
The Wu-Tang Candidate

by Miles Marshall Lewis

Dressed more like a punk vagabond than the hottest star of hip-hop's new minstrel moment, Ace Boon Coon sits in full blackface makeup eating cold pork and beans straight out the family-size can. Reeking of the Salvation Army, his tattered Levi's are partially obscured by knee-high tube socks striped in red and white. The clownish colors show through the bottom of his worn-out Pro-Keds' gum rubber soles, which look a size too large for his feet. A snug, sloganeering T-shirt—*Axe me about my DUMBASS chirruns*—clings to his bird chest. Lint specks his unruly Afro. The beans aid in Coon's live show, six minutes to curtain, during which he infamously moons the crowd and farts loudly into a microphone held to his anus. Coon's publicist mentions he may have to redo the firetruck-red lipstick exaggeratedly circling his full lips. Slouched in a chair facing the mirror, he frowns, shakes his head, and lets one rip. A fecal rotten-egg stink assaults the marijuana-scented air of the Fox Theatre green room, coupled with his strong body odor. Coon hears a din of protestors outside the venue over the constant laughter of Richard Pryor's *That Nigger's Crazy*.

"Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke. I'm bringing that nigger style back to black music. Not 'nigga.' Nigger! Outside with their flyers and shit . . . They need to take a closer look at their history before they come trying to take money out of my pocket with their protesting. The minstrel style been in effect, boyee. Go get a late pass!" Coon says, ironically paraphrasing the politically conscious Public Enemy.

Ace Boon Coon applied his blackface hastily, after arriving late to avoid the contrarians outside. I ask him about his backstage blacking-up ritual and he laughs. "Ritual?" he asks. "Like a routine? Motherfuckers make me call off so many shows, I ain't even used to doing this shit yet." Wary promoters

cancelled most of Coon's tour itinerary this summer, caving in to the pressures of protesters and civil libertarian groups including the NAACP. Most of his scheduled live performances end in ticket refunds. The rebellious atmosphere of a Coon show gives his occasional audiences the sense of participating in something anti-politically correct. Illicit. Naughty. The fact that crowds are ninety-eight percent white males doesn't faze him. "Busta Rhymes be rocking for just as many whiteboys as me," he says. "The whole hiphop shit is geared for them right now. This ain't the eighties, nigga." He breaks wind again, punctuating his point.

Coon's ritual-that-isn't starts with his pouring pure alcohol onto a few wine-bottle corks and lighting them in a large silver ashtray. He mashes the corks into black ashen powder, pouring in tap water to douse the flames. Protecting hands and face with cocoa butter, he spreads the resulting thick paste, slowly covering his own twenty-two-year-old boyish features, until the mask is complete. Lipstick comes last. To say the effect is spooky brings the old pejorative *spook* to my mind, as slanderous a term in its time as *coon* or *nigger*, to name two of this MC's favorites.

A blend of minstrel songs warms up the sold-out crowd: Ernest Hogan's 1890 smash hit, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," Lew Dockstader's "Coon! Coon! Coon!" These are interrupted once in a while by some modern tunes: Britney Spears's "I'm a Slave 4 U," Nirvana's "Rape Me." The weird mix finally ends, the lights die, and the boom-bap beat of "Pickin' Boogers" kicks off the show. The crowd roars.

Bubblicious and Risqué, both rising stars in their own right in the nearly soft-porn dominion of hiphop video, bracket the stage on either side. Wearing (if that's the correct word) itsy bitsy, teeny weeny, little polka dot bikinis, the dancers gyrate and shake mammoth saline-filled breasts and prodigious rear ends with vigor. If, like the star of the show himself, they're at all ironically subverting or merely flaunting stereotypes (of the oversexed black woman in this case), the effect is lost on the ogling fratboy crowd. Ace Boon Coon shuffles slowly out to center stage—barefoot, dully scratching his scalp—to more applause.

"Hey, Mom, what's for dinner?" he asks in his remixed cover of the Biz

Markie rap classic.

“Go up your nose and pick a winner!” the audience yells in response.

Coon proceeds to do so, smudging the makeup around his nostrils with a finger and tasting some snot from his nose. Laughter floods the hall.

More kinetic percussion kicks in underneath a loop of the familiar ragtime theme to *The Little Rascals*, signaling Coon’s breakout hit, “Black and Ugly As Ever.” He drawls into the microphone: “I am product for a coroner / on the corner / Gambling my life / willing to throw to die / I got rope burns on my neck from noose / knots I done knotted myself tight / twined on tattoos.” He emcees the chorus in tandem with a sample of Biggie Smalls: “Heartthrob never / Black and ugly as ever.” Risqué claps her rear end to the thumping crunk, mirroring Bubblicious on her hands and knees. Coon joins in between them with his backside to the audience. He bends over, pulls his jeans past the crack of his behind, and expels noisy wet flatulence into the mic.

“Soundman, turn the music down,” Coon commands. “I got a joke for y’all.” The MC is known for his mid-concert funny story, always ethnically vulgar. On any given night the audience reacts variously—from nervous titters to uproarious fits of laughter—dealing with its suppressed opinions and attitudes about blacks (especially here, in an African-American-dominant city like Atlanta). “Why is the Wu-Tang Candidate, that nigga Hedley Dixon, about to lose the black vote in November?” Coon’s never mentioned his political antagonist in public before, despite being vilified by Dixon since the beginning of his congressional campaign. “Nobody?”

“Blacks don’t vote!” ventures a skinhead up front in a White Stripes T-shirt, to some laughter.

“Nice . . . True, we don’t really vote. But the main reason we ain’t voting for the Head Dick is, he’s promising to create jobs for niggers!”

The crowd mulls momentarily, then cracks up.

The encore arrives ninety minutes later. The potent drum break and sizzling ride cymbal of John Cougar’s “Jack and Diane” pulse hard through “The Nigger Ya Love to Hate,” flavored with funky guitars from K-Rob and Rammellzee’s “Beat Bop.” Coon emerges from backstage with the cordless mic in one hand, a fresh watermelon slice in the other. He swiftly flaunts the trickiest rhyme flow

he's shown all night. "Me, I sit in a rock-and-hard-place state / festering hate / in the bowels of my abdomen / so evil that only harm to myself can ease the pain / I even reject my name . . ." Coon, sweat pouring from his blackface mask, munches on the fruit while an Ice Cube sample booms. He spits black seeds at the front row.

From what he's told me of the hiphop culture, I can't see how his act is any different from what rappers have been doing all along. He says Snoop Dogg has a pornographic video series, the Beastie Boys used to inflate a humungous penis onstage, and his song about picking your nose is already twenty years old. I personally haven't seen his show but I'll never be anything but proud of my son.

—Dr. Franklin Slader, Ace Boon Coon's father, July 2006

Malik Slader was born on March 1, 1984, into a middle-class family in Atlanta. His father, Franklin, was a highly noted authority on minstrelsy and remains tenured at Spelman, a local university founded for the education of young black women. His mother, Hawa, was an African lobbyist fighting against skin-bleaching creams proliferating in her native Ghana. Malik first began to emcee at twelve, writing rhymes imitating the cadences of his favorite rappers: Tupac Shakur, Nas, Biggie Smalls. His parents invested in recording studio software for his PowerBook and he came up with his first juvenile songs in high school, with titles like "Spit" and "Chocolate Box." Known as Lord Have Mercy, Malik changed his alias once another MC debuted on Elektra Records with the same stage name. Around this time an essay by cultural critic Stanley Crouch on the minstrel nature of hiphop, passed along by his father, inspired teenage Malik to bypass college and seek a deal as a rapper in blackface. Many labels expressed interest in his homemade music tracks and image, in spite of the inherent controversy, or, perhaps, because of it. Malik finally signed with Def Jam as Ace Boon Coon. *The Nigger Ya Love to Hate* sprang to the top of the *Billboard* chart the week of his twenty-second birthday. By summertime over three million copies rang through registers nationwide.

The Nigger Ya Love to Hate is a concept album for a genre unfairly judged

as too dumbed down for concept albums. Ace Boon Coon may literally shuck and jive but the often-poetic lyricist tackles difficult questions of self-hatred, cultural appropriation, and the fine line between satire and indecency. Mainly self-produced, the seventeen-song album features guest luminaries Flavor Flav (“Niggerish Licorice”), T.I. (“I Got That Blacker Toast”), Trina (“Coons Use the Back Door”), and Southern chanteuse N’Dambi singing the chorus to “Strange Fruit (Watermelon Man).” Atlanta native sons André 3000 and Lil Jon both lend additional production. It’s intentionally difficult to tell when *The Nigger Ya Love to Hate* spoofs hip-hop and when it’s deadly earnest, which is partially the nature of its success. “I ain’t the first to do what I do,” Coon opines. “Busta, Flav, Ol’ Dirty Bastard—God bless the dead—Biz Markie, they all pioneered this. It’s that clown prince style.”

“We weren’t the only ones ridiculed in playhouses during the minstrel days,” says Gigi Martin, Ace Boon Coon’s twenty-two-year-old fiancée, discussing blackface with grad-student fervor over Scrabble at The Beautiful, a soul food restaurant. The vivacious redhead arrived fashionably late for lunch, an entrance made all the more dramatic by her radiant beauty and smart style. The muscled-toned belly between her superlow-riding denim culottes and cranberry midriff hoodie flattens out past her hip bones to infinity. An L.A. native straight out of Brentwood, Gigi smiles movie-star-straight pearls (no doubt helped along by teenage orthodontics), curly locks grazing lithe shoulders, the bling of her diamond’s cut just a shade away from ostentatious. She could be the thinner, younger sister of actress Lisa Nicole Carson; tiny pedicured toes peek through elaborately strapped Jimmy Choos. A Spelman College alumna, class of 2006, she enters Yale this fall for African-American Studies. Product of the American Minstrelsy 101 taught by Coon’s father, she spouts knowledge from Dr. Slader’s course fluidly. “In the early 1900s racism was equal opportunity. Vaudeville made fun of Irish, Chinese, and Germans too. Jews and Italians. People at that time expected their differences to be dissed. Dixon is just pushing the same old family-values button, trying to scapegoat Malik and avoid the real issues. Like the older white politicians.” She sips lemonade.

Coon sits hiding behind sunglasses, lenses the shape and color of bugged-

out Negroid buckeyes; today's provocative T-shirt features a forty-ounce bottle of Olde English malt liquor. He picks at an entrée of oxtails, chitterlings, collard greens, and fried chicken (all dark meat). Given Coon's youth and slightly bourgeois background, I wonder how much of his smorgasbord is an act for the benefit of this writer. Without makeup the rapper goes completely unrecognized—he's a young blue-black brother with a gorgeous girlfriend, like any other. A waitress bearing Gigi's garden salad fails to make him out. The Scrabble game proceeds with all deliberate speed. (Gigi's words: PHALANX, SYPHON. Coon's words: TRAP, BOOBOO.) He's been mum again on the subject of the Wu-Tang Candidate, but Gigi slowly draws him out.

The first salvo launched by congressional candidate Hedley Dixon involved an organized protest against Viacom for airing the salacious video to "Coons Use the Back Door" on *BET: Uncut* and MTV. The heavily YouTubed clip was already isolated to late-night airings for its graphic simulated sodomy; Def Jam voluntarily pulled the video from rotation after the resultant publicity boosted Coon's album back up the chart to number one. Antisodomy laws still stand in Atlanta and so Coon promoted illegal behavior, said Dixon. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* hence dubbed the thirty-nine-year-old grassroots activist "The Wu-Tang Candidate" (invoking the rap group Wu-Tang Clan) for highlighting hip-hop in his bid for office in a way unseen since governor Bill Clinton roasted Sistah Souljah in the summer of 1992.

Scoring major newsmagazine exposure and a blooming constituency, Hedley Dixon pressed on, seeking a judge ruling to ban *The Nigger Ya Love to Hate* on obscenity grounds. A major platform point of Dixon's campaign touches on gender equality and ending violence against women, thus he pinpointed several sections of Coon's album for misogyny, sexual degradation, and obscenity violations. The ruling was denied based on a 1990s indecency trial concerning rappers 2 Live Crew and the Supreme Court; the First Amendment protects Coon's recording. Most recently Dixon has appeared on *Nightline* denouncing the depraved state of hip-hop in general with Ace Boon Coon sighted in his crosshairs. Watching his sales soar as a direct result, the MC has maintained silence. Until now.

"All right, let's talk about Dixon," Coon says, crowning his bushy Afro

with the unblinking darkie shades and sighing. “First of all, the man’s an opportunist. That’s real obvious. If his true problem was hiphop bringing down black people he wouldn’t be fucking with me, he would be taking his beef to the corporations more. I ain’t stupid, yo. I wear blackface. I know that pisses some people off. But I ain’t the absolute Devil of the black community. Niggas were wearing iced-out platinum dental fronts and buying spinning chrome rims and other stupid-ass, wasteful shit before my album dropped. Dixon just wants to get elected. He ain’t protesting Allen Iverson rocking conflict diamonds from Sierra Leone or Don ‘Magic’ Juan for marketing his life pimping hoes. I’m turning a buck how I see fit. This is America, nigga.”

Speaking as a rapper, you think corporations are more responsible for what constitutes hiphop nowadays than the artists?

“Nigga, please. White kids buy hiphop! If my shit was some underground quote-unquote ‘positive rap,’ I wouldn’t even sell a hundred CDs. Who buys shit like that outside the Zulu Nation? Corporations put power behind what people buying records wanna hear. The minstrels sold white people’s craziest ideas about niggas back to them for entertainment back in the days, and that’s what the most popular hiphop does now. I’m just blatant about it, and I’m fucking blowing up off it.”

“Malik and I debated this all the time when we first met,” says Gigi. “I totally agree with him now. 50 Cent is popular for fulfilling this über-Negro role for suburban white kids: shot, jailed, unstoppable. My parents collect Negrobilia, like the mammy cookie jars and stuff? They believe in reclaiming racist images, taking the power away from the whites who put it out there. Malik’s very smart. If we can reclaim the N-word, then why not the minstrel tradition? If we pocket the spoils, then the joke’s on who?”

No, I haven’t followed Dixon’s campaign remotely. We’re registered Republicans in this house.

—Dr. Franklin Slader, July 2006

Across Auburn Avenue from The Beautiful stands the brick temple of

Ebenezer Baptist Church. Martin Luther King, Jr. was baptized and later delivered Sunday sermons here during the civil rights era. Spacious grounds dedicated to the preacher's legacy stretch a couple city blocks' length behind the characteristic Southern church, including an eternal flame and Dr. King's tomb, elevated in the center of cascading waves of water. On a breezy Thursday, days after watermelon dessert with Ace Boon Coon and his fiancée, I return to the historic neighborhood to rendezvous with the Wu-Tang Candidate.

Informal polls show Hedley Dixon leading the race for Georgia's fifth congressional district. The young nominee has never held office of any kind but his widespread grassroots activism is locally known. Most recently Dixon spearheaded a fundraising drive for victims of Hurricane Katrina at Club 112, filling a literal truckload (said truck parked in front of the nightspot) of clothes, donated furniture, and canned goods to be driven directly to Louisiana. Until two years ago citizen Dixon was known as Hedley X; the young Muslim minister has been estranged since 2000 from the Nation of Islam—the cauldron of seminal black political figures like Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. In 2004 he reclaimed his given name and put together an informal exploratory committee to gauge his chances of getting elected Congressman Dixon. Like campaigns of the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton before him, this run should allow Dixon to leverage his political power more concretely, whatever its outcome.

Shaking hands he immediately chastises me for writing this profile instead of a damning editorial. “Frederick Douglass, a forefather of the journalism you do, came out strongly against minstrels in his day. It's bigger than hiphop, brother,” Dixon says as we walk the distance of the King Memorial. The Wu-Tang Candidate says *brother* a lot, the way young white teenagers might say *dude*, or blacks of different eras have used *homeboy*, *yo*, or simply *man*. The way Ace Boon Coon uses *nigga*. “Yes, I grew up with the culture, I'm one of the first to take it for granted. I know my Run-DMC, ‘Roxanne, Roxanne.’ I remember Latifah when she was just a teenager! But I consider hiphop the voice of the young black community on a whole, not only rap music. I've been trying to take the conversation away from Brother Slader and talk about some

of the bigger issues: education, self-respect, reparations.”

The Nation of Islam in his past, Dixon still carries the conservative air of the famously bowtied believers. His Caesar is neatly shorn, pinstriped suit pressed like he hasn’t sat all day, shoes spit-shined to a glow. He rests at the head of King’s crypt as if predicting the photo-op. “I have no personal bias against Brother Slader,” he says. “But he’s the perfect lightning rod to draw attention to the fact that black folks’ values in this new millennium have become sorely misplaced. This brother believes he can traffic in minstrelsy—one of the most egregious affronts to the dignity of blacks in American history—and profit from it without a problem? I’ve got a problem.” A Lexus glowing neon-red underbody lights hairpins the corner, its deep-bass sound system vibrating the windows of the King Memorial with Coon’s “Niggerish Licorice.” The car floats down Auburn like a hovercraft; Hedley Dixon shakes his head.

Dr. Franklin Slader welcomes me to his new home in affluent Buckhead the next day. (Elton John and Ted Turner are neighbors, but this elegant four-bedroom Colonial is dwarfed by their nearby mansions.) Frames adorn the marble fireplace mantle, portraits of the MC as a young man: private school graduation; a summer spent abroad with grandparents in Accra, Ghana. Mrs. Franklin Slader, née Hawa Kiwojolo, makes an arresting appearance both in photos and in person toward the middle of our interview. Scarred from hydroquinone lightening lotions, her skin—most noticeably her face—is severely depigmented, irregular pink patches breaking up her natural coal-black tone. Listening to Hawa discuss blemishes resulting from creams used to lighten her skin, the irony of her son’s use of blackface to darken his own comes to mind. How will his scars manifest one day?

Hawa Slader refuses to speak of her son’s rap career but she does talk about her past experience with products designed to retard her melanin. Cultural prejudices about the superiority of lighter skin rampant in the African capital of her birth caused her and a good part of the population there to abuse hydroquinone creams. She gradually suffered blotchy puffiness and splotches; eventually a permanent melasma condition set in. Throughout the late-nineties Hawa

successfully lobbied her home government to ban the sale of these harmful carcinogens. Dr. Slader helped draft her speeches. The connecting thread between a mother discolored from lightening her skin and a son who makes millions by blacking up is something Professor Slader also refuses to explore out of respect for his wife. He's understandably much more comfortable talking about Ace Boon Coon, the reason they're entertaining me in their home.

"I see Malik playing a character," says Franklin, "a modern-day variation on Jim Crow. Two of the greatest pioneering minstrels from the 1800s were white men using the stage names Jim Crow and Zip Coon. The flashier of the two was Zip Coon. He replaced buttons on his vests and coats with gold coins that he'd fling out at concerts. He reminds me of today's rappers obsessed with platinum jewelry and diamonds. He was more a caricature of the Northern Negro. But Jim Crow preceded Zip Coon, and his style was a distortion of the Southern country field Negro. Zip Coon wore high hats and tails with gold-coin buttons, but Jim Crow had holes in his shoes, clothes all tattered up. His hit record "Jump Jim Crow" made him the first international superstar of minstrelsy. That's who I see when I look at Malik's CD.

"I'm no apologist for the minstrel tradition, young man. But it's impossible to critique something you don't know the full history of. I assume you're here to critique Malik fairly."

The professor teaches class: "When the freed slaves performed in black-face after the Civil War, some of their minstrel songs included antislavery messages. These blackfolk were not sellouts! Blacks had a hand in creating the minstrel tradition from the absolute beginning. Why shouldn't we have taken advantage of traveling the world and making a living off what we helped build in the first place?"

Ace Boon Coon arrives, entering the den hand-in-hand with Gigi and his mother. Like backstage at the Fox, Coon looks less poor than punk: ragged Levi's; distressed combat boots; a Buckwheat T-shirt underneath a frayed jean jacket. His hair is matted like he rolled out of bed a minute ago. Gigi is his polar opposite, habitually glamorous in a tight baby-T (reading *Boys are stupid, throw rocks at them*) with a madras miniskirt and open-toe stiletto pumps. "Sorry we're late. Colored people's time, huh?"

Conversation wends around to the election once more and Malik Slader defends his Ace Boon Coon alter ego against Dixon for the final time. “Why can Shyne be Shyne and I can’t be Coon?” he asks, invoking the jailed former protégé of Sean “Diddy” Combs. “To be called a shine used to be just as offensive. But nobody ever mentions that with him.

“Look, a lot more black people got jobs because of me than Dixon got scrambling around trying to get into politics: my publicist, my road manager, my personal manager, my accountant, my lawyer, my stylist.” Gigi giggles at her ragtag fiancé mentioning a stylist. “For somebody bringing down the race, I’m sure creating a lot of income for the community. On Def Jam too, a record label created by a black man and run by another black man. The fans love what I do; I sold over three million CDs. Who picked that Nation of Islam dropout to decide what the black experience is and isn’t allowed to look like? My audience laughs *with* me, not at me. I’m a millionaire, yo. These whiteboys don’t seriously think I fart around all day long eating watermelon. They grew up with just as much love and respect for hip-hop as we did.

“Remember that KMD record, *Black Bastards*, with Sambo on the cover hanging from a noose? That was over ten years ago. Fans been sophisticated for a long time, don’t take away their choices. Why can Ludacris drop an album called *Chicken-N-Beer* and I can’t do my minstrel satire? Dixon ain’t calling out Ludacris, and he’s right down here in Atlanta with us. Dixon’s a hypocrite. No further comment.”



For all his talk against the excesses of young black culture, Hedley Dixon demonstrates the same excesses at his election-bid benefit. Were the *Bronx Biannual* reporter still in town for this political networking soirée instead of long-since headed north to his native Brooklyn, he’d be using his journalistic senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch to capture Compound in all its glory this Saturday night. Dixon’s party looks like nothing so much as a rap music video: attractive blacks dressed in Armani and Sean John, Moshood and

Gucci; a few celebrities sprinkled throughout—Coca-Cola chairman E. Neville Isdell; local record producer Jermaine Dupri with girlfriend Janet Jackson; Morehouse president Walter Massey. Free drinks, dancing, flirting. Dixon's party sounds like 2006 R&B hits from the hand of the regular weekend DJ. Dixon's party smells *hot*, the rising heat of too many bodies pressed together when it's still eighty-seven degrees outdoors at eleven-thirty at night; eaux de toilette, oils, musk, funk. Dixon's party tastes like sour apple martinis courtesy of open bar liquor sponsor Absolut, secondhand cigar smoke, the acrid tang of naked ambition. Dixon's party feels like America is about to have a congressman who knows his Run-DMC.

Thoughts sprint a marathon through Dixon's brain as sycophants glad-hand him every ten steps, hoping to add even more to his mental race. In his mind a teenager wearing a kente shirt with a red, black, and green leather medallion of Africa swaying around his neck riles up undergraduates on the steps of a college administration building. A natural ham, a born public speaker, he impresses the student body with knowledge he only just learned himself in the past few months—blended theories from Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Huey Newton, Chuck D. Other freshmen and sophomores from the dorms are behind him, behind the locked doors, holding the offices hostage. For the rest of his term at Morris Brown College, well after the building burns down in an unrelated faulty wiring accident, well before faculty force him to withdraw, the Atlanta University Center knows young Hedley X as a handsome rabble-rouser sharing the same fiery, demagogical spirit as his revolutionary heroes. A professor from those times now chairs a committee to raise funds for the school, which lost its accreditation some years ago and currently struggles with an enrollment of little over fifty students. How will Congressman Dixon help? he asks.

Another thought competing with the plight of Morris Brown is Zoraida, behind a velvet rope chatting up a rapper oblivious to Dixon's hip-hop vendetta. Little Jamal is asleep in Greenbriar with his grandma; Dixon didn't expect Zoraida to attend but here she is, scarcely fitting into that favored silk scoop-neck dress. The mother of Yusufu would never have come. He'd hear from Kerisha soon enough if he won the popular vote, he knew. He knew just as well that Zoraida's turquoise scoop-neck wasn't for him, it was to remind

him of what he messed up, the good thing he was missing out on. His conviction was equally strong about the reasons for his attraction to Gigi Martin, that she resembled a younger Zoraida: bubbly, brainy, hiding a hint of something hard to put your finger on, something devious. Angelic devilishness. Dixon thought of their appointment tomorrow and wanted to see Gigi tonight, wanted her here at Compound, the possible danger an aphrodisiac of its own.

Memories of his mother won't leave Dixon's head lately either, even here, recurring as often as old arguments they used to have over the Nation. Meeting a security officer from the Fruit of Islam underneath a shady highway crossing near the Omni Coliseum, he remembered her. Her voice came to him in these moments; she would've been proud to see her son's strides. She told him tales of mob ties; harassment her friends suffered in the sixties for failing to sell enough *Final Call* newspapers; the problems former convicts went through eventually trying to leave the organization; Brother Malcolm and his tapped telephones, the Honorable Minister and his babies. Times had changed, the hardheaded son countered, even if any of what his mom said was true. Near the Omni, by dilapidated shacks inhabited by the homeless, Dixon dealt with an FOI brother talking about guns, airplanes, hotels, beaches, plans, and schemes. And about those shacks? asks an activist in a sky-high headwrap. How will Congressman Dixon help the dispossessed?

Ace Boon Coon has one week to live. Only Hedley Dixon and a rogue in the black Muslim militia know this to be true.

Secrets are sexy. Malik puffs herb past midnight alone in his high-rise apartment building now and again, spending his night downloading videos featuring Risqué, exciting himself with knowledge nobody else has. As much skin as she shows the world, people still don't know about the cashew-shaped birthmark on the heart side of Risqué's ribs. Schoolkids who vote for "I Got That Blacker Toast" on MTV's *Total Request Live* don't know that Ace Boon Coon's dancer likes to beat her fists lightly on her lover's chest in bed; that her legs go numb after sex, or that she still retains

sensitivity in the tips of her breasts despite the saline engorgement; that her G-cup is a size smaller than her partner Bubblicious's. Malik knows. Sometimes she'll call in a record label car service voucher, get chauffeured downtown to Marietta Street, share his weed, and fuck the notorious MC till sunrise. Even more so since Gigi matriculated at Yale.

Malik and Lakeisha suffer rug burns on their knees from the teal carpet of The Raleigh, moving and moving four-legged across the floor chasing climax. They laugh aloud about their lovemaking scars afterwards, lounging in the king-size bed of their suite. Lakeisha rolls over the luxurious bedsheets and plush pillows, laughing inwardly at the spoiled peroxide redhead she once envied for so many reasons. The November night sky of Miami softly illuminates the room while Malik rolls marijuana into a White Owl.

"If she wasn't gonna get 'em done, why she come to the audition?"

"She thought I was playin'? Jana spoke to some of them after. A couple said they ain't think the implant thing was for real."

"I wonder about her sometimes, since. If she wasn't so shook I wouldn't be here."

They'd reached a new stage in their relationship, the stage where a couple discovers feelings for each other beyond the sex, and now they lay together naked considering everything leading up to this beachfront hotel. Discussing future concerts with a musical director before releasing his album, Malik's most inflexible idea involved a go-go-dancing duo shaped like twin Jessica Rabbits. Parody trumped allure, by design. Malik auditioned professional dancers and career strippers with implants willing to submit to even more extreme enlargement. Not for desirability; for absurdity. Tico and Marlene quickly outpaced competition, but in the end, Marlene—somewhat known from a reality TV show—refused to give her body over to Malik's perverted idea of performance art for a six-month touring schedule. After surgery Tico quit Magic City and started lining up work starring in raunchy rap videos as Bubblicious. In lieu of Marlene, Malik chose the runner-up he'd most want to fool around with on the road, a twenty-one-year-old from southwest Atlanta.

"Am I too heavy?" Women pose this question because of Malik's small frame, but, actually, not all that many women have asked because

Malik hasn't slept with all that many women. Everything is relative, his father always says—at the age when prep school girls were rejecting Malik because of his skinny body and ink-black complexion, Lakeisha was dealing with the flirtation of strange men bringing hard drugs to her mother's apartment. Use what you got to get what you want, she advised her only child, leading by example. Malik has always been thin but Lakeisha's mother emaciated gradually, even as her daughter's womanly frame continued to fill out. Malik directed his misfit rage into emceeing; Lakeisha turned the anger over her mother's young death inward.

"I love you on top. Don't move," he says, cracking joints in his feet with his toes. Malik's flighty engagement to Gigi didn't matter to Lakeisha, her last man was forty and married; an opportunistic fiancée wasn't cause to slow her roll. Malik—a newly rich celebrity—felt increasingly powerless to turn down sex or prevent himself from chasing it, with such a recent history of rejection and accumulated hostility over being ignored by impossible prospects like Lakeisha and Gigi. He proposed to Gigi in St. Martin after a passionate months-long relationship full of all the pent-up, unexpressed love he'd never been able to share, at least not with the type of woman he'd always wanted. A fling with Lakeisha—after many teasing rehearsals watching her practice strip-club moves with Tico—was even more exciting with the added aspect of keeping it secret. (Or was it getting caught?)

Secrets beget secrets, as more mature lovers already know. As of this feverish Saturday night in Miami, Malik has yet to learn about Lakeisha missing her menstrual cycle two months ago.

Gigi Martin rides a late-night flight from JFK to Hartsfield skimming *The Virtue of Selfishness*. Before landing she goes through the *Bronx Biannual* feature on her fiancé again. She'd felt the writer was attracted to her even at the time; she considers her suspicions validated rereading his fawning descriptions of her: *gorgeous; glamorous; radiant beauty*. Gigi's tried offsetting her looks with natural tomboyishness all her life, yet boys and men never seem to pay attention beyond her pleats and platforms, beads and bangles. Gigi, sitting on twin mattresses in dorms of the all-male college nearby her

alma mater, has belched in front of guys and still watched them discreetly adjust their crotches in suddenly cramped jeans, laughing off her supposedly innocent crude behavior and turned on by it at the same time.

She only packed a carryall for her weekend in Atlanta; she intends to do Rodeo Drive with Malik when she arrives in Miami. Departing first class she rents a cart to roll her baggage on. After three months in New Haven, the events of the past year don't seem quite real to Gigi anymore. Her hallowed Ivy League halls have certainly known their share of conspiracies, but Yale's latest Af-Am major surely contributes a worthy addition to the storied university this fall. Critics complaining that modern-day hip-hop has all the integrity of wrestling still couldn't imagine the covert pact between Ace Boon Coon, the Wu-Tang Candidate, and grad student Gigi Martin.

"Hi, I'm going to West End? Claremont Drive, West End Apartments?" The cab driver activates her meter and hurriedly pulls off in silence.

She wants to be rid of the whole cloak-and-dagger affair she helped concoct a year ago now; the scheme seems to be turning a corner, getting greedy. Things worked well enough up till this point. Hedley got the attention he coveted, the *Nightline* and *Newsweek* interviews, September's victorious primary. Malik sold millions of extra records and scored immeasurable currency in controversy with the national spotlight trained on his minstrel antics, pumping some of his profits back into Hedley's campaign in appreciation. Gigi alone objects to this fake death threat as wholly unnecessary. Staging an Election Day assassination attempt on Malik's life à la Big and Tupac will add even more to the mythology of Ace Boon Coon, but the fallout could sabotage them all should something go wrong, and so Gigi can't understand why Hedley came up with it.

For the first time in their complicit plotting Hedley's flirtations have become blatant, and lately the politician seems almost condescending, like he's dealing with a kid. The downtown skyline speeds by out of focus as Gigi stares through the window struggling to concentrate on one thought at a time. Would she fuck Hedley? she wonders. Arriving at their (hopefully) last clandestine meeting place—Hedley's home—will she sleep with the soon-to-be congressman if he has the nerve to proposition her? Gigi

knew Malik fucked groupies, of course he did. It wasn't something she'd normally tolerate, but she felt certain their relationship would never really evolve to the altar. Gigi's self-awareness included an intimate knowledge of her own shallow side—a side that couldn't refuse a reputation among Spelmanites as fiancée of a rich and famous rapper. He proposed; marriage to Malik wasn't *her* intention. The rise and fall of Ace Boon Coon would crest within three years, she'd thought from the start, two albums, maybe three. If they married and Malik could adjust to a formerly famous life, she'd be seeking tenure somewhere by then, and with their money properly managed she'd gladly stick by his side. In the face of an uglier outcome, she'd be entitled to millions as a result of his infidelities, a card she'd no doubt be able to play whenever she wanted.

Malik and Hedley avoid all direct contact with one another; can she sleep with Hedley? Does she want to? For the briefest of moments a luxe future involving a husband in the House of Representatives flashes through her mind.

Gigi arrives at the apartment complex, pays her fare, climbs the town house steps, and hands Hedley her leather duffel when he answers the door. She removes her Lacroix boots and conducts straightaway business: Malik wants blanks fired, wants to know exactly when to expect the shots, wants a specially coded text message sent to his pager in the event of anything unexpected. Hedley, listening intently across a coffee table, opens a bottle of rosé and responds in turn: at high noon a gunman will open fire harmlessly on the closed set of Malik's beachside video shoot and disappear without a trace. He'll need the same access pass as the rest of the crew, Hedley says, passing Gigi a fragile, bulbous wine glass. Between her second and third refills of Domaines Ott, she decides whether or not to give it up.

Ace Boon Coon wears a black tuxedo and bow tie on Miami Beach, his normally choppy Afro blown out; highwater slacks show off sequined silver socks. Director Benny Boom's concept is to outfit Coon as Michael Jackson from *Off the Wall*, his regular blackface intact. All involved hope the media will eat up the irony surrounding whitefaced Jackson parodied by a black-

faced minstrel. With every take, “Black and Ugly As Ever” echoes across the beach, Risqué and Bubblicious gyrating per usual, Coon rhyming into the camera over his own background vocals. Gigi looks on nervously from the boardwalk. At the stroke of noon she doesn’t spot the gunman but still hears his muffled silencer. She can’t turn her horrified eyes away from the wide arcs of blood suddenly staining the sand, can’t stop the screams leaping from her gut as she dashes to Malik, fighting past a tanned horde of women in bikinis running in the opposite direction. Lakeisha reaches him first, crying on her knees, Malik in her arms. No one thinks to cut the playback of the *Little Rascals* theme.

The Wu-Tang Candidate wins in a landslide.

(Special thanks to muMs the Schemer for all Ace Boon Coon lyrics.)