Introduction

Eccentric Performance and Embodied Music in the Post-Soul Moment

Eccentric: a. Of actions, movements, and things in general: irregular, anomalous, proceeding by no known method, capricious. b. Of persons or personal attributes: Deviating from usual methods, odd, whimsical. fig. Regulated by no central control . . .

—Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed.

When Prince arrived in our bedroom via the cover of Right On! magazine some time in 1980, shirtless in suspenders and loose red jogging shorts, a horizon of endless space and stars twinkling behind him, my sister Becky and I hastily replaced our pinup posters of Shaun Cassidy and Foster Sylvers with those of him. Prince seemed innocent, at first: he had the pout and big brown-eyed, long-lashed androgyny of Shaun Cassidy, and the softly picked ‘fro and shy gaze of Foster. Prince’s voice seemed gentle, like Michael Jackson’s did, almost even the same pitch as our own, and in most of his songs he seemed to be pleading for our attention. And besides, Prince was a music nerd—he wrote and produced his own albums and played all of his own instruments. But we soon learned to turn the volume down low, singing along to those images of sex as melting sugarcane and trembling butterflies, panting along with the unnamed “Sexy Dancer” when we were sure my mother wasn’t home. Prince’s appeal was tauntingly open-ended, whatever we wanted to dream up, it seemed. In “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” Prince adds that he wants to be “your mother and your sister, too.” And he takes this ability to mack by both performing and desiring femininity even further in his song “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” also covered by the band TLC, where he seduces the listener with the promise to wash her hair, make her breakfast, and take her to a movie—presumably a “chick film” where they can cry together.

As Prince grew as a phenomenon and took a more explicitly controversial stance in his music and iconography, everyone seemed to have an opinion about him. Alvin Poissant, MD, renowned psychiatrist and
frequent contributor to *Ebony* magazine on matters of the black psyche, wrote with alarm about him:

Like Boy George and Michael Jackson, Prince has an androgy-nist quality—a male-female aura, expressed with defiant flamboy-ance. . . . He emotes the wild, primitive dreamlike abandon of the unconscious mind. . . . His cartoonlike charisma is heightened by his ostentatious wardrobe, especially his cape, which gives him a mysterious, satanic, messianic quality. . . . He appears to have become the Pied Piper for a sexually obsessed, sentimental and perhaps classic generation of young Americans who can relate to the beat of his histrionic musical configurations.¹

Maybe Dr. Poissant was right. ã€ere was something in Prince’s coos that were edged with a growl, something slippery in his damsel-in-distress sighs that worked its way into my impressionable teen mind like a funky worm. Prince even got the goat of my grandmother, who called him, despite his prettiness, “ån at Ugly Little Man.” But I suspect that there was something complicated in the way she’d drop what she was doing to watch him, shaking her head but giving him the attention that her favorites, Phil Donahue and the Reverend Jesse Jackson Jr., didn’t always get. And who could blame her? Prince appeared on stage in bikinis and open trench coat. He sang about having sex with his sister. He refused to an-
swer the question of his race. He wore eyeliner and feathers and leather and ruffles, and later cutouts that showed the curve of his hip bones. He wore high-heeled boots and spoke of himself in the third person.

Prince is in many ways the consummate eccentric: creative, elusive, rocking racial, gender, and sexual lines. His performances reveal an erot-icism attached to multiple objects: lovers, specifically and enthusiastically women, but also God, his guitar, James Brown, and himself. Prince forms “strange relationships” with his listeners, with his instruments, and with his own performing body, which he struts, caresses, adorns and then pushes to create a wild range of sounds: whispers, squeals, pants, falsettos, and deep, sometimes electronically produced commands and pleas. His gender and sexual fluidity might also be linked to his musical style—a repertoire of mastery over a range of styles and past performers. A little Joni Mitchell here, some Marvin Gaye there, Bowie and Iggy, Jimi Hendrix, Bootsy, Little Richard, and a whole lot of James Brown. He is, as music critic and journalist Nelson George suggests, “a great musical
historian," able to take the strengths from past influences of rhythm and blues, soul, blues, and rock and put them in his own fresh and quirky world of sound. And as Mark Anthony Neal, a black feminist theorist, points out, at a time when black culture saw the emergence of strict codes of masculinity as tough and hard with the emergence of hip-hop, Prince countered with his own and very fluid ideas of black masculinity. From early on, on the cover of his eponymous album *Prince*, with his relaxed hair tossed into a Farrah Fawcett flip and the direct sexual gaze of his Bambi eyes, Prince insists on the pleasures of gender play. Is he woman or man? Gay or straight? he asks us. He doesn’t answer directly, but offers us instead a sexual dream space. On his album covers and videos, he appears flying naked on a white Pegasus or soaking in a violet-strewn bathtub or dreamily writhing on a four-poster bed, his sex always tantalizingly out of sight.

Even when flavored with hard urban funk, his songs seek to take us somewhere else: “a courtyard with oceans of violets in bloom”; the psychedelicized, purpled Minneapolis reimagined as Paisley Park; or a changed experience of our own bodies, as “sugar walls” or “a little box with a mirror and a tongue inside.” Some of this power to evoke an elsewhere is fueled by his merging of the sacred and the profane in his lyrics. In songs like “When Doves Cry” and “Let’s Pretend We’re Married,” he presents sex, even and especially hot and not necessarily reproductive sex, as sacred ritual and worship, a John Donne for the late twentieth century.

Prince raises key questions that will continue to be important to this book. How might such surprising and edgy performances of blackness, sexuality, and gender reflect the social condition of the Post-Soul United States—with its gains and limits of black political and economic freedom—and at the same time provide a space in which to think about an elsewhere, a space not yet invented? How might these performers speak not only to our own emerging political selves but also to our imaginations and desires? How might musical performance be the consummate form in which performers can negotiate the past as well as create new futures? This book explores a group of maverick performers who push the norms of blackness as they get entangled with sexuality and gender through the powerful platform of popular music. But because there are so many compelling examples to choose from, it’s not meant to be an exhaustive study. It intends to provide a theoretical lens through which to explore other black performances eccentrically rather than capture a finite set of eccentric performances.
Born in the midst of key civil rights decisions—thirteen years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, one year before *Loving v. Virginia*, on the cusp of the Summer of Love, and two years before Stonewall, I claim the term *Post-Soul eccentric* for myself. My parents were shapers of and shaped by these forces, each charting new paths from family and neighborhood. Both were the first to go to college in their families, and the first in a few generations to move away from Chicago and the rest of the family. I met while performing in an African dance troupe, my mother a dancer, my father a drummer, at the University of Illinois’ now defunct Navy Pier campus, an institution that served first-generation college students, the working poor, and students of color, or, like them, students who were all three. The choices that my parents made in their lives (completing college, pursuing graduate degrees, establishing careers in the arts) were very different from those of their parents, and the options that their lives gave me made my own choices for a life as an academic and writer very different from theirs. Much of their decadelong marriage was spent working together as activists and poets, publishing with *Air d World Press*, being involved in the rich political and artistic life at Fisk University in the early 1970s. My first adult friends were part of these circles: Cookie, John Hershey (Bar), Brenda and Baba Tu, students who would take my sister and me to rallies and football games and poetry happenings on Fisk’s campus. The influx of cultural capital (if not always plain old economic capital) that came then and later gave my sister and me a kind of cultural and aesthetic mobility that was for my parents hard won, and that we sometimes took for granted. Moving between cities and neighborhoods, and sometimes the deeper structures of race and class, we became fluid in our tastes and styles in fashion, and in music too. My mother encouraged my first Afro, although I was the only girl in my neighborhood in those post–Angela Davis days to wear one. By high school I’d shaved one-half, leaving the other to fall over my eye in a puffy version of a flock of seagulls flip.

I am convinced that the freedom to be “strange” that I was allowed reflects both the open ethos of my parents as individuals and a changing sense of community rules and possibilities of the time. In our shared room, my sister Becky and I listened to our 45s, LPs, and eight-track tapes, which looked both to the past and to the future: the Beatles’ *Magical Mystery Tour* and Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, *ABC* by the Jackson 5 and the soundtrack to *Black Orpheus*. Later we grew into Parliament’s *\alpha e me from the Black Hole* and Prince’s *Controversy*. On television we caught
flashes of utopian multiracial futures on *Sesame Street*, *Soul Train*, and occasionally *Star Trek*, as well as dystopian countercritique (in the guise of urban situation comedy) on *Good Times*, *Welcome Back Kotter*, and *Chico and the Man*. One of the songs that helped me move from wallflower to dancer was “Funkytown,” by Lipps, Inc. at 1979 disco hit spoke to an availability of choice and movement that catalyzed my desires as I came of age: “Got to make a move to a town that’s right for me.” Part nerd, part queer, part leftover Angela Davis wannabe, I always had the feeling that my own personal “Funkytown” was out there, and that someday I was going to find it. s yearning is also felt by the protagonists of Post-Soul novels by Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*), Junot Díaz (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*), Paul Beatty (*White Boy Shuffle*), and Danzy Senna (*Caucasia*). ese novels explore coming of age in a global Post-Soul landscape of shifting racial, gender, and sexual identity. In each of these novels, recently integrated schools and blurring neighborhood color and class lines, as well as the ghostly return of histories of racial violence, become the backdrop for the production of nerdy, eccentric, or “strange” selves, forged between the cracks of family and community. We can also hear this new sensibility in the hypnotic autobiographical voice of Daphne A. Brooks’s music writing, as she wanders the Southern California landscape in her Honda (“post-earthquake, post-mud-slide, post-riot, and right smack in the middle of the O.J. era of malcontent” *Grace* [1]), singing along to Jeff Buckley’s iconic album *Grace*, or to the blue-eyed soul of Journey’s “Lights,” reflecting on the pleasures and constraints of interracial cultural identification. Or in cultural critic Michael C. Ladd’s forging of a global black “quadruple consciousness” while in boarding school in the Himalayas, via Parliament and Funkadelic. blogs *Afro Nerd* and *Black Nerd Network* also give testimony to a growing space for discussion of nonnormative blackness that might fit into the realm of the Post-Soul eccentric, as do musical meeting spaces like the Afropunk Festival and the Black Rock Coalition. e term *Post-Soul* describes both a period—one that is still with us—and an aesthetic. e Post-Soul took shape in the wake of profound changes in black diasporic political and cultural life, including racial integration’s sometimes violent shifts in living patterns, relationships, and
ways of racial knowing, affecting neighborhoods, schools, businesses, urban spaces, and eventually airwaves. These social changes brought, on the one hand, increased access for the black middle class and, on the other, the solidification of poor urban spaces. Legislated social changes like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 meant greater political representation and access to institutions for this next generation. Desegregation of schools and the rise of a black middle class meant greater everyday contact between different races, classes, ethnicities, and cultures. Yet these changes have not meant the erasure of tensions and bias around race and class; rather they present a new context for them.

Global nationalism, and the increasingly profitable traffic in US black culture as representative of US culture, also shapes Post-Soul culture, as does the continued influx and intermingling of multiple international influences in what we think of as black sound, produced out of what theorist Stuart Hall calls the “global postmodern.” With this transnational black cultural traffic has come postmodernism’s promise of identity fluidity, on the one hand, and the threat of historical and cultural forgetting on the other. And of course there remains a lingering hunger for blackness as the marker of the authentic, primitive, and “real.”

As an aesthetic, “Post-Soul” features an intensified exploration of blackness—what theorist Bertram Ashe calls “blaxploration,” arguably distanced from the nitty-gritty of everyday political struggle; the examination of, wrestling with, and sometimes abandonment of past black cultural norms of racial purity and the embrace of the “cultural mulatto,” a term first coined by cultural theorist Trey Ellis in his essay “The New Black Aesthetic”; and with it the artistic use of a wide range of cultural influences, associations, and markers within and outside of black culture. The aesthetic also reflects changes, tensions, and fissures in black life, including deindustrialization, globalization, the rise of the prison complex, and increasing commodification of black cultural work in its critical and sometimes satiric mood.

While some cultural critics see Post-Soul as an aesthetic reflecting a loss of political ground, cultural authenticity, and overall discombobulation, my book instead sees powerful possibility in the very experience of racial unmooring, particularly as it opens up gender and sexuality. Recent work on Post-Soul music has characterized the Post-Soul as a period of loss. In Footsteps in the Dark, historian George Lipsitz suggests that for many Americans the period of the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by
the experience of an “exhausted and obsolete culture” in which “faith in the future is hard to sustain” and, even given a highly mediated world of magazines, newspapers, and television, answers can be hard to find.\textsuperscript{10} Lipsitz documents the ways in which black audiences have wrestled with the immediate economic and political negative forces of the post-civil-rights moment, including the white backlash against affirmative action, economic loss, deindustrialization, the growth of the prison industrial complex, and most profoundly, the growth of the AIDS epidemic. In the face of this shaken faith, Lipsitz argues, we can hear in the black music most embraced a longing for better and more meaningful lives, a longing for connection to others.\textsuperscript{11} \textsuperscript{11} así sense of a lost political and aesthetic ground is voiced even more sharply (if not without a sense of humor) by Nelson George in his \textit{Post-Soul Nation: año Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980’s as Experienced by African Americans [Previously Known as Blacks and Before año at Negroes]}. As we consider the musical performances that sprang out of the Post-Soul period, as well as the reception of the audiences that love them, we must take seriously the discombobulation, loss, and yearning described by George Lipsitz and others. But what these studies miss is the sense of possibility also offered by the Post-Soul moment—and in particular, the quest for an embodied and liberatory blackness.

As a departure from previous studies of the Post-Soul era, this study is particularly interested in Post-Soul musical departures from sexual and gender respectability so central to discourses of black uplift and national unity. We hear and see these possibilities of “strange” black embodiment on dance floors, in concert halls, on street corners, between headphones, and on celluloid, and, eventually, in the world of the Internet, including MySpace and YouTube, where the commercial and homemade intermingle.

\textit{The Post-Soul era has seen the birth of funk, disco, and hip-hop, and significant shifts and developments in soul and rhythm and blues. But this era is also responsible for a group of cultural mavericks, genre crossers whose music is less easy to categorize and who sometimes make their audiences uncomfortable. \textit{Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era} centers on performers of the Post-Soul period who are both familiar and “strange” or eccentric (including Eartha Kitt, whose career spans the near beginning to the Post-Soul end of the twentieth century, as well as Michael Jackson, Grace Jones, George Clinton, Stevie Wonder, Meshell Ndegeocello and Janelle Monáe)—
those who in their embodied voices, movements and gestures, iconography, appropriation of multiple styles, choice of cover songs, and other artistic projects blur categories of music genre, as well as race, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. These reinventions of popular forms become more possible with the rise of appropriation, pastiche, sampling, and irony in postmodern aesthetics. I’ve chosen this roster of performers in particular for their distinct sexual and gender theatricality, conveyed both musically and visually, and because of the often understudied elements of critique and contrariety in their music. Despite their contrariness, these figures are highly visible, notorious even—something like Cameo’s object of desire in its 1984 song “She’s Strange,” renowned, distinct, and yet hard to categorize: “She’s my Twilight Zone, my Al Capone / She’s my Rolling Stones and my Eva Perón.”

These performers often wear several hats, producing music, starring in films, and collaborating with other artists, often across racial and gender lines. Many are famous for being themselves—as “personalities,” as well as artists. Their theatricality—the self-referential, sometimes outsized performance of their own personae or selves, as well as invented characters, is a significant aspect of their eccentricity or strangeness, and provides a space for lampooning and critiquing past and present versions of blackness.

By “eccentric,” I mean not only out of the ordinary or unconventional performances but also those that are ambiguous, uncanny, or difficult to read. These eccentrics of the Post-Soul generation have created a controversial and deeply historically informed response to the dehumanized black subject and stretched the boundaries of popular forms of music, ultimately shaping a new public dialogue.

Through acts of spectacular creativity, the eccentric joins forces with the “queer,” “freak,” and “pervert” to see around corners, push the edges of the present to create a language not yet recognized: new sounds, new dances, new configurations of self—the makings of a black utopia. Here I turn to the home girls who have chosen to become exiles, brothers from another planet, the tribe of the Black Bohemian, nerds, queers, Trekkies and Funkateers. In my appropriation of eccentric, a term that, unlike queer, pervert, or even freak, has been depoliticized in most popular discourse, I explore a particular and underreported aspect of black experience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I want to highlight here how these eccentrics create the space for creative and intellectual production, which, while maintaining ties to the familiar—to
home, to the black community, and to corporate forces—also manages to open up new imaginative worlds with their own sense of logic and beauty. Eccentric performances are fueled by contradictory desires for recognition and freedom.

**Soul versus Post-Soul Eccentricity: More Than a Feeling**

How has Post-Soul eccentricity been forged from the fires of Soul? Soul is seen as the aesthetic and philosophical embodiment of Black Power—an ideal of a unified blackness and beauty. Soul feels like a recovery project that centers heretofore suppressed black physicality and sexuality: Isaac Hayes’s gold chains and bare chest, James Brown’s hard-earned sweat, Angela Davis’s Afro, the righteously bold stance of Pam Grier bearing a machine gun. Soul feels like the crooning seductions of Teddy Pendergrass, Roberta’s warmth and Aretha’s gospel shout. Soul claims its roots in the shared cultural memory of black history. In Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green’s critical exploration of Soul, they say that “Soul is the stuff of our dreams and marks that magical domain of powerful nothingness where fantasies and ancestors live.”

Soul is a reembrace of the black body beautiful: black sensuality, black sexuality and heart. It is invested in claiming a black self in response and contrapuntal to the earlier freedom projects of the civil rights generation—the Malcolm to its Martin—and to whiteness and the myth of objectivity. It is the voice of a younger generation invested in black nation time that has a widely recognizable beat—the beat of heart and cock. Soul is often male centered. Soul is informed by the revolutions around it, but it seeks a kind of consistency. Soul is driven by style, deeply invested in its own coolness, and for that reason, it sometimes ignores the lessons of its deepest reaching, when the spirit, the rhythm shakes us, or leaves us confused. Soul privileges the natural over the artificial, the pure over the mixed. As an ideal, it privileges and polices heterosexuality and masculinity, and it reflects a Christian influence at its base (i.e., Soul’s link to gospel), along with the embrace of a both sensual and procreative sexuality.

Post-Soul eccentricity, on the other hand, asks, what happens after the basic needs of family and community are met? What if the clothing of unity is too tight? What if the rhythms of the black body are less distinctly steady or comfortable? Post-Soul eccentricity draws on the
contemporaneous development of the aesthetic of punk, which takes castaways and garbage and refashions them in all of their dirt. Punk movement and dance reembrace the awkward, hunched shoulders and stiff movements of the wallflower, and fire them up with the spirit of rebellion.

Post-Soul eccentrics ask, where might blackness not only uplift us, or feed our souls, but sometimes also fail us, erasing our desires or constraining the ways we move in the world as sexual and sensual beings? If black is beautiful, do we squelch the fact that we feel awkward in these bodies, even among each other? What if we take that awkwardness, make it into sound, make it into dance, claim it, too, as black sound, as well as something else, something strange? ā is is a question that haunts the scratchy sounds of Eartha Kitt; the awkward, Mickey Mouse, knock-kneed stance of Michael Jackson in the “Billie Jean” video; the gruffness of Grace Jones; and the boyish slouch of Meshell Ndegeocello. Black as it is not necessarily beautiful is another truth of our lives that we need to tell, how it feels to dwell in the spaces outside of the known, beautiful, and loved, where the air gets thinner, giddier, stranger. ā is is a space of evolution, shifting, becoming. ā is space of excess turns out to be not one of lack, but an embarrassment of riches. It can even be entertaining, this body not just beautiful but beat, ashy, stinky, too big, too femme or butch, otherwise found wanting.

I am compelled by cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich’s book An Archive of Feelings in its formulation of music’s power to open up traumatic responses (for her sexual violence, for me the violence of racism and also internalized racial surveillance), especially as it takes the form of musical performance. ā ese performances recenter the effects of racism and gender surveillance back to the body, yet a return to the body with a difference. One of the difficult messages that some of these performances voice is the yearning to become white, to surround oneself with whiteness, or to neutralize race—to say, at least at first, that race doesn’t matter. Rather than glide over these moments, this book explores them: Eartha Kitt erasing her black southern voice in her biography (and claiming that she always spoke like a continental queen); and Jackson’s manipulation of technology to support his idealized notion that “It don’t matter if you’re black or white,” living for the moment the dream of racial, as well as gender and national, fluidity. When that “desire to be white” is stated up front, it has the power of a bomb. ā ese moments in black performance are dangerous—confirming the worst fears of the critics—but they are
not static. it is a moment, a phase, a response to trauma, and then we see a return, through music, through bodily transformation—toward healing, toward reconnection. Music becomes a site of healing and also a site of root working, political activism, revenge. Cvetkovich’s description of music’s function in the experience of lesbians’ sexual trauma captures the place of music in this troubled “return” of the Post-Soul eccentrics: “the music helps us return the listener to the pleasures of sensory embodiment that trauma destroys: ‘cuz those are your arms, that is your heart, and no no they can’t tear you apart.”

Post-Soul eccentricity is a layered rather than separate time, living on the hyphen of past and present, daring itself to look behind. In my analysis of the eccentric performances that follow, we see the remnants of cultural shame: minstrelsy, the outsized naughtiness and down-home funk of the blues women, the cultural memories of miscegenation, bad ethnic jokes, and also the queerness, softness of the captured slave—in other words, all that has been left behind or found in excess of the Soul project. it is how the eccentric complicates the “post “ in Post-Soul, because Post-Soul eccentrics do not just wipe the slate clean. they are both forward and backward moving, navigating a set of reference points that include the past as well as the future, that “something new.”

In Post-Soul eccentricity, transformation and alteration become a way of reclaiming bodies that are the sites of racial and sexual conflict and violence by changing them physically and sometimes permanently, through technological manipulation, for example, Grace Jones in the One Man Show or on the cover of her most recent, Hurricane (2008), where she is figured as a factory-made chocolate confection, broken on the assembly line, made to be hollow; Michael Jackson’s infamous bodily transformations over the course of his life, as well as on video (from Macaulay Culkin to Dancing Black Man to leopard; from little brown gingersnap boy to svelte, light-skinned, elfin man; from heartthrob to corpse in A rill er; and in terms of the extrafilmic and performative self, from troubled celebrity to hero, postdeath); Janelle Monáe’s reinvention as Cindi Mayweather, in which her android-muse must die and be re-animated, returning with each new song to groove us. In these examples, bodily transformations in performance are not just unconscious by-products of this haunted return to the site of black trauma: they are creative triumphs, attempted blueprints for new ways to live.

Post-Soul eccentrics also ask, how might past ideas of black nation time limit or constrain the ways we imagine our flights to the future—
and who gets to join us on those flights as our lovers and children? the sense of restlessness and the desire for an elsewhere bridges Eartha Kitt’s resistant spirit of rejuvenation and reinvention with the futurist impulses of Post-Soul artists: Stevie Wonder’s plants, Meshell Ndegeocello’s Soul spaceship, George Clinton’s space pods, Janelle Monáe’s escape from the Palace of the Dogs in her song “Tightrope.” Each trades allegiances, shifts genders, and instruments, always also seeking collaboration, between other races, peoples, nations, planets, sound-making machines.

I place these popular performances in the context of critical and artistic conversations—conversations that sometimes blur the line between theoretical and artistic—about the black fugitive imagination. these conversations have primarily centered around poetic and musical performance, especially jazz performance, but may also arguably include Post-Soul pop performances. the fugitive describes the artistic impulse to escape the constraints of the objectification and social death of slavery—but also to never fully escape its embodied lessons. these informed “dark songs” of pain and struggle embody what poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey, after Federico García Lorca, characterizes as duende, the darkening of sound, the tearing up of meaning, restlessness, versioning, the slide away from tradition and the familiar (Mackey); shrouding or “afro alienation acts,” as Daphne A. Brooks calls them; the desire for misrecognition (in the words of Fred Moten); hovering always at “the rim of the wound”; the space of the break. This is purposeful and artful disorientation hidden in the plain sight of commercial radio, MTV, and Soul Train, it’s purpose: to “Let loose from the noose that’s kept me hanging around” (in the words of AC/DC’s Angus and Malcolm Young, but as reconstructed and recontextualized in performance by the black rock group Living Colour).

It is precisely this fugitive spirit that informed Prince’s politicized struggles with Warner Brothers in the late 1990s, when Prince became the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. After riding a crest of fame that included sold-out tours, multiple Grammies, two feature films, multiple spinoff groups, and five platinum albums, Prince fought to be released from his 1992 contact with Warner Brothers Records and to own the masters to his own songs. In his acts of rebellion against the studio, which included renouncing “Prince” as his slave name in favor of an unpronounceable glyph of his own creation, something akin to Malcolm’s X, and in appearing in public performances with the word slave jauntily carved out in marker on his high cheekbone, signifying on his role as
part of the Warner Brothers’ “plantation,” Prince placed himself in the
history of African diasporic freedom struggles. He made this connection
quite explicitly. He told *Jet* in 2004, “If you don’t own your master tape,
your master owns you. . . . And you might as well write slave on your face
too. It’s all about ownership.”

By becoming Prince evoked the erasure of history, of name and
subjectivity, of the black diasporic slave experience—at the same time
that he does so as an act of supreme self-naming and reclaiming of a
place in history, creating a new line of descent—something like Michael
Jackson naming himself the King of Pop and naming his children Prince
Michael Joseph Jackson Jr., Paris-Michael Katherine Jackson, and Prince
Michael Jackson II. Or George Foreman’s brood of five sons named
George. The “glyph” itself—sometimes called the “love sign” but actu-
ally a combination of male and female symbols—suggests, along with
its unpronounceability, the insufficiency of language to capture the full
spectrum of a fully emancipated, fully human self. As the glyph both
extends and postpones a determinate meaning, it also opens up the
meanings of Prince’s protest to future audiences—enacting what per-
formance studies theorist Harvey Young characterizes as the ways that
black performances are haunted by black projections of violence against
the body and self, and in turn how those hauntings can be reimagined
by creative acts that open up their meanings for the future audiences,
who might experience these hauntings in changed ways. Prince won
his case in November 1996 and with his first record after the split, pro-
vocatively named *Emancipation*, earned the money that allowed him to
pull himself out of a looming, if underreported, bankruptcy. But most
important, Prince gained control over his master tapes, and with it a
chance to demonstrate, through this highly theatrical and “strange” tac-
tic, the importance of controlling one’s own creative work and ultimately
claiming a more expansive space for the black body in public memory.

Such Post-Soul eccentric performances as Prince’s play out the his-
torical contradictions of the body and identity that were inaugurated
by slavery, and are informed as well by debates within more recent po-
itical movements: the 1960s idea that “you are not your body” in the-
ater, as well as the civil rights idea that you put your body on the line
of your politics; and the movements of identity like the gay and brown
and women’s rights, as well as the opening up of what we think of as hu-
man embodiment by technology and Afrofuturism. To put all of these
forces together, cook them up, and produce art is to make a claim to an
expansive humanity. If the picture ends up looking quite different from conceptions of the Post-Soul Black Bohemian or “New Black” explored by recent Post-Soul critics, it may be because these conceptions underestimate the range of political and aesthetic influences, as well as the rage deep in the heart of Post-Soul eccentrics.²⁵

Trey Ellis writes about the “cultural mulatto” that we “no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black.”²⁶ His conception of imaginative freedom is somewhat limited by his configuration of identity in solely racialized terms. I introduce a queered and eccentric politics of embodiment into our discussion of post-soul aesthetics in order to acknowledge the continued existence of prohibition as well as the possibilities of transcendence. Certainly, some of us continue to be more free than others in some black spaces.

**Black Eccentricity, “Quareness,” and Trafficking in the Authentic**

As I consider Post-Soul eccentricity’s departures from Soul, I’ve found it useful to combine recent theories of the “eccentric” by Daphne A. Brooks and Carla Peterson, together with E. Patrick Johnson’s notion of “quare” to describe the performance of “excess” or outsiderhood from the already marginalized cultural boundaries of the black community.²⁷ Post-Soul “eccentrics” are located “in-between” and in excess of norms of sexual identity and racial difference, as well as musical practice. In Carla Peterson’s foreword to *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, she discusses the ways that black women’s bodies have been figured as “eccentric” by the outside world, and the ways that eccentricity has been embraced and put to use by black women in their representations of themselves, from Sojourner Truth to Josephine Baker to Toni Morrison. She writes, “Here I have chosen to term the black female body ‘eccentric,’ insisting on its double meaning: the first evokes a circle not concentric with another, an axis not centrally placed (according to the dominant system), whereas the second extends the notion of off-centeredness to suggest freedom of movement stemming from the lack of central control and hence new possibilities of difference conceived as empowering oddness.”²⁸ áís eccentricity can be seen as both a response to voicelessness and an insistence “to reconcile body and spirit and represent the beauty of the African American self.”²⁹
Given the ways that both black men and women’s bodies have been twisted, denatured, dehumanized, exploited, and objectified, I would like to extend Peterson’s notion of eccentric bodies to consider multiple black sexualities, multiple black bodies in performance, including masculinities, femininities, and transgender identities. Eccentric performers’ ability to locate themselves in a freedom of movement in an otherwise constraining situation—specifically, the constraints of a history of brittle racial, gender, class, and sexual stereotypes—is very important in my consideration of contemporary black popular culture, because it is in these moments of freedom that black popular performers can push the boundaries of identity and recognition. These “difficult” and sometimes controversial performances produce erotic energy that transforms the collective experience of black music. “Eccentricity” in this study implies purposeful oddness, and a simultaneous hijacking of our gaze and ear-drums, jamming the system.

Daphne A. Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* was the first scholarly work to take this concept of eccentricity posited by Carla Peterson and use it in a full-length scholarly study of black performance. Brooks’s groundbreaking study intertwines with this one in its interest in strange pathways of black performance as a form of resistance—and in the importance of marginal and even alienated forms of blackness as a space for freedom—the space of the fugitive. Her study differs from this one in its focus on nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century performance, informed by the first decades after Emancipation, and by early discourses of respectability and surveillance of “proper” performances of blackness. These are foundational moments of black identity. In my study, on the other hand, with its interest in Post-Soul eccentricity, the fugitive and strange are necessarily informed by the Post-Emancipation moment analyzed by Brooks, but these performances appear at a different point of inner community conversation—after and in conversation with and sometimes against the Black Nationalist and Black Art movements, the emerging *āir d World* feminist movements and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movements. There is necessarily a different and complexly historically informed space for eccentricity within the black community—in counterdistinction to the Soul moment, as well as considering eccentricity/fugitive identity as a response to white privilege and power, although these are certainly intertwined.

In myriad ways, these eccentric performances complicate discourse
around authentic “black” behavior, politics, and art forms emerging from the “Soul” era, and continuing an ongoing conversation about black identity and unity that reaches back even further. In *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson calls our attention to the ways in which blackness is multiple and has always been a contingent performance that has been arbitrarily awarded authenticity, dependent on our historical contexts and shifting subject positions.

Indeed, if one were to look at blackness in the context of black American history, one would find that, even in relation to nationalism, the notion of an “authentic” blackness has always been contested: the discourse of “house niggers” vs. “field niggers”; Sojourner Truth’s insistence on a black female subjectivity in relation to the black polity, Booker T. Washington’s call for vocational skill over W.E.B. DuBois’s “talented tenth”; Richard Wright’s critique of Zora Neale Hurston’s focus on the “folk” over the plight of the black man; Eldridge Cleaver’s caustic attack on James Baldwin’s homosexuality as “anti-black” and “anti-male”; urban northerners’ condescending attitudes toward rural southerners and vice versa; Malcolm X’s militant call for black Americans to fight against the white establishment “by any means necessary” over Martin Luther King Jr’s reconciliatory “turn the other cheek”; and Jesse Jackson’s “Rainbow Coalition” over Louis Farrakhan’s “Nation of Islam.” All of these examples belong to the longstanding tradition in black American history of certain black Americans critically viewing a definition of blackness that does not validate their social, political, and cultural worldview. As Wahneema Lubiano suggests, “the resonances of [black] authenticity depend on who is doing the evaluating.”

Freed up from some of the constraints of a segregation era market, these are artists whose careers are distinctly irregular, unpredictable, and inventive, and whose self-presentations of body image and particularly of sexuality reflect an aesthetic of reinvention and change. At the same time, I’d argue that the condition of celebrity becomes a way for them to negotiate and sometimes circumvent the pressures of authenticity and respectability reflected in and sometimes perpetuated by the black community.

In this necessarily queered relistening to familiar and not so familiar
black popular music, I challenge the idea of an “authentic” black sound, as well as a stable black identity, in these eccentric performances. Current discourse on authenticity around black music and culture in many ways springs from the Black Arts Movement, which certainly has grown in complexity and heat during the Post-Soul era. As Paul Gilroy discusses in *A Black Atlantic*, we see cultural discourse reflecting tensions around the diffusion/fragmentation of black music—whether from what is seen as “illegitimate” amalgamations of rock or other “white” musical forms into jazz and rhythm and blues, responses to the advent of the digital and other technological innovations, or the continued appropriation of black sounds and traditions by white musicians and producers. Not coincidentally, the birth of hip-hop in the Post-Soul moment has also been accompanied by a reenergized Black Nationalist Movement for which music was a key force (including the Afrocentric rap of Queen Latifah, Public Enemy, NWA, and others). Gilroy points out that the continued presence of racism, including the denial of black cultural integrity and the “pernicious metaphysical dualism that identifies blacks with the body and whites with the mind,” fuel the push for a black musical production that is recognizably “authentic” and black, and that might then be used to uphold the ideal of a black nation. We must necessarily understand the desire to claim a space for eccentricity in light of these reenergized fears of cultural contamination and racial purity and the resulting constraints.

The question “What Is *This* ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” (the title of Stuart Hall’s brilliant 1992 essay) has been pursued in a variety of ways in black cultural criticism, by looking generically at black popular culture’s rootedness in the traditions and styles of the black vernacular, or by looking historically at black culture as shared responses to lived experiences, for example. Embracing eccentricity necessitates that we claim as “black” precisely those performances in which community resemblance and recognition break down. Therefore, crucial to my analysis of eccentric interventions in the discourse of black authenticity is Gilroy’s critique and deconstruction of the trope of “family resemblances” within black cultural criticism. His idea of a desired family resemblance between black cultural artifacts has been used as an interpretive filter to situate, periodize, and in some ways standardize and limit black cultural production. Gilroy uses this use of the “family resemblance” trope from Houston Baker’s study *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* to frame his discussion.
My tale, then, to say again what I have said, is of a complex field of sounding strategies in Afro-America that are part of a family. The family’s history always no matter how it is revised, purified, distorted, emended—begins in an economics of slavery. The modernity of our family’s sounding strategies resides in their deployment for economic (whether to ameliorate desire or to secure material advantage) advancement. The metaphor that I used earlier seems more apt for such salvific surroundings—they are, indeed blues geographies that can never be understood outside a family commitment.  

Like Gilroy, I think it’s important to intercede and complicate this ideal of “family resemblance” as “order words” for the ways that we conceptualize Post-Soul eccentric music, especially given the ways that the term authenticates the idea of an embodied blackness through this metaphor of the “natural” and socially sanctioned (as opposed to queered) body. This notion of black culture as family resemblance that echoes across time also directly or indirectly puts into motion ideals of respectability questioned by black feminist practice, and heteronormative time, as opposed to queer time, in Judith Halberstam’s sense. In both cases, the family is used as a means of filtering what is or is not legible, and legitimate.

Certainly Post-Soul eccentricity is a continuation of the history of the survival and struggle of black people, which has produced the ongoing, successful production of new sound, movement, and generic innovation within the violently constrained spaces of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, sexism, and segregation, as well as the fickle and often exploitative forces of capitalism. While this book focuses in particular on black performance in the Post-Soul era, it does not overlook the rich historical legacy of those creative, boundary-crossing performers who went before: the often imitated but irreproducible genius of vaudevillian Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker’s shimmy, minstrel innovator Bert Williams’s sly civility, Bessie Smith’s split-tongued blues, Nina Simone’s sneer, Little Richard’s Queeny camp, and, as I’ll discuss in the next chapter, Eartha Kitt’s growl, as well as her purr. The shape these influences take is not static, nor is it linear. The Post-Soul family is not a finite set.

The success of Post-Soul eccentrics reflects a critical interest in what has in the past been censored and disavowed in black performance—
particularly quare black performance. Æs critical interest in censored black performance, I’d argue, is central to the political dimensions of what Greg Tate calls “post-liberation” identity.37 Æ Post-Soul moment provides an unprecedented space of visibility for eccentric black musical identities, a new chance to stand up and both perform and be odd. Æ blossoming of rhythm and blues and soul in the 1950s and 1960s owes itself to highly theatrical innovators like Sister Rosetta Æ arpe, Etta James, James Brown, and Little Richard,38 performers whose combination of musical innovation, edginess, and often theatrical oddness had a key influence on the eccentric performers who came in the next decades. But for earlier eccentrics, this oddity sometimes had to be used strategically, and it often cost performers psychic and commercial freedom. What is it about the post-civil-rights period that has allowed for this space for eccentric performers to be as wildly popular as they sometimes were? We can’t overlook how structural changes influencing the trafficking of black music might account for some of these changes: the integration of performances spaces like Las Vegas and, to some extent, an unsteady opening of mass media venues to limited black images and experiences; and the shaping hand of black musical innovators like Motown founder Berry Gordy and Soul Train producer and host Don Cornelius to provide new and wider spaces for black performance.

Artists in the Post-Soul era have reconceived of black music and black experience in a world where black identity is becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, where black music is trafficked increasingly globally, but also in an industry where generic risk has become increasingly narrowed and calculated. One of the key tensions that Post-Soul eccentrics have had to negotiate is their influence, embrace, and use by, and sometimes collaboration with, enthusiastic white audiences. Indeed, their sounds and styles often reflect a cross-fertilization with other streams of (white) oddity happening contemporarily. In Grace Jones’s sound and style, for example, we see the influence of glam rock, and the shock/pop world of Andy Warhol. Michael Jackson dedicates his 1988 autobiography Moonwalk to Fred Astaire, who had died the year before, and credits him as one of his biggest influences in dance, although we might also note the ways in which Jackson’s style reflects the hip-hop and particular break dance innovations happening on the streets of New York, Los Angeles, and other urban spaces. In his early days as a performer, Sylvester joined and performed with San Francisco’s radical queer and mostly white per-
formance troupe the Cockettes. Every musician studied here has collaborated with white performers, and speak to the influence of rock, folk, pop, and punk produced by white musicians. These collaborations reflect an interest in tapping into national and global streams of musical experimentation, as well as markets previously earmarked as “white” and off-limits to black artists. Significantly, these movements were also sometimes conflicted sites of struggle for artistic control.

Nonetheless, black eccentrics’ borrowings and movements into white worlds call for an interpretive lens grounded in black musical and performance traditions. We would miss much from our understanding of Stevie Wonder’s musical experimentation, interest in spiritual transcendence, and sartorial androgyny in his *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* if we only interpreted him as a “black Hippie,” for example. In my chapter on Wonder, I explore his crossings into the realm of plants, as well as the genres of opera, electronic music, and rock on that album in the context of the history of representations of the black body and the black intellect. Performers like Wonder (especially in this late 1970s experimental phase), Grace Jones, and Michael Jackson challenge us to rethink the terms of black authenticity and community membership that we bring to our most visible cultural figures. Their work, in its intervention in the politics of black embodiment and authenticity, might be considered examples of organic intellectual work, challenging their listeners to rethink and reexperience blackness through new, sometimes less familiar and comfortable positionalities.

All of the artists discussed in this book must negotiate two key conditions in their careers, and these conditions are grounded in the Post-Soul, post-civil-rights moment. First, these artists appear in a moment of potentially expanded notions of black identity within the black community. These new notions of a heterogeneous blackness are in part enabled by more porous cultural boundaries influenced by shifts in neighborhoods, integrated working spaces, and the influence of African and other global diasporic musical traditions. For example, the effect of shifting neighborhoods and schools on black musical performers who play rock is captured profoundly by Maureen Mahon in *The Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*. Here, several of her subjects discuss the impact of bussing and forced desegregation of schools on the kinds of music they listened to, danced to, and created—music, especially rock, being both soundtrack and sometimes also catalyst to social belonging—at the same time that they name the cross-effects of
black freedom movements like the Black Panthers, Black Nationalism, and black pride as shaping a complex and varied racial identity.\(^{40}\)

We must also consider the impact on all communities of a slowing, changing commercial market in blackness that occurred, in part, as a result of these shifting social and spatial patterns. Taking the Jackson 5 as an example, we might note the release of albums with tours in increasingly large and spectacular arena halls or venues like Las Vegas at the same time that they appeared in black festivals and expos. (I first saw the Jackson 5 at the age of six in 1973 at the Black Expo in Nashville.) They appeared on black-marketed and produced shows like *Soul Train*, as well as *American Bandstand*, *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*, and *Midnight Special*, along with Christmas specials, award shows, and other television appearances that reached wide international audiences, including a comedy sketch series and the Jackson 5 cartoon. They were publicized in both black and white teen venues like *Right On!* and *Tiger Beat*, along with adult magazines like *Time*, *Life*, *TV Guide*, *Jet*, and *Ebony*. Indeed, a significant social change to note in these early Post-Soul years is a growing mass media that included black youth as an audience—perhaps a direct outgrowth of Johnson Publishing and other black corporate ventures. The black-owned *Soul Train*, as the presiding "hippest trip in America," in its moment not only challenged but changed *American Bandstand*.\(^{41}\) *Right On!* most likely changed who *Tiger Beat* included on its covers. Post-Soul eccentrics lodged themselves both within and between the spaces of white and black commercial markets, affecting black and white America.

With these changes came anxieties about the appropriation of black culture and style by white culture. While appropriation of blackness by white culture is by no means new, it has presented itself in new ways characterized in part by the visibility and glamorization of civil rights and Black Nationalist cultural heroes (e.g., Norman Mailer and the Black Panthers), increased white interest and consumption of powerful new aesthetic developments in black arts and music (including soul and blaxploitation), and the celebration of certain black stars, including savvy commercial music producers like Berry Gordy and Quincy Jones.

And a final condition, rarely noted in terms of Post-Soul identity,\(^{12}\) is the contested influence of new identity movements and politics that actively interrogate the past invisibility of gay and lesbian and trans sexualities. As same period is characterized by bursts of oppositional creative work and political and cultural activism. We see the blossoming
of women of color feminisms, for example, exemplified by the publication of *A Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981; increased visibility and activism by lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered and queer folk, including vital work by authors like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cherrie Moraga, Joseph Beam, Marlon Riggs, and Gloria Anzaldúa; the energetic activism of Queer Nation, ACT-UP, and other queer activist groups; and the cultivation of black and Latino queer and other countercultural spaces, including the disco. These queer interventions create the space for pleasure and a vision for the future, a third space. Here, I borrow the concept of “third space” from feminist theorist Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed: Every Out of Bounds*. Sandoval characterizes the third space as a practice of third world feminist oppositional consciousness, creativity, coalition and meaning-making that embraces ambiguity, contradiction and play in lived experiences. Post-Soul eccentricity explores this third space through strategies of embodied and queered historical knowing. Eccentrics know that charisma, the elements of surprise, laughter, and sometimes even chaos can get things done and that taking up space in a queer body can change minds. Yet we know that the struggle for black LGBTQ visibility and inclusion within black communities is a difficult and ongoing one. The Combahee River Collective’s 1977 “A Black Feminist Statement,” Cheryl Clarke’s “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance” (1982), and Barbara Smith’s “Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement” (1983) all document the ways in which the accusation of being a lesbian was used as a disciplining device to keep emerging black feminists from questioning patriarchy and homophobia within the civil rights and Black Pride movements. And, as Philip Brian Harper and Robert Reid-Pharr have pointed out, *faggot* and its synonyms have operated as shorthand for *political sell-out* in black men’s writing, film, and music, from Eldridge Cleaver to Amiri Baraka to Spike Lee. These movements have called into question black community conversations about home and self, body and desire, struggle and the desire for change. The vision in black gay and lesbian writing, music, dance, and other forms of art is a vision of transcendence and possibility for the self and, for some, the black community at large. As Essex Hemphill wrote in his 1992 poem “Heavy Breathing,” “I am eager to burn / this threadbare masculinity, / this perpetual black suit / I have outgrown.” Eccentricity, as we will see, can be contagious.
Eccentricity, Recognition, and Community in the Post-Soul Moment

I’d argue, then, that the Post-Soul era has seen visions of quare possibility in the midst of conditions of constraint, enabled in part by the shifting landscape of black identity and community. These moments are often overlooked by the critics because of their “strangeness”—and in particular, because of the ways that they exist outside of dominant modes of blackness, including normative heterosexuality. The Post-Soul eccentric’s queer fierceness and potential for transcendence have been underplayed in most histories of the period. I think this is due in part to the ways in which the questions about gender and sexual subjectivity that I’m asking are relegated to the margins in a quest to create a linear narrative among Black Pride, Black Nationalist discourses of the civil rights movement, and hip-hop—perhaps the most commercially visible aspect of Post-Soul artistic production. Indeed, in some popular uses of the term *Post-Soul*, including music reviews and other popular discussions of black music in newspapers and magazines in the early 1990s, Post-Soul and hip-hop become interchangeable. This is not to say that there aren’t powerful examples of femmecentric hip-hop, homo-hop, and other alternative aspects of hip-hop. This is more to say that when the term *hip-hop* is generally and popularly invoked, feminist and queer hip-hop are seen as marginal.

If we revise the post-civil-rights cultural landscape to foreground aesthetics that can be both black and queer, our conception of a Post-Soul identity might look quite different from earlier formulations of Post-Soul culture. In this book, I return to the voices and bodies left out in the quest to archive a recognizable and ultimately more heteronormative history of Post-Soul black experience. I offer a sustained analysis of a transgendered erotics/politics to transform the conception of a Post-Soul culture and aesthetics as they have been shaped so far in critical conversations about black music. *Sounding Like a No-No* links the transgendered erotics of Grace Jones and Michael Jackson, for example, to shifting conceptions of transexuality that bookend the late 1960s and the mid-1980s: the underreporting of the presence of black drag kings and queens at the Stonewall uprising and in other queer bars and spaces in the early 1970s on one end, and on the other end, the growing visibility and influence of filmmaker Marlon Riggs’s work, especially his *Tongues Untied* (1985), which presents black-on-black gay and trans love with beauty, grace, and
eloquence to a new generation of black and queer writers, artists, and
performers. I’d argue that it is the music itself that has opened up new
possibilities.

In my formulation of an eccentric framework that is also queered, I
resist the simple equation between queer performance and queer iden-
tity. In many ways, these performers are queering what we think of as a
“queer” culture or nation. Michael Jackson’s, or George Clinton’s sexual
identities, though nonnormative, are not always clearly readable, for ex-
ample; neither have they necessarily claimed a place in an LGBTQ move-
ment. At the same time, I don’t want to rely on an uncritical embrace of
black or not-quite-queer exceptionalism. Even though these perform-
ers might not always fit recognized codes of blackness or lesbian, gay,
transgender, or queer identity, it matters that these performers are par-
ticipating in an ongoing and always changing black aesthetic. Whatever
their claims to identity might mean, their performances mean and mean
intensely for other black and queer lives, as models, influences, and
soundtracks to queer world making.

José Esteban Muñoz’s influential concept of “disidentification” has
been particularly useful in my conception of the ways that these black
artists negotiate spoken and unspoken tensions around racism, gender,
sexuality, and class in performance. Muñoz defines disidentification as
“the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negoti-
ate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or pun-
ishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of
normative citizenship.”

The artists I discuss are disidentificatory both in the ways they nego-
tiate constraints of authenticity within the black community and in the
ways their works explode the fiction of identity that they experience as
commercially packaged subjects and subjects that circulate within white
culture. We see in each chapter moments of tension between fixed/es-
sential categories—ways of performing racial and sexual identity that are
deemed authentic—and social categories, which are also “often format-
ted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, and gender.” Especially
important to my conception of the “eccentric” is Muñoz’s conception of
the ambivalence with which subjects disidentify “on and against” domi-
nant culture.

As commercial success stories, Grace Jones, Michael Jackson, and the
other eccentrics covered here, in their spectacular, look-at-me oddness,
are neither “good” nor “bad” subjects, in Althusserian terms. Æ ey are
unavoidably inside ideology. As Muñoz breaks it down, disidentification reveals the ways that the binary of identification and resistance, or counteridentification in Louis Althusser’s thinking, still is in danger of recentering the dominant ideology, whether for or against it. Instead, these subjects work to transform dominant ideologies from within.  

α ese eccentrics do successfully package and sell their moments of oddness. α ey illustrate the growing ability of the marketplace to not only accommodate the new but also feed on the innovative tactics of these eccentrics. At the same time, eccentric figures are sometimes able to hijack or harness the modes of publicity and spectacle of capitalism, or at the very least, use past successes to finance less marketable projects. We might take, for example, Grace Jones’s movement between subcultures and dominant cultures. If Jones began as a subcultural figure, a performance artist with her collaborator Jean-Paul Goude, she relatively quickly became a familiar face in Studio 54, on late night talk shows, in cameos on sitcoms, as a villain in James Bond films, and as an introducer at the Grammies. She even sang a duet with Luciano Pavarotti on Paris Public Television. Yet as she travels in these new venues, she does not alter her image, or performance, continuing to employ a mask of unreadability and surprise. αi s makes her consumption and reappropriation by others for subcultural ends all the more satisfying and possible. (I wonder, for example, if Jones being cast as God by the creators of the Church of Grace Jones website, a gay Edenic fantasy, was at all informed by the mysterious, dominating figure that she cut in commercial film releases like A View to a Kill or Boomerang.) As I comment in chapter five, Jones’s choice of the title “Corporate Cannibal” as the first single for her latest CD speaks of the double edge of her and other eccentrics’ work.

This Is What Eccentricity Sounds Like: Performing Imaginative Freedom

Familiar and strange, eccentric performance does a particular kind of work in relation to the center, by speaking to the condition of being highly visible and highly scrutinized, embraced and at times held at arm's length from the center. We see this dynamic in Joshua Gamson’s description of Sylvester’s early reception in the black community in his book α e Fabulous Sylvester.
Sylvester opened for Chaka Khan at the Capitol eatre, wearing a silver sequined robe, a feather boa, and black high-heeled boots. “The drooping tendrils of nouveau afro framing his wide, subtly made-up, baby-soft face gave him that look,” wrote Vince Valetti, “of a somewhat slimmed-down, somewhat freaked out Roberta Flack.” At first, the mostly black, mostly straight crowd seemed to be at a loss. Unlike male falsetto soul singers they’d heard—love men like Eddie Kendricks or Donnie Elbert, say, or Smokey Robinson—Sylvester was clearly not trying to win over the ladies with feminine softness. Sylvester sang, as Guy Trebay put it, “like a street girl—sassy, hot, skirt hiked up, paying it no mind.” At night, he took a look at the audience. “Sometimes folks make us feel strange, but we’re not strange,” he said. “And those folks—they just have to catch up.”

Sylvester is clearly making something new—a new black aesthetic that is at once nostalgic and futuristic (one part blues woman, one part space age funkster). In Sylvester’s commandeering of the Capitol eatre, he both courts a black popular audience and insists on his right not to explain his place there. Sylvester’s use of pastiche draws from a vocabulary of images of black female sexuality and black male soulfulness that might be familiar to his audience, while switching codes, rewiring the circuits. Onstage he puts front and center a self that his audience might look right through if seen on the street, or even at a family reunion. But the space of the stage demands their participation. Sylvester is innovative but also still in trade or conversation with mainstream black culture, both odd and highly visible.

I find in Sylvester’s performance and the other performances explored here a complex and sometimes awkward negotiation of communities that includes courtship yet always with the risk of rejection from both sides. Eccentric artists hold their audiences in an embrace that is both compelling and awkward. â’s awkwardness can reveal much about the potential and limits of black identity at this particular cultural moment.

Âr ough an analysis of eccentric sound and bodily performance, we can better understand the ways that black performers and black consuming audiences internalize and challenge laws of sexual and racial norms, even while those laws might be contingent and porous. How do eccentric performances push the codes of social laws around authentic race and sexual identity within the black community, even while they are also
constitutive of that community and reflective of its traditions? As eccentrics disidentify with these norms, we can see how important they are for pushing and changing conversations within and outside of black spaces.

Central to my understanding of Sylvester’s performance here are Judith Butler’s theorizations of desire, recognition, and social intelligibility. If recognition is the code through which we desire and seek a place in the social order, our intelligibility is necessarily situated within a nexus of power relations influenced by the particulars of race and class within our community space. The material effects through which we hope to be recognized by others, as “woman,” “queer,” or “black,” for example, are contingent on history and ideology, and dependent on an unstable process of both reiteration and exclusion. Sylvester’s reception by his black audiences exposes the dynamic of becoming intelligible, and the ways that recognition, while it rests on the internalization of these larger ideological forces, is also an open process. What is “intelligible” is always inherently contingent and unstable, and that in turn can be a productive and even erotic space, what Butler calls “a culture of democratic contestation” (Butler, Bodies, 221–22). Deferral of recognition is the locus of desire. As Sylvester reinvents himself, he is reinventing his audience, feeding a hunger that they never knew they had.

Moments of collaboration and contact are especially important for exposing and exploring the contingency of identity. For the artists in Sounding Like a No-No, the breakdown of essentialized understandings of blackness and other social roles can especially happen at moments of ecstasy—when performers teach their subjects how to understand their bodies differently, and interdependently, where “the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short circuit,” as Muñoz puts it. Bodies need other bodies in order to short-circuit. We short-circuit these codes in relation to each other. Sylvester’s collaboration with the listener, with the dancers, with backup singers is potentially infinite; it is the place where ethical risks are engaged, including the risk of recognition. When, for example, Sylvester’s voice intertwines with the orgasmic “female” backup voice in his last moments of “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” the collaboration reorders the call-and-response tradition of leader and follower, as well as the heteronormative narrative of masculine musician/lead singer and feminized backup. In its melding of various femininities, the song leaves unclear whose voice is the “doer” and who is “being done”—and in fact, since the two feminine voices intertwine, we are unsure who is being made “real.”
Music and other forms of creative pleasure making are produced out of the space of contingency, of not knowing. As Benin-born singer Angélique Kidjo has said, “Inspiration is in the domain of the unknown” (Barnett 31). The often ecstatic experience of seeing and hearing the unknown is a refrain in each of my chapters: Eartha Kitt’s geographically dislocated voice, the smile that might be a sneer behind the mask of Grace Jones, the gender fluidity of nonverbal sound in Michael Jackson’s Off the Wall, and the secret life of plants that Stevie Wonder attempts to translate for us.

With these ideas in mind, I’d like to identify several markers of Post-Soul eccentric performance that will shape this book. Eccentric performance includes an initial off-centeredness, the use of not-so-ordinary means and often seemingly conflicting methods of theatricality: the crossing of generic boundaries of form or the crossing of gender or racial boundaries through twice-removed actions. For musical performance, this off-centeredness is particularly important in terms of sound: falsettos, growls, shifting accents, gasps, shouts, tones that threaten to veer off-key, improvised lyrics, breaks in the “fourth wall”—or silence. Eccentric body performances include gender code switching, facial gestures that might threaten a loss of emotional control one minute and then switch to a cool mask the next. This off-centeredness in many ways works against the grain of norms of black authenticity, or expectations of cuddliness or accessibility.

These sometimes unpredictable stylistic performances reveal the voice behind the Duboisian mask that hides the tensions between racialized and sexualized worlds. Fred Moten’s groundbreaking book In the Break importantly highlights the ways that black bodies in performance have become a means of protest, giving voice to the unspeakable experience of black violence, and at the same time stretching the lines of genre. As he says in his opening lines, “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.” Ultimately, Moten opens up what has been figured as the history of black suffering, and this suffering’s contribution to a radical black aesthetic of the avant-garde. He argues that this suffering produces pain as well as a blessing, “baraka”—a surplus of signification that must necessarily be understood not only through the lenses of the visual, but also through sound. Such protest is key to the pursuit of freedom. In Sounding Like a No-No, I follow Moten’s insistence that in the roughness and edginess of black sound, “submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred,
dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive,” we can find political passion, even in commercial performance.

Duboisian mask can be the playful mask of the trickster (e.g., George Clinton), the childlike mask of the innocent (Michael Jackson), or one of brittleness and even cruelty, a gleaming or deflecting surface—one that is worked for its maximum effect (Eartha Kitt, Grace Jones). The mask of the trickster is one of the many ways that these performances use theatricality as a means of disrupting the pressures and constraints of “authentic” or true feeling, associated with blackness. Within this mask lies the critique of the world of art and marketplace that is both generically savvy and historically informed—what some have called triple or even quadruple consciousness. It is in this spirit that I read Grace Jones’s controversial image on the cover of Jean-Paul Goude’s Jungle Fever (1982), naked, caged, eating a raw piece of meat, her face twisted in a snarl. Certainly, her performance of her sexuality, her race, her gender, her very humanity in this image, is in some ways still constrained by the social history of other images of black female sexual animality. Jones’s use of the sexualized spectacle of her own body challenges us, tempting us to erase her humanity and skill as an artist by sheer force of sensation. Yet we must credit Jones’s own role as cocreator in this production, and note the ways that her work engages contemporary movements in art and feminist discourse. There is always a risk involved in an eccentric performance, the danger of alienating your allies, cutting too close to the bone, or just trying people’s nerves. Yet the working of this moment can produce the release of anger, an explosion of laughter, the joint between performer and audience, and perhaps even ecstasy.

Eccentric musical performance depends on a queered relationship between body and sound, one that through the heightened state of performance opens up boundaries and produces a state of vulnerability and change that can approach the ecstatic. There is an aspect of the spiritual in the state of strange. Simon Frith has commented on the ways that the state of the body in performance (singing, dancing, playing an instrument) is always in some ways unnatural and potentially risk taking in its exposure to and attempt to connect with the audience. For example, the mouth, as it is used to create the sound, is stretched abnormally large to create sounds, exaggerating syllables. Bodies as they work as musical machines are forced into unnatural positions. The body in performance is permeable in its readiness to be changed or transported by the act of producing music. At the same time, this can be turned around to
be powerful—to diva, work, overwhelm, to inspire and transform the listener. This heightened aspect of eccentric performance, its ability to both shift and make strange the body of the performer and to transform the listener’s and collective audience’s relationship to their bodies is a key aspect of the Jazz Aesthetic, as described by Omi Osun Joni L. Jones. Within the Jazz Aesthetic, both body-centeredness and virtuosity—“an individual’s responsibility to bring forth her specific and idiosyncratic self into the world”—are key aspects of performance. The body as it is both idiosyncratic and queered becomes a key instrument for shared knowledge and spiritual connection. Moten describes the powerful realignment of the black performing body as “the amplification of a rapt countenance, stressed portraiture. No need to dismiss the sound that emerges from the mouth as the mark of a separation. It was always the whole body that emitted sound: instrument and fingers, bend. Your ass is in what you sing.”

Eccentric sound flips the switch, splits the tongue. It highlights dissonance in terms of the relationship between body and expected pitch or register (here, echoing the sense of feeling “queer” in the old valence, to feel and/or sound odd). Eccentric sound can speak to the experience of one’s body within the social body as changing, unclear, unintelligible. In “Walking in the Rain,” Grace Jones describes this as dissonance among appearance, sound, and feeling, cut by experience of prohibition: “Feeling like a woman, looking like a man, sounding like a No-No.”

While not every artist that I discuss here would describe himself or herself as queer (or gay, lesbian or bisexual), I argue that these performances not only queer traditional narratives of “authentic” black bodily presentation and identity, but have also shaped notions of what it means to “be” queer—to act or be seen or heard as queer. These eccentrics, while not necessarily embracing a queer identity themselves, have presented a soundtrack and visual iconography in some cases for queer culture: for example, the choreography for Michael Jackson’s video for “Beat It” has been appropriated by the femme drag queens the Queen Bees, and Grace Jones’s performances of high femininities and female masculinities make her a popular drag persona, lending her edginess to highly spectacular and sometimes muscular examples of butch and femme queen realness.

Generally speaking, popular music can be read as an audience-driven form of performance, consumed, queered, and transposed by its listeners, integrated into the most intimate aspects of fans’ lives. Sheila White-
ley and Jennifer Rycenga, editors of the collection *Queering the Popular Pitch*, suggest that queerness’s disentanglement of gender presentation from object of desire is important in the realm of popular music because “popular music . . . contains both hidden histories and iconoclastic figures that have long attracted devoted audiences who sense something quite different from what the mainstream thinks is being projected.” Pop music is a form shaped by the desires of its listeners, as well as its performers, from queer club remixes of Lil’ Kim’s sometimes homophobic raps in queer club spaces to my sister and me, obsessively listening and relistening to that one delicious line from Isaac Hayes’s “at Shaft” (“at Shaft is a bad mother—” “Shut your mouth!”). Post-Soul eccentric music is always shifting in its usefulness, always ready to be remade.

**Coming Attractions**

Chapter one, “Becoming Post-Soul: Eartha Kitt, the Stranger, and the Melancholy Pleasures of Racial Reinvention,” explores more deeply the common threads of eccentric performance, including generic innovation, highly stylized self-presentation or theatricality, and “difficult” or queerly embodied sound in the work of Pre- and Post-Soul outsider Eartha Kitt. Borrowing Audre Lorde’s concept of “biomythography,” which combines biography, history, and mythmaking, this chapter considers the ways that Kitt’s reinvention of her black southern self becomes a model for Post-Soul identity. At the same time, Kitt negotiates the ideal of “black exceptionality” as a flawed tool against racism and essentialism through sound, stage performance, and the autobiographic impulse in her work. Kitt’s often mythic presentation of self that at the same time works against historical forgetting produces a sometimes slippery archive of oddness and familiarity that will become an important resource for performers and audiences in the Post-Soul moment.

Chapter two, “Stevie Wonder’s ‘Quare’ Teachings and Cross-Species Collaboration in *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants and Other Songs*,” turns to Stevie Wonder’s radical performance of knowledge and possibility, in opposition to tragic and otherwise limited cultural narratives of “black male genius.” One of the most powerful examples of Wonder’s innovation is one of his most creatively risky pieces, his soundtrack *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*, which redefines black humanity
through inner lives of plants, opening up traditional constraints on the body, including those of racism, sexism, gender normativity, and ableism. Through an exploration of cross-gender and cross-species groove, Stevie Wonder explores new directions of sensual knowledge and identity, musically charting the erotic power of collaboration.

Chapter three, “Here’s a Chance to Dance Our Way Out of Our Constrictions: P-Funk’s Black Masculinity and the Performance of Imaginative Freedom,” considers the ways that George Clinton’s two funk projects, Parliament and Funkadelic, create new spaces for nonnormative heterosexuality and creative production. P-Funk’s solidly funk, hallucinatory, and often politicized music, experimental cover art, and wildly theatrical stage shows create a new queer space for black heterosexual men. Most significant, P-Funk’s music explores black experience, particularly bodily, sexual, and sensual experience at points of ambiguity, vulnerability, pain, desire, and laughter, using tools of music that speak to their listeners individually and internally, as well as collectively. This power to harness emotionally strong and sometimes inchoate feeling had a powerful effect on its audience—prompting some to find unity and empathy.

Chapter four, “Michael Jackson, Queer World Making, and the Trans Erotics of Voice, Gender, and Age,” offers a new conception of Jackson’s becoming—gender and age as experienced through voice in his first solo album, Off the Wall. Through his cries, whispers, groans, whines, and grunts, Jackson occupies an erotic third space of gender, one that often undercuts his audience’s expectations of erotic identification. In this way, his vocal performances anticipate ongoing debates around trans-gender identity and essentialized notions of desire. Jackson’s third space of sound complicates our reading of him as a desiring subject at later points in his career, as he moves from child-adult to man-child, and as he reinvents the terms of racial belonging through his always becoming body. The chapter frames Jackson’s always becoming body in the context of shifting notions of Post-Soul black childhood and coming of age, including my own.

Chapter five, “Feeling Like a Woman, Looking Like a Man, Sounding Like a No-No: Grace Jones and the Performance of ‘Strangé’ in the Post-Soul Moment,” considers disco and film provocateur Grace Jones, and suggests that Jones is often misread because of her effective contrariety and use of masking. In Grace Jones’s work and that of the other black artists influenced by her, we see the wedding of disco and punk,
art and fashion, male and female, animal and human, and human and machine to create new notions of black sexuality. Jones’s use of drag puts her into the larger history of the ways in which performers of the African diaspora use performance in complex ways to lobby a critique of the dehumanization of black people. Yet Jones’s use of drag and other techniques of performing identity poses challenges of readability. She is, in many ways, a trickster figure, sliding out of the grasp of both her fans and her critics. Like other trickster performers of color who rose to prominence during the same period of the 1980s and early 1990s, Jones uses an outsized, “strange” public persona—one that often risks caricature—to lobby critique and express anger and ultimately, agency.

Chapter six, “Funking toward the Future in Meshell Ndegeocello’s *a e world has made me the man of my dreams,*” draws from recent work on Afrofuturism in black music to consider the ways that funk musician Meshell Ndegeocello explores new forms of community and embodiment in multiple national and transnational/transworld spaces. Through Ndegeocello’s “blaxploration” of gender, sexuality, religion, race, and nation in her seventh album, *a e world has made me the man of my dreams,* I ask, “How might black artists engage multiple audiences while performing a dream of the future that is insistently black and queer?”

I end with a brief consideration of the recent success of performer/provocateur Janelle Monáe, and how her vibrant, expansive, and often gender-queer, sci-fi infused, punky funk gives evidence for a future of more explicitly collective Post-Soul eccentric music.

Ultimately, in eccentric performance, there can be celebration in resistance, creating the possibility for connection, community, and change, what Lucille Clifton alludes to in her poem “Eve ain king”: “Come celebrate with me that every day something has tried to kill me, but has failed.” Ultimately, I am interested in the relationships between these eccentric performances and the production of queer and other counterpublics, where, as Muñoz suggests, “Communities and relational chains of resistance contest the dominant public sphere.” Eccentricity, though, is more than a critical intervention, in the academic sense, and it is about more than survival. Eccentricity creates a space for dreaming, a declaration of fun, funk, play, and pleasure.