Sounding Like a No-No
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Published by University of Michigan Press

Royster, Francesca T.
Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era.
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Growing up, I took pleasure in and an example from the funky sartorial experimentations of my uncles Kevin and Chip: cutting each other’s hair in my grandmother’s pink bathroom in preparation for a Saturday night and the care they took to shape each other’s muttonchops and goatees with the small electric razor they had ordered from Service Merchandise. I secretly hoped that my uncle Chip would pass on to me his stylishly worn army jacket with the magic marker sketch of Jimi Hendrix, fist raised, that he drew on the back, but I’m still waiting. Understated men, they were well liked in Parkway Gardens, the South Side Chicago housing development where my grandmother lived, for their good humor and style. I’d watch them go out with their friends from my grandmother’s fifth-floor window and admire the brave way they’d laugh together, throw their arms around their friends, take up space on the sidewalk. Dashes of style: well-shined Stacy Adams shoes, a yellow knit shirt, wide-legged jeans with silver rivets up the side, or a leather cap tilted just right, added color and texture among the rust and weeds, as they stood in clusters alongside the railroad cars that sat abandoned in back of the buildings. Someone might be smoking, the orange glow of Kools lighting up the gestures of their hands. And somewhere someone would have a boom box playing a bass line of deep funk: Ohio Players, Slade, Parliament, and Funkadelic. Sometimes I wanted to be them.

In Funkadelic’s Cosmic Slop (a short film directed by Armen Bolidian, Westbound Records, 1973, as found on YouTube), I see the spirit of my uncles and their friends as teenagers, out on the street. The men, funky in their sartorial grooviness, arms raised like birds, run from a city park tunnel, this everyday space of darkness and transition. The underpass is true in its particularity: an underpass somewhere in Central Park, a space in which to write graffiti, make love, share an illicit smoke. The urban park underpass, a dark pause in the middle of the
green, the city turning in on itself, ripe with damp earth smells that seep into the concrete, along with the piss and smoke. It’s the space where the wildlife of the park (animal, vegetable, mineral) takes refuge. Castaways and survivors. Broken glass and pigeons. The men fly from this space, and they come running toward us, like children playing airplane, like Busby Berkeley dancers on shrooms, like serious visionaries, transformed in ceremony, this unclaimed black and brown and white tribe.

Released by the squeal of guitar, they take over the park and the streets beyond. The city, for once disinterested in them, becomes their playground. They congregate in front of a fountain, climb over park benches and into the streets like a wave, still steady in tight leathers and platform boots. Rhythm guitar driving them ever outward, they create a Soul Train line in the middle of Times Square. They move like birds do, in parabolas, looping, then circling away. They dance in mirror to each other, shoulders, hips, and long thighs in call-and-response. Sometimes the men turn their backs to the camera, disoriented, lost in their own experience of beat; they close their eyes to follow internal geographies. They turn, stoop, and crouch toward the camera, as if engaged in capoeira with it, as if ready to pounce. The camera matches them, meets them, slows down their groove into a tasty syrup. They do slow splits, they are superhuman in their flexibility. Loose and tight. Flow and the force of drums felt on the back of the neck. Laughter. The beat stays right on. Faces squish up in the nastiness of the stank of it. The men heat the air of the city, defy gravity, take flight.

In this film made to accompany the album Cosmic Slop, produced before the age of music videos, we see the vision and ethos of Parliament and Funkadelic’s lead and cofounder, George Clinton, in action: playful sexuality expressed by a tight beat and theatrically citational, body-conscious style; eccentric, exploratory individuality, as well as the power of the collective; a grounding in the everyday grittiness of black street culture, combined with the quest for imaginative freedom. P-Funk’s Post-Soul “blaxploitations” enact a liberationist black sexuality funking up traditional codes of masculinity. Together with his ever expanding band, which over time included such luminaries as guitarist Eddie Hazel, bassist Bootsy Collins, lead singer Gary Shider, keyboardist and arranger Bernie Worrell, and cameo appearances by Sly Stone, Clinton changed the face and the feel of funk music, making it visionary, dangerous, hallucinatory, hilarious, and very hot.

And they are beautiful, these men, in Afros wild and defiant, shirt-
less, unmasked and masked. They are a parade of tricksters, all moving with the antidiscipline of funk: Wolf meets griot, King Tut meets spaceman, Sly Stone meets Afro-Kabuki warrior, Pierrot meets Pimp. They wear found shirts as headscarves and flags, carry branches from the dying trees found along the avenue as their walking sticks. They have holes in their pants. They are dirty. They have painted on themselves, on their faces and chests like children do, playing in their mothers’ makeup. They have marked themselves with mud and clay as their paint, like warriors do. Before Kiss, before Iron John, alongside Bowie and Iggy, they have returned to the land of make-believe and to the lost feminine with serious intention—at stake, their own freedom. They have returned to this city park to funk. And, as the lyrics tell us, to hear their mama call. (George Clinton once said that funk can save your life. And so can listening to your mama.)

What do we make of the fact that this dance of masculine dreaming, of freedom and future and found community, is all to a song of lost women, mothers whose smiles mask the fact that “life is really tough”? The singer remembers his mother, and the things that he as a child is not supposed to know—that she had to “turn tricks” in the neighborhood in order to hold things together.

But always with a smile, she was sure to try to hide the fact from us that she was catching hell, hey!

As the men seek solace in the beat, and in the sloppiness of the cosmos, their future mixes with things and people left behind, found objects and the lessons they never wanted to receive. As they seek rebirth, they are haunted by their mothers’ late-night calls of grief: “Please, please don’t judge me too strong.”

The song is a series of countergrooves: the heavy downbeat of The One, played by drum set and bass, countered by the extending riffs of the bongos; the high sobbing of Worrell’s lead guitar versus the gruff, tight forward shuffle of the rhythm guitar; Gary Shider’s earnest falsetto and the street realism of his leading lyrics, countered by the mystical “Hoo Ha ha” of the chorus, a dance with the devil. The psychedelic aspects of the song: the chanting, the fuzzy blur of the guitar’s tone, the deep hypnotic repeating of The One, might invite us inward, where Shider seems to be, possessed by the spirit of his mother. But ultimately the song keeps bringing us back to the present, to the experience in our bodies of...
the beat, right now. In “Cosmic Slop” we hear performed in the lyrics and sound the lesson that will be revisited again and again by P-Funk. We hear the lesson that haunts P-Funk’s roster of others, and links them to other Post-Soul eccentrics, an acknowledgment of the complexity of desires, the funk in fucking: “And then the devil sang, / would you like to dance with me? / We’re doing the Cosmic Slop.” A song of empathy, a song of vulnerability, with a dance of yearning and flight. Haunting and the exorcism of judgment. The voice of mother becomes woman becomes self.

In this dance, in this cross-gender joining, they take pleasure in the movements of all of their parts. Polymorphously perverse, their pleasure is in the call of mother as it is in the join of skin to fabric; in the mystery of the mask; in the crouching, the shimmies, the pop of the bass against fiberglass; in the move of air through nostrils from dank to clean and then funky again; in the peal of the guitar; in the heat of other men; in the dance of other men; in being watched, in dancing alone; in nature, in the confines of man-made concrete. In the fetish of leathers, headbands, and feathers, in a cold metal saxophone on bare chest. In the One, in bass and drumbeat matching the beat of the heart, in blood rising and insistent. In the hush of cymbals and the chant of the singers; in the mystery, raising the hair on the back of the arms; and, yes, in the crying of the man who in his falsetto becomes the voice of Mother, a pain in the solar plexus, the tear in it so much like her or your own voice, for that matter, when you wake yourself from dreaming.

“Cosmic Slop” appears in 1973, early in the life of Funkadelic, the funk collective orchestrated by George Clinton. Clinton, singer, songwriter, as well as bandleader, was born in 1941 in Kannapolis, North Carolina. His family moved to Plainfield, New Jersey, a predominantly African American community not far from New York City, when he was still in his teens. There he formed his first group, the Parliaments, which used to practice in the back room of the barbershop where Clinton straightened and styled hair. The Parliaments were inspired by many of the successful doo-wop groups of the 1950s, including Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, but they set themselves apart with their protofunk sound (heard in their hits “I Wanna Testify” and “All Your Goodies Are Gone,”) and often eccentric lyrics and performance style, including costume changes at the ends of their gigs in which the all-male group became visibly pregnant, and “in titties and wigs.” The Parliaments evolved into two entities, Parliament and Funkadelic, in the 1970s and kept going until the early
1980s. These groups moved from underground sensation—performing in local clubs in Detroit, producing the edgy music that most radio stations were afraid to play—to become one of the most influential forces in black sound and performance, including huge, sold-out, highly theatrical stage shows.

In their innovative oddity, Parliament and Funkadelic’s songs became the bedrock of the hip-hop aesthetic, sampled by Snoop Dog, Run DMC, NWA, De La Soul, Digital Underground, Public Enemy, Dr. Dre, L.L. Cool J, and Outkast, to name only a few. They’ve also influenced other genre—and sometimes gender-bending—artists, including most notably Prince, Living Colour, Fishbone, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Under the artistic direction of Clinton, Parliament and Funkadelic shared and swapped musicians, representing the yin and yang of Post-Soul aesthetics. If Parliament became more associated with black music’s commercial side, including dance and disco, Funkadelic was the voice and body of the critique of the commercial. Funkadelic has been characterized by its critics and by Clinton himself as the more hard-rocking of the two projects, more driven by the experimental sounds of psychedelia and Clinton’s genre-pushing vision of a black music that reembraces rock as one of its own—as the heat left out in black music’s recooking of the blues by Motown and other, more commercial black music ventures. Together they have a complex relationship with the commercial and mainstream, critical of the music industry’s tendency to eat its young, reflective of the history that has already shaped black music and the black bodies that produced it, but also pushing to create sounds to capture more ears. The bands evolved into several entities, including Bootsy Collins and His Rubber Band, the Brides of Funkenstein, and Parlet. And Clinton, Collins, and some others of the band still play their three-hour sets in venues like Lollapalooza and the Pitchfork Festival as the P-Funk All Stars. (Here, unless speaking specifically about one of the groups, I’ll refer to the groups collectively as Parliament/Funkadelic or as P-Funk.)

**Funking Up Nationalism’s Divisional Gender Logic**

In the song “Cosmic Slop,” as in many other P-Funk’s songs, we see at work a process of political and aesthetic reconfiguration, taking stories and aesthetics from black ghetto culture, and also braiding them with other influences, ultimately transforming what is considered “authentic”
black culture, especially in the wake of Black Nationalism and the Black Art Movement. “Cosmic Slop” unapologetically combines elements of avant-garde and psychedelic rock culture with the existential, historical, and aesthetic aspects of black working-class life, addressing the urban poverty that continued to haunt African Americans in cities like Plainfield, New Jersey, as well as the struggle to maintain community and black love in a changing social scene. It combines the hard guitars of white rockers like Vanilla Fudge and the prepunk of Iggy and the MC5 (friends and coconspirators with Clinton), or the exploratory openness of psychedelia, with the driving rhythm of James Brown, as well as the soulful falsetto of a Curtis Mayfield or Marvin Gaye. Westbound records’ film for “Cosmic Slop” might be said to be informed by the happenings and be-ins of the 1960s, and perhaps the experimental theater of Augusto Boal—particularly in Boal’s attention, through theater, to the politics of bodies in space. Yet, as the song’s lyrics concern black tribe, nation, and family, the realism of poverty and the sex trade, we might consider the influence of the Black Art Movement in its interest in creating politicized art about black life. In its exploration of black clothing, hair, and gesture, as well as urban cityscapes, I also see echoes of blaxploitation films of the same period. Yet rather than creating a glamorization of black street life, P-Funk definitely lets loose the weirdness and the unexpected. The terrain is never what one would expect from watching Superfly. The album Cosmic Slop presents a series of eclectic references and layered identities in its lyrics, from the neighborhood prostitute who is also a mother in the song “Cosmic Slop” to a new lover who might be a transvestite in the song “No Compute.” The album’s particular album’s sound and lyrics shift wildly in tone, from soul aching to wickedly sly to surreal.

P-Funk’s embrace of outsized, “funky” expressions of desire, its subcultural reference points, as well as its bringing together of cross-racial artistic aesthetics, might be one reason that the band in its first years had trouble securing stable airplay on black radio stations. P-Funk album cover artist Ronald “Stozo” Edwards talks about the group’s difficulty in attracting black audiences in its early days.

Niggas have always been a little scared of Funkadelic. My cousin bought that Maggot Brain album, it was the scariest shit I had ever heard. You had to be, like, a freak to be into them. It was the same trip with niggas liking Jimi Hendrix. It was almost a sellout to be into anything that had too much rock-and-roll guitar going
on. Plus *funk* was still a bad word. If a mug was “funky,” niggas would call you out on that shit. I’m not talking about the music, I’m talking about the odor. So there was just a select crew of some whites, but predominantly some blacks, who were willing to take that walk on the wild side.⁸

P-Funk’s sometimes hard rock sound, combined with its challenge to political and cultural orthodoxies, set it apart from much of the soul and funk of the period. Song-writing partner Sidney Barnes describes the early band as having “a young, black militant kind of weirdness that people just weren’t associating themselves with.”⁹ The very kinds of experimentation that P-Funk trafficked in, and in particular the melding of black nationalist and black hippie worlds, were sometimes thought to be socially and artistically dangerous, especially in their fluidity, at least by some in the Black Art Movement. Take, for example, poet Haki R. Madhubuti’s castigation of the black hippie Clean in his poem “Move Un-Noticed to Be Noticed: A Nationhood Poem.”

Clean, u is the first black hippy I’ve ever met.  
Why you bes dressen so funny, anyhow huh?  
I mean, is that u, Clean?  
Why u bes dressen like an airplane, can you fly,  
I mean,  
Will yr/ blue jim shoes fly u,/ & what about yr/ tailor made bell bottoms, Clean? Can they  
Lift u above madness,/ turn u into the right direction. & that red and pink scarf around yr/  
Neck what’s that for, /Clean,/huhn? Will it help you fly, yea, swing, siwinging swing?¹⁰

Madhubuti’s poem paints a portrait of the black male hippie as one who has abandoned proper blackness—and, by extension, himself. The poem’s coy jabs at Clean’s tailored bell bottoms and pink and red scarf imply his refusal of proper gender as well. Phillip Brian Harper suggests that some of the poems of the Black Power Movement depend on a “divisional logic” that betrays an anxiety about ambiguous gender identities. This binary is exemplified by an “authentic” model of black masculinity, including self-determination, righteousness, black identification, and hardness, on the one hand, and on the other, a “failed” mas-
culinity: assimilationist, effemininate, mixed-up, and too influenced by the standards of white culture.\textsuperscript{11} It's what Eldridge Cleaver describes in \textit{Soul on Ice} as being “fucked.”\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ἀi s} surveillance of sexuality and gender conflates body politics and desires with political vision, so that, for example, Amiri Baraka’s “Civil Rights Poem” calls Roy Wilkins “an eternal faggot”—perhaps by suggestion—because of his perceived assimilationist politics.

\textit{ἀi s} policing of black masculinity by some in the Black Art Movement has had a lasting effect on the ongoing discourse of black nationhood, authenticity, gender, and sexuality. Black feminist theorist Barbara Smith has commented on her own experiences of some of these constrictions of gender and sexuality in her introduction to \textit{Home Girls}.

I will never forget the period of Black nationalism, power and pride which, despite its benefits, had a stranglehold on our identities. A blueprint was made for being Black and Lord help you if you deviated in the slightest way. How relieved we were to find, as our awareness increased and our own Black women’s movement grew, that we were not crazy, that the brothers had in fact created a sex-biased definition of “Blackness” that served only them. And yet, in finding each other, some of us have fallen into the same pattern—have decided that if a sister doesn’t dress like me, talk like me, walk like me, and even sleep like me, then she’s not really a sister. Conformity.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{ἀe s} tensions within nationalist black political movements around sexual and gender codes become particularly vexed in the context of art making and performance in particular—perhaps because poetry, music, and other forms of performance are so emotionally powerful—at the same time that some nationalist writers have feared performance as being politically diffuse. For example, in his highly influential book \textit{The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual} (1967), Harold Cruse betrays a growing discomfort with art, and particularly performance, as a reliable medium of black politics. Although Cruse repeatedly embraces the creative intellectual as vital to the black community, and talks about his own experience in theater as the first place where he realized the potential for community, he distrusts the radical potential of nonlinear thinking, and the importance of feeling and other often ambiguous or fluid ways of knowing that accompany creative work. For example, Cruse gives Lang-
ston Hughes faint praise for his “extraordinary faculty for defining the confused sensations that constitute the collective conscience of simple minds” but adds that Hughes is “not a thinker.” He says that James Baldwin fails to address “black reality” in his novels. In his commentary on Paul Robeson, Cruse reveals his discomfort with performance and its accompanying forms of feeling as knowledge as the site of intellectual work.

He [Robeson] exists in a world of illusion and there is little dividing line between his relationships with the world behind the footlights and the world of living reality. As an actor-performer, it was remarkable that Paul Robeson essayed an actual leadership role. But he never was to escape, fully, the world of make-believe.

Overall, Cruse suggests that because the performer’s work is inherently and physically collaborative, “he is in many ways the most ethnically unstable, or the most aracial of all Negro artists.” The actor must embody and interpret with others. Cruse here seems especially concerned about the performing body as open, making physical his suspicions about the ambiguity and potential vulnerability of the act of interpretation that also reveals itself in his discussion of Hughes. It would seem that for Cruse, the body, theatricality, sensation, feeling, and cross-racial collaboration are dangerous as sites for intellectual work because of their unpredictability and lack of pure or stable answers to political problems.

P-Funk was often willing to explore black experience, particularly bodily, sexual, and sensual experience, at these points of ambiguity, vulnerability, pain, desire, and laughter, using tools of music and performance that spoke to bodies individually and internally, as well as collectively. Yet this power to harness emotionally strong and sometimes inchoate feeling had a powerful effect on its listeners—prompting some to find unity and empathy with other black men. Take, for example, P-Funk lead guitarist DeWayne “Blackbyrd” McKnight’s description of Eddie Hazel’s guitar on Maggot Brain.

I was listening to Funkadelic for as long as I can remember. “Maggot Brain” fucked me up. It was emotion—the sounds that Eddie was making, and the way he was playing the notes that he played. I don’t know where he was at the time he was doing it, but damn! that’s what I think got me—just emotion-wise. I don’t think I had
heard a song like that with, like, no drums, no bass, and playing like that.\(^\text{18}\)

Hazel’s guitar models a kind of vulnerability, emotional immediacy, and transformation that becomes the nexus for a new form of community between the black men—and others—who listen. As I’ll discuss below, in everyday acts like hanging out and listening to the radio, record collecting and exchanging, going to concerts, or learning and imitating Hazel’s guitar solos, black men have found powerful routes of transformation.

The black hippiedom and funk experimentation of P-Funk pushed boundaries of black culture and sound, as well as sexuality and black respectability. George Clinton, as a kind of trickster figure, deliberately courts images that risk abjection and rejection. Clinton’s recounting of his experience of the 1967 race riots in Plainfield, New Jersey—a narrative that one might expect could be the place to solidify one’s political status in the black community—is playfully contrary, countering an idealized view of the properly masculine, properly righteous, black nationalist warrior.

We couldn’t get in or out of Plainfield for a while. They let us in, and we ended up in our apartment for the next two days. And like everyone else, you ran around and got whatever was laying out in the street. The only thing I tried to take was big boxes of tissues and sanitary napkins. My stealing days or my riot wasn’t that profitable.\(^\text{19}\)

Here, as well as elsewhere, Clinton identifies himself with not only femininity but abject femininity. In interviews, in public appearances, and onstage, Clinton and other band members risk the notion of proper black masculinity, not just by cross-dressing but by playing with dynamics of humiliation, abjection, and exposure: wearing diapers or soiled bed sheets for robes; wearing see-through women’s black lace panties; or creating the outsized and sexually anxious persona Sir Nose, with his pale, floppy, rubberized, and (somewhat thinly) phallic schnoz, for example, to disorient prevailing views of black masculinity and open up new spaces for creation. In these campy moments, we see Clinton and his band mates performing an intentional and arguably feminist masquerade of male and female gender, in that their performances foreground and consciously play with the rules of gender.\(^\text{20}\) In their particu-
lar work of foregrounding in P-Funk, gender is always deeply connected to the history of race, yet it travels, and is multiple, linking the objectification and criminalization of black slavery and segregation to a surreal yearning for the future. Whether in Hazel’s open displays of emotion or Clinton’s self-parodic, shame-shedding laughter, P-Funk’s performances embody and embrace nonnormative forms of desire, and rage, as well as the unspoken loss that punctuates black male histories of embodiment in public space. In P-Funk’s performances of eccentricity, and especially gender and sexual eccentricity, we might find a project of “creative historical knowing,” to use Kathryn Bond Stockton’s phrase, which exposes, among other things, the racist logics of social debasement.

This disorientation, as a form of disidentification, can have critical as well as pleasurable effects. As John Corbett suggests, P-Funk’s disruptive, disorienting take on black masculinity shares with black eccentric musicians Sun Ra and Lee “Scratch” Perry the strategic use of alter egos and personal mythologies in their performances to support an overall aesthetic and politic of disorientation or “unreality.” Whether we look at George Clinton’s elaborate staging of “The Mothership Connection”—complete with rebirth from an onstage pod, or the comic book struggles of good and evil between Sir Nose and Dr. Funkenstein, Clinton and P-Funk embrace the unreal as a space of critique. Disorientation is not just a moment of confusion but a performative command to look at the world in a decentered way—indeed, to embrace a constant position of critique and dis-ease. Clinton not only asks his listeners to disorient themselves from normative modes of pleasure but he presents disorientation itself as a form of pleasure. This embrace of disorientation will become the fuel for transportation to new worlds in the futurist and gender-bending work of Meshell Ndegeocello as well. Both artists ask their audiences to see and hear freshly through forms of beautiful confusion, in the process expanding the spaces of black identity.

P-Funk’s performative reconfiguration of normative black sexuality, as well as its nonessentialized rethinking of gender and nation, contradicts at least some tenets of black sexuality in the nationalist rhetoric of this period. If, in the Black Art Movement and Black Nationalist rhetoric, we see the solidification of a particular kind of heterosexual black manhood, and the importance of art in policing that notion of black manhood, as I’ve previously discussed, P-Funk then complicates matters, even as it presents its own rhetoric of a populist nation. Here the nation is formed not specifically by race but by “One Nation under a
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Groove.” And while such a nation is founded on the love of funk, a form that Clinton and P-Funk explicitly link to black musical and cultural forms, drawing from the call-and-response of gospel, the bent notes of slave calls, African polyrhythms, the soulful harmonies of doo-wop, and the on-the-street storytelling of black life, “groove” is something that anyone, guided by funk, potentially can enter, “just for the funk of it.”

Nation, under the P-Funk banner of groove, is both culturally specific and fluid, embodied and inviting transcendence. Such rethinking of nation as new potentiality—constructed by desire (“Do you promise to funk, the whole funk, and nothing but the funk?”)—is reflected in Eve Zibat’s description of the Chocolate Jam, an all-day celebration of music and black pride that took place in Washington, DC, in July 1978, which featured the music of P-Funk and bassist Bootsy Collins as headliners.

The dark heads and bright clothes of 10,000 young Washingtonians on the field of RFK Stadium break into the fragmentation of a vast Impressionist painting. A simmering effect over the surface gradually resolves itself into the bobbing groups of tightly packed dancers and the shaking of thousands of upraised arms. Driven by the insistence of the disco beat, couples bump hips, knees and elbows; on the edge of a giant platform, a roadie dances in exact tandem with a girl 10 feet below.

Here we see funk’s potential to unite its audience precisely in the experience of disorientation, as Clinton and Hazel tell us in their 1970 song “Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow.”

Queering P-Funk: Music as a Space of Nonnormative Black Self-Fashioning

I’d like to suggest that the musical space of P-Funk—whether it is the space of the live concert or the space between your ears or headphones—might exist as an important space for improvising and performing nonnormative sexual desires for black men. And while these moments are at times inchoate and contradictory in terms of a critique of sexism and homophobia, they do at least advance an “elsewhere”—a fantasy space for new formations of self. This is particularly poignant in a historical moment that saw increased surveillance of black men’s bodies in public
space, reflected in a reported rise in the black male prison population. As this book argues, in general in the Post-Soul moment—a moment that is arguably still with us, if we can look beyond the rhetorics of unity and racial uplift, which tend to flatten sexual identities—we might well find more examples in which seemingly normative male spaces serve as places for more fluid sexual and gender self-fashioning, identification, and desire. We might think of music as this space—sometimes a space within a space tightly patrolled by others.

While black feminists, gays, and lesbians have—perhaps by necessity—created a visible public space in which to talk about and practice nonnormative sexuality and community, such a community space for nonnormative heterosexual black men is missing. Here I’m thinking of the formation of nonnormative sexual communities through clubs and other social spaces, the founding of feminist and queer journals and other publications, and political activist movements. Where are the spaces in which black men who are heterosexual can talk about their desires—particularly nonreproductive sexual desires—and claim public space in which to talk to each other about those desires? If, as many have argued, the black family is the space in which to be productive citizens, where are the spaces in which to be nonproductive? I’d argue that we have to look with a queer eye at the narratives, creative practices, and performances of black masculinity otherwise deemed “normative,” looking in high school halls, straight bars, and spaces for style and self-fashioning, like barbershops. Interestingly enough, George Clinton’s memories about his first job in the Silk Palace as a hair stylist, in a New Jersey barbershop, give a very different construction of this mostly male space that we see in the dominant media. If in films like Ice Cube’s Barbershop we see the barbershop as a space where playing the dozens, hair styling, and even physical violence allow men to keep each other “in check” about their masculinity, Clinton’s descriptions of the over- and underground economies at the Silk Palace hint at a more chaotic and perhaps layered and fluid space of male self-fashioning, and pleasure.

Processing hair. We had two or three older barbers who had their clientele, playing checkers and shit. a en we had the younger guys, who may be nodding, you know what I mean? I might have a girl in the back there. Somebody’s head might be burning, talkin’ ’bout “Get this shit out of my muhfuckin’ head?” Congolene—fry
that muthafucka! Just put it on your head with a comb or brush, grease your head to death, then wash your head out while you pat your feet and holler. Or you might get: “I’m going to audition for my record thang, I’ll tell my boy to comb you out. I put the waves in, so you gon’ be cool.”

Clinton’s barbershop here is both a real space (a particular and indexible place in a particular historical moment located in the black community in Plainfield, New Jersey) and a space linked to the other Chocolate Cities that P-Funk sings about (Washington, DC, New York City, Cincinnati, and Detroit), as well as an imaginative space of laughter and experimentation.

To locate P-Funk in a queered discourse of eccentricity requires listening for what is unnamed, unrecognized, and perhaps unclaimed—what Phillip Brian Harper calls “Critical speculative knowledge” of what seems to be hiding in plain sight:31 “For how else can you capture a boogie, if you don’t attack from the back?” (lyric from P-Funk’s “α eme to the Black Hole”). P-Funk’s spectacularly freaky funk, its enthusiasm for booties, and its almost Irigarian call to surrender to the pleasures of underwater aquaboogieing seem to these eyes as queer as it gets.32 Kodowo Eshun, Ricky Vincent, Anne Danielsen, and Amy Nathan Wright discuss the erotic pull of P-Funk’s music but have less to say about the implications of their eroticism in terms of gender codes of black masculinity.33 A queered reading of P-Funk goes against the grain of much recent cultural and music criticism, which has been primarily focused on P-Funk as a place in which to imagine an Afrofuturist utopia (or dystopia),34 or P-Funk’s interventions in the politics of sampling, copyright, and other aspects of black cultural traffic.35

A queered reading of P-Funk faces the strong sense of ownership of the band by (straight) fans, blogs, and other commentary. Perhaps this is because P-Funk’s rhythms have, especially in this hip-hop age, become the gold standard of (heterosexual) black male cool. We see the power of P-Funk as a sign of cool and black male normativity in cultural critic Robin D. G. Kelley’s autobiographical essay “Confessions of a Nice Negro, or Why I Shaved My Head,” in Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream (New York: Beacon Press, 1996), where he claims Funkadelic as having been important to his own Post-Soul—and insistently nonnerdy—coming of age in the 1980s.
Never an egghead or a dork, as a teenager I was pretty cool. I did the house-party circuit on Friday and Saturday nights and used to stroll down the block toting the serious Radio Raheem boom-box. . . . As one of us who had cars (we called them hoopties or rides back in that day) spent our lunch hours and precious class time hanging out in the school parking lot, running down our Die Hards to pump up Cameo, Funkadelic, Grandmaster Flash from our car stereos. I sported dickies and Levis, picked up that gangsta stroll, and when the shag came in style I was with it—always armed with a silk scarf to ensure that my hair was laid. (13–14)

But while Kelley includes listening to Funkadelic as one of the many initiation rites that marked his place in the world of black male cool, his description at the same time implicitly reveals how black male self-fashioning and performance have some room for fluidity in their appropriation of feminine gendered signs—certainly something explored by Cameo, as well as P-Funk. These standards of black male cool are not naturalized or stable: five or six years earlier, that silk scarf would have labeled him a “black hippie” and a decade later the shag might have got him teased in the hall. While the costs of a “bad performance” of black masculinity can be high (to borrow E. Patrick Johnson’s notion, expressed in his article and performance Strange Fruit), black masculinity can and does often have elements of the “silly” or “queer,” if put in another context, or is pushed into excess.36 As I’ll argue at more length a little later, P-Funk takes the inherent aspects of silliness/excess in black male style and embraces them, pushing them to the edge. By exposing what is inherently queer about black male sexuality and style, P-Funk can show us what in other circumstances must be masked, or encoded, in normative black male identity and performance. At its most fundamental level, in the music and live performances of Funkadelic and Parliament, we see a rejection of fear, loathing, and shame of the black body and the embrace of sexual and imaginative freedom.37

The implications of P-Funk’s work as potentially feminist and queer gets drowned out by, first, the dominant of conceptualization of funk as a stereotypically masculine sound and scene, including primary emphasis in some musicologists’ working definitions of funk on the One, as opposed to what musicologist Anne Danielsen calls the “extended ambiguity” of funk.38 Funk scenes locally and nationally have been dominated by men—despite some amazing examples of female musicianship in the
funk scene, including Sly Stone’s trumpeter Cynthia Brown, Labelle, Betty Davis, female P-Funkers the Brides of Funkenstein and Parlet, Meshell Ndegeocello, and others. Despite this, P-Funk’s “militant kind of weirdness” makes room for a new and nonnormative masculinity. As George Clinton once told *Rolling Stone* magazine, “Funk is anything that you need to be to save your life.”

P-Funk, through its sound, lyrics, and use of theatricality on- and offstage, makes room for a more exploratory and decentered notion of black male identity. I’m interested in the ways that we might think of a queer heterosexual black masculinity as a means of giving voice and visibility to black masculine self-fashioning that is often “bred out” of the traditional neoliberal subject. Cultural Historian Rinaldo Walcott suggests that narratives such as heteronormative conceptions of family, or the overall idea of the triumph of black men over slavery through economic achievement and traditional notions of power—what he calls the “from victim to victor” narrative—are often lobbied to root out less coherent, and ultimately less economically useful, notions of black masculinity (at least according to a postliberal state, one that was definitely in formation in the United States in the Post-Soul moment). I’m particularly interested in the ways that P-Funk might be read as an opposition voice in this context, presenting performances of black maleness that play “chicken” with codes of respectability.

As George Clinton takes some of the discourses already in the air, including psychedelia and black nationalism, and makes them his own, he creates a space for something strange, outlandish, and new, particularly in terms of gender. Many fans and critics have praised and theorized Clinton’s funk as a means of space travel—an important tenet of an Afroculturalism that nonetheless reminds us that we cannot escape our origins. As Michael C. Ladd writes, “Funkadelic focused on flight, but not escape.” But I think there’s room for more thought on how Clinton’s Parliament and Funkadelic make us think about this “something new” as a distinctly embodied experience.

Funk, with its hard-driving rhythm, is very much about the body and pleasure. As many recent theorists on funk have written, you cannot have funk without the sweat, without the labor of the body at work (and play). Clinton asks us to think about the funky body as one that challenges the order of the ways that the body is patrolled and controlled in space. In the song “Aquabooogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop),” for example, Clinton imagines an underwater escape from this history of control
where, “With the rhythm it takes to dance to what we have to live through / you can dance underwater and not get wet.” The song offers underwater as a place to speak back to history, to defy the rules of nature. Critics Tony Bolden and Cheryl Keyes speak to the West African etymology of the word *funk* as meaning both “bad odor” and “bad order”—a tantalizing combination. Clinton and his Parliament/Funkadelic crew are not just interested in outer space but also in reconceiving inner spaces—the spaces of desire and the performance of those desires for others—through the creation and sometimes deconstruction of “personae” of blackness. In performance, P-Funk commandeers the nightclub, the stadium arena, or the city park to perform sexual freedom and exploration outside of the familiar discourses of courtship and family.

In spite of the often crudely sexualized terms in which male and female relationships are represented lyrically and in terms of the icons of its covers, Parliament/Funkadelic’s ultimate vision of black humanity seems to be one in which men and women are equal and connected in struggle. This is captured well in Pedro Bell’s cover for *One Nation under a Groove*, where men and women plant a Black Nationalist flag together. P-Funk represents that struggle, though, as an ongoing and imperfect one. Much of P-Funk’s album cover artwork provocatively represents black women’s bodies as contested territories, and as the locus for political and psychic frustration. The cover for *Cosmic Slop* features an image of a naked, chained black woman that echoes some Black Nationalist art in which the enslaved women become the icon for black struggle, or where the head or body of a nude black woman is used to depict a lost “Mother Africa.” But these P-Funk images utilize a more dominant note of the surreal. A woman’s left nipple is circled by a map of the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean, the nipple itself seeming to be the waters of the Caribbean. Her left breast has been transformed into a combination lock. These bodies are mediated objects, where scopophilia and touch are linked to colonization and capitalism. Rather than the nostalgic use of the black female body as a sign of lost Africa that we see in some popular Black Nationalist iconography, these images present the black female body still entangled in political battles and the economic exploitation of others. The lettering on the album is punctuated with spurts of what seem to be representations of blood, sperm, and/or milk, linking the album’s artistic production and creativity to the material products of the body and sex. On the cover of *Maggot Brain*, the bodies of women even more actively express their frustration. Here,
a woman, screaming and surrounded by maggots, becomes the icon of frustration and dis-ease explored in the songs—the visual equivalent of Eddie Hazel’s crying guitar in the song “Maggot Brain.” In this way, the album features an image of collective frustration and struggle.

Yet these album covers do sometimes implicate P-Funk in their participation in the objectification of black women, and in the trade of sexualized black bodies that they would seem to be critiquing. The controversial cover for *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* skirts the line between critiquing and exploiting the objectification of women’s bodies. The back of the album depicts a nude black woman (or cyborg?) on all fours, transformed into a machine in which money goes in and sound comes out. Her body is punctured with knobs, wires, and bolts. The critique is somewhat ambiguous. Is she meant to be the personification of the exploitation of black people? A “tar baby” produced by the powers that be to distract us all from our own exploitation? A gullible consumer? P-Funk’s placement of itself as an increasingly successful commercial band, straddling underground and mainstream success, is also unclear. In my reading, the cover seems to extend its critique of the institution of slavery to consider how the exploitation of black bodies and labor continues through the music industry—perhaps here a not so veiled critique of commercialized black music such as that of Motown (the target of George Clinton’s ire and critique). This reading is reinforced by the fact that the woman is shown shackled and seems to fit an ongoing critique of the music industry as a form of exploitation of black labor leveled by Clinton and the group. Whatever its intention, the cover was boycotted by the group Women against Pornography (WAP), and Warner Brothers was forced to alter it. But in a rebellious move against the company, P-Funk created a cover that allowed the viewer to peek at the shackled female legs, and bits of her torso, with slashes and slits, and the words “Oh Look! The cover ‘they’ were TOO SCARED to print! Peek Here. And Here, too.” Perhaps this new “peep show” cover is meant to suggest that WAP and Warner Brothers’ emphasis on the nudity overlooks the political critique of the original cover. In any case, we see here, as in the case of many of Grace Jones’s performances, for example, that sexual spectacle often risks misreadings, an ongoing tension in eccentric performance.

Many of P-Funk’s songs explore the politics of relationships and sexual conquest in wry, and sometimes self-critical, ways. Male sexuality is often the source of gentle and not so gentle mockery and critique. Con-
sider the nasally, weaselly, potentially parodic chorus of Clinton’s otherwise pretty celebratory ode to “doggin’” in “Atomic Dog”: “Why must I be like that? Why must I chase the cat?/ Nothin’ but the dog in me.” In the later, Afrofuturist concept albums of the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, including *Mothership Connection* and *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, the evil institutions of oppression are depicted as exaggeratedly phallic: Sir Nose and his bop gun, the dookie squad, which chases after its enemies with “pissgun rays” on the inside cover of *One Nation under a Groove*. And I think most significantly, the group’s constant return to and sometimes critical image of the pimp as both a site of great style and cool and a figure of economic oppression returns over the course of their work as a trouble spot to negotiate. (See, e.g., the song “Trash a Go Go” on the *Cosmic Slop* LP, which features a judge shaming a man who pimp’s his girlfriend to feed his drug habit.) Rather than settling these moments of contradiction in black sexual politics and desire, the group embraces moments of ambiguity in black life. So, according to “Funkadelic Bylaw No. 19”: “It is better to open your eyes and say you don’t understand . . . than to close your eyes and say you don’t believe” (credited to O. J. Rodney on the cover of *One Nation under a Groove*). In other words, according to P-Funk, it is better to acknowledge the complex and contradictory aspects of black love, sex, and politics as they present themselves to you in the flesh than to pretend you’re beyond them. This is the hard-learned lesson taught to Sir Nose by Dr. Funkenstein, the personae created by Clinton and featured in songs like “’uelle from the Black Hole,” “Glory-hallastoopid,” and “Flashlight.” Sir Nose always claims that he is too cool to sweat, funk, swim, or dance, until he is taken over by the music.

Clinton lends his skills in the theatrical to engage in an ongoing conversation about the masks of blackness, and in particular, the experience of double, triple, and even quadruple consciousness. This conversation gets pushed into a new form by Clinton, by getting us to think about such masks playfully and critically. His is also the mask of the trickster. The mask is both burden and boon, a way to escape, re-create oneself, trip on out. The masks of trickster, space alien, hippie allow for an exploration of the black imagination, and with it, gender and sexual freedom.

P-Funk does not posit as the solution to full humanity and black freedom the suppression of desires, in all of their sticky, complicated, and funky forms. Instead, we are encouraged to dance our way out of our constrictions. P-Funk chooses subversive and nonnormative tactics: cross-dressing and transvestitism (from performing as a pregnant doo-
wop group to the consideration of a mock marriage to Iggy Pop); scatology; fluid lyrical movements between male and female voice; depiction of the fluidity between masculine and feminine desire; the melding of human and machine, and sometimes with it, the fetishization of nonhuman objects as sites of desire (including a gyrating dance with a huge flashlight in a 1978 stage show in Houston); the mind-expanding ethos (and sometimes ingestion) of psychedelic drugs; the embrace of nonreproductive sexuality, and especially praise of the “booty” as a site of desire (in “ἀέαμε to the Black Hole”); and, through it all, an embrace of silliness as an aesthetic.

Black Men, Black Cool, and the Aesthetic of Silliness

Anyone who has seen a photo of George Clinton himself—bursting wide-legged and smiling out of a spaceship on the cover of Mothership Connection or more recently, pumping up the Lollapalooza crowd in a large African gown—must be struck by Clinton’s propensity toward outrageous, original, and gender-bending style: hair extensions (always at least shoulder length, and in unearthly Day-Glo orange, acid green, or platinum blond); his rocking of oversized sunglasses and hats (even before Flavor Flav thought of it); and his willingness to switch from spandex and spangles to long white ermine coat to wedding gown. These outfits are often bricolage—Clinton might be wearing an African dashiki combined with raspberry beret covered in political buttons, under which he might be rocking a long blond wig. He might bring together a shiny pimp “cane” with silver thigh-high platforms. Gary Shider, inexplicably, is almost always wearing a diaper (and in a 1978 live performance in Houston, a diaper and silver leather chaps). The Brides of Funkenstein, the women of the group, sometimes are in everyday street wear, sometimes in the space-age glamour favored by Labelle, and other times in what looks like their panties. During the Dr. Funkenstein era of the early 1980s, the Brides and Clinton himself wore “big booty” fat suits—referencing, perhaps, the Venus Hottentot. At play seems to be a sampling of historical moments and influences, textures, and most definitely genders. In interviews, Clinton has reflected a strong interest in black style, and especially the creative and sometimes over-the-top impulse of black cool, especially after his experience as a barber and hairstylist in New Jersey.
“After you’ve done other people’s hair for so long you know the concept of doin’ hair,” he says, wrapping a bright braid around his index finger. “The garbage man looked just as cool as the pimp and the singer when they left the barbershop. Really, style is just a bunch of bullshit, it’s just how you carry it. If you is safe with that concept, then you can be ugly as you wanna be or cool as you wanna be and know that neither of them mean shit! No matter how cool you are, you can go someplace where you look corny as hell to somebody. . . . We thought that to have your doo was the corniest stuff in the world when you got around hippies. And then a few years later, the afros came out and then the black people started lookin’ silly. So it means that styles just go ’round and ’round and ain’t nothin’ permanently cool or corny.”

Clinton’s deconstruction of black style flies in the face of one of the beloved commandments of Soul: that black people are just naturally cool. Black style, then, and the accompanying command to be cool are freed up as a space for play, for silliness. As Dr. Funkenstein (with dripping white ermine, hat, sunglasses, and cane), Clinton captures the image of the pimp, but it gets transformed and transmogrified. Clinton takes what’s already over the top and pushes it further, shows us the potential queerness of it. Stepping out of the mothership, and surveying the crowd, he captures the hypervisibility and command of this image, but he further denormalizes it, lets us laugh, too. He gives the pimp a blond wig, puts Superfly together with Foxy Brown, and then adds some silver chaps from the Village People, to boot. Change clothes, change places. Perform it for the people on the street and the club. Perform it for white college girls and bourgie black men. Perform it for the black hippies who have always wanted to have a stage of their own. Perform it for Led Zeppelin (members of which apparently did go to their shows, too) and the white Soul crooners, learning black sound. Resteal the sound, and their guitars and amps, borrowing their new twists and adding your own. Perform it for Berry Gordy and show him what he’s missing. Play it for Aretha and the music executives. Strip off your clothes if you have to.

Silly sartorial style—especially outrageous, outsized style: the nattier-than-thou suits of the black dandy, the boxy bold shoulders and outrageous colors of the zoot suit, hip-hop’s oversized bling, are part of an everyday evolving performative history of the adorned black body using
innovations and appropriations in fashion to claim collective freedom in white-controlled spaces.\textsuperscript{50} We might also put P-Funk’s signifying on the black body through silly style into the historical trajectory of black tricksters and comics such as minstrel performer Bert Williams, Richard Pryor, and Dave Chappelle, who, as Glenda R. Carpio suggests, use humor to both conjure and ultimately exorcise black stereotypes and a history of violence. P-Funk’s music, and in particular the rhythm of the funk, as well as their highly theatrical forms of gender masquerade, might be means of ritualistically entering into and riding the spirits of the past.\textsuperscript{51}

Embracing perversity for all that it’s worth, Clinton’s improvisational and sometimes whacked-out style performs his body’s status as free—as the property only of a boundless black imagination. As Clinton tells John Corbett:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{\textit{The Temptations and the Pips had their type of thing wrapped up—the choreography, the outfits. . . . Instead of wearing suits we’d just gotten pressed, we’d wear the bags that they came back from the cleaners in. We’d just bust holes where the legs and arms would go. If we were on the road and we didn’t have the costume, I’d take a sheet from the hotel and just dump whatever I had around it.}}\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Certainly, in Clinton’s description of their improvisational tactics, we see a rejection of the codes of respectability pushed by Motown and others. Though Motown’s Berry Gordy and George Clinton at one time collaborated in Clinton’s early days, the relationship between the two devolved into heated competition, mutual influence, and/or stealing of riffs, and sometimes playful animosity. Clinton’s commentary on Motown might be seen as part of the band’s ongoing critique, or at least complication, of the image of the black male entertainer, along with the minstrel, the pimp, and the hypermasculine gangster, interrupting and reconfiguring the ways that black masculinity has been sold for others’ pleasure. And we might think of the crazy stagecraft—the wildly oversized flashlights, the ingenious doobie-smoking skull, and, of course, the mothership itself—as other expressions of creative freedom. Indeed, Clinton designed and paid for these sets himself, taking the profits that other performers might have used for Cadillacs or houses for their mothers, and used them for costumes, spaceships, and birthing pods.
Queering Black Cultural Traffic: P-Funk and the Entertainment Industry

George Clinton makes black cultural traffic one of his central points of political concern in his music and interviews. In “P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up),” he sings about appreciating the blue-eyed-soul sounds of artists like the Doobie Brothers and David Bowie but razes, “Sounds like it got a ār ee on it though, to me.” Clinton does not attempt to place P-Funk above the forces of commercialization and other aspects of black cultural traffic and trade. Instead, the band allows for messiness, including cross-influence across lines of race, genre, and power, as well as corniness and cool. In answer to the high number of unacknowledged samples of his music, Clinton has both gone to the courts and produced an album of frequently sampled songs called Sample Some of Disc, Sample Some of D.A.T., which includes an application form for the use of copyrighted materials. āi s acknowledgment of the messiness of musical influence can also be seen performatively in the songs themselves. ā e band sometimes dared to “Doobie” its funk, taking on consummately “white” pop standards and lending them a hard funk edge. Band manager Bob Dedeckere describes one late 1970s P-Funk set as that which moves from “Dixie” to “Do You āin k I’m Sexy” to their own “Maggot Brain.” Indeed, the band’s relationship to white rock in some ways acknowledges cross-influence, as well as the borrowing and reborrowing of black sound.33 I hear in Clinton’s rerecording of Cream’s “Sunshine of Your Love,” featuring Brian McKnight’s one-man multiple guitar work- over, as a form of (loving) revenge. Each return to the bridge keeps topping itself, reaching higher and higher, betraying the calm, steady beat of the drums. Clinton says of the song, “We took the motherfucker and roughed it up.”34 At the same time, Clinton has enthusiastically collaborated with a new generation of white performers influenced by P-Funk’s songs and style. Since going solo, Clinton has performed live with Phish and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and has produced and recorded with a variety of other artists.

P-Funk is not afraid to situate its music in a history that is both violent and comical, and that can completely transcend the politics of race, even with a mothership. P-Funk bassist William “Billy Bass” Nelson ac-
knowledges the multiple influences of acid and psychedelic rock on his sound.

Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, that motherfucking record turned me the fuck out, for that direction—more like a pop-rock type of thing. Blue Cheer and Jimi Hendrix turned me out for acid rock. And Cream turned me out for the bluesy kind of rock. And I listened to those albums diligently, every day, until I knew all the songs, note for note. After I heard that stuff, I knew that I couldn’t just play rhythm and blues constantly. I had to be able to branch out and play it all.\(^55\)

I find the repeated use of the phrase “turned out” in Nelson’s description to be significant and suggestive. Not only does the term refer to an extreme and perhaps ecstatic reversal of previous thinking—having one’s proverbial mind blown. It also has more visceral, even sexual connotations—literally being turned inside out. In some sexual slang, the term refers to being “turned” in terms of sexual orientation,\(^56\) or of being raped, or prostituted. Nelson’s choice of words speaks to the ways that his view of black music was turned inside out—the ways that white rock forced him to think about the relationship between white and black sound, not as opposites but as being of the same family. It also recalls a deeper cultural memory—the “primal moment” of sorts of the “rape” of black sound and labor—the history of abjection of black performers in the United States as unacknowledged sources of rock and pop. Indeed, we might think of this history of rock as entwined with the deeper history of “love and theft” of black labor, creativity, and sexuality.\(^57\) P-Funk resists complete erasure of this history and interestingly conceptualizes music listening and musical performance as a mixture of pleasure and pain, abjection, and remastery.\(^58\) Ultimately, then, P-Funk’s quest for imaginative freedom is informed by the history of the black body as it works and reworks history.

In his foreword to the book Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream, playwright August Wilson writes, “Reduced to its most fundamental truth, black men are a commodity of flesh and muscle which has lost its value in the marketplace. We are left over from history.”\(^59\) P-Funk, with its interest in grooving, vamping, and being turned out and reanimated through sound, presents an extraordinary
realignment of the black male body in labor. As Clinton describes it, “We had a groove that was religious. We could vamp forever.” Instead of the image of the black male body used up through the labors of nation building voiced by August Wilson, P-Funk offers up a new relationship to work, one where sweat leads to pleasure and exploration, where the black male body might be viewed under new terms of value.

Yet P-Funk's style is not meant to be a complete escape from reality and the more familiar struggles of home. We are meant, I think, to consider the work that goes into the production of P-Funk's musical performances in the same way that we are meant to see them (and ourselves) sweat as we dance. For Michael Ladd, P-Funk's dirty costumes and other less than perfect aspects of stagecraft were part of its political vision, the ways that the fantasy was not meant to be one of escape but one of return.

â¢ ey got their image from everywhere but primarily from the broom closet or the trash. â¢ ey were beyond their world; they were out of this world. My friend Michel, horn player and flutist, remembers seeing them at the Apollo â¢ eater in 1977; “Shider was wearing a diaper like he always did, and he had these elevator boots on but they weren't fly, they were worn, like really worn. â¢ en out comes George in a baby-blue sheet with Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote on it and the sheet is not clean. He's got a bike chain around his waist for a belt. I mean, it looked like he grabbed the first thing he saw when he was walking out the door and was like, ‘Fuck it, I’ll wear this.’”

For Ladd, P-Funk's creative style marks its travel produced from a history of struggle. Struggle graced with silliness. â¢ s creative refashioning provides an important way for black men in the Post-Soul era to reexperience their bodies in history. P-Funk acknowledges both the costs of history and the funk of a history of struggle, as well as a way out, a possibility for something new by way of humor, vulnerability, and emotional openness.

Take, for example, some recent eruptions of P-Funk in writing about black men's coming of age. In all three of these examples, the sounds of P-Funk provide an entryway to new ways of being for Post-Soul men, where gender, sexuality, and class prove constrictive. While the paths that P-Funk offers are inchoate in their advice on how to proceed, they
serve to encourage each speaker to create something new, to rebel, and especially to dig deeper into modes of desire and embodiment that may have been otherwise ignored by their families and communities.

Poet Kenneth Carroll, who grew up in the Montana Terrace Projects in Washington, DC, remembers the profound impact that the music and cover art of Parliament/Funkadelic had on him and his male friends, as a space where he and his friends found a rare pleasure in critical interrogation, imaginative freedom, and self-fashioning.

“Guys who literally could not read would be interpreting the pictures, the art work, and they would come over my crib. We’d be in my living room, going over what it meant.” Kids played hooky from school to line up in front of a downtown record store on the day Parliament Mothership Connection LP came out, he says. A crew of older kids carried P-Funk albums from party to party, and invented dances, and became a self-styled “funk mob.” “Part of the thing was that, for a lot of us in the inner city, they literally kind of opened the world up,” Carroll says. “In the framework of their music, there’s a possibility of being beyond. at you can literally exist as a Child of the Universe somewhere, where color and class and none of that really matters. at people could be something else besides, you know, po’ niggas.”

Carroll and his friends’ critical “funk mob” might be the visual and aural model of bell hooks’s “oppositional gaze”—the practice of critical looking (and listening) as a form of pleasure and power, the key to a decolonized mind. She writes, “By courageously looking, we defiantly declared ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’” Along with the pleasures of disorientation, P-Funk’s music and visuals offer space in which to imagine new possibilities for oneself and each other.

For writer-critic Michael C. Ladd, Funkadelic, and especially the early music of Maggot Brain and Cosmic Slop, becomes a space of escape from the normative pressures of black middle-class men coming of age in Boston: dressing “seditty,” combing one’s ’fro, or keeping it cut short, nice and tight.

My mother, like any sensible black woman of her age, was big on appearance. Getting me to dress well was a constant struggle. At-
tempting to drag a comb through my afro was near impossible. I'd pull a William and Ellen Craft and just start running. I would run until I had exhausted my mother and aunt's energy and the pick would slip from their hands. But I felt like the world was against me on this one. Everyone was snap tight UpSouth. Needless to say, when I saw the Funkadelic covers I felt I had finally found some company—big, bushy muthafuckas. They were the masters of the margin, right in the middle.\(^\text{65}\)

While Ladd doesn't talk specifically about the link between Funkadelic and sex, the music becomes his alternate soundtrack for the politics of gender and (sexual) coming of age around him, and is a part of his own awareness of his body, and his fashioning of it, as a site of contested ownership.

Grit, and nappy and ashy kneecapped grit is what I needed. I didn't wash already, that's whom I was, a complicated black kid bouncing from a faux ghetto to suburbia and back, in the same town. . . . I found \textit{Cosmic Slop} at my cousins'. It did not save my life. It just gave me the map so I knew how.\(^\text{66}\)

Finally, we might consider P-Funk bassist Bootsy Collins's narrative of discovery and becoming a part of George Clinton's band, in this interview with \textit{\textcopyright} omas Sayers Ellis, as an example of how the blaxploitation that P-Funk offers its audiences also works internally, for its creators. Bootsy offers another example of the ways the band opens up the constraints of normative black masculine performance. For Bootsy, his collaboration with George Clinton becomes a way to move beyond the musical and sartorial aesthetic of respectability and high style embraced by James Brown's band to something more experimental. Bootsy describes showing up at his first James Brown session in 1969, with “tied died jeans, my afro was leaning to the right. And we were wearing them little round eyeglasses from back in the day. Just cool.”\(^\text{67}\) But he was out of step with the aesthetic of smooth soulfulness of James Brown and his review.\(^\text{68}\) To be asked to hold down the bass in the Godfather of Soul's band was an amazing professional opportunity. Bootsy describes his apprenticeship with Brown as a time when he learned discipline and, in some ways, a route of respect as a fatherless son. But Bootsy also describes his yearning to play outside the bounds of Brown's direction.
“Son, listen to me now. I’m the Godfather of Soul.” He always had to lecture me and it was cool because, like I said, I didn’t have a daddy back home, so I guess he felt like he had to fill those shoes. And he was like my dad. “Son, you got to stop doing all them things and just give me the One.” So when I started doing that, he started to like it and I could tell. So I figured, if I could give him this One and play all them other things . . . I think he’ll like me.69

When Bootsy is introduced to George Clinton’s clearly more countercultural style, he finds a way out of the disciplining framework of family and patriarch.70 He goes to visit Clinton in his apartment and finds a new mode of blackness, a (post?) soul mate for the self that he had to sacrifice in order to play in Brown’s band.

I remember walking in the house. I’m kinda semi-trippin’ too. Walk in, and George didn’t have no furniture, got no furniture in none of them. And he sittin’ in the last room, in the corner, got his legs in like, a Buddha thing, you know, with his head down. He got a star on one side and a moon on the other shaved in his head and the rest was bald. He got a sheet on, his feet you know, he got these big “Boy, I say Boy” feet. You know who I’m talking about. Foghorn Leghorn! . . . And I’m like Dang, this is going to be fun.71

For Collins, Ladd, and Carroll, P-Funk’s music provides a means of seeing around corners to a future that others can’t see, and to provide new answers to those basic questions of desire and funk and freedom that plague them in the present. P-Funk shares its lessons in how to occupy the spaces of city streets, schoolyards, and concert stages in the full-on beauty of a new black masculine weirdness: ashy knee-capped, ’fro leaning to the side, playing to the One to the pulse of your own magnificent body. For its growing collective of Funkateers, P-Funk awakens otherwise unheard frequencies. Please do not adjust your set.