscan system which was shoddy at best. The system does not track the customer’s race when hard copy CDs and records are purchased in the

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146 *Hip Hop Evolution*, 2016.

147 *Hip Hop Evolution*, 2016.


Rather, they categorize the stores that participate in the data collection as high-income/low-income and suburban/urban and guess from there, a practice which has led to criticism of subjective and conjecture-based data (even though Mike Shalett, the Soundscan founder has referred to it as a “fair assumption”). In today’s market, it would be easier to analyze a more accurate demographic breakdown of rap and hip hop listeners thanks to online streaming services like Apple Music, Pandora, and Spotify. The assumption that companies like Nielsen-Soundscan had maintained for twenty-five years was that primarily white audiences listen to rap and hip hop. Their constructed demographic breakdown between white and black hip hop listeners is assumed to be the same as the general population breakdown, and therefore, there are more white in raw numbers are listening. This seems as though it could present a conundrum for authenticity in hip hop: faced with the social truth that there are more white people in America, how can black performance art not be made for white consumption?

The racial makeup of much of hip hop’s audience, as well as the fact that many white men are producers at major labels led many to believe that the capitalization and commodification of hip hop was really a black art form being played for white culture. As hip hop grew, a cult of authenticity developed and became linked to ideas of geography, class, race, gender, and

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generation; though in the context of minstrelsy it is easy to conjecture that the ideal of authenticity strengthened as a response to a performative past plagued by misrepresentation.\textsuperscript{159}

While questions of audience are important to consider, this chapter focuses on the social awareness that many rappers exhibited during the early 2000s through their music and online message portals. The Internet played a significant part in hip hop culture with the development of online messaging boards and the free upload and streaming services of YouTube and Soundclick.

In a podcast discussion, Taylor and Austen argue that today there are two types of black interactions with minstrelsy. The first is a performer echoing minstrelsy, whatever the outcome. The second is the critique of the representation, which has been there all along.\textsuperscript{160} This hypothesis is supported with an analysis of early 2000s rap output. One of the more controversial criticism of minstrelsy was the delayed release of rap group KMD’s 1993 album \textit{Black Bastards} album caused by its controversial cover art [Figure 4].\textsuperscript{161} The cover depicted their logo, which is a cartoon sambo or coon figure with exaggerated lips and eyes, hanging from a galley. This life-size mascot follows the group around in the movie for their hit single, “Who Me?” in which the rappers ask if people truly interpret authenticity and accurate representation from that mascot’s imagery.\textsuperscript{162} Asking the question of the audience turns this video into a tool with which to critique American society and the status of race relations in the country.

\textsuperscript{159} Ogbar, \textit{Hip-Hop Revolution}, 5-7.


Because the cultural memory of minstrelsy has maintained its connection with base and degrading stereotypes, subversion and ironic usage of associated language and imagery allows for terms like “coon” or “Sambo” to be used as a tool for social commentary. It is important to realize that hip hop is traditionally socially conscious—it was essentially born of Black Power, the Harlem Renaissance and Reaganomics. Ogbar argues that in addition, hip hop “is conscious of the cultural politics that have marginalized black artists who have had their work co-opted by white performers.” Therefore I argue that hip hop and rap position themselves in two unique ways against minstrel history: first, that they are both undeniably and inextricably black art forms. And second, that memory now requires a declaration of authenticity from rappers both when blackness is underperformed and over-performed. However, the as Hall would point out, the encoded message can often get mangled in the decoding, and the line between social commentary and continuation of minstrelsy easily blurs.

During the early 2000s, other rappers knew of a minstrel history, but chose to represent their response differently. Specifically, the Atlanta based Lil Jon and the Eastside Boyz simultaneously challenged and reinforced concepts of minstrel stereotypes through their performances. On stage, Lil Jon’s character communicates largely in exclamations. Dave Chappelle is credited as the catalyst for Lil Jon’s fame, because of a series of skits where he impersonates the rapper by only saying three words “Okaaayyy!” “Whuuut?” and “Yeeeaah!” The signature tone and projection of Lil Jon’s voice is enjoyed by many, judging by his

164 Ogbar, Hip-Hop Revolution, 8.
performance. In 2003 alone he had three top singles.\textsuperscript{166} After the \textit{Chappelle’s Show} skit, Lil Jon reported being “[thrust] into pop culture, and not just urban but white society as well” to the point where grandmothers recognized him!\textsuperscript{167} His posse the Eastside Boyz consists of two men: Lil Sam and Big Bo. The fact that the two together spell Sambo is no accident. When hip hop artist Mos Def heard about Sam and Bo, he gave passionately asked \textit{The Source}, “You think the rules changed ‘cause niggas got No. 1 records? What are we supposed to tell our kids? After Malcom, Martin, and Du Bois we got Sam-Bo? I’m supposed to be down with that ‘cause it makes me dance?”\textsuperscript{168} But his 2003 album \textit{Pull Up Ya Hood}, a reference to the Ku Klux Klan member garments, has him, Big Sam and Lil Bo posturing in front of two burning Confederate flags in clear defiance [Figure 5]. Where then, do Lil Jon’s intentions lie? The answer is difficult to decode, as whatever subversive message he tries to send is often overshadowed by his wild on stage performances and flashy jewelry.\textsuperscript{169}

Lil Jon led a paradigm shift in 2000s rap music; his style of dance music with catchy hooks that value repetition over poetic lyrics defined this era of hip hop. One-hit wonders abounded, and with the advent of cellphones, snap rap was born. Snap rap, or snap music, refers to songs that you could easily buy and put on your phone as a ringtone.\textsuperscript{170} This drove up sales for many artists who

\begin{enumerate}
\item Lil Jon is called a “real” artist but one who panders to stereotypes in Ogbar, \textit{Hip Hop Revolution}, 8.
\item Phonte Coleman, interview by author, phone, March 27, 2017.
\end{enumerate}
had popular catchy music like Atlanta group D4L’s 2005 single “Laffy Taffy.” Ghostface Killah called it “bullshit.” “Laffy Taffy” hit number one on the Billboard Top 100 charts in January of 2006 and went three times platinum. This inspired others like Atlanta based Dem Franchize Boyz to produce their hit, “Lean wit it, Rock wit it.” Dance songs were also subject to criticism when the moves conjured images of shuckin’ and jivin’. The song “Chicken Noodle Soup,” accompanied by a popular dance met critique for just that as it necessitates splayed legs and spastic foot tapping.

Another southern rapper, Lil Wayne, got heat for his performances. Because he wears grills, raps about bling, bitches, money, critics love to rail on him for negatively representing black people, black culture, and playing into stereotypes as an “icy rapper.” His use of ornamental grills and decision to pay tens of thousands of dollars to wear gold and diamonds on his teeth also draws annoy some critics. The issue that critics see with the adaptation of grills in the hip-hop

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176 An icy rapper concerns himself only with bling and chains. Jeffries, 57.

community is largely due to parallels with the wide-toothed grin of minstrel characters past.\textsuperscript{178} Perhaps more significantly, showing your teeth has come to be a pejorative because it alludes to slavery and standing on the auction block.\textsuperscript{179} He experienced even more backlash from cultural critics offended by the insensitivity of his song “Whip it like a Slave” in reference to whipping up, or cooking, cocaine.\textsuperscript{180}

Another defining episode of rappers and minstrelsy is the public, private life of Flavor Flav. Flavor originally started as Public Enemy’s hype man, acting outlandishly due to his use as a strategic comedy relief during serious performances. Perhaps due to his role in helping another, authentic performance was he able to avoid scrutiny or name calling.\textsuperscript{181} However, when his reality TV show based off \textit{The Bachelor} premiered in 2006, the hip hop community’s attitude towards him changed. On \textit{Flavor of Love} he acted garishly, continued to wear his large clock necklaces, and encouraged black women to also act foolishly on television; all this lead to accusations that he sold out.\textsuperscript{182} However, he was not universally disdained, and the show had high ratings; in fact, 7.5 million viewers turned in for the season finale of Flavor of Love 2, making it the top ranked non-sports cable telecast for the entire year.\textsuperscript{183} This level of popularity reveals “nuances and rhythms


\textsuperscript{180} Taylor and Austen, 248.

\textsuperscript{181} Westhoff, 41.

\textsuperscript{182} Mark A. Neal, guest, “Skin Color, Stereotypes, and “Minstrel Rap,”” The Takeaway (Podcast), \textit{WNYC}, December 5, 2006.

of African American humor that will always be out of reach of white performers (in literal or proverbial) blackface.”

Critics of gangster rap also used minstrel language to address their concerns, which leads to a reassessment of the word’s history and memory and ultimately contributes a novel meaning to the minstrel lore cycle. Within gangster rap, tropes of coons, dandies, or sambos are difficult to find amongst the death and dope dealing. While there is similarity in the use of hyperbole, critics of gangster rap that use minstrel language ascribe to a narrative that America had more or less decided would run counter to the memory of beloved mammies and gentle dandies—the buck. As discussed above, 19th century minstrel characters were ignorant and lazy, more concerned with singing and dancing than anything else. The “buck” character was introduced in 1915 by the film Birth of a Nation in a fearmongering attempt. For gangster rappers whose lyrics value guns, bitches, drugs, and money, the bill fits the persona they aspire to project. They speak in hyperbole to tell a tale of ghetto danger and intrigue. A notable example of gangster rap is the group NWA (to stand for Niggaz with Attitude), the self-titled Most Dangerous Group on Earth. Made up of members Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren, DJ Yella, and Eazy E, NWA introduced excess and murder into the mainstream of rap and hip-hop. While critics called them ignorant, they bucked against expectations of authenticity and left behind “knowledge of self or empowering the race” in order to display “the strength of street knowledge.” Their premier album, Straight Outta Compton, saw no airplay on the radio because of their explicit lyrics, and especially because of

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184 Taylor and Austen, 20.
185 Ogbar, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop, 318.
186 Ogbar, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop, 318.
187 Ogbar, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop, 318-327.
their track “Fuck tha Police,” which landed them a cease and desist letter from the FBI; the album still went platinum, meaning they sold one million copies and since gaining traction is now listed as triple platinum.\footnote{“N.W.A” Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, accessed November 12, 2016, https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/nwa.} While I will not go further into this different approach to using minstrel memory, I recommend Kevin Lee LaGrone, “From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The “Nigger” as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment” for further reading.\footnote{Kevin Lee LaGrone, “From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The “Nigger” as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment,” \textit{Journal of African American Men} 5 no. 2 (Fall 2000).}

When trying to understand why authenticity is so crucial to the culture of hip hop, it is important to consider the natural inception of the movement: it was genuine and it was authentic. For example, RUN DMC fit in with mainstream culture, and not necessarily as commodities. They were featured on MTV, \textit{Saturday Night Live}, and \textit{American Bandstand}, and had a hit single with Aerosmith.\footnote{“Run-D.M.C.,” \textit{Rock & Roll Hall of Fame}, accessed March 13, 2017, https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/run-dmc.} They broke the mold by having it change for them—their 1986 nomination for a Grammy in Best R&B Vocal Performance must have opened the floor for conversation about creating “Best Rap” categories. Run DMC was popular and “did it all by being themselves – dressing without image or affectation, and popularizing black tennis shoes in the process.”\footnote{Though this could be tied back to the commodification of urban fashion causing traditionally accessible brand prices to rise, which we still see with brands like Nike and Champion today.} Grandmaster Flash was genuine. Afrika Bambaataa was genuine.\footnote{\textit{Hip Hop Evolution}, 2016.} They sought change for their communities within gangs and the ghetto. The same level of selfishness that you find in icy rappers was not there. And so, it may have felt for some members of the community that their genuine
revelation in self and community was short lived, and that snap rap signaled a regression to negative presentations of self that could ultimately damage the community.

With these institutional shifts in the way rap music was nationally portrayed and consumed, the stage was set for a discussion and debate over lingering images of minstrel performance in the twenty-first century. Okayplayer was born in 1999 (years before artists were accessible through social media platforms) to Ahmir “?uestlove” Thompson and Angela Nissel. Together, they sought to use this platform to take care of their band, The Roots, website. Yet the project grew quickly, hosting musicians’ websites and discussion boards for fans and artists to interact directly. In his time online, Questlove, a prolific drummer, found the North Carolina group Little Brother and decided to mentor them. Together, with magazines like trusted hip hop cultural centers *The Source* and *XXL*, the term *Minstrel Show Debate* was born in 2004-2005 to describe the state of affairs in rap and hip hop at the time. Having access to both sources provides a well-rounded view of the hip hop community since large magazine publications like *The Source*, *XXL* and others provide industry standards and complement the underground and independent point of view presented by Questlove and Okayplayer blogs and discussion boards. On the messenger board, Questlove, known for speaking out, really started it all when he writes in September of 2004:

“[The Coon…The Mandingo…The Line Blurer…The Rollercoaster…]…there is no person of color who has ANY success without at least these elements. None. beyonce/urkel/George Jefferson/’carlton’ from fresh prince/oprah/busta NO ONE. problem is: is that these are limiting categories because they will forever make a person 2 dimensional “at best”—if you are judged

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194 Hypersexualized black male.

195 Mammy; uses “Line Blurer” because the history of drag has allowed this term to refer to a docile, ambiguous, unsexed person (and a key safety feature in the Mammy is her complete lack of sexual appeal).

196 A buck character not dangerous enough to hurt you, but enough scare you.
SOLELY on these merits above and for NOTING else? You are not considred what they call “normal”—or as I say “human”\(^\text{197}\)

While Questlove began leading and contributing to discussions of “cooning” and minstrel performance in 2004, it took commentators for *XXL* and *LA Weekly* until 2006 and 2007, respectively to chime in. In these discussion boards, you see the import and implication of language; with the development of new minstrel terms not used in the past, you see new lore cycles being built in real time. The word “coon” and the term “cooning” refer to performers that the community saw as selling themselves out for profit. Questlove wrote in September of 2004 “half of these “coon” accusers wouldn’t even know real coons. Only difference is the blackface has been replaced with spinners, platinum chains, and riches...just because the artform is supported dosnt[sp] mean that we are seen as artists as opposed to…objects.”\(^\text{198}\) He also refers to the craziest part of his drum solo as “exotic primitive attraction,” admitting that he, too plays the minstrel card.\(^\text{199}\) The ambiguities abound. Other discomforted artists followed suite. Ghostface Killah crowned Soulja Boy “coon of the decade;” Ice-T called him out for “single handedly kill[ing] hip hop.”\(^\text{200}\) Nas made a public service announcement warning Lil Wayne of his coon behavior by filming Nick


Cannon in blackface eating watermelon. In another skit, Chappelle’s Black Stereotype Pixie watched the Ying Yang twins on MTV Cribs and exclaimed “even I’m embarrassed!”

If these critics missed the good ole days, they were in for a shock. In 2006, the Internet spawned Ms. Peachez, a cross-dressing southern rapper whose song “Fry That Chicken” became “the most politicized” video of the decade. It depicts an army of children sitting around a dilapidated farm table demanding Ms. Peachez, with her grown-out nails and unkempt wig, “Fry That Chicken!” This low-quality video has received almost seven million hits since its upload in 2006. The song is supposed to be comical, but the imagery fulfills many negative stereotypes that still affect the African American community, including a penchant for fried chicken. The racist tropes that contribute to this clip are so much that a Washington Post op-ed columnist called Birth of a Nation “tame” when compared. In this way, the viewers that watch this consume the same type of entertainment that the audience of nineteenth century minstrel shows did; bopping along to a catchy beat while laughing at an overdone caricature. It forced rappers, hip hop artists, and critics alike to the web to watch the video, and mostly everyone was incensed by it. The crazy thing about its virility in the online space, there is no context. Lack of context also forgoes control of your audience. And, fascinatingly, some members from the rap community interpreted


the song as “real.” In fact, the ambiguity of authenticity and the subscription to minstrelsy “killed” a rapper. In 2006, Phonte Coleman of Little Brother posted on MySpace that his alter-ego, Percy Miracles, was dead. Percy was a romantic who in 2005 appeared on The Minstrel Show to satire Ray-J. Percy met a death of two characters we have met before: Pierre Delacroix from Spike Lee’s Bamboozled and Dave Chappelle from his own series, Chappelle Show. Just as those two men pushed society’s acceptance of racism, so did Phonte with Percy as he tells it:

I was at home one day working on a few sketches for a quick parody album I wanted to record. I really wanted to write a song and see just how far I could go…see just how tasteless, racist, and outrageous I could be before black people all over (intelligentsia and blockhuggers alike) all raised a collective fist and said, ‘oh, hayulll naw….we ain’t fitna take this shit no mo!’ The song in question was called “Pick That Bale” by Percy Miracles, which came with its own accompanying dance, and was topped off by a scorching 16 bar cameo from A-Dolf the Nigger Hating Dopeboy. (yeah, I took it there..) I thought that a song so racist and over the top would really open people’s eyes and help them realize that ‘yeah, I know its ‘just music’ but somewhere a line has to be drawn.’ I thought that a song so crude and tasteless would finally set some kind of standard. That was, until, I clicked on youtube and saw a video of a Black man dressed in drag, singing about the praises of fried chicken….If I ever had to single out one defining moment that led to Percy’s death and the subsequent scrapping of all my parody work, that was it. It was then that I realized that there is no such thing as a ‘floor’ for Black music……the law is TRULY ‘anything goes,’ and I couldn’t afford to play the fool no more.

The outrage is warranted. But this post highlights the severity and sincerity of what the hip hop critics are trying to accomplish through calling out negative portrayals and representations of black Americans. That Percy had to die for the cause is a casualty worth mourning as lore cycles, especially as they protect the art of satire and parody, are called into question again and again. One might never have thought that parody in the black and hip hop community was at such risk, and you would hope that minstrelsy would be put to death before satire...unless they are morphing into

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207 Phonte Coleman, “The Death of a Star: How a Piece of Fried Chicken Killed Percy Miracles.”
the same thing. In this conversation, Phonte’s positioning and point of view is particularly significant as 2006 is exactly and only one year after he released a full length studio album entitled *The Minstrel Show* that sought to call out the minstrel rappers by doing none other than parodying the state of hip hop and rap as they saw it.
CHAPTER 3

LITTLE BROTHER AND THE MINSTREL SHOW

In the Summer of 2005, Atlantic Records sent out a sample to garner excitement for Little Brother’s upcoming sophomore album. Having been recently heralded as one of XXL Magazine’s Most Anticipated New Artists, a Band to Watch from The Spin, and signing a record deal with a major label, Little Brother was doing well.208 The three Durham, North Carolina based members, Big Pooh, Phonte, and 9th Wonder had met at North Carolina Central University a few years ago and had released The Listening on the independent label ABB to considerable acclaim and success. They had been previously lauded by their ability to make “music that brilliantly splits the line between art and commercialism, all while maintaining their fun-loving hip hop purist stance.”209 Yet, this album was going to be different than anything anyone had put out before. The album was called The Minstrel Show, and the cover of the sampler they sent out depicted a grinning cartoon blackface character—they were here to send a message[Figure 5].

As I have laid out in my project, a deep-rooted history of minstrel shows in our history means that racist depictions of black Americans have influenced much of the culture we consume today. The debate waging during this period revolved around questions of memory, agency, and representation. Little Brother takes this conversation a step further and requires their listeners to question the form of critique that the rap and hip hop community had chosen to talk about their


own. *The Minstrel Show* was subtitled: “The Biggest Colored Show on Earth” in what could be decoded as a dig of the entire rap and hip hop community and its potentially conflated sense of grandeur when criticizing others (remember, Little Brother is a Southern rap group, and Southern rappers are known for their shamelessness, a theory supported by this album²¹⁰).

The album cover released in September of 2005 with the album was even more intriguing than the sample. Calling directly on a history of minstrel and variety/comedy shows, Little Brother has each member posed as if on a TV Guide, grinning widely at the camera, their white teeth standing out against the dark background and their black faces [Figure 6]. The album art introduces the television theme of the album that is carried throughout the track list. *The Minstrel Show* is the “new hit sitcom” airing Sundays on UBN, the fictional “U Be Niggas” Network imagined by Little Brother, with an allusion a now defunct television station UPN that aired black sitcoms – in fact, upwards of ten at a time.²¹¹ Chris Hardwick hosts *The Minstrel Show* which runs like a full television production reminiscent of something like *American Bandstand*. In *The Minstrel Show*, Yazarah sings the chorus to the intro and conclusion of the album, with the words “We’d like to welcome you to everything there is to know/This is our life, this is our music, it’s our Minstrel Show.” While this seems to be welcoming and insinuates agency in the representation of the black identity, the album is largely a parody. Every type of rapper is subject to satire somewhere in the songs, from gangster rappers to Ray J. There are special guests, commercials, people who call into the show, and Phonte’s R&B alter ego Percy Miracles.

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²¹⁰ Taylor and Austen, 225.

Skits are representative of a continuation of minstrel history in hip hop. Skits became popular in the late 80s after De La Soul put them in their album *Three Feet High and Rising.*\(^{212}\) The skits provide comic relief and are designed to appear like an impromptu or improv comedy sketch.\(^ {213}\) They are meant to add humor to albums, and skits on Biz Markie’s “Just a Friend” helped catapult “yo mama” jokes into popular lexicon.\(^ {214}\) Little Brother has multiple skits on the album, including an entire track called “Diary of a Mad Black Daddy” in which a father is yelling at his child for listening to that “ig’nant ass shit” and those “damn minstrel show niggas making black folks look like damn fools.”\(^ {215}\) His imploring of his child to finish their multiplication tables is interrupted by a phone call, which leads into the next track “All for You” in which Phonte and Big Pooh “call” their fathers and discuss the trials of black masculinity and fatherhood. Skits like “Diary of a Mad Black Daddy” and “5th and Fashion” are indicative of a black humor that allowed listeners to be privy to their construction and message and also portend a sense of familiarity.\(^ {216}\)

With an album like this, Little Brother created the opportunity for themselves to spread a message, or an awareness. They answer the question of art for art’s sake themselves, and decide education is part of it, continuing the trend of old school, genuine, authentic hip hop artists from the seventies and eighties. In an interview with Redbull, Phonte explained, “hip hop just wasn’t


doing the same thing. Instead of being an instrument for positivity, telling people they’re beautiful and to build them up, it was destructive and there were a lot of images we were seeing around the time that were kind of, “Damn! Enough is enough.”

In an interview, Rapper Big Pooh said “to me, minstrel is an exaggerated and over the top depiction of a culture of people from the outside looking in through jaded eyes. It plays on fear. It plays on a disturbed sense of humor and sometimes an over sexualized idea of people within a culture. In this case, black culture.”

And that this album was a “…critiquing our own, so to speak. Culture appropriation happens, it’s expected. For those OF the culture to play the role is the most disturbing and hurtful part of the whole thing. Visually that’s what we tried to illustrate.”

In this regard, The Minstrel Album is a particularly interesting case study because they were able to turn in their record completely finished to Atlantic and did not make any changes that the label recommended. Similar to Chappelle’s Show, the influence of the media on the creative process, at least in that regard, was essentially eradicated, creating a pure piece of artwork.

The education factor of their work is built into their background. 9th Wonder’s signature on Okayplayer read, “We Must Educate As Well As Entertain.” And looking at their discography, it is clear that education about black pasts, and especially black Southern pasts was important to them.

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218 Thomas “Big Pooh” Jones III, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2017.

219 Thomas “Big Pooh” Jones III, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2017.

Earlier in 2005, they had released a mixtape called *The Chittlin’ Circuit 1.5*.\(^{221}\) The Chittlin’ Circuit is actually the vernacular and colloquial name for the chain of theaters spread throughout the southeast and midwest of America’s landscape where black performers got their start.\(^{222}\) Since after the Civil War and before the Civil Rights Era, blacks were banned from performing in the same venues as whites, they had their own, more underground venues.\(^{223}\) Black historians and artists have struggled to come to terms with The Chittlin’ Circuit being called such, since a chittlin’ is a historically poor black meal made out of pig intestines; however both historians and artists consider it a marker of ingenuity, and see redemption in its use.\(^{224}\) However, historians and artists alike have pointed out that the chittlin’ is an example of black ingenuity and making a good thing out of a bad situation.\(^{225}\) That Little Brother would title their mixtape The Chittlin’ Circuit indicates that their knowledge of black performance history is extensive, and further proves that they have made a conscious effort through their art to make social statements and potentially incite social change.

That Little Brother, as well as all if not most of the rappers who have been brought up as subject to scrutiny with the standard of the minstrel show debate, are southern is important. Place is important. That these rappers in question were all Southern contributed to a national narrative about southern cultural inferiority and a branding of this music as “Dirty South.”\(^{226}\) Moving

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\(^{226}\) Westhoff, 299.
forward in the conversation, and leading to the discussion of Little Brother, location is also important to consider because of the cultural diversity that exists within different cultural regions in the United States. The South has a history of discrimination and enslavement of black Americans that similar to minstrelsy maintains a memory that is hard to forgo. Black culture is unique in America, and in the South, a unique lens has been put on the experience. Rap and hip-hop originated in New York City, Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and then found its competition on the West Coast. Yet, the South was producing music, too. As illustrated above, many Southern artists were not taken seriously by other rap groups. The way they presented themselves didn’t make sense to authentic rappers up north. Yet, the southerners were using the culture that had remained behind to create their personas. When OutKast came onto the scene with Andre 3000 and Big Boi, the respect for Southern rap changed. The duo proved that it was possible to produce good southern rap, and opened the door for many others to come forward.

The Minstrel Show was revolutionary. XXL magazine gave The Minstrel Show an XL rating, and The Source gave it a 4.0. However, the editor in chief, Joshua “Fahiym” Ratcliffe, resigned after the album was not given a 4.5, as he had suggested. But how did the public receive it? Although the album was released to much critical acclaim, it faced an unexpected controversy when BET would not play their video on Rap City because it was “too intelligent.” Regardless, the video did not play on BET. The song Little Brother chose to sell as a single was “Lovin’ It ft.


228 Westhoff, 8.

230 9th Wonder, interview by Justin Hunte, “9th Wonder Recalls Original Theme For Little Brother's Aborted Third Album” (transcript), HipHopDx, July 8, 2014; and 9th Wonder, interview by Justin Hunte, “9th Wonder Recalls Original Theme For Little Brother's Aborted Third Album” (transcript), HipHopDx, July 8, 2014; and Phonte Coleman, interview by Jeff “Chairman” Mao, (transcript), Red Bull Music Academy, 2006.
Joe Scudda,” who is a white rapper that they introduced as performing in blackface. The song was also not a snap rap song, and in fact the music video makes fun of all the different types of rappers, icy, backpack, gangster, earthy, and lost out to that market which was just blowing up at the time. In their opening week, Little Brother sold 18,000 copies of The Minstrel Show, leading The SPIN to call it a flop a year later. There was also a scathing review on Pitchfork railing against Little Brother’s disdain for the state of hip hop despite the presence of Kanye West, Missy Elliott, and OutKast. However, his review seems to miss the mark, attacking the members personally rather than the quality of the music. It is interesting to see though a critic of the community who does not agree with the minstrel show debate.

Phonte, Pooh, and 9th Wonder all address the fact that the album didn’t do as well as they wanted. Interestingly, both Phonte and 9th Wonder conflate the mismatch between critical acclaim and commercial success with a separation of themselves from their space. Phonte cites filming the “Lovin’ It” music video in New York instead of in North Carolina, and 9th Wonder also agrees that they should never have gone to New York and “lost themselves.”

Also, Phonte and Big Pooh thought maybe people missed the point. Pooh cited minstrel shows and the history of blackface and minstrelsy to be too taboo for people to really know about.


235 9th Wonder, interview by Justin Hunte, 2014.
And that people didn’t really want to ask themselves if they were part of the problem.\textsuperscript{236} Phonte spoke about how Bun B, a member of UGK, thought that \textit{The Minstrel Show} was a dig at him when that was not the intention at all because Phonte respected Bun B immensely.\textsuperscript{237} Hall talks about encoding and decoding messages.\textsuperscript{238} A producer encodes the message for the audience to decode, but mistakes can happen in encoding, the delivery of the message, and decoding that results in a game of telephone. The audience either misses the message or misinterprets it, calling for a redesign on the part of the producer.

Little Brother released their \textit{The Minstrel Show} album at an interesting and crucial turning point in American rap music. At the 2005 release, the minstrel show debate among performers and critics was in full swing.\textsuperscript{239} Little Brother’s return to truer iterations of a minstrel show contributed to a nice but important conversation in the mid 00’s hip-hop community. And with their social commentary and well-curated album, the group subverts the negativity and has a view wonder - is there any positivity left in a minstrel performance? Can it be used for good?

When asked in his interview, if he had anything else to say, Phonte replied: “I think we could have made the same record and again, if you just put it in different packaging it becomes a hit, you know what I’m saying, cause most people don’t get the packaging anyway” and then, “If I had to do it all over again would I do it? Yeah. But I think we could have made the exact same

\begin{footnotes}
\item[236] Thomas “Big Pooh” Jones III, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2017.
\end{footnotes}
album but if we had called it anything other than *The Minstrel Show*, it would have been fine. It would have had some great hits.”

Was America, or the hip hop community, not ready to face a project called *The Minstrel Show*? Where they not ready to leave behind the type of music and commercial success they had been seeing with their music? Was using minstrel history in this way going too far? Analyzing the lack of *The Minstrel Show*’s success can be used as a thermometer for the cultural climate at the time. However, just as cultural images that stay with us must be deconstructed in order to be reimagined, understood, and reused, so did *The Minstrel Show* blow up the use of these words, terms, and names and led hip hop into a new, more conscious realm of production.

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240 Phonte Coleman, interview by author, phone, March 27, 2017.
CONCLUSION

Through its one-hundred-and-fifty-year history, minstrelsy has been a tool to measure authenticity in the black performance art community. The word has shifted significantly in its meaning and in its representation to this point as well. That fact that a black rap group from North Carolina would release an album called The Minstrel Show in 2005 seems counter-intuitive, and perhaps it was. In the community, especially the underground community that still loves Little Brother ten years after they disbanded, the general understanding is that the group was ahead of its time. When Little Brother came on the scene, there was no group doing what they did to the level they took it to. While a political statement was nothing new, to go in and criticize the political statement and its delivery method was, perhaps, “too intelligent” for 2005 America. In the past twelve years, however, many rappers have come forth as “conscious rappers,” gaining a new title for picking back up where rap left off in 2004.

Artist NYIOL was highly criticized for his 2007 song “Y’all Should All Get Lynched,” in which he goes after almost every “minstrel” rapper on the scene, calling them “coon ass rappers” and “fake ass gangsters.” He makes it political, reminding his audience that “Malcolm X…And Martin Luther King died for you to act like this.” His video was banned from YouTube for content; an animated version now lives online.

In 2011, BET barred Killer Mike’s video for his track “Burn,” in which he focuses politically on the struggles black America is facing, the anthem being “I will burn this motherfucker down.” However, this video was eventually allowed onto BET airwaves after a Twitter backlash.
Rappers like J Cole, Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West are among the elite and most popular of these rappers. They are all considered authentic and “real.” And the conscious rap is a commercially viable route today, unlike in 2005. The impact of these rappers on the community and on the national attitude towards hip hop music and race will be an interesting field to study in the years to come. Their use of minstrel history or blackface performance, if it exists, will also be interesting to study in a later research project. Little Brother critiqued not only the practice of snap rap, but also took the criticism to such a high level that they essentially challenged the use of minstrelsy as a critique as well. Minstrel history, while a sordid past, asks communities important questions about memory and pushes them to toe the line between being aware of your history and glorifying a negative past.

Minstrelsy used as a tool to measure authenticity within the black performance art community. The importance of using this history and memory has to do with dominant and counter narrative, race relations, artist intent, and the value of cultural productions. One of my big takeaways, and an interesting question that could potentially spur further research, is does the Minstrel Show Debate center around the question of what it means to be black in America?

In a 2014 interview, 9th Wonder revealed that Little Brother had planned a third album as a trio, and if released, it would have been called “Can’t Win For Losing.” The album would be marketed like a Blaxploitation film to fit in with their trilogy: radio, television, film. An exploitation film is a low budget film that acts specifically and intentionally to make a comment on the current cultural or political landscape; Blaxploitation films came to be in the 1970s to specifically discuss black issues.

241 9th Wonder, interview by Justin Hunte, “9th Wonder Recalls Original Theme For Little Brother's Aborted Third Album” (transcript), HipHopDx, July 8, 2014.
In explaining the intent, 9th says, “cause we already thought The Minstrel Show didn’t do what we wanted it to do and we’re trying to do the best music that we can and we’re still getting the short end of the stick.” Little Brother had a role to play in speaking out for their representation at the time. Although 9th Wonder left the group in 2007 and Phonte and Big Pooh officially dissolved the group in 2010 after releasing their album *Leftback*, Little Brother’s artwork has earned its role as a significant moment in black performance art history.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX


242https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2007.1.69.21.76.8?destination=explore/collection/search%3Fedan_q%3DHentry%2520Clay%2520Anderson%2520%26edan_fq%5B0%5D%3Dtopic%2520American%2520%26edan_fq%5B1%5D%3Dtopic%2522Photography%2522%26edan_fq%5B2%5D%3Dplace%2520Mississippi%2522%26edan_fq%5B3%5D%3Dedanmdm.indexedstructured.name%2520Rabbit%2520Company%2522The%2520Rabbit%2522s%2520Foot%2520Company%2522%26edan_local%3D1
Figure 2: Saltshakers, March 14, 2017, author’s photograph.

![KMD Album Cover](image1.jpg)


![Lil Jon Album Cover](image2.jpg)

POOH: My introduction to minstrel shows was through old movies and literature. Seeing Spike Lee’s “Bamboozled” also had me go do a little more research on the topic.

I started to not only learn but understand what minstrel shows and blackface was as a teenager.

POOH: To me, minstrel is an exaggerated and over the top depiction of a culture of people from the outside looking in through jaded eyes. It plays on fear. It plays on a disturbed sense of humor and sometimes an over sexualized idea of people within a culture. In this case, black culture.

Blackface represents the mask. That represents the character or the caricature.

POOH: Was definitely aware of the history. That is the whole point of the album. It is critiquing our own, so to speak. Culture appropriation happens, it’s expected. For those OF the culture to play the role is the most disturbing and hurtful part of the whole thing. Visually that’s what we tried to illustrate.

POOH: Our whole idea behind creating The Minstrel Show began with us being frustrated with the direction of Urban Music, specifically Rap/Hip-Hip, and where it was going. Everything felt extra and exaggerated when it came to the music. Nothing felt real or relatable. We felt that it was more satire, caricatures of what, in our case emcees, should be.

POOH: In my opinion a lot of people missed the point on our overall statement. Looking back, the subject of Minstrel Shows are so taboo that most people didn’t understand the history or couldn’t correlate the connection between actual Minstrel Shows and us naming our album, The Minstrel Show. I think they were also looking
for us to give examples of who we felt was playing the part, instead of what we actually did which was show what good honest Hip Hop music sounds like.

**LBN:** When thinking of ways to critique hip hop performers, why did you choose minstrelsy?

**POOH:** We wanted to do something that was brash. Make a statement that would never be forgotten. It’s certain topics that you have to go big or what’s the point, this was one of those topics. It’s also how we were actually feeling at the time. You couldn’t be “regular” and make waves in the music history, at least not in Rap or Hip Hop. You had to have a crazy back story or walk around looking like you robbed a Brinks truck. It was a weird and crazy time.

**LBN:** Why do you think the language of minstrel shows is an effective tool in critiquing hip hop?

**POOH:** It forces people to take a look at themselves. It makes you take pause and question, “am I apart of the problem?”

**LBN:** How are you able to code messages differently between lyrics and performances (including music videos)?

**POOH:** Our message was more of balance than anything else. Coding messages in lyrics are easy, it’s how you tell a story. It’s the words and phrasing you choose. Visually you have to challenge the mind of the audience. Our video for a single off the album put all these different people in one place and had them interacting with each other. While they all entered the place separately, the balance was them mingling with each other by the end of the video, which made it look “regular” not anything out of the ordinary.

**LBN:** What was the inspiration for your album art?

**POOH:** We wanted our album art to look like the old TV Guides that our parents used to get. Before the guide popped up on your tv screen you had to look at this little magazine to see what was coming on for the day or week. In keeping with the TV Guide theme, we decked it out with images that reflected original minstrel shows while using the cover to reflect a modern minstrel. That’s back to the coding. Three black men, smiling wide, teeth showing...for the camera.

**LBN:** How do you think history has contributed to hip hop performances?

**POOH:** We all borrow from the past. Whether is consciously or subconsciously, it happens.
LBN: In your personal experience, how does art contribute to collective identity in America, and why is it important to continue creating and performing art?

POOH: Art is supposed to be the honest expressive outlet of what you see, hear, and feel. It is therapy. It connects people from different genders, races, ethnicities, religions, age groups, occupations, etc. When used correctly it is a tool that brings people together. I can recall doing shows and speaking with people after from all walks of life. We had teachers, lawyers, college students, drug dealers, and blue collar workers all in the building together sharing an experience.

LBN: How do you think your album has contributed to the language surrounding and cultural understanding of black performance art?

POOH: I believe what that album did was show a generation of young people that it is okay to be who you are. You don’t have to put on an act for anyone. It has allowed some to be who they really want to be and that is reflected in their music and art. It also showed that three young black men from the south didn’t just reject what was going on around them at the time but instead chose to give, in their minds, a better alternative to what was going on in music.

LBN: Do you believe hip hop has changed significantly since the release of The Minstrel Show, now more than ten years ago?

POOH: Some, yes. Significantly, no. Different fads come and go. Younger artist come and expand upon what it was they grew up on. You have artists that grew up on Little Brother and The Minstrel Show album that decided to give the world their version of what good music is, like a Kendrick Lamar or a Drake. While you still have the exaggerated characters and caricatures it isn’t like it was in 2004 when we were putting together The Minstrel Show album. Time changes things, always.

LBN: Who do you think the most important critics of hip hop are?

POOH: The most important critics are the consumers. The people that buy the music, pay to go the shows, and purchase the merchandise. They wield the most power but have tricked into thinking they have the least. We felt we could make the statement we made because we were, and still are, fans first.

LBN: In “Lovin’ It,” Joe Scudda is introduced as performing in blackface. Do you consider white rappers as culturally appropriative? Can black rappers perform in blackface?

POOH: There are some white rappers that appropriate the cultural and some that don’t. You can always tell who is who when the proverbial shit hits the fan. It’s like the saying (excuse the language but important to illustrate the point here), “everybody wants to be a nigga, but nobody wants to be a nigger.” - Paul Mooney.
Yes, black rappers can perform in “blackface” as well. It’s rappers out there that create whole extravagant personas, characters, to be someone that aren’t to entertain people.
Figure 9: Phonte Coleman, selections, interview by author, phone, March 27, 2017.

LBN: What were your reference points for minstrel shows and blackface? (School, Movies, TV, etc.)? Do you remember the first time you learned about these topics?
Pc: First time I learned about it was in school. First time I learned what a minstrel show was was 7th or 8th grade...[It was] a thing where you learn about it then look back and think “oh shit.” [You see a] character like Buckwheat or in Tom and Jerry – the nanny, “oh tom!” – over the top black fucking mammy; even a character like Speedy Gonzalez. It made me look back on a lot of stuff in my childhood and reconsider...

LBN: Are you aware of a history of black minstrel performers who also wore blackface? If so, how did that contribute to your inspiration for The Minstrel Show?
Pc: I became aware of them once I got to college and got further along. It was sad in some ways because it’s almost just a metaphor, one of those things, like you’re not black enough. My black skin and being naturally black is not enough, I have to make myself extra black. When I found out there were black performers...they were doing what they had to do at that time to survive. I understood where it was coming from.

LBN: Did you consider the history of black performers when creating The Minstrel Show?
Pc: Absolutely. [I was] thinking about black performers having to exaggerate themselves...to sell to a primarily white audience.

LBN: Your album created some controversy. It’s been said Source editor Josh Ratcliffe stepped down after the magazine didn’t follow his suggestion to give The Minstrel Show a 4.5/5 rating. It was also rumored that BET producers said your video for “Lovin’ It” was too intelligent for the audience. At the time, how did you interpret this controversy?
Pc: At the time, there was...I think, uh, when the record came out, first and foremost, we had to fight Atlantic to put the record out. And to their credit, they let us do what we wanted to do. At the time when we came out, we didn’t really have anything else that sounded like that. We didn’t get a lot of love from a lot of major outlets. We didn’t get play time on BET. I did an interview with Steven Hill – current president of BET – did an interview with him on election night – and we talked about that. And he was like, look man, I don’t know where that came from. We would never say something like that. It’s water under the bridge now. The Source thing was true. At the time as I remember it, Young Jeezy’s first album [Motivation 101] was coming out, and I want to say, he gave us four and a half and they gave Jeezy either four or three and a half but at the time [missed name] was running the show and what I heard was that they wanted to stay in the good graces of Jeezy so they didn’t want to give us a higher rating than him. Jeezy had the street at that time – he was the dude. The one guy that is the fan favorite, street favorite and then you have this little underground group that’s big in college dorms maybe but that’s about it. He did step down for that. Me and him remain close to this day. There was a lot of people, lot of lifelong bonds I formed with people from that time….Ratcliffe is one of them,

LBN: Do you believe hip hop has changed significantly since the release of The Minstrel Show, now more than ten years ago?
Pc: I think there are huge differences. I think a group like Little Brother would probably do today better in today’s market place...than in the marketplace of 12-13 years ago. At the time
when we came out, that was bam in the middle of snap – ringtone records. That’s when ringtones were hot. Basically ringtones were things you could buy over the cell phone, if you liked your favorite song you could buy the ringtone. Also could have callback songs – if someone called you that’s what they would hear.

We bought Little Brother “Lovin’ It” as a ringtone. Needless to say, these are songs that are very simple and that can be made very cheaply with very cheap sound, you know what I’m saying. It is much easier to remake a song like “Lean With It, Rock With It” or “Laffy Taffy” - much easier to sell that as a ringtone than “Lovin’ It” by Little Brother as a ringtone.

The movement at that time was snap and snap rap – a movement out of atlanta – records like, you know,“Laffy Taffy,” “Chain Hang Low” by Jibb, “Lean With It, Rock With It,” “In My White Tee.”…all these one hit wonder records that were just runnin shit.

And so, for a group like little brother to come out, we really had no one else that was in our lane. Today, you have a Kendrick Lamar, a J Cole, a Logic, a Big Sean, you have all these cats who are more, I mean slightly less to the middle, than the cats back thenn who were just all the way to the right.

We didn’t have anyone around us to help us make sense to the listeners. So yeah, it was a tough time, and then because I think we were new, a lot of people thought we were being arrogant and looking down, like you think you’re better than us

I think that [The Minstrel Show] was something bold. I know for a fact we ruffled a lot of feathers. One moment that I regret, or at least realize that maybe they got us fucked up, I was reading an interview with Bun B from UGK with AllHipHop – he brought us up. “These cats little brother with the minstrel show, are they talking about me?”

And I was just like, “Oh my God, like no, no dude, I couldn’t diss Bun B. I would never diss you, you’re Bun B of UGK.”

That was one moment where I just felt it in my gut, like man, maybe we went about this the wrong way. You don’t get a redo on this shit – but when I saw that from Bun I was like, man. So with the next album Getback….it was kind of just a way of letting people know if the minstrel show concept was a little too much for you, if it was a lot to take in……

But overall it was a really tough time. The people that loved it loved it but by gold standard it didn’t really sell a lot. To be fair, I don’t know if we were the right people to bring that message If I had to do it all over again would I do it? Yeah. But I think we could have made the exact same album but if we had called it anything other than The Minstrel Show, it would have been fine. It would have had some great hits.

**LBN:** How does your audience affect your work?
**PC:** [There are] some references in work that you make that you know a certain audience will get, like going out to the Elk Lodge… As an artist, you’re just trying to make the best records you can make – what we learned [is] you can’t ever predict where it’s going to land. You’re writing songs, and so I think most artists by extension, write songs or create art thinking they’re
going to connect with people like themselves, yeah I think young black men will get this…but, you know, once you put something out, you have no control over how something is interpreted. You have no control over how people synthesize it. I don’t think Aretha Franklin had a man in mind or had, you know, men in mind when she did “You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman,” but I love that fucking song. I’m not a woman, but she sang the fuck out that song and that’s just a gorgeous record. So yeah you really don’t have any control over it. You can think your audience is one demographic, but once it gets out you have no control. I’ve seen that time and time again in my career where I’ve made records and the supporters of those records are unlikely people.

I think we could have made the same record and again, if you just put it in different packaging it becomes a hit, you know what I’m saying, cause most people don’t get the packaging anyway. Again, little stuff like that – even like, you know, the video, the only video we ever did – it tried to do so much, and it just didn’t fucking work. It was a glorified live performance – we shot the shit in a club in Brooklyn – that was our first video, why wouldn’t we shoot it in North Carolina with our people. Was that the best visual to paint the picture of who we are? Looking at Little Brother, we were just so thorough. The thing that made us gold was our live shows – and what sold us was who we were as people. If you hear the music you think, “Ah, these are four college students,” but if you see us in person and come to a show you’re like, “oh I get it.”

So there’s a disconnect there, but shit, the “Lovin’ It” video cost $65,000 in 2005 – even back then that was considered a low budget video compared to cats who were spending 200, $250,000. Now $65,000 – people have shot movies for less than that. At the time there wasn’t the cell phone technology…to shoot high quality high res videos. There was social media like MySpace but there wasn’t like Instagram and Snapchat and Twitter where you could direct fan engagement. So for us we weren’t a very visual group. They knew our music but they didn’t know what we looked like or whatever. I think there were a lot more tools that we could of used to paint the full picture of who we were. We tried to do that by the end but by that time, it was like whatever. I won’t speak for 9th and Pooh, but I just wanted off the label and off the contract.

LBN: How do you view the importance of history in the artwork that is being produced?
PC: I think history is very important, just in life in general. Past is prologue – if you want to know what’s coming, just look behind you. I think history is very important, especially as black performers, and knowing the people who paved the way and what they started and the people that came before you that made it so you could have a platform today.

My guiding forces have always been to make the music and put out the images and the lyrics that are the most true to me, and true to who I am. There are a lot of people who say: the white gaze. I remember, I just don’t think about white people that much. I have real life shit to handle. I have kids to raise and fuckin…I give like way less of a fuck of what white people think about us now than I did 12-13 years ago when I did The Minstrel Show. So now, I just don’t give a shit. Be yourself, be who you feel you are, be true to yourself, and there’s gonna be white people that fuck with you and black people that don’t fuck with you and vice versa. I’m a lot more nihilistic these days I guess. Thirty-eight year old Phonte would never make an album like The Minstrel Show cause I just don’t care.
That comes with experience, comes with time…I don’t want to speak for Pooh and 9th – I was really searching for my place… it was a strange time in hip hop, just for young people, young men and women… it was kind of a fucked up time…I’m so much a believer of the phrase youth is wasted on the young… I just think about the things that used to consume my mind as a kid in my early twenties and dude, if only someone was there to tell me that: in fifteen years you weren’t gonna care about none of this shit, it would have made my life easier. But you have to go through it. At that time, I was really searching for my place, it was a strange place to be in… no one was doing what we were doing on a major label. We were the first cats to [do that].

Slum Village, one of our contemporaries and a huge influence on us, they got signed to Capitol – and we were all struggling because there was nothing that sounded like us out at the time. It was a hard time. So yeah, in your twenties, you try to find yourself in the world, and in the music, trying to figure out: where I fit in, am I good enough, I know I’m dope, but where do I fit in? All the anxiety, all that paranoia, I guess … goes in the record…but now a man in my late thirties, I’m not that person anymore.

LBN: Anything else you’d like to add or discuss?
PC:
[In terms of The Minstrel Show] the fact that I’m the phone with someone twelve years later who’s writing their thesis on it, that means a lot to me. That’s a sign that the work truly touched someone. Because I could think of a whole bunch of other stuff I could write my thesis on. Something like that, to know a piece of work you did years ago is still speaking to people, and in some cases is speaking for people, that is valid… that is better than money. You can’t buy that, you can't manufacture that. That’s better than money.