

Authenticity and the Minstrelsy in the Performance of Blackness

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Abstract

Whites have continuously claimed to be superior to other races, but their suppression of African Americans has perhaps been the most enduring. Therefore, white working males have insisted on misrepresenting Blacks by constructing "blackness" on their own terms. However, the unique elements of Black culture have also drawn white people's fascination with Black art forms. As a result blackface emerged in the 1800's with whites painting black burnt cork on their faces to appear Black and imitated exaggerated behavior of Black slaves and former slaves. This paper will examine the cause of these performances and why blackface is still performed today albeit in revolutionary ways.

Introduction

In the eighteenth century whites painted their faces Black and used makeup¹ to create the impression of big lips and large eyes, characteristics that stereotype Blacks. They mocked and mimicked the perceived behaviors and vernacular of African American slaves in the south and former slaves in the north through profitable minstrel shows performed around the world. There is no debate that the purpose of these shows was to demoralize and degrade a group of people that were feared by those who maintained control. However, the very action of a more powerful or privileged people dressing up as those with less power or privilege demonstrates the white working class' curiosity about a creative, unique and vibrant culture that

to this day remains a mystery to them. The purpose of the evolution of blackface and its inauthentic performance of Black culture to today's popular entertainment is twofold; in the effort to further confine Black people they are continually misrepresented, and those who *create* these performances continue to capitalize on the fascination of white America by producing Black culture as a commodity.

The Birth of Blackface

Blackface performance was popularized in the late 1820's by Thomas D. Rice who created the character of "Jim Crow", a southern slave dressed in rags. George Washington Dixon followed as "Zip Coon", a northern, urban, dandified Black. Jim and Coon danced and sang like "happy go lucky" slaves while Rice and Dixon used the acts to respond to anti-slavery movements.

Whites both exploited Blacks and controlled the image of their culture. Plantation slaves relied on music originating from their native Africa to communicate with one another, lighten their burdens, restore their spirits and enjoy the little free time they had. On the other hand, most white Americans were of Anglo-Saxon heritage and did not have a strong musical tradition. Their musical forms were stiff and emotionless. Southern whites were drawn to the music made by slaves because "there was something about the great emotion and the great variety in

rhythms in Negro music that they responded to in spite of themselves.”² Early minstrels conducted “field work” among Blacks in the South in which they derived the songs and dance movements they performed on stage. Whites “blackened their faces...played musical instruments such as the banjo and the bones that were associated with blacks, sang songs in imitation of black songs and danced imitations of black dances.”³ However, the way these performances were replicated was not nearly consistent with the actual behavior of Blacks because “minstrels eclectically selected their material with their eyes on its entertainment value, not on its origins.”⁴ For instance, although Afro-American’s often used nonsense humor in their narratives, the prevalence of the strong over the weak during conflict stems from Anglo-American tradition.

Moreover, early blackface made the physical features of Blacks laughable and grotesque, and labeled their behavior ludicrous. Minstrels appeared with unappealing characteristics such as bulging eyeballs, flat, wide noses, gaping mouths with long, dangling lower lips, and gigantic feet with elongated heels. African Americans were shown singing, dancing, being foolish or longing for the old plantation. White working class males constructed “blackness” and insisted that the minstrels accurately represented Blacks. The language created for characters denoted the beliefs that African Americans were less intelligent and incapable of grasping the concepts of the English language. These images had a powerful affect on American culture by depicting Blacks as fools and creating stereotypes that were seen across English-speaking places.



Figure 1: Construction of "Blackness"

White audiences spurred the success of the minstrel shows, believing that they were authentic performances of Black culture. Blackface acts were often a white person’s first exposure to African American culture and thus appeared very unique. They were fascinated at the creative storylines of the folk songs and had “unabashed enthusiasm for the music and dance of the country’s most despised minority.”⁵ Yet their deepest satisfaction was driven by the portrayal of Blacks as inferior people and their greatest pleasure stemmed from comedic acts presented at the expense of Blacks. Especially after 1850, when plantation skits were replaced by slapstick farces, Blacks became scapegoats for whites. They were portrayed as lazy, frivolous, irresponsible and immature, which assured whites of their supremacy and allowed them to experience feelings of euphoria.

The minstrelsy also prohibited African Americans to represent themselves publicly when Blacks were finally allowed to join the performances or form their own troupes. The audience demanded that they too paint their faces

and join in the buffoonery. Participation in the shows afforded nineteenth century Blacks the chance for mobility - geographically, socially and economically - and above all provided them with the opportunity "to be somebody". However, if they wanted to be popular they had to mimic the white minstrels' imitation of Blacks. Black people went into disguise as the kind of people white America believed them to be in order to share in the profits being made from their culture. Frederick Douglass commented on the situation in *The North Star*:

*It is something gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience...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.*⁶

More importantly, as black minstrel troupes proved their popularity and profitability, their ownership and management generally fell into the hands of whites and by the mid-1870s the most successful black minstrel troupes were all white-owned.⁷ Large companies with greater drawing power and larger resources took over the smaller troupes. "These white-owned and -structured shows had the greatest exposure, made the most money, and focused audience expectations on stereotyped images of Negroes. Most of all, they illustrated that when blacks became marketable as entertainers, it was white men who reaped the profits."⁸ Despite this, Black minstrels were

particularly successful because white audiences were confident in the authenticity of their performances and the images reinforced white's rationalization for maintaining control. White minstrels had to find ways to contend with their new, authentic Black competitors. Therefore, they ultimately abandoned blackface and fabricated more lavish productions as well as a variety of shows and musicals. By the turn of the twentieth century, the popularity of the minstrel shows had nearly vanished and so did the opportunities for Blacks to participate in the mainstream of popular culture. For the most part, Black entertainers became limited to all Black audiences;

*Although this nourished Afro-American culture and laid the foundation for the professional black entertainment circuits that flourished virtually underground in the twentieth century, it also meant that blacks again became just the unpaid sources of the material - music, dance, and humor - that periodically revitalized American popular culture and made white entertainers famous and rich.*⁹

Traditions of the minstrel show, however, were continued in newfangled forms of entertainment such as movies and radio. For example, silent films cast white actors in blackface as lazy and comical characters known as Uncle Tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy and the Black buck, further distorting Black stereotypes. Uncle Tom was the faithful old Black man who never turned against his "massa" while the coon portrayed Black men as buffoons. Mulattos were usually only female and represented the plight of fair-skinned Blacks attempting to pass for white. The mammy was a big, fat,

obstinate, female coon whereas her offshoot, Aunt Jemima, was more polite and religious and imitated the characteristics of Uncle Tom. Lastly, and almost of the most significance, is the Black buck. He was portrayed as a physically violent savage out to raise havoc.¹⁰ D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*¹¹ best depicted this character as images of white actors in black faces raping, stealing and threatening the people of the South flashed across the screen, providing another example of "how the relationship of popular media to public opinion can perpetuate racial stereotypes."¹² Although the early minstrels presented Blacks as having the intelligence and decision-making capabilities equal to that of an animal, this was perhaps the first performance of Blacks as brutal beasts. Silent films were particularly effective in portraying these images because there was no talking to distract the audience.

White's continued to turn a profit at the expense of Blacks with "talking pictures". In 1927, *The Jazz Singer*,¹³ featured Al Jolson, a Jew and the son of Russian immigrants, in blackface. John Kenrick proclaims that because "Jolson openly refused to eat in restaurants that would not serve black performers," he was anything but racist.¹⁴ However, his demeaning depiction of African Americans reinforced the stereotypes of "blackness"; the happy, singing and dancing darkie and he personally benefited with a boost in star power from the instantaneous success of the film.



Figure 2: Al Jolson

"Talkies" also saw the continuation of Blacks succumbing to stereotypes in order to earn their own piece of the money-making blackface pie. Stepin Fetchit, a Black comic named Lincoln Perry, became Hollywood's first major African-American star. He was criticized by the Black community for perpetuating the stereotyped images of the day, playing the role of the lazy, shiftless Black character of a farmhand, stable boy or slave.

Likewise, radio shows took advantage of white's fascination with Black culture and need for a sense of power to increase their popularity. *Amos 'n' Andy* aired in March of 1928 in Chicago. The act, conceived by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two whites who portrayed the characters Amos Jones and Andy Brown, mimicked so-called Black dialect. In 1951, the highly successful show was televised on CBS with an all Black cast participating in roles of rude, aggressive women and weak Black men.¹⁵ Finally, an outraged public emerged against the degrading pictures of an alleged Black experience and the show was pulled in 1953.

Blaxploitation

As the Civil Rights movement caught fire in the fifties and sixties, performing in blackface slowly fell into disrepute.¹⁶ But out of the Black Power movement arose a movie genre known as blaxploitation causing a cultural film explosion in the seventies. These films at least attempted to capture the realities of Black public space however truncated, but “in their efforts to sell “soul to the masses,” the short-lived but prolific era of blaxploitation and revisioning of the meanings and icons of blackness introduced both cartoonish and surreal constructions of blackness to a mass buying public.”¹⁷ Once again, African American characters and their lifestyles were presented in a manner that reinforced negative stereotypes and supported eighteenth-century white’s conception of good-for-nothing Black men. Elements of the films included the glorification of drugs, especially cocaine, and living a life revolved around drugs, sex, pimps, gambling and guns.

Success of blaxploitation films came as Hollywood was fully realizing the power of the Black ticket buyers who accounted for more than 30 percent of the box office in major cities.¹⁸ However, it is important to note that the movies popularity did not result in Blacks gaining control of their performance. Donald Bogle on the circumstance:

What became most disturbing was that while these movies appeared to be black (in concept, in outlook, in feel) and while they were feverishly promoted and advertised as such, they actually were no such thing. Many of the new black-oriented films were written, directed,

and produced by whites...The film industry hoped simply to make money by indeed exploiting an audience need.¹⁹

The movies were originally instant hits with Black audiences despite lackluster performances and shoestring budgets, but by 1975 they realized they were being patronized and exploited and the films experienced a quick demise.

Blackface’s Modern Day Mayhem

Blaxploitation was targeted to “namely black urban youth, who did not have the benefit of the presence of a black middle class capable of presenting counter-narratives of black struggle.”²⁰ Although the films did not represent Black culture, the movies did embody the realization of many Black youth who were actually surrounded by these negative images, particularly in a small borough of New York. The South Bronx area became concentrated with poverty due to construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway in 1950 and waves of poor Puerto Rican and southern Blacks arriving in 1960. Crime exploded when policies such as rent control and new corporate income taxes were implemented and worsened as the remaining middle class residents took flight to the northeast corner of the Bronx to live in Co-op city. By 1970, residents that remained were mostly desperate welfare recipients.

Experiencing recurring violence, the public’s persisting cynicism, and ongoing political and social unjust, young Blacks were almost confronted with a predetermined destiny. Perhaps out of defiance, they searched for their own means of communication in an effort to fulfill their needs of being heard

concerning the racial and class struggles that filled their everyday lives. Much like slaves in the nineteenth century, they developed mediums for expression that both reflected self determination and rebellion as well as allowed them to escape their dismal circumstances and enjoy themselves.

On New York streets, deejays provided break beats for dancers and music to inspire graffiti artist, but by 1978 emcees stole the spotlight because they enhanced the hip-hop experience by speaking directly to the crowd.²¹ Emceeing (rap) is a medium for social commentary that speaks from reality and experience while crying for human rights and justice. “Ideally a rap is a group of rhymes that are thrown together so everything has meaning. Nothing said is frivolous. It reflects the here and now and ideally the lifestyle of the one rapping.”²²

The visibility of deejays and emcees and the ease of sharing the music due to cheap manufacturing and distribution greatly contributed to hip-hop’s growth. Interest in the hip-hop phenomenon further flourished with the assistance of *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988. As hip-hop began to spread across the continent, it manifested itself on the west coast and witnessed the birth of Gangsta rap, a by-product of gang culture and street wars within South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and Long Beach with a tinge of “retro-mack” culture of East Oakland.

Not by happenstance, African American cinema and rap videos quickly resulted in the reincarnation of the minstrels’ coon as dotting rappers. For example, the talent of The Fat Boys, coined “The Three Stooges” of rap, was

masked by their manager who exploited the burly boys and cast them in a film entitled *Disordilies*²³ within which they played the role of three hopeless men. They became buffoons in the eyes of mainstream America, satisfying white’s conviction of Black males as exaggerated caricatures, especially when they possess exuberant talent. MTV, once strictly a rock channel, took a hands-off approach to all forms of Black music until the white-owned station was swindled into playing a rap video by Run D.M.C. when they joined forces with Aerosmith. Since then, MTV has continually controlled images of Black culture by favoring videos by pop-rap artists such as MC Hammer over those who deliver positive images and messages about Black culture like the Native Tongues. Chuck D has recently accused MTV of reducing black faces to blackface due to a lack of image balance. The station demanded that Public Enemy remove all references to Mumia Abu Jamal in their “Gotta Give the Peeps What they Want”²⁴ video, but turn to the channel at any given time and you are likely to hear Nelly chanting “it’s so hot imma take my clothes off”.

Artists who want air time on MTV have succumbed to the colorful, carefree or cartoonish videos that have turned Black people into comedy once again. Through videos, Black culture is marketed for white profit, with Black performers tagging along for what they can get much like nineteenth-century minstrels. Suburbanites have been continually exposed to distortions of Black culture as Blacks still happily play the role of modern-day Steppin’ Fetchits for financial gain.

By the summer of 1993, alternative rock was on the decline, Gangsta rap was rapidly gaining popularity, and MTV needed a new hook. They nabbed the subculture's blueprint, an often cartoonish portrayal of black masculinity, ghetto realism, and gangster sensibilities. The minstrel shows' plantation was instantaneously reborn as the "hood" in rap videos and Black movies. The "ghetto lifestyle" was glorified by lyrics that support stereotypes about criminal Black youth while images of African American males as hypersexual brutes were provided by MTV's heavy rotation of Gangsta rap singles. Movies based on and inspired by the music genre such as *New Jack City*²⁵ were the product of illusions about young, insensible Black men who have "an alarming tendency to blow each other's brains out over wounded pride and drugs."²⁶ On the other hand, Black women usually played one of three trite roles in Gangsta rap videos or films. The first is a modern day mammy. Female rappers were often hard-core and standoffish women sporting big, baggy clothes and deep vocal tones. The other two are equivalent to those of Aunt Jemima's coon and Tom-like performance, stimulating white's perception that Blacks are incapable of independence and self-sufficiency. Women were either trifling females who got pregnant to trap their sexual partners into a lifetime commitment and/or collect welfare benefits, or they were prostitutes who obeyed their pimps and submitted to their every demand.

Gangsta rappers have been accused of shamelessly exploiting Blacks in the pursuit of record sales with performers such as Niggaz With Attitude, the self-proclaimed "world's most dangerous

group," claiming they represent Black America authentically. The term "studio gangstas" has been used to describe the rappers because many who write the violent narratives have never lived the experience. Most of the rappers that portray characters of gang bangers or hustlers either no longer live in the ghetto or never did. Hip-hop, once a positive outlet of Black self expression, a shared experience uniting urbanites and a channel of discussing social ills, now represents an inferior, illicit culture in the eyes of the mainstream.

According to author Nelson George, the single sales of early emcees like Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa betray the myth that there was ever a time when hip-hop buyers were exclusively Black. Rappers and record labels discovered early on that crossover hits had to contain upbeat dance music and lyrics. Sampling has been fundamental in allowing them to cross racial barriers by using beats from several music genres. One reason the content has been diminished is because MTV and white audiences do not want to hear issues articulated by the voice of Black people. Moreover, Gangsta rap, packaging entertainment within demeaning and negative Black images, became immediately popular with white kids, just as minstrel shows were beloved by white audiences. Gangsta rap "attracts listeners for whom the ghetto is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, and erotic fantasy, or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom."²⁷ Much like southern whites in the 1800's, the youths' fascination with this twentieth century construction of "blackness" has spurred its success.

Whites have also made an effort to directly participate in the hip-hop movement by claiming their authenticity and street credibility. From the Beastie Boys to 3rd Base to Vanilla Ice, white rappers have attempted to exploit the genre by producing sounds and images of so-called “blackness” with the Young Black Teenagers representing the ultimate in blackface parody. The later day white professor of hip-hop, Eminem, is constantly accused of doing his own version of Al Jolson in blackface. He claims he would never degrade Blacks by using the word “nigger”, yet he continues to coon up as a laughable superhero in the name of rap and shows no shame in earning his own share of the profitable hip-hop pie. His perspective on white rappers; “Though I’m not the first king of controversy/I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley, to do Black Music so selfishly/And use it to get myself wealthy (Hey)/There’s a concept that works/20 million other white rappers emerge.”²⁸

Most importantly, although many comedic, Gangsta and white rappers are recruited by Black producers, white attorneys, business managers, personal managers, accountants, agents and label executives ultimately control the business. White directors and production companies have aggressively pursued rappers with hip-hop’s increasing exposure and popularity. Consolidation has occurred for two reasons. First, Black boutique labels have signed to major distributors who own most of the major labels. Secondly, major music companies that wanted to expand worldwide merged to increase their marketing power. Media giants like Sony, Bertelsmann and Vivendi Universal, formed with the purchase of

Island, Def Jam, Interscope, Geffen, A & M, Polydor and MCA, have acquired top rap acts. For example, Erykah Badu, Common, The Roots and Jay-Z are all signed to Vivendi. The label has nine of the top twenty rap albums this year. Taking one look at the company’s Board of Directors it is clear that once again the image of Black people and performances of “blackness” have fallen under the control of white males. Most disturbing, however, is that with managers receiving about 20 percent of a rapper’s album sales, accountants taking about 5 percent and lawyers collecting another 5, whites are still profiting from the sale of Black culture.²⁹

Conclusion

For almost two centuries, blackface has ruled the images of Black culture. According to Alex Kellogg;

*It goes virtually without saying that in America culture is a commodity and commodity, culture. And nobody sells culture quite like black folks. But in the process of co-optation by which blackness is yanked from the margins of society into the mainstream and legitimized in the marketplace of mass consumption, something is lost, and what was once subversive art can quickly become insidious stereotype.*³⁰

Whites formed minstrel shows with art and culture stolen from African American slaves, used it to degrade them and resold it to others like themselves who were fascinated by the vibrant sounds and mysterious nature of Black people. Although Blacks found opportunities in minstrelsy, they also found themselves trapped within racial conventions and ultimately contributed to their own demise. Their participation

in blaxploitation further fueled negative perceptions of Blacks and led to them being exploited by playing white-constructed roles of cold-hearted heroes, gangsters, drug dealers, pimps and thugs. In turn, whites showed no shame in taking an art form created and cultivated by Black youth and employing it to defame other Blacks. Nothing contributed more to the mainstreaming of hip-hop than the music video. Blinded by the “Benjamins”, Blacks continue to coon up and submit to white’s construction of “blackness”. Black performance (by whites and Blacks) has now become an emblem of Black authenticity with Blacks being objectified and whites empowered. In the words of Armond White, “the minstrelsy is no longer simply a denigration of Black performance; it is the Western condition.”³¹

¹ White’s spread burnt-cork on their faces to make them black and used white makeup to create distinct facial features.

² Haskins, James. *Black Music in America; A History Through its People*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1987: 9.

³ Haskins 21.

⁴ Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974: 48.

⁵ Burns, Ken and Geoffrey C. Ward. *Jazz; A History of America’s Music*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000: 8.

⁶ Douglas, Frederick. “Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders” *The North Star*. Rochester: 29 June 1849.

⁷ Sellman, James Clyde. *Entertainment; Minstrelsy*. Accessed: 27 October 2002. <http://www.africana.com/Articles/tt_200.htm>.

⁸ Toll 211.

⁹ Toll 274.

¹⁰ Bogle, Donald. “Black Beginnings: from Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Birth of a Nation.” *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*. New York: Continuum, 1989: 3-18.

¹¹ *The Birth of a Nation*. (Allied Artists Entertainment Group, 1915).

¹² *Birth of a Nation, The*. Accessed: 28 November 2002.

<http://www.africana.com/Articles/tt_248.htm>.

¹³ *The Jazz Singer*. (Warner Bros., 1927).

¹⁴ Kenrick, John. *Theatre Lover’s Journal for Nov. 2000: Blackface and Old Wounds*.

Accessed: 28 November 2002. <

<http://www.musicals101.com/blackface.htm>>.

¹⁵ *Amos ‘N’ Andy Show; U.S. Domestic Academy*. Accessed: 28 November 2002.

<<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/A/htmlA/amosnandy/amosnandy.htm>>.

¹⁶ This is not to say constructing performances of “blackness” stopped, but wearing burnt-cork masks was no longer acceptable.

¹⁷ Neal, Mark Anthony. *What the Music Said*. New York: Routledge, 1999: 96.

¹⁸ Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993: 83.

¹⁹ Bogle, 241-242.

²⁰ Neal 97.

²¹ Within the context of this paper, hip-hop refers to the four elements that define the culture; deejaying, graffiti, emceeing and break-dancing.

²² Cook, Dave “Davey D”. “The Power of Rap; The Historical Definition of the Term Rap”. 1984. Accessed: 26 September 2002.

<<http://www.daved.com/whatisrapdav.html>>.

²³ *Disordilies*. (Warner Home Video, 1987).

²⁴ Public Enemy, “Gotta Give The Peeps What They Need” *Revolverlution* (In the Paint, 2002).

²⁵ *New Jack City* (Warner Bros., 1991).

²⁶ Light, Alan. ed. *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999: 206.

²⁷ Perkins, William Eric. ed. *Droppin’ Science; Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple U Leland,

John. “In Rap Industry, Rivalries as Marketing Tool” *New York Times*. 3 November 2002.

iversity Press, 1996: 122.

²⁸ Eminem, “Without Me” *The Eminem Show* (Interscope Records, 2002).

²⁹ Leland, John. “In Rap Industry, Rivalries as Marketing Tool” *New York Times*. 3 November 2002.

2002.

³⁰ Kellogg, Alex. *Blaxploitation Redux*.

Accessed: 27 November 2002.

<http://www.africana.com/Column/bl_views_0107.htm>.

³¹ White, Armond. “*Bamboozled* directed by Spike Lee” *New York Press*. Accessed: 22 October 2002.

<http://www.nypress.com/print.cfm?content_id=2807>.

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