CONCLUSION

“The Biggest Colored Show on Earth”

Afro-Modernism, Hip-Hop, and Postmodern Blackness

“I have never, in all my journeys, felt more of an interloper, a stranger, than I felt in Atlanta,” confessed James Baldwin in his treatise on the child murders, The Evidence of Things Not Seen (55). Visiting the “new” Atlanta only a few years after the ghastly string of killings, professional tourist V. S. Naipaul continued to be befuddled by the city as well (25–27, 57). His diagnosis of Atlanta’s race relations deduced that “there were two world views here almost, two ways of feeling and seeing that could not be reconciled” (58). At the end of his “turn in the South” he mused in Toomerdesque tones, “But in this flat land of small fields and small ruins there were also certain emotions that were too deep for words” (296).
Both Baldwin and Naipaul discovered the same paradox W. E. B. Du Bois had accentuated almost a century earlier, when he referred to Atlanta as the “Gateway to the Land of the Sun” and as the capital of “the Land of the Color-line,” exemplifying how the South in general was a very “odd world” indeed (Sous 48, 128, 43). In a sense, they all had been on the hunt for answers to the famous questions posed in another unmistakably southern tale: “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all” (Faulkner, Absalom 142). William Faulkner’s Shreve, the Canadian medical student, discovered when he posed these questions to Quentin, the quintessential white southerner, in their frigid New England dorm room, that there is a South that keeps eluding words. And, paradoxically, for this exact reason it is all the more vital to “tell about the South” again and again, to reimagine it anew.

In some ways then, Goodie Mob’s Dirty South echoes Baldwin’s sense of alienation even as it attempts to provide an answer to Shreve’s queries. Listening to the Dirty South’s topography as the soundtrack to Tayari Jones’s fiction also limns a trajectory of Afro-modernism that segues into postmodernism. As musicologist Adam Krims notes: “It seems, at times, that rap music would have to have been invented by postmodern theory, had it not been there, poised to exact its tribute” (8). Extending Craig Werner’s paradigm of the three key themes of modernism, hip-hop makes readily audible (and visible) the three key themes of postmodernism: disjunction, textuality and parody, and simulacra. Generally, where modernism’s concerns tend to revolve around the dissociation of sign from referent, postmodernism tends to explore the interplay between signifier and signified. Hip-hop’s electronic sampling of beats and melodic fragments indulges in an aesthetic of disjunction; textuality (in its widest sense) and parody are evident in rap’s relentless self-referentiality and aggressive competitiveness; and there is the proliferation of simulacra, the performative demarcation of a geographic terrain—the “hood” as genus loci—whose borders are often patrolled by highly stylized personae. Hip-hop scholar Russell Potter is among those who have pointed out how the cultures of the African diaspora anticipated, by centuries actually, in many ways not just modernism, but postmodernism as well: “Living, talking, making music, and writing in the subjectivity of resistance that was built—had to be built—against the economic and philosophical bulwarks of slavery and colonialism, black cultures conceived postmodernism long before its ‘time’ as construed by writers who had to wait to take their cue from Derrida, Foucault, or Lyotard” (6).
In situating hip-hop squarely within a historical continuum, Potter at the same time also alludes to how contemporary African American cultural production often impugns the white noise of “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” that would demote both human experience and history to the status of, in Paul de Man’s words, “a purely linguistic complication” (Derrida 158; de Man, “Resistance” 92; Lehman 93–104). Interestingly enough, Jacques Derrida’s (in)famous proclamation that there was no outside-the-text, one of the more controversial flashpoints of the critical project of deconstruction that accompanies postmodernism, occurs in the section in Of Grammatology in which Derrida reads the autobiography of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions.1 In the same paragraph, Derrida writes that

in what one calls the real life of these existences “of flesh and bone,” beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the “real” supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like “real mother” name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence. (159)

Even if we should therefore have read, in Frederick Douglass’s text, that the gashes in the autobiographer’s feet “only come forth in a chain of differential references,” the point is that somebody’s frostbite scars surely did exist, but were never recorded by history-as-text. Moreover, “what opens meaning and language,” for Douglass as much as for Goodie Mob, is ‘writing’ as an act that makes ‘apparent’ the shortcomings of (mis)representation of whatever the surrounding culture deems a “natural presence” at any given time, (mis)representations that can and do have an impact on “the real life of these [black] existences of ‘flesh and bone.’”

Thus, Madhu Dubey notes that “[s]ome idea of the real that eschews both organicism and technological fetishism, innocent mimesis and textual inflation, seems urgently needed in the postmodern era,” not least because in our own time, “[t]he question of referentiality stubbornly persists as a vexed problem in African-American fiction as well as literary criticism” (11, 49). Afro-modernism’s historical conscience effects an ongoing interrogation of the act of representation; in African American postmodern-
ism, this interrogation seems far from obsolete, but is in fact intensified. Taking his cue from bell hooks, Timothy Spaulding explains that postmodernist blackness “reflects the political ideology of black nationalism, the ‘authority of experience’ and identity politics of black feminism, and the deconstructive project of postmodernism. From these discourses, African American writers develop a concept of ‘narrative authority’ that reinvests the contemporary writer with political agency by radicalizing the act of storytelling” (17). This tenacity of “some idea of the real” in African American postmodernism stems, according to Toni Morrison, also from the fact that

[i]t’s not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery. . . . From a woman’s point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with ‘post-modern’ problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. (qtd. in Gilroy, “Living” 178)

These, then, are also “‘post-modern’ problems” that the Afro-modernism of The Untelling addresses, a narrative that is very much ‘about’ the telling and the untelling, the telling inarticulacies, of the black female body. Andreas Huyssen illuminates the stakes when he points out that postmodernist practice born from poststructuralist theory, “where it simply denies the subject altogether, jettison[s] the chance of challenging the ideology of the subject (as male, white, and middle-class) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity” and adds that dismissing questions of authority and authorship altogether “merely duplicates on the level of aesthetics and theory what capitalism as a system of exchange relations produces tendentially in everyday life: the denial of subjectivity in the very process of its construction. Poststructuralism thus attacks the appearance of capitalist culture—individualism writ large—but misses its essence; like modernism, it is always also in sync with rather than opposed to the real processes of modernization” (213).

Paradoxically, the perhaps most unabashedly capitalist and most thoroughly postmodernist lot within the contemporary “tribal geography” is also the most fiercely territorial and individualistic one: hip-hop. Its performance rites, highly evocative of the Turner-Stepto conception of communitas, often demarcate symbolic ritual grounds that are not only celebrated enthusiastically but also carefully policed and vigorously defended (Benston 39; Smith 43–45, 107–9). The glorification of a mythical “hood”
is often accompanied by the ritual incantation to “keep it real.” That these ritualistic claims to a “tribal” terrain actually result in the continuous fabrication of often contesting authenticities does not diminish the perceived ‘realness’ of the ritual ground in question, because in hip-hop identity is inextricably linked to geography (Krims 123–51; Ogbar 6–8, 23–24). At the same time, socially conscious hip-hop often harks back to Afro-modernism’s historical conscience. In a process Derrick Alridge terms “imaging,” the more socially aware hip-hoppers seek to graft historical references onto present-day concerns: imaging addresses “temporal limitations through techniques that morph time and provide a wider lens for seeing the organic, metaphorical, symbolic, and concrete connections” between hip-hop and the Civil Rights movement and the black liberation struggle in the New World (228–29). Says Goodie Mob’s Khudjo, “We all living in the same struggle. It’s just different times” (qtd. in Alridge 233).

Little Brother is another such trio, composed of rappers Phonte and Big Pooh and producer 9th Wonder. Based in Durham, North Carolina, they too hail from hip-hop’s most lucrative territory, the Dirty South, although their aesthetic owes much more to Goodie Mob than to, say, Ludacris. Little Brother’s sophomore outing, released in the fall of 2005, is a concept album whose title is program: The Minstrel Show. Recorded and mixed in Durham’s “Chopp Shopp Studios,” the record resonates with thoroughly postmodernist techniques (booklet 12). The governing principle is parody, that of a TV sitcom called “The Minstrel Show.” Accordingly, the concept album begins with a jingle: “You are watching UBN, U Black Niggers Network, Channel 94, Raleigh-Durham, Chapel Hill,” which is followed by guest vocalist Yazarah sweetly intoning the sitcom’s theme song: “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.”

Postmodernist techniques not only are evident in the music, but extend to the packaging of the CD, announced repeatedly as “The biggest colored show on earth.” On the cover, the trio strikes the classic minstrel pose: three disembodied heads, the only color contrast consisting of the gleaming white of eyes and teeth against dark brown skin. The front-cover logo as well as the entire booklet is a parody of TV Guide magazine, reconstituted here as LB Weekly. The announcement of a cover story on page 34 about “THE MINSTREL SHOW: THE NEW HITS COM. SUNDAYS ON UBN” is counteracted by the fact that there is no page 34 in the booklet. Even the parental-advisory warning sticker—not a sticker in this case, but printed in the lower left-hand corner—reinforces the postmodernist play as it calls attention to the artifice of the album’s guiding concept.
The inside of the booklet continues the parody: LB Weekly lists the songs like TV Guide lists shows, including air times and even star ratings. For example, “Hiding Place,” airing at “1 p.m.,” ranks guest rapper Elzhi with only one and a half stars out of three, whereas Big Pooh gets all three. The program announces that the broadcast of “Cheatin’” has been “cancelled” and “replaced with Percy Miracles, Live in Rome ’78” (5). Of course, the CD does include the track: and much like the shifting identities of minstrels, Phonte Coleman, a.k.a MC Phonte, morphs into Percy Miracles here, in a hilarious sendup of R. Kelly’s bedroom crooning. LB Weekly also includes an ad for “the second season finale of ‘Lovin’ It’,” another UBN sitcom, set to begin “This Monday night 8 p.m.”—but in fact “Lovin’ It” is track the tenth, slated to air on “Sunday, September 11, 2005” at “6:30 p.m.” (5, 7). Other postmodernist simulacra inside the booklet include an ad for a new line of clothing called “5th & Fashion” and even a crossword puzzle (2, 12).

But at the same time, Little Brother’s postmodernism is suffused with bell hooks’s “authority of experience” (29). In LB Weekly’s “Story of the Week”—the seriocomic liner notes—Derek Jennings insists that Little Brother “talk about real shit while everybody else talk shit about keeping it real. Our forebears hustled and struggled so that we would no longer have to scratch when we ain’t itch, or smile when we ain’t happy. But in 2005, even though you don’t have to rock blackface to be in entertainment, it ‘shole heps.” On the track “Watch Me,” for example, postmodern parody joins satire born from a social and historical conscience when Phonte raps,

I’m Phonte, international stage ripper; done
Made friends and made figures
While you stuck on the front porch mad, like you fixin’ to shave

That’s reality, so color me purple.
My name in history, nigga, that’s all I work for.
Better keep it moving like the laws of inertia
Before these Carolina boys come to hurt ’cha:
Better tell them about it!

On the one hand, Phonte’s parody here mockingly displaces the bygone folk culture of the black South celebrated in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple and in the pastoralism of Steven Spielberg’s movie version by boasting about his ability to navigate the global economy. On the same track, Big Pooh begins his verse by stating simply that he “can’t afford to
not record”—and how successful the trio has been in its manipulation of the postmodern conditions of consumer-capitalism is brought ‘home’ in the booklet’s acknowledgments, which list two people of Little Brother’s extended posse whose sole task is apparently “international currency conversion” (12). Booker T. Washington would be proud—and Shug Avery perhaps surprised.

On the other hand, Phonte’s postmodern parody is also an act of “imaging,” and as such it invests its very target with an authority that speaks to the continued validity of a collective historical consciousness and conscience. “Watch Me,” and the album as a whole, resounds with the “memorious discourse” of postmodernism: this is a discourse that, according to Christian Moraru, does not constitute “an irresponsible art of forgetfulness,” but rather seizes on the postmodernist mode of representation “as a case of prodigious, ‘compulsive’ cultural recollection” (Memorious 37, 21). What Little Brother’s parody recalls is not just the racist distortions of white minstrelsy but also the often more complex and differentiated performances of minstrelized blackness enacted by African Americans themselves. Little Brother’s “biggest colored show on earth” harks back to the slogan “The greatest colored show on earth” that the famed Rabbit Foot Minstrels used to advertise their performances (Abbot and Seroff 289). Like W. C. Handy’s Mahara’s Minstrels, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels were an all-black outfit that at one point included blues shouter Ma Rainey, the “Mother of the Blues,” who, according to legend, kidnapped a teenaged Bessie Smith in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and taught her to sing the blues as a member of the troupe (Lieb 4–19). The blues’ Mother and Father both, as well as Bessie Smith, the “Empress of the Blues,” and many other early blues artists such as Ida Cox or Perry Bradford, toured with minstrel troupes, indicating how crucial a part the black minstrel show played, and continues to play, in the lineage of contemporary American popular musics (Lhamon 110, 145–46; Stewart-Baxter 11–12, 36–47). In their own time, the very existence alone of outfits such as Mahara’s or the Rabbit Foot Minstrels enabled their African American cast to project themselves “across the South as a glorious, enviable spectacle . . . when white racist reaction was concerned with restricting black freedom of movement through public space,” as Adam Gussow observes (88). The introduction to “Watch Me”—“And right now, you in tuned to the biggest colored show on earth: The Minstrel Show, nigga”—is yet another reminder that the entire album is a historicized ‘text’ that explores the ‘script’ of the black body as a site of ongoing contests of representation and hence of power, an historicized text just like Walker’s novel, or Ma Rainey’s performances, or the pen in the gashes of Frederick Douglass’s feet.
For his part, the Father of the Blues defended Mahara’s Minstrels vigorously: “It goes without saying that minstrels were a disreputable lot in the eyes of a large section of upper-crust Negroes,” Handy wrote,

but it was also true that all the best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel show got them all. . . . Encyclopedists and historians of the American stage have slighted the old Negro minstrels while making much of the burnt cork artists who imitated them. But Negroes were the originators of this form of entertainment, and companies of them continued to perform as long as the vogue lasted. Mahara’s outfit, like the Georgia Minstrels, the McCabe and Young Minstrels, and the Hicks and Sawyer Colored Minstrels, was the genuine article, a real Negro minstrel show. (Father 33–34)

The modernist concern over authenticity in Handy’s slightly revisionist and oxymoronic gloss (“a real Negro minstrel show”) is revisited in Little Brother’s postmodernism: both insist that there is something “genuine” and “real” behind the minstrel’s mask: Afro-modernism’s historical conscience, hooks’s “authority of experience.” The kind of postmodern rewriting Little Brother are engaged in here amplifies their text as, in Moraru’s words, “a modality of setting up—and straight—the cultural accounts of society, its memory, and its struggles” (Postmodern 173). And if, as Houston Baker contends, it is “the mastery of the minstrel mask by blacks that constitutes a primary move in Afro-American discursive modernism,” then Little Brother indicate that black postmodernisms constitute an extension of the tradition, not a break from it (Modernism 17).4

This contiguity is evident, too, in the ways in which *The Minstrel Show* rewrites Paul Laurence Dunbar’s famous masqueraders, who also “sing, but oh the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile” (lines 12–13). But not only are Little Brother far from resigning themselves to a loss of narrative authority and control that corrupts the songs of Dunbar’s tragic minstrels; “these Carolina boys” who have “come to hurt ’cha” also see very little “vile” in the clay of their ritual ground (Baker, Modernism 39–40; Spaulding 19). However, they still acknowledge that, like Dunbar’s singers, they too perform in an international cultural marketplace that prefers to celebrate a “mask that grins and lies” but remains largely indifferent to the humanity of those behind the mask (Dunbar 1). The parody of *The Minstrel Show* thus oscillates between the postmodernist recognition that all identity is constructed and the modernist quest for an authentic self. Little Brother’s brash reclamation of narrative authority at once subverts
the tragic resignation of Dunbar’s minstrels and affirms the authority of that which engendered both “We Wear the Mask” and their album’s own postmodernist updating of minstrelsy, namely an historical conscience born from the variegated experience of what it means to be black in the New World. And so, even in the thoroughly postmodern, highly digitalized contexts of consumer-capitalism and the global economy, Mark Anthony Neal concludes that “[o]nce again, we’re back to ownership: ownership of possibilities, language, and experiences; if not of blackness itself”—even and especially in the contemporary, urban South (188).

Thus, in their insistence that representation is power, Little Brother—who take their name in deference to the pioneers of hip-hop—position themselves squarely within the African American tradition, a tradition ranging from the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass to the subversive minstrelsy of Bert Williams to the fiction of Toni Morrison. The legacies of this tradition and its historical conscience remain. As Phonte sums it up, “To me, THE MINSTREL SHOW is ultimately about responsibility. . . . As rappers, we have to take responsibility for what we say, and for the images we portray to our people. If not, we’re doing essentially what minstrel shows did: perpetuating negative images and reinforcing these negative stereotypes” (qtd. in “Little”). It is a sentiment echoed by many, including historian Jeffrey Ogbar, who sees in more commercially oriented rappers such as Lil Jon, the King of Crunk, “the quintessential postmodern super coon” (31).

The African American postmodernism of Little Brother (if perhaps not that of the King of Crunk) exemplifies that, as Ralph Ellison put it, “Negro American consciousness is not a product (as so often seems true of so many American groups) of a will to historical forgetfulness. It is a product of our memory, sustained and constantly reinforced by events, by our watchful waiting, and by our hopeful suspension of final judgment as to the meaning of our grievances”—even into the third millennium (Shadow 171). For a people whose history and humanity have been consistently denied or distorted by a national ‘master’ narrative, the performance of an authentic human voice remains absolutely crucial.

In these performances, the ritual grounds of the American South resurface time and time again as a site of prime importance in the ongoing process of reinventing culture and identity. The ramifications of this collective process, as we have seen, extend far above and beyond the Mason-Dixon Line. Perhaps this is so because, as Goodie Mob could tell both Shreve and Derrida, succinctly and with postmodernist irreverence, “Shit just don’t sleep / In the Dirty South.”