Sounding Like a No-No
Royster, Francesca T.

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I remember watching my father play drums in the park. Sometimes on a Saturday, he'd bring his congas and bongos out, his cowbells, his cuicas and shakares, and play for whoever wanted to come and listen. Other drummers would come, too, and they'd form a circle, and they'd play for hours, sometimes stopping to talk, or have a smoke. The music could go on and on for hours, circles of music, and sometimes women came and joined the drummers. They'd kick off their shoes and dance in front of the drummers, or take a tambourine or some sticks to keep time as they'd dance. They'd shake for us, wrapped in African cloths or the Indian blankets that they'd brought with them, and cry out, too, and that, it would seem, would make the music go on even longer. My sister Becky and I would watch my father enter the music, until he became someone else, and sometimes we'd grow afraid. He'd sweat right through the red bandana that he'd tied around his head. Sometimes he'd throw his head back, close his eyes and smile, or stare straight ahead, as if he didn't see us. But when the music ended, when the sun would go down, or when Becky and I would complain that we were getting hungry, we'd help my father pack up his drums again in their canvas cases, and he'd carry them, one on each shoulder. I'd smell his iron-sweat-smell of an athlete, and I would think that someday, I would learn to push past my everyday self and enter music like this.

This was different from listening to music at school, where we'd sometimes dance to the Folkways album of Lead Belly singing “Pick a Bale a Cotton” that my teacher brought in. We were taught to squat down and “pick” in time to the music, but we were always encouraged to keep in a neat circle, even as the music sped up.
But when I saw Stevie Wonder jamming with his band and a group of children on *Sesame Street*, I saw my own relationship to live music translated and broadcast on TV for the first time. Stevie showed us the power of live music, the power of funk, that it was okay to dance, that there was something good and right in letting it take us over.

A little after *Julia*, but before *Good Times*, right around the same time that *Soul Train* made its trip across the tracks of our minds, *Sesame Street* appeared. *Sesame Street* was a new place to expand the social horizons of kids of color, bringing aspects of black and brown life to the small screen. *Sesame Street* was radical in that it opened new worlds, at the same time that it made home lessons—the things you were sometimes discretely discouraged from remembering in school—official. Jazz, funk, and salsa infused everything, from the hallucinatory counting exercise whose animation looked like the cover of Miles Davis’s *Bitches Brew* to Roosevelt Franklin’s syncopated recitation of the ABCs, Roosevelt being the only Muppet with his own set of backup singers. Snippets of cinema verité joined animation, skits, and musical performance to create a collage of multiple narratives of urban realities. The stoop was a major meeting place, and so was the corner store, and the alleyways between buildings. The stoop was where the Snuffleupagus would sometimes appear, after all. Laundry flapped proudly on the line, and Oscar loved that garbage can. The Muppets were all different colors—some you’d find in nature, some not—but their songs and voices, styles and worries spoke to many of us. I recognized in Kermit’s blues, “It’s Not Easy Being Green,” the pain, frustration, and sometimes wonder of being born into a history of racism—sung by this most proper-talking frog. The adults in this world—Maria, Mr. Hooper, Susan and Bob and Gordon (Bald New Gordon, as well as Afroed Old Gordon)—expanded my universe of parents and grandparents, and I thought of them as my adult friends. Some of these adults were also famous ones, like Carol Burnett and José Feliciano. I remember watching, transfixed, as Buffy Sainte-Marie breastfed her baby right there at Big Bird’s nest, imagining her nipple as a red, blooming sun.

And Stevie. Stevie Wonder’s *Sesame Street* performance of “Superstition” took the music that I heard at home with my parents and mixed it up with counting and the alphabet, and with navigating new urban spaces. It’s an example of one of the ways that *Sesame Street* spoke specifically to children of color, acknowledging the role that musical performances already played in many of our lives. This particular song, in its lyrics and Wonder’s uninhibited performance, served as a way of
unlearning the bodily lessons of assimilation into white culture. Stevie’s Sesame Street “Superstition” is still available to us, archived (at least for the moment) on YouTube, and Sesame Street’s website (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ul7X5js1vE). But it is also definitely a performance steeped in the hip, off-the-cuff style of its own historic moment. The band, in sunglasses and the funky duds of the era (colorful silk shirts and Apple Jack caps), is surrounded by the garbage cans and other bits of gritty urban debris that are a part of the permanent Sesame Street set. On fire escapes and risers made to look like back porches is a group of multiracial children, listening. Some are dangling their feet in time to the music, or swaying lightly to Stevie’s jams. And one child dances wildly, light-brown-skinned, hair in exuberant curls, flailing his arms in time to the music, and most notably rolling his head back and forth with abandon, in a movement something like Stevie’s own. Stevie refers to this trademark movement as his “blindisms,” which he explains is a way of getting rid of the “excess energies” that are brought on by his music. The camera pans the clusters of young dancers and when it hits the dancing, head-rolling child, cuts away, returning quickly to Stevie. Stevie, too, rolls his head back and forth, smiling at his own singing. The camera never returns to a close-up of the wildly dancing child, but he is sometimes seen in the top left-hand corner, a little out of focus. What are Wonder’s music and sound teaching this child and the rest of us about the body?

In Wonder’s Sesame Street performance, he presents the right for his child viewers to take up the pleasures of black music in public space. In an interview included in Crescent Dragonwagon’s biography about him, Wonder remembers his own desire to listen to and enjoy his favorite musician, blues legend B. B. King, without embarrassment, on the school bus as a child.

I remember when I was little, I used to listen to this black radio station in Detroit on my way to school. Like I was the only black kid on the bus, and I would always turn the radio down, because I felt ashamed to let them hear me listening to B. B. King. But I loved B. B. King. Yet I felt ashamed—because—because I was different enough to want to hear him and because I had never heard him anywhere else. So freedom, freedom begins in the simplest things, even such things as feeling free enough to turn a radio to
In the twenty-three-year space between Stevie Wonder’s birth, in 1950, and his performance on Sesame Street in 1973, the public space for listening to black music freely had certainly changed. Black popular music’s direct role in getting out messages of freedom at this same moment—Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (1967), James Brown’s “Say It Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud” (1968), and Sly and the Family Stone’s “Stand!” (1969) are just a few noteworthy examples—all helped create this new context. And now the freedom for children to consume black music and openly express their own funkiness was happening in television space.

Wonder’s lessons in groove teach the importance of beat and contrariness, the combination of paying close attention and getting lost in music. The ability to feel the “strange” in the groove requires listening with one’s body, as well as one’s ears. Grooving involves playing between the beats, working against comfort and expectation, the essence of funk music. On the opening of the recording of “Superstition,” Stevie, on drum set, works the high hat and cymbal, changing volume, just before or behind the beat, adding extra taps, and hits. The pattern shifts just enough to keep us paying attention. As Wonder makes his drums speak, drawing from the Africanist tradition of the talking drum, he at the same time translates the speech of the drum into a language of the body—one that in turn creates a call-and-response with the audience. Wonder’s embodiment of musical energy’s power to transform—the “blindisms,” as well as his own feedback loop of drum playing—might be linked to other traditions in black musical performance, like the “whoos” and nonverbal sounds of soul singers and gospel shouters.

Wonder’s musical performances are protests against passing, and against the forgetting of the particularities of one’s body, its strengths, its place in time and history. His performance is all of these things, and it is its own particularized thing, connected to the state of being blind but also to the state of being in music. It is significant that Wonder explicitly links his movements to his blindness, because he acknowledges the ways that his experience of the music and the experience of the body as a blind person have their own specificity. Wonder gives permission for his blindness to be performed as a whole body experience, expressed rather
than “passing” as sighted. The rolling repetitions of his head mark the groove of the music, the arc and swing of it. It is a movement, like other forms of dance, that is both spectacular and infectious. Wonder’s performance of musical pleasure is inherently social, and collaborative, connected to others. As Wonder’s music-infused movements provoke and inspire audiences, he challenges the Western notion of the blind body as “being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased.”

Drawing from Nietzsche’s understanding of the body as self-differentiated becoming, Foucault reminds us how the body is constitutively unstable, always foreign to itself—an open process of continuous self-estrangement in which “the most fundamental physiological and sensorial functions endure ongoing oscillations, adjustments, breaks, dysfunctions, and optimizations, as well as the construction of resistances.” In Wonder’s performances of “groove,” he puts at a premium the unknowability of experience, the sense of “wonder,” of never fully grasping what’s there. Wonder’s blindisms physically chart the movement of sound as spatially layered, so that we who are watching visualize not only the ecstatic effects of music on the body, but also the ways that music shapes one’s experience of space in a nonlinear way. The experience of sound in a basic way involves the pleasure of surprise—of being acted on from what Alexander Weheliye calls “multiple overlapping spatialities,” and surrender. As Jody Berland describes it, in her Locating Listening.

We surround the usual object, facing towards it as something other than ourselves; to look at something, even one’s own image, is to constitute it as something separate. To listen to something is to forgo that separation. Sound comes at us from behind or the back from any direction, and surrounds us; we are constituted as listeners within its space.

If we could map Wonder’s blindisms, we might see them as the trigonometry of sound as it moves us. His is a theater of what it means to be “moved,” giving evidence of music’s power beyond the authorship of the artist. Greil Marcus has said that “in its truest moments, songs like microbes—without intent, without brains—use people.” Another word for this, is, of course, spirit, but Marcus’s use of the language of science gets at the anxiety that sometimes accompanies this experience of transformation. What Wonder’s performances show us is the ways that music
challenges the hierarchies of the body and its movements that have become normative in Western culture. And these hierarchies of movement are inherently political. Kodwo Eshun, in his essay “FUTURHYTHMACHINE,” describes the ways that rhythm reacts on and re-creates the body, producing a new kind of intelligence.

Your mother says: don’t put your hand like this, don’t put it like that. That’s social law, which gets inscribed in the body. It becomes muscular, it becomes gesture, it becomes physicalized. A lot of music is about unlearning the mnemotechnics that have been inscribed by the social world, before you get the chance to revolt against them.8

The best moments in music force us to think about our bodies, movements, and gestures as socially politicized, scrutinized, and shaped. Music questions the boundaries of the body itself. Such powerful moments in music bring to light the ways that all of our bodies are potentially “quare,” producing meanings and pleasures in excess of our immediate understanding. E. Patrick Johnson reappropriates this sometimes homophobic term as an alternative to queer to denote “excess incapable of being contained within useful conventional categories of being,” as well as to describe someone who “thinks and feels and acts (and sometimes, ‘acts up’).”9 As an expression of the ecstatic effects of music, and the pleasure of sharing, Wonder’s performances blur the line between sexual and nonsexual, and have at their heart an exuberant appreciation of black musical traditions. This requires a certain level of vulnerability and willingness to exist between the space of sex object and spiritual resource. Such lessons on the embodiment of music, I’d argue, are an important, if neglected aspect of Wonder’s performances. In Wonder’s repeated return to the space of ecstatic possibility, his performances are “queer” or quare.

**Wonder’s Moral and Aesthetic Authority and the Revival of His Quare Teachings**

My embrace of Wonder as a quare or eccentric artist pointedly goes against the grain of criticism about him. Perhaps because of his phenomenal success as both a crossover artist and one who speaks provocatively and directly about black experience, Wonder’s fandom is both
wide reaching and protective. It's difficult, in many ways, to see him as an outsider or eccentric. Indeed, for critics like Craig Werner, in his very quirkiness and originality Wonder is distinctly American, a sign for a new moment of black identity that would soon be shared. In his strongest, Grammy-producing period, Wonder’s songs compellingly captured what Werner calls “the gospel imperative”: the turn away from self to spiritual, as well as civic, concerns. \textit{Innervisions} (1973), for example, featured warnings for the post-civil-rights generation of urban dwellers about the temptations and despair of the city in “Too High,” “Jesus Children of America,” “Higher Ground,” and “Living for the City.” The 1976 album \textit{Songs in the Key of Life} combined an embrace of everyday black life (in “I Wish”), black pride (“Ebony Eyes,” “Black Man,” “Sir Duke,” and “Isn’t She Lovely”), community self-critique (“Village Ghetto Land” and “Past Time Paradise”), and spiritual renewal (“Love’s in Need of Love Today,” “Have a Talk with God,” and “As”). Stevie’s own life also provides a poignant model of integrity and achievement. Wonder’s development from the “Little Stevie Wonder” of “Fingertips,” a blind child harmonica performer managed by others, to the Stevie Wonder of \textit{Innervisions, Talking Book, Songs in the Key of Life}, and other creatively and politically innovative works in the 1970s marks his ability to take control of his career, and more important, to use pop music as a space for teaching, for opening up how black people think about themselves, and their relationship to the rest of the world. In his period of increasingly independent artistic production, Wonder was able not only to open up his own aesthetic but to capture the public’s attention, modeling a dynamic, hip, and also reflective mode of blackness. Moreover, although Wonder has also made songs that would seem to be blatantly commercial or formulaic (his contributions to the soundtrack to the film \textit{The Woman in Red} [1984] come to mind), he has continued to stay politically engaged in the public sphere through music and public speaking campaigns, including his work to support the making of Martin Luther King Jr’s birthday into a holiday and his public support of Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency, culminating in his performance at Obama’s 2008 inauguration celebration.

In these discussions, there seems to be a hesitancy to discuss his performances as they are embodied—and none of his critics has framed him as “strange,” “queer,” or otherwise nonnormative. One unspoken reason for this might be the desire to look away from Wonder’s body as it is disabled, to keep it hidden by piano or synthesizer, out of politeness,
discomfort, or shame. Looking away allows his voice to be integrated into the normative trajectories of his romantic ballads. Instead, Wonder has been held up as the sometimes disembodied voice of a middle-class black community, the bridge between a pre-civil-rights dream of equality and the reality of a thriving black community. Often takes the form of praising Wonder as a “black genius”—a category of highest artistic praise, but one that often leads to a static and underexamined picture, or a tragic trajectory, as I’ll discuss later. Werner, for example, praises Wonder’s experimental soundtrack Journey through the Secret Life of Plants as “bafflingly beautiful,” but he doesn’t explore more deeply those moments of difficulty in Wonder’s work or the ways that the album is performed by his powerful, if quirky, physical presence.

This chapter seeks to challenge what is already known about Wonder, to show how his generic crossing in Journey through the Secret Life of Plants, his quirky soundtrack to an experimental documentary about plant life and feeling, is a symptom for the ways that Wonder created for himself a space of freedom out of past successes. In the face of all of the ways that Wonder has been embraced as a moral and musical exemplar, I’m interested in moments when he doesn’t as easily fit into this image of black belonging. How might Wonder’s embodiment of the groove—and his application of these lessons of embodiment to the nonhuman—fall in excess of black community standards of black masculinity? And how might a project like Journey through the Secret Life of Plants provide Wonder the chance to explore embodiment and sensuality beyond such boundaries? In this discussion, I’ll consider aspects of Wonder’s music and performance that exceed the notions of respectability and “higher ground”—to explore the “quare” Stevie.

Unapologetically goofy, countercultural, earnest, maybe even a little nerdy, Stevie Wonder’s Journey through the Secret Life of Plants took fans by surprise. For many of his critics, it was seen as a detour from Wonder’s run of classic hits that came after his declaration of independence from Motown: Bob Kilbourn called the album “courageous” but “odd” and “quite pointless” and “alien to the usual Wonder Style.” Stephen Holden wrote in the Village Voice that the album’s vision is “as achingly sweet as it is profoundly foolish.” When he was first approached by film producer Michael Braun to score and perform the soundtrack, Wonder himself paused about its place in his artistic direction: “I hadn’t given much thought to writing a score. Before writing, Michael approached me, but I’d always figured if I did one it would be for a film that would raise soci-
ety’s consciousness about black people. But this film interested me, being about plants, and it seemed to be a good place to start.” In many ways, a project like Wonder’s Journey through the Secret Life of Plants reflects a new openness and possibility in the marketplace for black artists. But even more important, it embraces pop music as a potential place to explore new epistemologies of body, history, and being.

Wonder’s soundtrack attempts to give voice to plant feeling and desire as a means of disrupting the powerful ways that popular music and culture hierarchize and normalize desire, body, and spirit. In an interview about the making of the film, Wonder comments, “Most popular songs . . . are about love and relationships: I want you—Do you want me? When are we going to get it on? I’ve written songs about that and I will again. But there is more to life—and love—than this ‘up and down’ business. . . . I’m dealing with love and life on a different level.”

At we are a culture that puts a premium on normative representations of (human) sexuality, Wonder suggests, limits the spectrum of emotion and spirit that’s available. In many ways, Wonder’s work parallels that of blind author Rod Michalko in The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness. Michalko argues that sight deceptively presents a world of accessibility to everything—the rhetoric of vision implies that there’s nothing that can’t be known (a kind of imperialism of the gaze). Blindness for Michalko (like plants for Wonder) teaches us the shape of our own desires to know, as well as the insufficiency of our sight or other senses to fully satisfy those desires.

Wonder’s redefinition of black humanity through the inner lives of plants—and his embrace of the possibilities of new knowledge lent by plant intelligence in Journey through the Secret Life of Plants—is a bold claim to creative freedom. Beyond the project’s sheer unusualness, I will consider the implications that this piece has for the ways that we think about race, sexuality, and disabled embodiment. If images of blindness in black popular culture are mostly heteronormative, from Jamie Foxx’s depiction of Ray Charles in Ray to Lionel Richie’s romancing of a blind art student in the unfortunately unforgettable video for “Hello,” Wonder’s sonic explorations in Journey through the Secret Life of Plants suggest the need for new epistemologies of the body and its boundaries. Through an erotics of cross-species collaboration, Wonder creates a radical performance of knowledge and possibility. Ultimately, we might consider Journey through the Secret Life of Plants as a queer offshoot of Wonder’s ongoing exploration of the perimeters of black life, being, and freedom.
Stevie Wonder was born Stevland Hardaway Judkins (later Stevland Morris) to Calvin Judkins and Lula Mae Hudaway in 1950. Growing up in Michigan, first in Saginaw and then in Detroit, Wonder was an energetic, highly musical, and mischievous child. He learned piano, harmonica, bass, and drums early on, sang in the church choir, and was known for his humor and love of practical jokes. Wonder was blind at birth, the result of premature growth of his retinas. First “discovered” by Berry Gordy at the age of eleven, Wonder was embraced for his exuberant energy, incredible drum and harmonica playing, tuneful songwriting, and comfort on stage. Perhaps most famously, Wonder’s exuberance in his early career is captured by “Fingertips, Part 2” (1963), his first real hit. An recording of a live performance in Chicago begins in the middle, at what seems to be the moment of audience and performer frenzy during a Stevie harmonica solo. We hear the crowd already worked up, clapping and answering Wonder’s call-and-response: “Everybody say ‘Yeah!’” The audience cheers as Wonder answers them with a frenzy of blues harmonica, backed by a chorus of horns. Wonder works the crowd “just a little bit louder” and then rewards them with a round of harmonica that moves up to an even higher octave. The horns draw the frenzy to a close, and Wonder is escorted from the stage, but the audience continues to roar. In what will then become legend, Wonder runs back onstage and whips up another verse, apparently to the surprise of the next act. (One can hear in the background of the melee Joe Swift, conductor for the next act, shouting “What key, Little Stevie!? What key?”) After a few more choruses, stage manager Clarence Paul manages to carry Wonder off the stage. According to Mary Wilson of the Supremes, this legendary performance “was a choreographed ploy to make the audience think that Stevie didn’t know where he was,” a play, perhaps, on Wonder’s blindness, youth, and perhaps also the transformative power of his playing. Yet the fact that similar theatrical shows of enthusiasm became part of Wonder’s stage shows suggests a conscious harnessing of black musical theatrical tradition that places the transformative power of music in the body. Stevie’s being carried from the stage has powerful roots in the Black diasporic spiritual and cultural tradition, from African dance to “getting happy” in church to James Brown’s live performances of “Please Don’t Go” (as he is led off by attendants who gently cover his sweat-
drenched body with a regal red cape) to Prince’s orgasmic explosion at the end of “Little Nikki” in the film *Purple Rain*.

Likewise, Wonder’s exuberant performance of “Kiss Me, Baby” (1965) at age fifteen, filmed in front of a live audience for the London pop television show *Ready, Steady, Go!* as part of the Motown Review, stands out in contrast to the other performances of Motown artists of the period: the Temptations’ tight choreography; Smokey Robinson’s contained if still smoldering crooning; the Supremes’ tight, stylized hip shakes; and Martha Reeves’s muscular Monkey. Instead, we have Stevie, jumping up and down, a much more straightforward expression of joy, head thrown back, wide smile. “Kiss Me Baby!” Stevie’s wide claps leave his body open to our scrutiny, as if he’s opening up his heart and lungs and stomach to us, or as if he’s about to fly.

Despite their palpable links to black performance history and style, Wonder’s performances of embodied pleasure and openness to music are risky. These expressions, rather than being taken as signs of inwardness, become further manifestations of the lack of self-consciousness and intellect of the black artist. The objectification of the black body and devaluing of black art are further complicated by the history of representation of the blind and otherwise disabled body, which has been figured as object, unruly to the gaze, and exceeding the grasps of knowledge, and at the same time open, available to be disciplined by the scientific/voyeuristic gaze. When disabled bodies make moves in excess of “proper” bodily comportment, viewers tend to view them as accidents, or signs of loss of control, rather than as a point of distinction or particularity, says Garland-Thomson.

The success of Wonder’s early performances of bodily “openness” and pleasure, as well as his struggles for artistic control, should be put into this larger history of the demonized black disabled body, as well as ongoing struggles for sexual freedom and full citizenship for disabled people. Wonder has had to struggle against the constraints of artistic control imposed by his producers, and by a marketplace that has put a price on an aesthetic of black expressiveness and black joy. Looking back at his earliest work, Wonder reports, “The people who produced me used to say, ‘Now come on Stevie, I want you to scream on this part of that song, ‘cos that’s you, man.’ And I used to scream my head off. en I thought, well, shit, maybe, maybe not. If I feel it, I’ll do it, but don’t make me scream before the break on every song.” In contrast to most of the eccentric performers in this study, Wonder counters the impulse
of excessive black theatricality as a performative strategy. As Wonder de-
veloped as an artist, he crafted more strategically his exuberance and en-
ergy into his musical projects and political work. Wonder began to chafe
under the diminutive “Little Stevie,” and at age sixteen he dropped the
title. At the same time, he sought to expand the breadth of his musical
performances and generic packaging. While his early albums reflected
trends that Gordy and the Motown executives chose for him (A Tribute
to Uncle Ray [1962], a collection of Ray Charles tributes, or, less inspired
perhaps, Stevie at the Beach [1964], a collection of surf music), Won-
der also developed a stockpile of his own songs, including “I was Born
to Love Her.” â€™s strategy culminated in Wonder’s renegotiation of his
contract with Motown at age twenty-one, as a result of which he was able
to keep an unprecedented amount of artist freedom and ownership of
his music.23 Wonder’s struggles to maintain control over the shape of his
image, his sound, and his creative direction might be seen as part of his
larger commitment to artistic and performative freedom, which we also
see at work in his bodily presentation.

In much of Wonder’s music that takes on sexuality explicitly, he is
fighting against a discourse demonizing, or at best dismissing, the sexu-
ality of the black disabled body, and is in itself a radical act. Wonder’s
performance of an exuberant sexual and sensual self might be read
alongside narratives by black blind or sight-disabled authors like Ray
Charles in Brother Ray and Audre Lorde in Zami: A New Spelling of My
Name, which speak openly of sexual and sensual pleasure and awareness
heightened by blindness and of a successful path to sexual and artistic
fulfillment.24 In Innervisions and Music of My Mind, Wonder includes
songs about his marriage to singer Syreeta Wright, their mutual love, and
an honest depiction of their struggles to maintain their marriage, while
“Isn’t She Lovely” paints a portrait of fatherly love. Wonder performs a
nonnormative sexuality in his self-presentation, as well as in his sound
and stage performances. In the liner notes accompanying Songs in the
Key of Life, Wonder writes, “My mind’s heart must be polygamous and
my spirit is married to many and my love belongs to all. Sweets je t’aime.”
â€™en follows a list of no less than ten of Stevie’s past lady friends with the
eleventh in capital letters: YOULANDA. â€™s followed by “_______,”
with the notation “(â€™re’s an empty space for you),” and then his sig-
nature and thumbprint. After that there appears, again in caps, “PS TO
YOULANDA, IF LOVE WAS WHAT I SOUGHT FOR THEN YOU
HAVE GIVEN ME MORE THAN I EVER KNEW EXISTED!”25 â€™s
carefree, polyamorous spirit informs *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* as well, where, for example, in “Outside My Window” Wonder sings a love song to a flower.

In his live performances as an adult, Wonder balances the need to create a shared atmosphere of musical pleasure, spontaneity, and freedom for himself, his musicians, and his audience with professionalism and attention to detail. Despite the shield that the sunglasses provide, his posture and face are often open and relaxed, moving freely, rather than in explicitly choreographed dances. Whether singing or playing synthesizer or piano, harmonica, drums, or occasionally bass, Wonder projects exuberant energy, confidence, and humor: laughing between beats, imitating the flourish of a guitar with his voice, changing lyrics to add “Stevie” whenever possible, breaking into his trademark smile. While he is clearly the leader, he shares the stage with others with a spirit of generosity, making room for his backup singers and other musicians to have a chance to solo and show off as well, demonstrating their connectedness. Sometimes a performance will break into impromptu teasing, as when in a 1974 live performance of “If You Really Love Me” one of his conga drummers begins imitating his voice, or the whole band will get the spirit of church, clapping wide, stepping into extra solos, involving the audience. Wonder wears a wide range of flamboyant and sometimes gender-bending styles, from braids, dreadlocks, Afrocentric robes, and Indian shirts and beads to glam-rock-influenced glitter and sequins and ornate sunglasses.

Indeed, like the other performers discussed in this book, I see Wonder’s sonic and bodily performances as opening up the spectrum of black sexuality. In his openness and fluidity, Wonder fits neither the extremes of black hypermasculinity nor femme divahood. Most useful has been E. Patrick Johnson’s notion of “quare” to describe the ways that Wonder, in his braided, dashikied, and strategically vulnerable masculinity, might be read as “odd or slightly off kilter.” I have also found useful Kobena Mercer’s and Jason King’s discussions of the sexually open and/or androgynous performances of sexuality in the works of Michael Jackson and Toni Braxton. Like Wonder’s *Plants*, Jackson’s *à riller* in part performs an eroticized cross-species sexual/erotic collaboration (here monster and man). Jackson seeks and finds in *à riller*’s cross-species identification a route of sexual reinvention and ambiguity—a place in which to be “not like other guys.” And as Jason King discusses, Braxton’s sexual “heat” combines masculine toughness and feminine fierce-
ness to explode the constraints and packaging of pop Soul. Likewise, Wonder's bodily and vocal performances challenge the codes of gender and genre. Neither cool nor fierce, Wonder remains difficult to fit into readily available continuums of black sexuality. He represents a space still not yet occupied.

The marketing of the black male performer has often favored an aesthetic of cool: distanced, beyond being affected by others, exemplified by Miles Davis, back turned away from the audience, and Savion Glover's unsmiling face as he does his hip-hop soft shoe. The stakes of remaining cool for the blind or otherwise disabled body remains prickly. Even though the blind male body might well be one of the most visible disabled bodies in the world of black music, we might see an impetus to “push past” blindness differences, either by translating them into spiritual knowing or by hardening them into a pervasive sense of cool. For example, in the film Ray, Taylor Hackford's 2004 biography of Ray Charles, we see manifest anxieties about the blind black male body: the fear of the blind body as nonproductive labor; the physical vulnerability of the blind body; the economic vulnerability of the blind body; and, perhaps harder to articulate, the ways that the blind body might posit new and unheard of forms of sexuality and sensual response. Are black blind bodies “freakish” both in the ways that they look and the ways that they access the senses? One response of control is to allocate the black blind body into the realm of the feminine, as a means of taking it out of circulation and control.

Even in Ray’s opening credits, we see the disciplining of the potentially vulnerable black and blind male body into this topos of coolness, which will continue over the course of the film. The credits show an older Ray Charles (Jamie Foxx), smoke lingering among his fast-moving fingers on the keyboard, to evoke the sensuality, heat, and power of his sound. His image is then reflected back in Ray's black sunglasses, effectively closing his face and eyes to the audience. The result is a “cool,” closed performance that we learn has been hard-won. The younger Ray must contend with sexually and economic exploitative managers (“Come and get some of Mama's 'blackberry pie!'), envious band members, and his own demons. If the younger Ray lacks the understanding and economic value of his own “mojo,” by film’s end, Ray has learned how to reshape his performances and masculinity to better fit these standard codes.

Stevie Wonder is the opposite. In his bodily performances, as well as in the political and romantic earnestness of his lyrics, he claims the
right to openness—to wonder. His “blindisms” visually perform the effects of the music, in turn affecting others. The changing textures of Wonder’s voice (from high and reedy to low growls), his closed-mic gasps and breathiness (e.g., audible in “Signed Sealed Delivered” and “My Cherie Amour”), and his willingness to play with his voice via voice bag and vocoder give a sense of his vocal style as reflecting a fluid embodiment, one that is varied in its presentation, open to collaboration, supplementation, enhancement, and inspiration. This openness is in fact the key to the power of the erotic. For Audre Lorde, for example, pursuit of the erotic in one’s life work necessitates deep feeling and principled connection with others. It requires vulnerability and openness. The display of such openness and expressiveness of feeling is hard-won, I’d argue, going against the dominant aesthetic of black male cool, and is always at risk of being attributed to black “naturalism” or essentialism.

**Stevie Wonder, Eddie Murphy, and the Persuasive Power of Quare Performance**

We see evidence of the power of Wonder’s performances to challenge notions of black heteronormative masculinity in Eddie Murphy’s imitations of him. For those of us growing up in the 1980s, perhaps Stevie Wonder himself was Eddie Murphy’s imitations of Wonder. Frequently during that period, on *Saturday Night Live*, in guest star appearances, and in his concert film *Delirious*, Murphy’s imitation of Stevie Wonder was part of his bag of tricks, along with those of Gumby, Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood, Velvet Jones, and James Brown. Murphy’s attempted mastery of Wonder, his ability to evoke what is most familiar and admired about him (his trademark vocalisms, visual iconography, and political and spiritual earnestness), is a strategy to establishing himself at the center of a Post-Soul generation. Murphy not only demonstrates his knowledge of key icons of an integrated Post-Soul culture; he can deflate them, remake them in his own image.

I see in Murphy’s attempts to “do” Wonder a mixture of admiration, desire, and envy. (While Murphy aptly captures a recognizable simulation of Wonder’s glissando, his own recordings, including *Party All the Time*, are more forgettable.) While Murphy describes himself as a fan and friend of Wonder, I think there is also more than a family resem-
blance between Murphy’s parodic treatment of Wonder’s “quareness” in these performances and Murphy’s often present gay panic, reflected in the homophobic humor of his early work. What Murphy isolates in his Wonder imitations is the opposite of his own iconography: where Wonder’s style is often androgynous and decorative during this period, emphasizing flowing Afrocentric robes and braided hair in beads, Murphy’s is harder, slick, muscled, and angular in red leather pants and open shirt. Wonder’s rhetorical style (at least in Murphy’s imitation) is rambling and circular, while Murphy’s delivery is the defensive one-two of a boxing match. If Wonder’s voice, movements, and body are often feminized, Murphy’s are macho, even femmephobic. As Murphy parodies Wonder in performance, he distances himself from a black masculinity that seems to be vulnerable, feminine, and at risk of being read as unself-conscious or “natural.”

We might consider Murphy’s parody of Wonder as an example of the ways that the policing of compulsory heterosexuality is also interwoven with a system of compulsory able-bodiedness, as Robert McRuer argues in *Crip α eory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. If, in the past, “heterosexuality and able-bodiedness were wedded but invisible and in need of embodied, visible, pathologized, and policed homosexualities and disabilities,” in our current postmodern and neoliberal moment, normalized (abled-bodied and heterosexual) selves depend on a performance of more spectacular examples. Normalcy is demonstrated through tolerance of the now more highly visible other. Rather than arguing for a space at the table of normalcy, McRuer’s use of the in-your-face moniker of “Crip” in his *Crip α eory* attempts to push the envelope of this performed tolerance, to expose its larger function of containment. But this dynamic of othering is further complicated as we think about the policing of queer and disabled sexuality among black male bodies, which, as Robert Reid-Pharr points out, have been consistently configured in modern culture “as an inchoate, irrational nonsubject.” The laughter that Murphy courts might be a way of striking out against this experience of being figured as “nonsubject” as a black man—as a way of maintaining his own subjectivity.

In Murphy’s impersonation of Wonder, we must also note the high stakes of this form of humor, where to successfully perform another with a difference requires knowledge and subtlety. Murphy has clearly paid close, one might even say loving, attention to Wonder’s cadence, the textures of his voice and breath. Murphy has watched and captured the ways
that Wonder holds his head, the strength of his neck and shoulders, his open smile. In embodying Wonder, Murphy risks being haunted by him.

Indeed, I’d like to suggest here that Wonder teaches Murphy the potentiality of quareness, exposing what is similar between them. In isolation, Murphy’s imitation of Wonder’s “softness” bolsters his own “hardness”—both figurations of black sexuality that are “nonnormative,” spectacular, and, as it turns out, highly lucrative. Murphy has constructed a stand-up style based on sexual outlaws Redd Foxx and Richard Pryor. His is a style that combines sexual charisma, mastery, and aggression. Yet as a moment of performance, Murphy’s “read” on Wonder depends on the agreement of the audience on their differences.

Murphy’s performance of impersonation attempts to control the startling effects of Wonder’s performances. Through parody, Murphy produces a “looked at” Wonder who can never fully return his gaze, and therefore is suspended in the gendered dynamics of power. His performance of Wonder is a special version of what Garland-omson calls the “politics of staring” at the disabled, where “staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant.” Through imitation, he attempts to hold him steady in his gaze, in part owning and becoming him at the same time that he “fixes” him. Ultimately, though, as Murphy imitates Wonder, he is also seduced by him. In a skit on *Saturday Night Live* where Stevie Wonder is guest host, the show stages Murphy “caught” imitating Wonder when the real Wonder appears onstage. Murphy “teaches” Wonder how to be Wonder, and Wonder good-naturedly obliges. The skit ends with the two singing together. This skit not only reveals Wonder’s good humor about being the object of imitation but also reveals the potential for the imitator to be transformed through the act of imitation. In the tightly regulated space of black male performance, Wonder gives Murphy a space in which to be open, even if that openness is caught between scare quotes. Perhaps what Murphy recognizes in Wonder, and distances himself from, is the ways that Wonder performs an examined life, exposing the constructedness of a masculinity dependent on the tyranny of the gaze. In the essay “Seeing Nothing: Now Hear . . .” Martin Welton argues that “the dominance of vision, its range over a given situation, has long been linked to characterizations of male power and agency, to the power of the male gaze to see at a distance and command, and hence to be ‘objective.’”
poignant in its intersection with race, where black masculinity is always so closely watched and fetishized.

**Stevie Wonder’s Journey through the Secret Life of Plants: Wonder as “Quare” Seer**

In *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*, Wonder continues to expand the territories of black masculine performance. Though an album in part about the cosmos and spiritual connection to nature, like many progressive rock and psychedelic rock projects from roughly the same period, *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* includes soul ballads, disco, funk and pop, classical, African, and Japanese orchestration, as well as ambient sound. In interviews about the project, Wonder insisted that despite its seemingly esoteric approach, it was in part about down-to-earth black life and love. For example, in a 1979 interview with the *Washington Post*, Wonder tells reporter Carla Hall that, like his other projects, this music “comes just from my life.” At the same time, he insists that black life and love are of limitless potential as a subject. He tells Hall, “You see, I think that we cannot allow ourselves to put boundaries on what we do musically. An element of surprise is always good.”

Wonder’s soundtrack, along with the film, exposes the disconnection between science and spiritual practices, united through the ecstatic effects of music and cinematography. Neither the film *The Secret Life of Plants* nor Wonder’s soundtrack has had the cultural and scientific impact that it might have had it tempered the insistence of its message: plants have lively inner lives and emotions and, specifically, they feel empathy, pain and pleasure, and desire toward humans. Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird’s 1973 book *The Secret Life of Plants*, the film and soundtrack’s source, suggests that we might consider the possibility of plant eroticism and sensuality, and among other things, that “plants and succulent fruits might wish to be eaten, but only in a sort of loving ritual, with real communication between the eater and the eaten.”

The film documents the intrepid scientists and artists who attempt to locate and chart plant feeling and response: a scientific lab in the Soviet Union that attempts to show that plants “remember” when other plants are mutilated or cooked; a lie detector specialist who turns from the mean streets of San Diego to measure plant empathy and higher consciousness; and
George Washington Carver, who saw in the peanut a sense of “spirit” and an “invisible world,” as well as potential for a lot of very useful products. The book, film, and soundtrack’s exploration of plant spirit is in keeping with the practices of many cultures around the world, from indigenous cultures of North and Central America to that of the Dogon people of Mali.

Like Gil Scott-Heron’s description of the blues mentioned earlier, Wonder and the filmmakers of *The Secret Life of Plants* use plants to further “the science of how we feel.” But in its most powerful sequences, the film turns away from the humans who are obsessed with this secret life and uses its technology and craft to document the lives of the plants themselves: their movements; their emotions; and, it is suggested through Wonder’s music, their “souls.” The soundtrack and film’s first sequences tell the story of evolution, in “Earth’s Creation” and “The First Garden.” Wonder’s harmonica plays a duet with birdsong, backed by kalimba. A jazzy bass line is matched by the rhythm of crickets, broken by the synthesized rumble of thunder. This rich natural and synthetic combination of sound provides the loam through which leaves curl and reach.

The very question of plant knowledge asks us to rethink the ways we understand knowing and our language for describing that knowing. By reconfiguring the senses to foreground the shared experience of humans and plants, the project foregrounds a challenge to what we think of as bodily knowledge and pleasure. It forces us to face how our mechanisms for describing what and how we know physically or psychically are limited by human language.

Wonder’s “sounding” of plant intelligence provides an aesthetic of expansiveness that captures the ways that plants become technologies for “seeing” and understanding. He does so by using the spectrum on musical instrument digital interface (MIDI) synthesizers, his own voice, and the voices of his backup singers to capture plant wit and sensuality. Critical theorist Richard Doyle, writing on the rhetorics of plant intelligence by naturalists and theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggests that we think of plants as technologies of sorts, for seeing and understanding, particularly in the ways that plants get human audiences to “pay attention”—through color, smell, and even limited movement. Indeed, we might think of the relationship between primates and plants as a form of seduction in which plants act not only on insects but on thought, “inducing visions of intoxication and ecstasy; activating, am-
plifying, and altering the mind.” Rejecting the idea of his own limits, Wonder presents himself as mediator of these experiences, forcing us to think about his body as a resource for communication with these non-human subjects.

Throughout Journey through the Secret Life of Plants, Wonder uses the range of his MIDI synthesizers to play with sound textures and rhythms, with crossings of human, animal, plant, and technology, sometimes including what sounds like the plants themselves: the whip of a leafy branch in wind or held in a moving hand. He uses the stretch between octaves to capture a sunflower’s turn with the sun. Rather than playing into the Western splits between mind and body, and technology and human, Wonder demonstrates the facility of technology to move us to new relationships with the body, voice, time, and organism. For example, he offers a range of timekeeping: the traditional drum set and the tasty blues bass line but also the pulse of synthesized crickets, a clock, and the unpredictable bottom of thunder.

Wonder also reconfigures music and groove through the positionality of plants themselves. For example, in the instrumental version of “Send Her Your Love,” we hear a sound collage as if from the point of view of flowers on a table. We hear a strangely muted collection of tones and rhythms: laughter, the clinking of glasses, the strumming of a Spanish guitar, all entering the earphones from multiple, intertwined directions. We are flooded with sensation, the melody of the original version lost to the textures of the other noises.

If, as Richard Doyle suggests, plants, despite their apparent passivity, are able to capture human and primate attention through multiple mechanisms, including smell, bright color, stickiness and other textures, and movement, this would seem to mimic what Wonder is also doing stylistically in Journey, layering styles and devices. The expansiveness of technique itself a proof of its beauty. As the expansiveness of the album’s finale and its rapid shift between styles and sounds: pop ballad, classical, traces of Indian and Japanese, African rhythms, and also popular instrumentation. As we consider Wonder’s capturing of plant intelligence, its “secret life,” we might return to the ways that Stevie himself is attempting to produce a supplement to vision in this soundtrack project, sound creating the color, texture, movement, smell, and even taste of plants—through synesthesia.

The secret life of plants turns out to be a lesson in collaborative, complementary existence and adaptation, something along the lines of Wonder's Teachings.
der’s lessons in “groove.” The song “Race Babbling,” for example, suggests that the speed and sound of everyday life obscure the simple lesson of interconnection and need, told in the voices of the plants: “Can’t you see that / Life’s connected / You need us to live / But we don’t need you.” The song’s funky disco stylings—evocative of George Clinton, Sly Stone, and also perhaps Giorgio Moroder—capture the pressures of urban life at breakneck speed. And layered on top of the song’s rhythm sections, melody, and harmony are a ticking clock in the left speaker and a plane landing in the right. But as the guitars stand back and the song breaks into a meditative three-minute sequence featuring the rhythm section, perfect for dancing, we experience the trance effect that dance music’s repetition can provide, creating space within motion for thought and transformation. (Here I’m reminded of the midsong meditative effect of Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love.”) The song disturbs the neat distinction between “nature” and technology.

In a radical move of “blaxploration,” Wonder claims these issues of interspecies communications as specifically black concerns. As *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* openly questions the splits between mind and body, human and technology, it in turn pushes the boundaries of black identity on a national, species, erotic, and aesthetic level. We watch in the film a fly rapping to a Venus flytrap with the seductive style of a George Clinton (“Hello, Flower. Boy, do you look juicy”). One-celled organisms groove to a funky bass line. We watch flowers unfold, captured by Ken Middleham’s time-lapse cinematography, Wonder’s harmonica and synthesizers giving voice to their yearning. Wonder not only creates a soundtrack that counters the hierarchy of image to sound in film (where his music creates the heart of the film, it *is* the secret life of plants), but he is claiming for black musical production the space of experimentation and intellectualism, as well as spiritualism, at the same time that he is claiming that at the root of all life is funk, which writer and Bay Area Funkateer Rickey Vincent defines as “an aesthetic of deliberate confusion, of uninhibited, soulful behavior that remains viable because of a faith in instinct, a joy of self, and a joy of life, particularly unassimilated black American life.” In this Post-Soul moment, “Soul” can include a plant subject, and groove and improvisation are the movements of evolution, the soundtrack of life on this planet.

In his infusion of “funk” into this depiction of the life of plants, Wonder suggests that black music is synchronous with the roots of all life. This runs counter to the status of black life and sexuality as social death,
the legacy of slavery. Indeed, a running theme of the soundtrack is the restoration of black life/aesthetics’ connection to the natural world, estranged by African removal and enslavement, as well as migration from South to North. Both “Come Back as a Flower” and “Outside My Window” treat the themes of rediscovery and connection to plants as a form of spiritual healing. “Come Back as a Flower” explores the beauty of rural life and rhythms with a sense of childlike wonder and immediacy, which builds into an increasingly complex and alive composition. Wonder begins first with basic singular instruments and voice: piano, bass, the sound of hand-clapping, and Syreeta Wright’s sweet soprano. As the first verse is completed, and the melody repeats, the arrangement builds, and other sound elements join and intertwine with the first ones. Wright’s voice is now accented with ghostly dove call, the bass joined with the groan of what could be the creak of wood against wood. As the patterns repeat themselves with a difference, the song explores the possibility of an Edenic return, though one that acknowledges the inevitability of change.

“Outside My Window” considers the possibility of reconnection to the natural world and its rhythms in an explicitly urban space, where nature is clearly framed through the lens of the human. Stevie’s singing in this bouncy ballad is accompanied by what sounds like a synthesized whip of a branch in the air, water, the rustle of leaves, and the sounds of children playing just outside. Here plant life is not disconnected from human life.

In “Black Orchid,” a midtempo ballad cowritten with Tammy Wright, plant life and beauty are specifically linked to the desire to heal black womanhood, postslavery: “In a world / with need for a change / A touch of love in fear of hate.” In the “Black Orchid” sequence in the film, the black orchid is literally a black woman (performed by Eartha Robinson), the adult version of Wonder’s sturdy-legged young protagonist in “Living in the City,” perhaps. Robinson moves in an Alvin Ailey–inspired dance from a burned-out tenement building to a field, until she merges with a tree. Wonder’s plea for the appreciation of the black orchid and a renewal of her power parallels the defense of black womanhood devalued by slavery, in keeping with early black feminist writings by Anna Julia Cooper and Maria Stuart: “Black Orchid, Black Orchid / Why did they criticize / when they knew your love could cast its spell and consecrate their eyes?”

In “A Seed’s a Star/Tree Medley,” a song combining lyrics in English and Bambara, plants become a route for African return: “I gradually
burst through my shell / Pushing down into the ground / the root of me
is homeward bound.” the song is the energetic apex of the album, struc-
tured something like a rock opera, with Wonder taking on the persona
of “Tree” in deep vocoder, with Tata Vega’s honeyed mezzo-soprano in
response. Trumpets, a chorus of African drummers, and two guitars, as
well as the claps and other responses of a live audience, add the texture of
liveness and drama. In this and each of the songs of the album, Wonder
explores and merges the sensuality of plant life with the exploratory and
yearning elements of the erotic.

It makes sense to me that Wonder’s Journey through the Secret Life
of Plants project occurs simultaneously with the blossoming of hip-hop
culture, in 1979. Both share a sense of urgency, drawing from the expres-
siveness of black cultural traditions in the attempt to capture through
sound and beat and shape black aliveness and struggle. And while Won-
der’s Journey doesn’t sound at all like the dynamic, pared down aesthetic
of much early rap, both emerge out of a context where “social alienation,
prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect,” in Tricia Rose’s words.42
Despite the characterization of Journey by many of its critics as (only)
airy or otherworldly, we might, in particular, connect Wonder’s explo-
ration of return in this project, in addition to its other themes, to rural
landscapes and knowledge, and to Africa, as a response to the deindus-
trialization and burned-out city landscapes that have also influenced
hip-hop graffiti, breakdancing, rap, and DJing.

Stevie Wonder as Post-liberation “Black Genius”

Wonder’s quest to create an art that links black life and spirituality to
plants and all life creates a line of flight from what Greg Tate calls “the
looming shadow of black failure.” Tate writes:

For too long black genius has been just another word for black ex-
istential suicide. How did Samuel Delaney put it: “I have come to
wound the autumnal city. So howled out for the world to give him
a name. the in-dark answered with the wind. All that you know
I know.” Yet, even in the face of all the light that has been shed
on blackness before us, in this generation, on the eve of the mil-
leennium, we remain dark to ourselves, setting up shelter in Plato
caves of our own immaculate design, black holes situated in Arc-
tic wastes where no other black soul can hear us scream, because, to paraphrase the poet Ninety Nine, we’re cool like that, we’re sold out like that, we’re played like that, we’re lost.”

Wonder’s willingness to reimagine that living as a sensual/erotic connection beyond species is one of the ways that he expands the notion of the black genius, releasing him from the constraints of black genius and black masculinity as tragedy, as well as from the idea of blind sexuality as invisible.

Over the course of Stevie Wonder’s career, he has been labeled as a black genius, a term that is limited in its conceptualization of black male identity. *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* is Wonder’s gentle rejection of the reductiveness of the formula of packaged pop, but it is also an engaged “blaxploration” of black humanity and expression, looping in on past texts—including Wonder’s own—and moving beyond his own genus as well as genius. Whimsical, goofy, meditative, the album is a response to the often limited parameters of black intellectualism and “genius.” *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* is very much in keeping with Greg Tate’s characterization of the “postliberationist,” Post-Soul moment. Postliberationist art is deconstructive, reflective of its own workings and its relationship to white power, says Tate. Absorbing and reaching beyond the lessons of the Black Art Movement, these artists demonstrate a love of blackness, while keeping in sight a wide horizon, free to draw from all cultures for its “gene pool.” In this case, however, Wonder widens the notion of “cultures” to include nonhuman ones.

In popular culture (and often played out in everyday life), black male genius has its limits concerning where it can go and what it can do. For one thing, the term genius in the world of black music is almost always used synonymously with male (with the exception of Billie Holiday, thanks to Farah Jasmine Griffin), and its most embraced and best-known models are reassuringly and zestfully masculine, deeply loyal and embedded in the world of men. Black male musical genius is often connected to sex and the seductions of power. Trumpeter Freddie Hubbard tells this story about Miles Davis: “Miles would hit a low note with that Harmon mute in his horn and the girls would move their legs like they had just got too hot to keep their thighs together.” The stories we tell about black male genius are bigger than life, mythological. These geniuses are arrogant, charismatic. In these stories, black geniuses are exceptions to the rules of racism, or else they are victims, man-children, brought down by the
limits of the flesh: sex, poverty, drug addiction, loneliness (as in Clint Eastwood’s image of Charlie Parker depicted in the 1988 film *Bird*). The stories that we hear about black geniuses are that they are misunderstood and therefore doomed. They die of loneliness. They die of not being able to do their art. Or else that they die from the difficult knowledge their art yields. They are martyrs to the black creative spirit. These tragic stories of genius are so powerful, in part, because they are also lived, and speak to the limited place in the world for black creativity and radical thought.47

What might be missing, perhaps, in black genius cultural narratives is the impact of fundamental aspects of empathy and transcendence that are nonetheless at the heart of music’s power to affect one’s humanity—the possibility, even in the exploration of one’s blackness, of leaving behind one’s own pain and struggle to touch and understand another’s, outside of one’s own gender, race, tribe, or even species. Spoken word and jazz artist Gil Scott-Heron alludes to this element of empathy when he defines the blues at its best as “the science of how things feel.”48 Music critic Stanley Crouch hints at it when he describes the jazz geniuses of his youth, their ability to satisfy the often unspoken “need for beauty” in black life, and his own desire to transcend “the mediocrity, oafishness, and stupidity” that loomed in his life and in those of his community.49 These aspects of feeling, empathy, and connection are often underplayed because they don’t fit into traditional notions of black masculinity, perhaps. But I am reminded of the wide psychic reach of the work of black male geniuses when I remember a bus ride home from the 1992 March on Washington for Women’s Lives. Someone had put Marvin Gaye’s song “Sexual Healing” on his or her mixed tape, and the whole bus joined in singing, mostly women and some men, many of us survivors of sexual assault, maybe all of us with the desire to get beyond just surviving in our thoughts. Maybe this was against the grain of the original vision Marvin Gaye had in performing the song, maybe not.

What Stevie Wonder models in his work are the limits of these past conceptualizations of black male genius, by centering empathy, and the transcendence of the historical, social, and even physiological constraints on one’s body through openness to others’, through music. Wonder’s genius is in his fundamentally democratic configuration of groove. Groove for Stevie is the elemental and human and also plant and animal force of desire, which moves all of us to show our faces to the sun. Groove is the life force, and the force of connection. What Wonder offers to the ongoing story of black genius is a fundamental investment in living. Each of the
eccentrics discussed in this book use strategies of off-centeredness to re-
but the forces of history that shrink the creative spirit in black life. As we’ll see in the next chapter, for Grace Jones, this revolt against black spirit killing takes the form of satire, a mask that momentarily hides critique and rage; for George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic, it takes the form of a goofy embrace of sexual pleasure. For Stevie, wonder, openness, and vulnerability, along with the communal powers of groove, are the forms that his strategy takes. In Journey through the Secret Life of Plants, Wonder explores new directions in sexuality—the erotic power of cross-species collaboration—as a means of escaping tragic trajectories of black masculininity. This has implications for the ways we think about the constructions of sexuality, race, gender, and ability in the Post-Soul moment.

Wonder pushes these limits, but he does so while also enjoying the fierce loyalty and protectiveness of his audience, as we see in Eddie Murphy’s confession about him in his 1983 film Delirious.

I remember I did Stevie Wonder in a show once, and black people lost their muthafuckin minds! I had brothas rolling up on me, going, “Hey! You the muthafucka that be doing Stevie Wonder? . . . Don’t ever let me see you do that shit again! I’ll fuck you up! Stevie Wonder’s a musical genius!”

Perhaps this very protectiveness keeps us from recognizing Wonder’s radical quality as an artist, and as a performer of eccentric blackness. In his thoughtful study of African American musicians and blindness, The Songs of Blind Folk, Terry Rowden suggests that for blind musicians “the attribution of genius has functioned as a way of countering the deindividuating narratives to which blind African American performers have frequently been subjected” while also mystifying the political, economic, and historical factors shaping authorship. Keeping Rowden’s thesis in mind, I’d suggest that the term black genius obscures what’s often “strange” about Stevie’s work, in particular in terms of gender and sexuality.

There are some very powerful parallels between the trajectory of Wonder’s career at this stage and that of another performer often figured as a “black genius” from the same period, Jimi Hendrix. Cultural critic Steve Waksman, in “Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the Electric Guitar, and the Meanings of Blackness,” writes about Hendrix’s desire to create a sound without limits (intellectual, technical, and social). Like
Wonder, Hendrix found in the Electric Lady studios a place of safety, and innovation through technology. Hendrix, like Wonder sought to expand his sound and audience by listening to and collaborating across genre and race, stretching blues and gospel traditions and taking them to new places. Waksman suggests that toward the end of his life, Hendrix sought an escape from the traps of a highly spectacular and objectified black masculinity perpetuated by white rock audiences: “For Hendrix, as for Fanon, a sight of blackness in the eyes of others had become oppressive, and so he expresses a desire to be heard, not seen; listened to, not watched. The most ‘visible’ of black performers, he yearns for a sort of invisibility . . . a realm of pure music where both he and his audience can lose themselves in the power of sound.” Unfortunately, in his shortened life, Hendrix was unable to fully occupy this space of creative freedom. I’d like to suggest that one of the ways that Wonder has been able to escape some of the creative constraints experienced by Hendrix is by resisting the temptation to become invisible and instead reclaiming new spaces for creative collaboration and production. Wonder has been able to achieve a flexibility of sound and genre that has influenced other Post-Soul chameleons, including Prince, Michael Jackson, and India.Aire.

In the last sequence of the film *The Secret Life of Plants*, in a performance of the title song, Stevie Wonder appears for the first time in the flesh. Wonder walks through a field of sunflowers without his sunglasses. His braided hair and gown, following the style of the cover of his *Talking Book*, make him both androgynous and mystical—a “seer.” As he travels through the sunflower field, and then a stream of lily pads and a finally a forest, he is the only visible human. As the camera slowly pans the fields we realize that we are watching a view of nature as Stevie might have seen it, had he been sighted. As his moment is indicative of the ongoing practice of collaboration between Wonder, technology, and humans (as well as plants) that has made the soundtrack possible. As he floats through the field, singing, we get a profound sense of yearning, an acknowledgment of his own limits. Wonder’s soulful and earnest voice is cushioned by the lush, classical Spanish-style guitar arpeggios of Ben Bridges and Michael Sembello. At the same time, the sequence demonstrates the possibility for connection, and for new ways of being in the world. The lilies, connected by a rhizomic network of roots under the surface of the water, are an ideal metaphor for the image of symbiosis and connection between plant and human life throughout the film and soundtrack. In the idealized figures of the blind of the classic past—Blind Tiresius, for
example—the blind person is an oracle, disconnected from the everyday problems of the flesh but for an androgynous, if shell-like body. An end sequence demands that we consider both Wonder’s body in the flesh and his capacity for transcendence. And parallel to Marlon Riggs’s final naked run through the forest at the end of his *Black Is, Black Ain’t*, Riggs’s last film before he died of AIDS, Wonder’s disabled black body performs both vulnerability and strength, singularity (a celebrity among a field of repeating flowers) and collaboration. He is, like Riggs, reclaiming the green world, its expansiveness and freedom, for black people. At the same time, he does so in collaboration with human and nonhuman others, vulnerable, open, and insistently quare.