

RECONSTRUCTING THE MOTHERSHIP: MEANING AND HISTORY
IN THE MUSIC OF P-FUNK

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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During the 1970s, the Parliament-Funkadelic collective, or P-Funk, performed a unique type of funk music that impacted the lives and culture of generations of fans. Their music has been a vital force in the developments of popular music, redefining the limits of concept albums and performances, and opened the doors to funk rock, hip hop, and neo-soul. I address the ways in which P-Funk has been received, interpreted, and reconstructed by the diverse constituents of American popular culture from the 1960s to the present. Each chapter explores a discrete interpretive community that has granted meaning to the collective from perspectives of history, music, iconography, consumer culture, and popular entertainment media. The resulting study unifies these threads through their engagement with history and the evolution of P-Funk through time. Ultimately, this thesis seek to shed light on a group that has lacked thorough scholarly attention.

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CHAPTER I

MOMMY, WHAT'S A FUNKADELIC? HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF P-FUNK

“Nature is the realm of change, Spirit is the realm of becoming. The life of a spirit is a history: i.e., not a process in which everything comes to be and passes away, but a process in which the past is conserved as an element in the present.”

-R.G. Collingwood, “Notes Towards a Metaphysic”¹

“My whole thing was to get the spaceship off the ground. Once you get the spaceship off the ground, I could live off that history forever.”

-George Clinton, interview with Howard Kramer²

In Julian Blaustein’s 1951 science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Earth is visited by an extraterrestrial humanoid named Klaatu (portrayed by actor Michael Rennie), who represents an interplanetary alliance that has granted humanity the opportunity to join them. This alliance would ensure peace for all, but before Klaatu is able to present his offer, he is murdered by armed forces that, in essence, represent humanity’s paranoia, self-preserving interests, and penchant for violent outbursts. After being revived by Gort, his robotic servant, Klaatu announces his offer to the hundreds of people within earshot, and informs them that humanity must either overcome its destructive tendencies, or itself be destroyed—if not by extraterrestrials, then by themselves. He returns to his spaceship and departs. Despite Klaatu’s best intentions, humanity was not ready to devote itself to peace.

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History: And Other Writings in the Philosophy of History*, ed. W.H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 130.

² George Clinton, interview with Howard Kramer, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Education and Public Programs Division Records, 30 July 2011, <http://catalog.rockhall.com/catalog/RG-0004/rrhof:6773>. Accessed at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, 25 March 2016.

Almost twenty-five years later, a different variety of spaceship landed on Earth, providing humanity with another opportunity for salvation. Hot off the heels of their successful, politically compelling 1975 album *Chocolate City*³ and their comparably popular psychedelic funk album *Let's Take It to the Stage*⁴, the Parliament-Funkadelic collective of musicians released *Mothership Connection*.⁵ In a gesture toward devoted science fiction fans, including himself, George Clinton deliberately based the album's cover art on Klaatu's iconic flying saucer.⁶ On the album cover, Clinton—the mastermind, lead vocalist, and spokesperson for the Parliament-Funkadelic collective—is pictured in the doorway of the Mothership, which would itself become iconic of Parliament-Funkadelic and emblematic of the power of music to shape cultural consciousness by way of metaphorical, even spiritual transportation. In the album art, as well as in visually parallel theatrics at live concerts of the late 1970s, Clinton portrays Dr. Funkenstein as he descends from his Mothership to offer the curing power of “the funk” to humanity (see Figure 1.1 for a comparison of these images with a still from the 1951 film). Whereas Klaatu's mission proved to be in vain and his call for peace fell upon deaf ears, fans met Clinton's emergence from the Mothership with enthusiasm and a palpable hope for salvation. Like Klaatu, Parliament-Funkadelic, or P-Funk for short, offered the inhabitants of Earth the promise of peace and unity, one filtered not through the genre of 1950s science fiction movies but through the

³ Parliament, *Chocolate City*, Casablanca NBLP 7014, 1975. Vinyl.

⁴ Funkadelic, *Let's Take It to the Stage*, Westbound Records W-215, 1975. Vinyl.

⁵ Parliament, *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca NBLP 7022, 1975. Vinyl.

⁶ George Clinton and Ben Greenman, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 143.



Figure 1.1: (Clockwise from top left) Klaatu descending from his spaceship in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951); Parliament, *Mothership Connection* (1975), front of album cover; Parliament, *Mothership Connection* (1975), back of album cover; George Clinton descending from the Mothership at a Parliament-Funkadelic concert.

idiom of 1970s psychedelic funk. In 1978 this appeal would be distilled into the mantra “one nation under a groove,” a slogan repeated in subsequent years by the group’s many disciples.

This thesis seeks to demonstrate P-Funk’s cultural potency and place in history by analyzing their presence in American popular culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To grasp the full significance of P-Funk, I argue, one must explore not only the history of the group and their music, but also the way their influence manifests itself across a variety of other contexts, including scholarship, literature, music, visual art, and other media. I argue that when

framed historically, the work of scholars of popular music, critics, musicians, and general audience members *perform* historiography in a very real sense; if a historiography is the sum of a topic's historical renderings and interpretations evaluated critically, then such renderings acted out in culture (as opposed to traditional text-based histories) should also be evaluated. This project, then, is just as much (if not more so) about the “interpretive communities” that have constructed and reconstructed P-Funk over the last five decades, as it is about Clinton's collective itself.

In essence, the following chapters will consider the interpretive communities that have surrounded the Parliament-Funkadelic collective since the beginning of their early period. I consider diverse interpretations of the group—whether they be analyses of P-Funk in peer-reviewed literature, curated collections related to the group in popular music archives, or more recent music and art by others that draw upon the P-Funk legacy—and assess the ways in which the group has been constructed through time. In order to highlight the diversity of P-Funk's historical presence, each chapter is devoted to the consideration of specific interpretive communities. The remainder of this chapter will review and evaluate academic sources on Parliament-Funkadelic from a historiographic perspective, including monographs, articles, and archival collections, paying particular attention to the rubric of Afrofuturism. The second chapter focuses on P-Funk's position within an aesthetic network of music, presenting heretofore underestimated influences on the group, their contemporary musical contexts, and the musical developments post-P-Funk that resulted from the aftershocks of their sonic footprint. Chapter three is a more varied study of P-Funk's presence in American popular media focusing on their album art, iconographic motifs, and relationship to popular culture in the late twentieth and early

twenty-first centuries. Chapter four attempts to synthesize the work of these interpretive communities in order to treat P-Funk more holistically, reconciling their historicization on multiple fronts. Each chapter, therefore, will focus on those different communities and the ways they historicize and derive meaning from P-Funk. Although the group is no longer at the foreground of American popular culture, their presence is still ubiquitous, I argue, in multiple ways. It is my hope that this project will encourage readers to explore the extant textual and audio-visual materials surrounding Parliament-Funkadelic with a critical eye (and ear), but perhaps more importantly, that it will prompt further discourses about P-Funk and other related topics in popular music studies. Here, however, by historicizing P-Funk's musical legacy, I will attempt, metaphorically at least, to reconstruct the Mothership. Before launching a critical exploration of P-Funk, however, it is necessary to frame this study within a larger scope of methodological models.

Methodological Models and a Hermeneutics of History

The first methodological basis to address is that of "interpretive communities" which frame the way history is told and understood. By interpretive communities, I refer to the work of Stanley Fish regarding the interplay of signifiers, interpreters, and meanings in his volume *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.⁷ He discusses the ramifications of culturally-agreed-upon understandings of experiences that affect the meanings we grant to our perceptions. According to Fish, a topic, utterance, or other signifier can mean drastically different things to interpretive communities that experience or value particular ways

⁷ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

of perceiving. He argues, in other words, that the meaning and import of any signifier is malleable to some extent, and depends upon the people involved in its interpretation(s).⁸

Historiographically speaking, interpretive communities are responsible for the ways in which the histories of a subject are organized and told; an analysis of those communities' perceptions and interpretations are the work of a historiographer.

This is the framework espoused by David C. Paul in his reception history *Charles Ives in the Mirror: American Histories of an Iconic Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Paul's historiography explores the interpretive communities surrounding Charles Ives throughout the twentieth century, demonstrating how the composer's reception reflects diverse and changing facets of American culture. In his introduction, he states that "the history of Ives's reception is not simply a series of portraits of an unusual composer, it is also a series of mirrors that reflect the way Americans have viewed themselves. It is the restive, fractured story of nation in miniature."⁹ He further concretizes the concern of his subjects with American culture: "[...] what links them all, aside from a fascination with Ives, is an abiding preoccupation with the nature of American experience. Ives and his music have served as a prism, refracting the rhetoric of the nationalist, the passions of the patriot, the ruminations of the discontent, and the grievances of the outcast."¹⁰ Paul's own "abiding preoccupation with the nature of American experience" results in an inherently interdisciplinary study that combines historical criticism, American studies, political science, and anthropology. The result is a multifaceted historiography

⁸ Ibid., 338.

⁹ David C. Paul, *Charles Ives in the Mirror: American Histories of an Iconic Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

of Ives which aims to convey the composer's relationship to American identity as it evolved over time through the discourses of different interpretive communities.

While Paul does offer ample background in the fields of cultural history and American Studies, what I would like to add to his methodology is a specific basis in historical theory. I am especially interested in the work of Marc Bloch¹¹ and R.G. Collingwood¹², two writers who offer important perspectives on historical criticism and the interpretation of history. As these author's note, a primary concern of historical research is the possibility and validity of historical knowledge. Although historians often employ an objective and impartial tone, complete and accurate historical truth seems more like a potentiality than a realistically achievable goal. By delineating the historical field and limiting the scope of their studies to a finite set of sources, historians have not choice but to overlook or downplay facts and perspectives that would unnecessarily complicate their narratives, as though the prisoner in Plato's "allegory of the cave" finally turns around to find another wall with different shadows. (P-Funk audiences might recognize this bind as the "placebo syndrome.")¹³

Although the sheer diversity of interpretive communities problematizes any notion of a singular truth, historians can craft comprehensive historical accounts by piecing together

¹¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953).

¹² R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. William H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Collingwood, *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History*, ed. William H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹³ The placebo syndrome is also closely related to the P-Funk concept of "funkentelechy." From the eponymous Parliament song (1977), it is a portmanteau of "the funk," i.e., one's soul or human nature (to be discussed below), with the Greek "*entelechia*," an Aristotelian concept that roughly amounts to the synonymity of one's potentiality and actuality. Funkentelechy, or one's "at-work potentiality" for being in the groove and existing according to "the funk," is what P-Funk attempts to awaken in those affected by the placebo syndrome. This is achieved with the "bop gun." For more on *entelechia*, potentiality, and actuality, see Joe Sachs, "Aristotle: Motion and its Place in Nature," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, 2005. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aris-mot/>, accessed 3 February 2017.

seemingly disparate layers of context. Therefore, a self-awareness of one's own place in the theoretical discourse of history provides the historian with a frame of reference, albeit a subjective one, a vantage point from which history or historiography can be constructed. A challenge in writing about P-Funk is the lack of historical distance between this thesis and P-Funk, a group that is still actively performing and whose legacy continues to reveal itself in the work of other contemporary musicians.

Instead of seeing the historical proximity of P-Funk as an obstacle to “objective truth,” Bloch and Collingwood's ideas about interdisciplinarity and *longue durée* suggest ways of wrestling productively with these complexities. According to Bloch, the study of history should involve “an area of overlap, where the union of two disciplines is shown to be indispensable to any attempt at explanation.”¹⁴ The theory posited by Bloch and his colleagues, who established the *Annales* school of historiography in France during the early twentieth century, promoted history that encompassed considerations of economics, geography, sociology, and anthropology. Rather than solely centralizing political events, singular historical figures, or discrete events, the *Annalistes* valued long-term history that was disciplinarily more extensive. In this more flexible view of historical study, a wider range of documentation became worthy of historical inquiry, and the goal was to produce as complete a study as possible.¹⁵ In other words, Bloch emphasized the need to synthesize multiple sets of knowledge as well as multiple frames of perception and

¹⁴ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 25.

¹⁵ Jeremy D. Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111-12.

interpretation.¹⁶ Considered with respect to P-Funk—a subject that has become thoroughly embedded in American music, social politics, and popular media—I face the challenge of incorporating overlapping disciplines and bodies of literature; additionally, due to the group’s spiritually charged performances and intensive mythology, I also must explore the reception and interpretation of their music and the experiences that it enables.

My methodology also draws upon the work of English historian R.G. Collingwood. In his “Notes Towards a Metaphysic,” Collingwood describes the gradually evolving nature of cultural and historical situations. As he explains in the first epigraph for this chapter, “Spirit is the realm of becoming. The life of the spirit is a history: i.e., not a process in which everything comes to be and passes away, but a process in which the past is conserved as an element in the present.”¹⁷ In other words, historical progression is a cumulative process, not a linear one. For example, if event A is “prior both in logic and in time” to event B, and A has a beginning, there is no “ceasing to be.” Rather, Collingwood argues that there is “an accumulation or enrichment of the existent by the sum of its own past.”¹⁸ See Figure 1.2 for a reproduction of Collingwood’s diagram of this process. Collingwood admits that this pattern of events does not necessarily occur as such in real life; yet he argues that at the level of logic, one historical circumstance,

¹⁶ To this notion of historical framing we can attach the concept of interpretive communities and the work of Stanley Fish, who evaluates whether and by what criteria certain interpretations of a signifier are “acceptable.” Using the example of William Blake’s 1794 poem “The Tyger” and its multiple interpretations by different critics, Fish comes to the conclusion that a degree of pluralism is inevitable in the determination of meanings; although he concedes that some unfounded and irrelevant interpretations could certainly be ruled out, there is a fundamental “core of agreement” upon which an interpretive community—say, in this case a literary or academic institution—maintains that a certain range of analyses is justifiable. He says, “Nowhere is this set of acceptable ways written down, but it is a part of everyone’s knowledge of what it means to be operating within the literary institution as it is now constituted.” In other words, sets of knowledge, which frame perceptions and interpretations, are determined, understood, and accessed by communities or institutions of discourse. See Fish, 341-43.

¹⁷ Collingwood, 130.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-31.

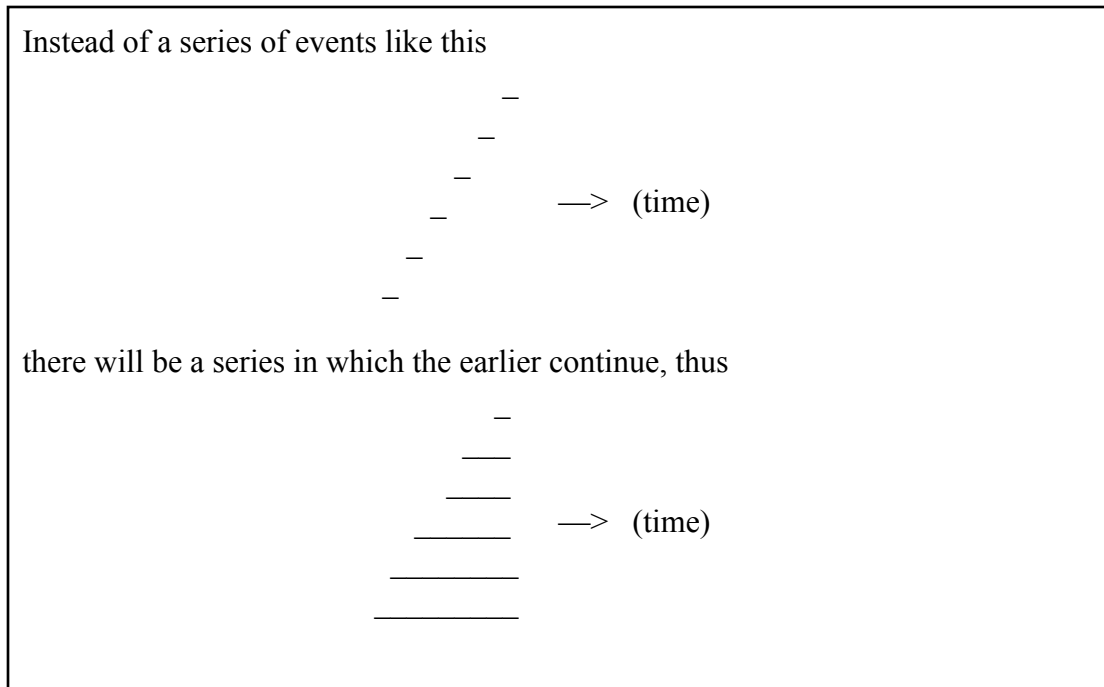


Figure 1.2: The historical progress of events. Reproduced from R.G. Collingwood, “Notes Towards a Metaphysic,” in *The Principles of History*, ed. W.H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131.

event, or idea must remain, at least theoretically, for resultant phenomena to occur. This fundamental assumption about the continuing presence of the past is essential to this historiography. P-Funk, like their musical predecessors and successors, did not produce music in a historical or cultural vacuum. Their work reflects an ongoing accumulation of ideas and cultural growth.

For example, when Parliament released *Mothership Connection* in 1975, there was more symbolism at play than a mere homage to a popular science fiction film. The Mothership itself, to which the band devoted an eponymous song, “Mothership Connection (Starchild),” has become closely associated with the philosophy of Afrofuturism as a trope of black science fiction as well as black social liberation. Although I will consider the prevalence and potential problems of that association later in this chapter, it is nonetheless an essential fact that the process of the

Mothership becoming a trope extends both into the past and future. As a signifier of liberation, the Mothership becomes part of a multitude of symbols that have held similar meanings within the interpretive community of the African diaspora. Ezekiel's wheel, the subject of the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and the Mother Plane referenced by the Nation of Islam all signify the longing by African Americans for liberation from oppressive conditions of varying degrees and contexts.¹⁹ In the post-civil rights era, the P-Funk Mothership became the latest iteration of this trope; with the additional cultural emphasis on space travel after the United States' successful moon landing and the prevalence of science fiction film and television programs, it made sense for P-Funk to explore the possibility of African American liberation from Earth itself.

In fact, George Clinton was inspired not only by Klaatu's offer of salvation in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*—which only featured a handful of non-speaking African American actors—but more powerfully by the character Nyota Uhura, portrayed by Nichelle Nichols, in the *Star Trek* television program of the late 1960s. It was a powerful gesture at the time to include an African American woman as a bridge officer on television and it provided Clinton, as well as other African Americans and women, with compelling hope. Clinton has stated, "I had to find another place where they hadn't perceived black people to be and that was on a spaceship."²⁰

¹⁹ For the origins of the "chariot" trope in African American spirituals, as well as other iterations of the trope such as trains, see Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 213-216.

²⁰ Quoted in Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 63. For a description of Parliament's *Mothership Connection* to the *Star Trek* television program, see Clinton and Greenman, 140-41.

The forward extension of the Mothership trope began in Parliament-Funkadelic concerts, during which a 1,200-pound aluminum Mothership complete with lights and hydraulic moving parts descended onto the stage, from which Clinton emerged from a cloud of exhaust smoke like an interplanetary prophet. This spectacle was a spiritually powerful one for many African Americans in the audience, precisely because of the historical evolution of the Mothership's sociopolitical symbolism. This is one example of what Collingwood meant: after all, without that association, the Mothership would be an exciting and expensive theatrical project, but little more beyond that. Only out of the persistence of the "chariot" trope through history could the album, song, or Mothership itself command the same spiritual or cultural power. This symbolism is also closely tied to the cosmic themes prevalent in releases by Funkadelic (Parliament's sister act), as the albums *Cosmic Slop* (1973) and *Let's Take It to the Stage* (1974) foreground the group's cosmogony in which "the funk"²¹ is a universal power, akin to "the force" in the *Star Wars* saga.²² Additionally, Parliament has posited similar themes of black empowerment in *Chocolate City* (1975), in which Clinton suggests that the White House be painted black, and that various African American icons including Aretha Franklin, Richard Pryor, and others occupy key political positions. While this is a more grounded theme than the Mothership, *Chocolate City* perpetuated the explosion of black self-determination in music, a trend that began with the formidable, undeniable virility of James Brown. *Chocolate City* maintained this momentum in the form of a celebration of blackness in urban settings and politics, and re-energized black

²¹ This type of reference to funk is often notated as a proper noun. It indicates an "impulse" or "soul" that is prevalent in and subsumes funk music. See Tony Bolden, "Groove Theory: A Vamp on the Epistemology of Funk," *American Studies* 52, no. 4, "The Funk Issue" (2013), 10-11.

²² This is not an arbitrary connection. The liner notes for Funkadelic's 1978 album *One Nation Under a Groove* narrate a story on similar epic proportions, the main villain of which is "Barft Vada." The parallelism to Darth Vader is self-evident, and was probably intended to be immediately understood.

consciousness by launching into space. The optimism behind these Afrofuturist ideals has been challenged in recent years due to the inadequacy of social change and efforts to improve racial disparities in income, housing, education, and other facets of life. Ice Cube has employed P-Funk references in his songs as a way of questioning the real, lived experiences of Black Americans in opposition to the hope sparked by P-Funk; more recently, A Tribe Called Quest recorded “Space Program” (2016), and cynically remarked, “there ain’t a space program for niggaz, yeah you stuck, stuck, stuck.”

This brief overview of some of the different contexts informing the work of P-Funk as well as the way that P-Funk’s music has provided inspiration for others suggests the cumulative nature of history. In order to unearth other layers of this history, this thesis focuses on an important period of time that Funk historian Rickey Vincent calls “the P-Funk Dynasty.” The collective’s lifespan in its most concentrated period of activity, for all intents and purposes, occupies the years 1970-1980. This is determined by their major studio album releases, which began in 1970 with Parliament’s debut album *Osmium* on one end, and George Clinton’s departure in favor of a solo career after 1980 (his debut solo album, *Computer Games*, was released in 1982). Within these years, the period 1970-1974 will be referred to as P-Funk’s “early period,” when the group was beginning to expand from their earlier doo-wop format and exploring the possibilities of psychedelic funk; the period 1974-1978 will be called their “middle period,” and comprises their greatest concentration of album releases, tours, and the peak of their popularity; the years 1978-1980 will be called their “late period,” and is characterized by the tapering of their recording projects, the (arguably) declining quality of those recordings, and ends with Clinton’s departure from the group. Any period before 1970 will be considered “pre-P-

Funk,” and the years after 1980, even though members of the collective were still quite active in numerous ways, will be considered “post-P-Funk.” If the latter two labels are not used in favor of a differing, more appropriate label, it will be made clear that this is the case. While the division of time in this way is somewhat contrary to the theoretical frameworks previously discussed, it will in certain cases allow for more clear references to particular contexts that can sensibly be grouped together, and avoid a study that is too sweeping in scope to be presented and followed with sufficient efficacy. The reader, then, should bear in mind that the events described in this project are divided and organized by the author for the sake of utility, but also that they are intrinsically related, and that these divisions are not intended to obscure that essential fact.

Literature Review

Although the entirety of this project is a review of texts—written, oral, and musical—concerning P-Funk, this chapter primarily deals with historical writing about the group. This section introduces and critiques some examples of secondary literature that address P-Funk from a historical perspective. The sources considered here include scholarly, peer-reviewed texts that refer to or focus on the group with significant depth or offer particularly unique insights about their place in American history and culture. I also include literature that is not peer-reviewed but which provides essential information about the group, namely in the form of biography and oral history. Such texts have contributed significantly to the group’s historicization and their status among much of their fanbase. All of these texts, regardless of the extent to which they aspire to be “historical,” do in fact historicize the group by contextualizing, interpreting, and thereby constructing P-Funk for their respective audiences.

In popular music studies, especially for group's like P-Funk that have only recently begun attracting scholarly attention, oral histories can be of equal or greater importance than textual documentation. Oral histories provide information and insights that do not appear elsewhere in written form, and can be accessed through fans as well as in documentaries or other transcribed formats. Chief among such sources is the volume of interviews *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History (For the Record)* (1998), edited by Dave Marsh. This series of interviews with P-Funk members and associates is extremely concise, making the book accessible to fans interested in cursory information about the group. The book includes brief excerpts from interviews with P-Funk's major players, including George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and Bernie Worrell, Fuzzy Haskins, Garry Shider, Fred Wesley, as well as the artist responsible for much of Funkadelic's album art, Pedro Bell. The slim volume does not include every individual associated with the collective (nor could it), yet its nature as an orally transmitted history of the group—or at least as a set of primary source documents—offers a level of direct access unavailable by most other means. Although oral history may appear less filtered than historical writing, it is nonetheless shaped by the editor's organizational plan, the respective motives and biases of the interviewer and interviewees, and the frozen textual nature of the book itself.

In addition, oral histories, as with other forms of historical narrative, tend to limit their scope to certain landmark moments and issues. For example, the general outline of P-Funk's oral history typically acknowledges Clinton's barbershop in Plainfield, New Jersey, as Parliament-Funkadelic's place of origin, and the fact that the original members formed the doo-wop group The Parliaments as teenagers. Their failed audition for Motown Records led to Clinton being hired as a songwriter for the company in Detroit, Michigan; shortly thereafter, in the mid-1960s,

The Parliaments began recording in Detroit for Revilot Records, cutting their hit single “Testify” in 1967. At this point, sources often skip ahead to the early 1970s, when Funkadelic, The Parliaments’ band, became the collective’s headlining group, releasing a series of successful albums between 1970 and 1974. By 1974, Parliament (the shortened version of their original name resulting from contractual issues with Revilot) released *Up For the Down Stroke*, fusing Parliament-Funkadelic into an inseparable pair of acts. Between 1974 and 1978, they released their most successful albums, this in tandem with their extravagantly theatrical concerts turning them into one of funk music’s “super groups” along with the Isley Brothers, Rufus and Chaka Khan, the Commodores, and Earth, Wind & Fire.²³ Their “Earth Tour” of 1976-1977, which featured the exalted Mothership, solidified their position of celebrity, and after a few more album releases, they began to recede from the public eye as a unified collective. Members began to explore opportunities on their own: George Clinton moved onto a solo recording career and currently tours with the P-Funk All Stars, an echo of the super group that resounded through the 1970s; Bernie Worrell recorded and performed with the Talking Heads; Bootsy Collins continued work with his Rubber Band; Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns sporadically recorded with other artists, and Wesley himself would remain a sought-after performer, arranger, and teacher; Maceo Parker now headlines his own tours; even the recordings of Parliament-Funkadelic have taken on a life of their own after the group’s dissolution, becoming sample material woven throughout the soundscape of hip hop.

With minor variations and added details, this outline is replicated in more formal histories of the group, including Rickey Vincent’s *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of The*

²³ Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 223.

One (1995). The book is a broad take on funk music as a whole, spanning the mid-twentieth century to the 1990s, from the ideological foundations of funk through its most recent iterations in hip hop music. He divides his history into dynastic periods: Predynastic (Early Sixties), First Funk Dynasty (Late Sixties: Unification), Second Funk Dynasty (Early—Mid-Seventies: The Shining Star), Third Funk Dynasty (Late Seventies: P-Funk), Fourth Funk Dynasty (Eighties: Naked Funk), and Fifth Funk Dynasty (Nineties: Hip Hop Nation).²⁴ Within this scheme, P-Funk first appears within the “Soul” category of the First Funk Dynasty of the late 1960s as The Parliaments, alongside the likes of James Brown, Motown artists, and Otis Redding. Under the Second Funk Dynasty, Vincent accurately lists Parliament and Funkadelic as separate entities; they remain as such through the Third Funk Dynasty, otherwise known as the P-Funk Dynasty. In this period, Vincent categorizes them under “Monster Funk” because of their similarities to other groups that produced intense dance funk music with outlandish themes and imagery.²⁵ The Fourth Funk Dynasty of the 1980s has George Clinton listed as the only signifier of P-Funk’s presence during this period (perhaps a reasonable indication, considering the tenuousness of P-Funk after their disbandment only a few years prior), but the Fifth Funk Dynasty contains a provocatively-named category, “P-Funk Hip Hop.” This heading subsumes hip hop acts Digital Underground, EPMD, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Digable Planets, and Arrested Development; in the chapter “Funk in the Nineties: Return of the Funk,” however, he also mentions Uncle Jamm’s Army, a DJ and dance crew heavily inspired by P-Funk and active in the Los Angeles electro-hop scene,²⁶ and some of whom would continue on to form the group

²⁴ Vincent, xi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 223-24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 314.

N.W.A in the mid-1980s; Afrika Bambaataa, one of the first widely recognized hip hop DJs from the Bronx, New York, also receives attention for his explorations of electronic music and the futurist themes to which P-Funk opened the doors in the previous decade. Vincent also discusses the respective recordings by Dr. Dre and Ice Cube from the early 1990s, which, although not specifically listed under his category of “P-Funk Hip Hop,” may be considered as such due to their heavy borrowing of P-Funk aesthetics, lyrics, and themes (see Chapter II).

Vincent’s sweeping history makes the centrality of Parliament-Funkadelic in the scope of funk music quite clear. The cover of the book advertises a “Foreword by George Clinton,” many of the chapter epigraphs feature quotes by Clinton or Parliament-Funkadelic lyrics, the Fourth and Fifth Funk Dynasties feature P-Funk prominently, and the book’s final chapter, wrapping up his entire discussion of funk music *as a whole* is entitled “Postscript on The Funk: Sons of the P,” an explicit (though transparent) gesture of Vincent’s attitude toward the group—as though his radio moniker “Uhuru Maggot”²⁷ were not telling enough. He does, however, give fair treatment to other prominent and influential funk entities, including the “super groups” mentioned above as well as the Bar-Kays, the Ohio Players, the O’Jays, Kool & the Gang, K.C. and the Sunshine Band, Zapp, and of course, James Brown and Sly & the Family Stone.

One of the drawbacks of any historical text, Vincent’s and Marsh’s books included, is both the condition of finiteness and the unavoidable perspective that the author or editor brings to bear on the information itself. Although “P-Funk *per se*” remains unchanged, “P-Funk as

²⁷ “Uhuru,” a word of Swahili origin meaning “freedom”; “Maggot” is a reference to the Funkadelic album *Maggot Brain* (1971) and its title track, with its attendant concepts of freeing one’s mind, the perceived positive and negative effects of drug use, and the beginnings of P-Funk cosmogony (as evinced in the track’s opening monologue: “I have tasted the maggots in the mind of the universe; I was not offended, for I knew I had to rise above it all or drown in my own shit.”).

presented” by any individual varies from one text to another. This inevitable framing of a topic within a narrative, as Hayden White explains, means that the writing of history is essentially a poetic act.²⁸ The author’s narrative plan, of course, is conceived retroactively and with the subject’s context in mind—a context that, at the time, likely did not appear to the subjects themselves in the same way.

This authorial perspective is most evident in the kinds of biases revealed in Vincent’s text, particularly those directed towards the genre of disco, which was largely concurrent with P-Funk’s middle and late periods. In his chapter “Disco Fever: The (Real) Hustle,” he makes it clear that he views disco as a blemish on the face of African American popular music, and spends much time criticizing the racialization of disco music by the record industry. Drawing on the writing of music journalist Nelson George, Vincent claims that the rise of disco amounted to “the death of rhythm and blues.”²⁹ He makes other suggestions throughout the chapter that testify to his disapproval of disco’s influence, citing George in claiming that the genre represented “[a] retreat from the beauty of blackness...The sound of the death of R&B.”³⁰ Perhaps most incisive, Vincent blatantly states that “[w]ith the one strong, indignant exception of The Funk blasting its way through the airwaves, disco radio spread like a crippling disease on the heartbeat of a people.”³¹ While Vincent and George are entitled to their personal opinions, there is a point at which their polemic histories threaten to obscure more balanced and nuanced approaches to the

²⁸ Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (February 1984), 12.

²⁹ Vincent, 210.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

history of funk and disco, two genres whose exact boundaries can be unclear at times if not impossible to define.³²

After Vincent, the two most comprehensively complete source texts on Parliament-Funkadelic take the form of biographies. The memoir by George Clinton, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard On You?* (2014)³³ and the biography of Clinton by Kris Needs, *George Clinton & The Odyssey of the P-Funk Empire* (2014) take a thoughtful approach to the history of P-Funk through the lens of Clinton's life story. Both texts are deeply personal and present the history of Parliament-Funkadelic in more intimate terms than Vincent's more "objective" text. Both of these books were published relatively recently in 2014, reflecting perhaps the inevitability of P-Funk members aging and dying. Most of the surviving original members of the group are in their seventies, and Clinton and Needs possibly realized the urgency of documenting these stories before it is too late.

Whatever the case, these relatively few historical and biographical sources speak to the dearth of written accounts of P-Funk. Although many authors have addressed the group in passing or devoted articles and book chapters to certain aspects of the group, such as their Afrofuturism, iconography, or music, the only scholarly monograph dedicated to Parliament-Funkadelic is Anne Danielsen's *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (2006). Scholarly works devoted in part to P-Funk include John Corbett's *Extended*

³² I can attest to this personally, as Vincent's strong argument against disco profoundly influenced my own view of it compared to seemingly "authentic" groups like Parliament-Funkadelic, not having taken into account the intrinsic authenticity of disco culture in its own context. I acknowledge the guidance of my advisor, Loren Kajikawa, in revealing this to me and contributing to the historical accuracy of this thesis.

³³ Because the biography by Clinton and Greenman is so extensively referenced throughout this project, I believe its value will speak for itself, and any critical considerations will be integrated in the thesis as they become relevant.

Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein (1994), which includes Parliament-Funkadelic analyses, profiles, and interviews among other artists in a wide array of genres, and a 2009 dissertation on psychedelic funk by Oscar Bettison entitled “‘I Wanna Take You Higher’: The Stylistic Development and Cultural Dissemination of Post-Psychedelic Funk Music.”

The relative obscurity of these academic sources make the two recently published P-Funk biographies even more influential. In effect, Clinton’s and Needs’ respective works represent the most substantial literature devoted to the collective. They provide unique insights about particular moments in Clinton’s career and developments in many elements of P-Funk, from their music to the relationships between members of the group, as well as the evolution of their musical and performative aesthetics. In his biography, Needs provides information that helps to contextualize our understanding of P-Funk. In “Chapter Seven: American Eats Its Young,” for example, he describes the cultural impact of the Vietnam War and the way Funkadelic responded to it with their album *America Eats its Young* (1972). This album’s title and theme commented on the relationship between international political affairs and the lives of black Americans, many of whom joined the military and fought in the war as a way to escape destitution.³⁴ Needs argues that *America Eats its Young* represents Clinton’s first attempt at engaging with politics on such a broad scale.³⁵

The album cover parodies a U.S. one dollar bill, the bald eagle clutching a heroin syringe in one talon and a gaunt, malnourished child in the other. The Statue of Liberty, with fangs and bloodshot eyes, holds seven infants, some of whom have been partially eaten. This cartoonish yet

³⁴ Kris Needs, *George Clinton & The Cosmic Odyssey of the P-Funk Empire* (New York: Omnibus Press, 2014), 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

disturbing imagery superimposes Clinton's interpretations of the twisted state of affairs in the United States—the combined total of America's place in the Vietnam War; rampant drug use among the impoverished and marginalized, as well as among some who have returned from the war. Needs also explains that the album cover art also marks the beginning of Funkadelic's emerging visual aesthetic (the subject of Chapter III).³⁶ Although not drawn by Pedro Bell, the artist associated with Funkadelic's later and most well known releases, the cover art for *American Eats Its Young* marks a transition toward the grisly surrealism for which their album covers would become notorious.

In sum, with the exception of these biographies by Needs and Clinton and the two scholarly treatments by Corbett and Danielsen, the literature on Parliament-Funkadelic remains relatively limited. In the chapters that follow, I draw upon these sources as well as other primary sources, including the music, liner notes, and album imagery of P-Funk itself, to attempt a more thorough accounting of the group's cultural history and relationship with American popular culture. One of the most intriguing and potentially useful of these sources is the P-Funk archive at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives in Cleveland, Ohio.

Curated Funk

During the initial stages of this study, I visited the Library and Archives of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (henceforth referred to as "Archives") to examine documents and other rare primary sources related to Parliament-Funkadelic. The Archives house the most

³⁶ See Amy Nathan Wright, "Exploring the Funkadelic Aesthetic: Intertextuality and Cosmic Philosophizing in Funkadelic's Album Covers and Liner Notes," *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013), 149-51.

expansive physical assemblage of materials concerning American popular music, with collections on specific musicians and ensembles, documents from private collections, record companies, and media entities (such as *Rolling Stone* or *Vibe* magazines), and other collated items from journalists, managers and media representatives, artists, and avid followers of a given subject. Material types range drastically, often depending on the topic. The collections containing materials on Parliament-Funkadelic, for instance, include memoranda and interoffice correspondences from Westbound, Warner Bros., and Casablanca record companies, personal notebooks and lyric sheets, tour itineraries, sheet music, legal documentation, newspaper and magazine clippings, photographs, videos, and even a sketch that George Clinton made on scratch paper while waiting for an interview at the RRHoF in 2011. These materials span several collections, many of which were not devoted to P-Funk alone.³⁷

There is one official collection reserved for P-Funk, called “Collection on George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic,” which is contained in two and a half Hollinger boxes, and comprises nearly one hundred individual items. According to the library’s online catalog, ARC-0148 was donated by Matthew Raska in 2009, and was not processed until 2011.³⁸ Nobody currently on staff at the Archives knows who Raska is, or has any awareness of the circumstances surrounding the collection’s provenance or donation. Endless searches and reviews of sources uncovered no information about Raska or any relationship he may have had with Parliament-Funkadelic.

³⁷ Other collections containing materials on the group are the Jules Fisher Papers, the *Rolling Stone* Collection, the Mo Ostin Collection, the Art Collins Papers, the Howard Kramer Collection, the Jane Scott Papers, the Michael Ochs Collection, and a series of photograph files. The total sum of materials adds up to several hundred items.

³⁸ “Collection on George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic (Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum Collection),” <http://catalog.rockhall.com/catalog/ARC-0148>, accessed 20 March 2016.

The contents of the “Collection on George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic” (ARC-0148) are diverse. The origins and significance of some materials are clear, while others are more puzzling. For example, some of the first items in Box 1/Folder 1³⁹ are carbon copies of “Phonograph Record Sessions Report” documents, production papers, and memoranda all pertaining to the 1990 film *Graffiti Bridge*, which was written and directed by the iconic pop star Prince. This find is not surprising given that Clinton contributed to the film as an actor as well as a musician, recording parts of the soundtrack with P-Funk members Garry Shider and Michael “Clip” Payne.⁴⁰ Additionally, Clinton and Prince had a personal and professional history that extends as far back as Prince’s early years as a recording artist. In fact, Clinton had been a consistent influence upon Prince’s music, and the close professional relationship they shared continued until Prince’s death in 2016. In fact, on May 6, 1997, Prince delivered the speech that officially inducted Parliament-Funkadelic into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (their induction took place alongside that of Joni Mitchell, Buffalo Springfield, the Bee Gees, and Syd Nathan, among others).⁴¹ ARC-0148 includes other materials pertaining to artists that P-Funk either influenced or directly produced, such as lyric sheets to songs by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Parlet, and Bernie Worrell. The inclusion of these materials in a collection devoted to Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic speaks both to the presence of close professional

³⁹ Henceforth, the numerical indicators for Box, Folder, and Item will take the form x.y.z., following the collection number. For example, Box 1/Folder 6/Item 2 in the present collection would be identified as ARC-0148.1.6.2. If no particular item is specified within a folder, the last digit will be omitted. Boxes without specified folders will simply be named by the box number.

⁴⁰ Warner Bros. Records, “Phonograph Record Sessions Report,” Soundtrack Single, 6 January 1990. Carbon copy. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives, ARC-0148.1.1. Accessed 21 March 2016. Names of personnel are listed in unidentified handwriting on the back of the document.

⁴¹ Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, “Prince Inducts Parliament-Funkadelic into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,” 10 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbS2dIADcsg>, accessed 31 January 2017.

relationships as well as the extensive nature of the P-Funk “Mob,” a term used by journalists and members of P-Funk themselves to signify the condition of the collective as a loose conglomerate, as opposed to self-contained bands.

Among the more provocative items, however, are the lyric sheets in Box 2 for the Parliament songs “Flash Light” (ARC-0148.2.1.3) and “Funkentelechy” (ARC-0148.2.1.4). These lyrics were written with a combination of pencil and blue pen, which seem to indicate the performers of specific lines. For example, in the “Flash Light” lyrics, lines recited by the Sir Nose character are written in pen, and the chorus chants “flash light,” “neon light,” and “ha da da de, da da, ha da da da da” are in pencil. This version of the lyrics loosely corresponds to the final recorded version of the song, the spoken-word interjections deviating somewhat by the second page. This possibly indicates that these particular lyrics were written down after the song had been composed, but shortly before the recording process was completed. The lyric sheets for “Funkentelechy,” similarly, appear to be a draft, with edits and additions clearly visible. Another copy of “Funkentelechy,” ARC-0148.2.1.23 follows the album recording more closely and thus appears to be a final draft. Also written in a combination of ink and pencil, these lyric sheets notate the vocal texturing of the song in detail. Numbers, arrangement parts, and even specific performer names are indicated in the margins next to specific lines, and these correspond with the final recorded version of the song. The level of detail is apparent when one considers that many of these lines are heard as simultaneous layers. Numerical indicators 1 and 2, which alternate on the page, overlap within the track itself. See Figure 1.3 for excerpts of ARC-0148.2.1.3 and ARC-0148.2.1.23.

I had originally thought that the discovery of new materials might magically revise the historiography of the group. Although I indeed found unique materials that added new layers to my research, what I eventually found more compelling was the opportunity to reflect upon how a subject's curation frames its historicization. Therefore, although those lyric sheets are fascinating

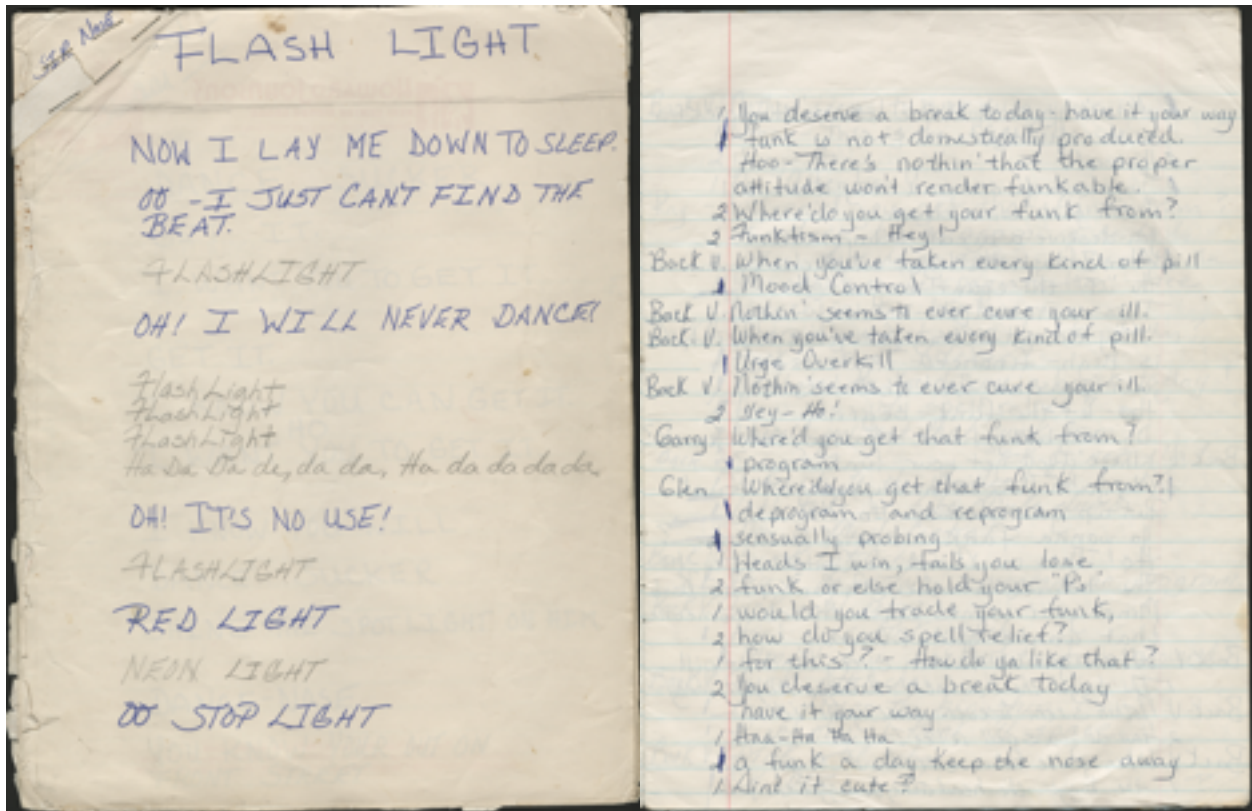


Figure 1.3: Excerpts from ARC-0148.2.1.3 (left) and ARC-0148.2.1.23 (right). Courtesy of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

simply as historical documents of P-Funk’s songwriting process, they are also pieces of a vexing puzzle. The handwriting, as with most of the handwritten items in ARC-0148, is currently unidentified. Across the lyric sheets, the handwriting switches between two distinct styles (exemplified in Figure 1.3). There are no outright indications of an author, though I have been able to make some informed deductions. The writing is either by George Clinton, Bernie Worrell, Archie Ivy (Clinton’s personal manager), or a combination of these people. That Clinton or

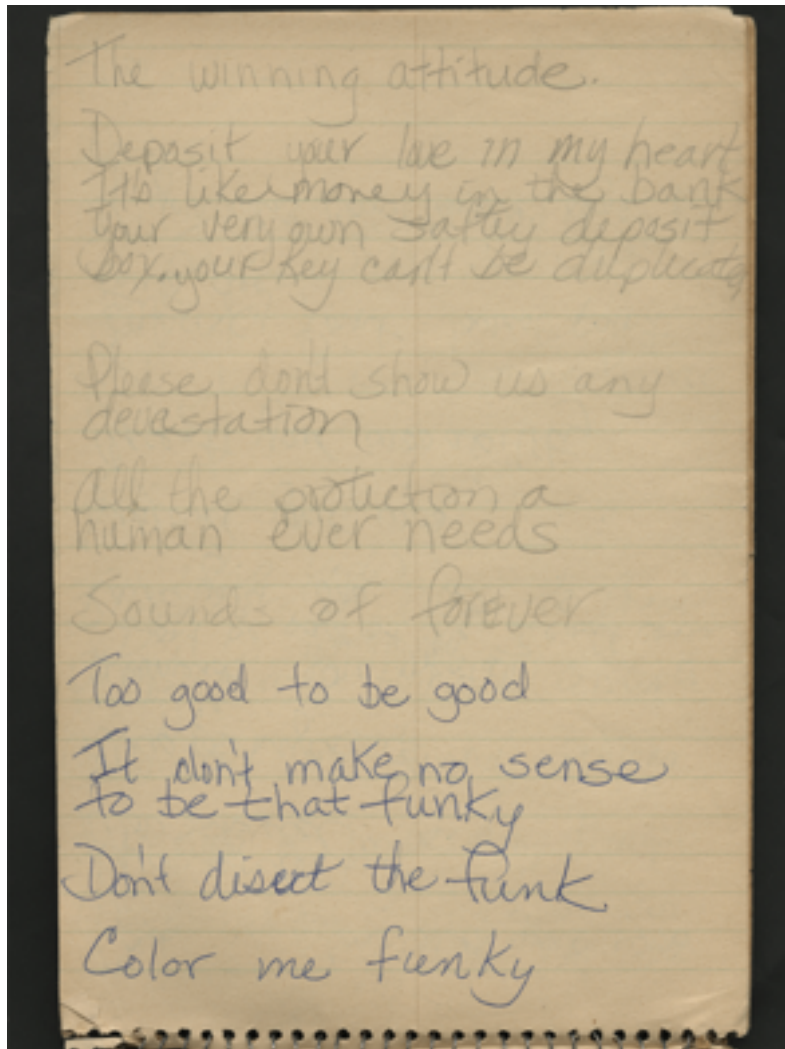


Figure 1.4: Excerpt from notebook ARC-0148.3.8.1. Courtesy of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Worrell penned these items was determined by the fact that all the lyrics included in the collection are either Parliament songs whose writing and production were directly managed by Clinton, songs recorded by other artists (such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers or Parlet) that were likely written by Clinton, or songs by Bernie Worrell, recorded on his debut album *All the Woo in the World* (1978). In fact, the handwriting style on Worrell's lyric sheets remains rather consistent with minimal (although some) shifts toward the other style; the former is more equally combined with the latter in the Parliament, Parlet, and Red Hot Chili Peppers lyric sheets. This

would seem to prove that most of these items are in Worrell's hand, except for the fact that he had no known connection to the Chili Peppers or their album *Freaky Styley*, which Clinton produced. Confusing the issue further are the twenty notebooks contained across two boxes of ARC-0148. Items ARC-0148.2.2.1 through ARC-0148.3.10.1 consist of notebooks serving a variety of purposes. Some of them include personal notes and reminders, grocery lists, and more drafts of lyrics; most of them contain a series of ruminations, one-liners and quips pertaining to The Funk. See Figure 1.4 for an example of one of the predominant handwriting styles in ARC-0148.3.8.1. These notebooks are where Archie Ivy becomes a possibility. In Clinton's autobiography, he explains that Ivy had become affiliated with P-Funk in the early 1970s, and had become an integral partner in the development and coherence of Parliament's ideological branding during their middle period. He recalls,

Archie became a regular in the P-Funk camp and then a member of the inner circle...he was the one who wrote down all the crazy ideas and began to organize them into a coherent message. If I made a joke or a pun, if I spouted a slogan just for fun, Archie would get it down on paper, where it started to take on a more profound significance. It's a good thing, too, because my handwriting and my spelling were awful...Archie's official title was personal manager, which increasingly meant confidant and soundboard and brain annex.⁴²

This recollection points to the historiographical import of the handwriting and its unknown authorship. Although Clinton suggests that Ivy may be the hand responsible for these pages, there is no record in the Archives conclusively identifying who wrote the notes or transcribed the lyrics. While Clinton's statement does increase the possibility that Ivy penned them, the ambiguity and unknown provenance of the materials in the collection renders any final determination problematic. Clinton's passing remark about his own handwriting and spelling also opens the possibility that he, himself, wrote in the notebooks; indeed, some of the handwriting

⁴² George Clinton and Ben Greenman, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 125.

seems rather careless, with certain words misspelled (e.g. “disect” instead of “dissect”). Whoever the author(s) may be, because the handwriting is rather consistent within the two styles across the notebooks and lyric sheets, the evidence suggests that the same person (or the same two people) wrote or transcribed all of these documents. If Ivy is the true author, this would mean that he, along with artist Pedro Bell (mentioned above), was a key member of the P-Funk “Mob” that did not play an instrument, but greatly contributed to the ideologies and aphorisms associated with P-Funk.⁴³

Ideally, one would be able to discern an answer either through deductive reasoning—which, in this case, has not led to any concrete conclusions—or by seeking further information from informed persons. Unfortunately, upon asking the archivists if they had any ideas about the handwriting, they informed me that there was little or no information to that end; furthermore, Clinton himself had visited the Archives in 2015 to promote his recent autobiography, and when he was shown these documents, he did not recognize the handwriting himself. This does not necessarily discount the theory that Ivy, Worrell, or even Clinton was author, but it may lessen the likelihood that Clinton was the responsible hand. Without further information, though, the case remains open.

This mystery provokes questions about the nature of historiography and its relation to archival curation. In an ideal situation, all of the above uncertainties would be readily resolvable; in fact, some simple clues would probably reveal who the author(s) of the lyrics and notebooks are. But why does it matter? It is precisely its unanswerability that makes the situation such a valuable contribution to P-Funk historiography. If a historiography comprises the examination of

⁴³ The various lines written in these notebooks include, for example, “One nation under funk,” “It don’t make no sense to be that funky,” and “Getting down on the One.”

discourses and historical constructions of a subject, then an archival collection certainly has much to offer. The existence, organization, and presentation of a collection in a setting such as the Archives—as well as the presence of Parliament-Funkadelic materials in other collections—demonstrates a very specific approach to the subject’s historicization by the collector, donor, and archival staff. That approach is guided by the collector’s potential relationship to the given subject, the nature of the collection itself, the reason for its donation, and the standards of organization and documentation of archival catalogs. The primary concern of the intersecting interpretive communities at hand—the participants of an archival process that includes the authors of the documents, Matthew Raska, and the Archives, among many possible others—was the preservation and organization of rare documents and materials that came into being during the life of Parliament-Funkadelic during what Vincent calls the Third Funk Dynasty, a historical period that frames these materials, and is simultaneously framed by them.

Outside of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, there is another substantial collection regarding Parliament-Funkadelic: *The Motherpage*,⁴⁴ an Internet database of P-Funk information, including the entire discography of Parliament-Funkadelic and related projects through 1997—the year the page was apparently last updated—as well as lyrics, album reviews, artwork, a bibliography, a list of P-Funk samples in hip hop music, a FAQ page, and other categories. Though it is quite different than an archive of primary source documents, as an online source *The Motherpage* is immediately accessible to the general public, in contrast with the Archives whose physical materials are mostly only accessible in person. The website was managed by Robert Clough in collaboration with dozens of contributors, all listed on the website

⁴⁴ Robert Clough, *The Motherpage* (1997), <http://mother.pfunkarchive.com/>, accessed 2 September 2016.

for reference. One example of this is the review page for *First Thangs* (1994), the reissue of material on the 1970 Parliament album *Osmium* along with other unreleased recordings. The reviews contained therein were contributed by three different writers, and are a simple way for one to gather informed opinions and interpretations of the music. As somewhat of a counterpart to the Archives, *The Motherpage* shares a similar dialogue with its subject, but was compiled for the purpose of providing the general public with an easily accessible archive of Parliament-Funkadelic materials and information. It is also essential to keep in mind that this database was compiled more than ten years before Matthew Raska donated the “Collection on George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic” to the Archives. While it is unfortunate that the page has not been updated in twenty years, it still stands as an essential source for P-Funk historians of any variety.

Afrofuturism in Perspective

Throughout P-Funk scholarship, great emphasis has been placed on “Afrofuturism” as a framework for understanding the collective’s aesthetic philosophy. Coined by Mark Dery in his 1993 essay “Black to the Future,”⁴⁵ Afrofuturism refers to any artistic or cultural production that reimagines the possibilities of black experience, particularly in the West, often through the lens of art, the politics of technology, and speculative fiction. Ingrid LaFleur, an art curator and advocate of this aesthetic philosophy, explained its general purpose in a TEDx talk at Fort Greene, Brooklyn, New York: “I generally define Afrofuturism as imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens. I see Afrofuturism as a way to encourage experimentation,

⁴⁵ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in “Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1993), 735-788.

reimagine identities, and activate liberation.”⁴⁶ In practice, Afrofuturist productions tend to explore potential interactions between people from diverse cultural vantage points—whether black or otherwise—and the growing horizons of technology, medicine, or other more fantastical contexts in the realm of science fiction related to the human potential for self-destruction and/or salvation. Ytasha Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* and the *2212: Book of Rayla* science fiction multimedia series, approaches the manifestations of Afrofuturism from a subjective, pseudo-academic perspective. As of this writing, hers is the most up-to-date and extensive manifesto on Afrofuturist media.

Womack’s chapter “Mothership in the Key of Mars” places the work of George Clinton and P-Funk alongside that of experimental jazz musician Sun Ra, Jamaican dub producer Lee “Scratch” Perry, and Jimi Hendrix, all of whom have been credited as vanguards of musical Afrofuturism. Indeed, from the mid-1950s through the 1970s Sun Ra and his Arkestra, in stage attire resembling both astronauts from the future and Egyptian gods from the past, shook the foundations of jazz with wildly transcendent “free” music that eschewed meter, functional jazz harmony, and form; Lee Perry manipulated reggae records with post-production effects including panning, reverberation, and remixing individual tracks to create fractured and amorphous sonic adventures; Jimi Hendrix, renowned for his explorations of the limits in guitar virtuosity, took advantage of electric timbres, distortion, and harmonics, reshaping musical sensibilities from gospel music for the drug-induced culture of psychedelia, while simultaneously contorting the hypermasculine, commanding stage presence of James Brown into one that provoked outward, innovative imagination rather than outright political thought.

⁴⁶ TEDx Talks, “TEDxFortGreeneSalon - Ingrid LaFleur - Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism, 25 September 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7bCaSzk9Zc>, accessed 10 February 2017.

Womack discusses how P-Funk fit into this mold of other futuristic black musicians, especially highlighting their cosmogony, the Mothership metaphor, and their persistent, almost mechanical rhythms. Firmly in the Afrofuturist spirit, Womack states that P-Funk “created astral-liberation party music.”⁴⁷ She focuses primarily on the Mothership and the *Mothership Connection* album as the center of her discussion on P-Funk, claiming that the Mothership connects an African past with a future in which the cosmos become an extension of the African diaspora. Indeed, much of Afrofuturist discourse treats the Mothership or chariot trope as a metaphor for the forced displacement of Africans during the “Middle Passage” of the slave trade.⁴⁸ Afrofuturist discourse actively considers the potential for liberation not necessarily back across the Atlantic, but beyond Earth’s atmosphere—either physically, by means of a spiritual chariot, Arkestra, Mother Plane, or Mothership, or mentally by way of technology, spirituality, or art.

Afrofuturism is certainly a useful framework for thinking about P-Funk. They did, after all, offer transcendence via the spiritually-charged Mothership, sent to Earth by Dr. Funkenstein to reveal the power of The Funk hidden for millennia in the Great Pyramids.⁴⁹ Their blend of speculative fiction, technologies (repurposing familiar objects like sunglasses, radios, and flash lights, as well as creating new technologies like the bop gun), and invented spirituality was not mere fun and games. It was a source of inspiration for many black Americans in the 1970s

⁴⁷ Womack, 63.

⁴⁸ See Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 “Globalities: Possibilities of the Globe” (Summer 2003), 288.

⁴⁹ This is a widely recognized aspect of P-Funk cosmogony. For the sake of reference, see Scot Hacker, “Can You Get to That? The Cosmology of P-Funk,” *Stuck Between Stations*, 11 January 2011, <http://stuckbetweenstations.org/2011/01/11/cosmology-of-pfunk/>, accessed 15 November 2016.

confronting such post-civil rights issues as deindustrialization and subsequent economic marginalization, continued racism, a growing drug epidemic, and the tension of the Vietnam War. P-Funk stood alongside figures in other social arenas, such as Malcolm X (assassinated in the previous decade), the comedian Richard Pryor, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, and boxer-activist Muhammad Ali, as symbols of black freedom. The cultural influence of P-Funk's Afrofuturism extended into music in the post-P-Funk period, as in the Los Angeles electro-hop movement, gangsta rap, and G-Funk (see Chapter II for more on this).⁵⁰

Yet, there is a point at which an idea may become stifling, preventing the possible benefit of other perspectives. This, I believe, is a tangible concern surrounding P-Funk. On the one hand, Afrofuturism is a productive framework to guide interpretations of the group. Within the interpretive community of ethnic studies, for example, it is particularly useful to consider the politics of black experiences as they relate to modern art, philosophy, and technoculture. When, on the other hand, most of the substantial literature on Parliament-Funkadelic frames them as eccentric Afrofuturists—as many tend to do—the discourse may obscure other possible connections that may be both historically accurate and politically valuable.

J. Griffith Rollefson, for example, thoughtfully appropriates Paul Gilroy's term "anti-anti-essentialism" as a way to explicate the mission of Afrofuturism and its music.⁵¹ Anti-anti-

⁵⁰ Ibid., 106, 111.

⁵¹ Rollefson believes Gilroy's concept of "anti-anti-essentialism" is useful in terms of Afrofuturism because of the ways in which technology interacts with and contradicts ideas of black authenticity and discourses thereof. The technological innovations in black music, Gilroy argues, critique essentialist and anti-essentialist binarisms of black culture and racial identity—for example, W.E.B. Du Bois' "double consciousness." Rollefson applies Gilroy's concept specifically to Afrofuturist music, with attention to the cultural work it performs toward a post-"white Enlightenment universalis[t]" humanity. J. Griffith Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1, "Becoming: Blackness and the Musical Imagination" (Spring 2008), 90-92.

essentialism highlights the inadequacy and inaccuracy of both primitivist (or essentialist) and post-structuralist (or anti-essentialist) approaches to identity and authenticity theorizations that both devalue and preclude blackness as a viable cultural category.⁵² Afrofuturism, for Rollefson, is a way of challenging the perceived binarism of essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives on black authenticity, and provides us with a third option. I would like to further appropriate the idea of anti-anti-essentialism and apply it specifically to P-Funk. Despite its binary-resistant nature, the discourse of Afrofuturism has the potential of ideologically essentializing P-Funk. This is not to undermine the Afrofuturist tendencies supporting much of their work, but rather to emphasize that complete, comprehensive interpretations of P-Funk require one to assess their music and philosophy with nuance and contextual specificity. In fact, much of P-Funk's cosmology and mythology are a *means* to a grounded, very real end; even on the back cover of the *Mothership Connection* sleeve, the Mothership is docked at street level in an urban neighborhood (see the bottom right image of Figure 1.1). Other Parliament albums speculate future possibilities as a way of reimagining real lived situations—consider *Chocolate City* or the practicality of the bop gun in *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. Funkadelic albums (and accompanying art) that embrace the grotesque, extraterrestrial, and mythological use such imagery as metaphors for the real-life vulgarity of The Funk, as in *Cosmic Slop*. The liner notes for *Let's Take It to the Stage* and *One Nation Under a Groove* narrate situations that read like science fiction fused with profane locker room banter, and are intended as commentaries on the music industry and consumer culture. Afrofuturism, intended to be a transcendental philosophy, should not become a deterministic category for a group that, by its own nature, transcended

⁵² Ibid., 91.

categorization. Indeed, Afrofuturism itself employs transcendentalism as a means to applicable, terrestrial ends.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, an interpretive study of P-Funk demands an assessment of the stakeholders in the group's historicization. When Bloch discussed the necessary interdisciplinarity of historiography, he called for an interrogation of what Stanley Fish would later designate "interpretive communities." Some of those communities have been evaluated here, but printed text is only the beginning, especially taking into account the multimedia facets of P-Funk and its existence as an entity conceived and developed within popular culture. Taken as a whole, P-Funk's history has been told in a variety of ways, from contained historical texts to the curation and exhibit of documents—records and artifacts of a once-thriving dynasty. Their history has also been framed in a number of ways, whether politically in the context of domestic or international affairs, ideologically in the context of racial discourse, or as a combination of aesthetically- and politically-charged transcendentalism. Whatever the case may be, a fuller account of the P-Funk's story, which necessarily involves those who participated in their history by conveying it, is a demonstration of applied funkentelechy, revealing the simultaneous potentiality and being-at-work nature of The Funk as an ever-evolving phenomenon.

CHAPTER II

STEAL THE MOTHERFUNKIN' P: INTERGENERIC ECHOES OF P-FUNK

“Hypertextuality (and transtextuality as a whole) can offer us a new perspective when looking at, and listening to, music: different pieces of music are linked in a number of ways; they thus share certain features. Among other things, a knowledge of this network of interaction enables us to ‘understand’ a given piece better.”

-Serge Lacasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality in Recorded Popular Music”¹

“If you’re gonna steal the funk, steal the motherfunkin’ P.”

-George Clinton, “Martial Law” (1993)²

It would be negligent to write an encompassing study of P-Funk without due consideration of its stylistic networks. Some previous studies concerning the music of P-Funk have taken their various influences into account,³ while others have explored the music’s metamorphic nature as interpreted through its reshaping in popular music since the 1980s.⁴ This study seeks to interpret the aesthetic webs connecting the music of P-Funk’s middle period, the height of their commercial success (1974-1980⁵), to the music of their past and future. I will identify elements that the earliest iterations of P-Funk borrowed from their musical environment, as well as those that artists post-P-Funk have found compelling enough to perpetuate by reinterpreting and repurposing them. By treating observable musical phenomena as a species of

¹ Serge Lacasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality in Recorded Popular Music,” in *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, ed. Michael Talbot (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 57.

² George Clinton, “Martial Law,” *Hey Man...Smell My Finger*, Paisley Park 9 25518-2, 1993.

³ In References Cited, see Clinton and Greenman (2014); Rickey Vincent (1996); Oscar Bettison (2008); Anne Danielsen (2006).

⁴ In References Cited, see Rickey Vincent (1996); Justin A. Williams (2013); Maureen Mahon (2004); Loren Kajikawa (2015).

⁵ Refer to Chapter I for an explanation of these period designations.

historical evidence, I seek to identify those musical-cultural signifiers that span decades and testify to P-Funk's significance in American popular culture.

I begin my analysis with a discussion of the early, under-examined musical influences on Parliament-Funkadelic, namely the work of the doo-wop group Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers, and the productions by Motown Records. This will lead to an aesthetic study of the early Parliament album *Osmium* (1970), whose unusual and offhandedly hybrid aesthetic reflected contemporaneous Funkadelic releases *Funkadelic* (1970), *Free Your Mind...And Your Ass Will Follow* (1970), and *Maggot Brain* (1971), as well as the diverse repertoires of popular music that heavily influenced Clinton. Some of these sounds eventually found their way into Parliament's revival album, *Up For The Down Stroke* (1974), launching the group into their middle period. After this, the chapter will turn to music produced after P-Funk's middle period, primarily by other artists in funk rock, hip hop, neo-soul, and contemporary R&B.

Throughout the chapter, I employ the ideas of Serge Lacasse, who divides musical intertextuality into categories based on a particular recording's approach to borrowing. According to Lacasse's framework, musical borrowing can be autosonic when it directly reproduces the sound of a pre-existing text, or it can be allosonic when it merely imitates a previous text. A borrowed sound is syntagmatic when its basis is in musical material, or paradigmatic when it is instead based on stylistic features.⁶ Lacasse's autosonic-allosonic and syntagmatic-paradigmatic axes offer a precise framework for making sense of different musical relationships and influences. Paying attention to these webs of borrowing allows us to trace musical-cultural meanings embedded in vinyl grooves (or digital sound files) across the decades.

⁶ Lacasse, 35-58.

Purifying the Funk (1956–1970)

The notion of “Pure Funk,” of which the designation P-Funk is likely a derivative,⁷ may initially come across as oxymoronic. After all, the power of “funk,” according to many of its proponents, comes from its uncouth, flippant nature, often paired with deeply visceral music and incisive social commentary. In his pioneering book on the story of funk music, Rickey Vincent gives some hints as to the linguistic origins of the term in extramusical contexts: in Old English, for example, “funke” referred to a “‘strong smell’ or ‘big stink’,”⁸ and was typically associated with blackness. Its racialized connotations spoke to a difference in social values, wherein a perceptible dichotomy lay between “what is considered good in the West (no scent?)” and “what is considered good in Africa (heavy scent).”⁹ When applied to the music of black Americans, ranging from jazz to soul to funk, it similarly referred to a particular visceral and earthy quality signified by an emphasis on rhythm and movement, repetitive and satisfying instrumental layers, and often ribald subject matter that refrained from taking itself too seriously. Much funk music has been informally labeled “sex music,” an association aided by artists like James Brown, Barry White, Isaac Hayes, and George Clinton, who drew attention to their sexuality. On the broad meaning of such a vast concept, Clinton succinctly stated, “Definition of funk? [A] warm, damp place that gives life.”¹⁰ This is an appropriate definition because, as it has been received, funk

⁷ This was introduced as a possibility in the liner notes for the CD release of Parliament’s *Motor Booty Affair*, Casablanca 842 621-2, 1990. CD.

⁸ Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996), 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ James Hale, *The Story of Funk: One Nation Under A Groove* (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014).

does seem to “give life”; it is, at its core, music for movement, or at least centralizes the body¹¹ and liberates it, whether on the dance floor or in the bedroom. For its devoted fans, funk musically represents the essence of what it is to be human—genuine, soulful, sometimes sweaty, always invested. In other words, there is an apparent correlation between the volume of perspiration and the purity of one’s funk.

Consequently, with the concept of P-Funk as “Pure Funk,” there is an implied parameter through which the racy soulfulness—both musical and conceptual—in funk becomes normalized. There is an inherent gesture toward the ideal, the experience of funk’s pure, raw state; the name “P-Funk,” then, which now refers to the particular subgenre of funk produced by the eponymous collective, at its foundation indicates their attainment of that purity through their music. In the midst of an evolving music culture, Parliament-Funkadelic reclaimed funk; further, they retroactively laid their claim to *the Funk* (whose stylization as a proper noun further denotes idealism) in its prehistoric, unfiltered, transcendental state.

In his study of psychedelic funk, Oscar Bettison said of the musical-cultural context surrounding Funkadelic’s *Maggot Brain* (1971) that “funk [is] a representation of a new awakening of black consciousness and the re-appropriation of other genres of popular music that also have their roots in African-American music.”¹² Bettison argues for the influence and pervasiveness of gospel music in Funkadelic, a powerful progenitor of some black popular musics (some of which were capitalized upon by white musical sensibilities and mainstream consumer trends). This re-appropriation of black soulfulness is clearly defined in Funkadelic’s

¹¹ This can be considered either literally, in terms of dancing bodies and/or sexualized bodies, or in terms of an ethnic or cultural centralization of specifically black bodies.

¹² Oscar Bettison, “‘I Wanna Take You Higher’: The Stylistic Development and Cultural Dissemination of Post-Psychedelic Funk Music (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2008), 71.

1970 release “What Is Soul,” wherein Clinton proclaims, amid a rhythmic, bluesy accompaniment and compact group vocals, that soul is “a ham hock in your cornflakes,” “the ring around your bathtub,” and “a joint rolled in toilet paper.” With these statements invoking stereotypes of black culture grounded in poverty, vice, and southern cuisine, Funkadelic thus identifies a particular black authenticity; within these specific parameters of blackness, “all that is good is nasty,” which is to say “pure.” Thus, when Parliament sang in 1975 “Make my funk the P-Funk/ I want my funk uncut,” they both pursue and realize the ideal: pure funk, which is to say, unabashed, profane, down-and-dirty soul with an irresistible groove. The ideal comes through musically via the intergeneric doors opened by psychedelic rock, 1960s funk, doo-wop, and the gospel-tinged soul of Motown Records.¹³ The essence of P-Funk’s retroactive reclamation of funk is a historical movement that applies reinterpretations of the past to the present moment. But such a broad palette of influences begs the question: What, exactly, does pure funk sound like, and how was it purified?

Among the array of musical genres developing in the 1950s, doo-wop was truly sensational. Imbued with the harmonic layers of gospel music and with the driving repetitive structure of early R&B, doo-wop would become the basis for many later rock and roll groups and soul artists. In the mid 1950s, the young and tragic Frankie Lymon, with his group The Teenagers, sparked a new fire in American popular music. Lymon’s impassioned recordings and explosive stage presence not only predated P-Funk but also James Brown, whose legendary exhibit of showmanship a decade later at the 1964 Teenage Music International (TAMI) Awards

¹³ This section will focus on Frankie Lymon and the music of Motown Records, models often neglected in considerations of P-Funk’s musical aesthetics. Although Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, and Sly Stone are indispensable influences, their work is more widely acknowledged as such; the impact of doo-wop and Motown soul will therefore be given more emphasis in response to this current lacuna in scholarship.

is more often regarded as ground zero for funk. But it was the Teenagers' 1956 hit "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" that originally inspired Clinton to assemble his own group in the mid-1950s.¹⁴ The compelling rhythmic force in many of Lymon's songs, coupled with his unmatched vocal dynamism and romantic performances that invoked both emotional and physical love placed him firmly in the tradition of African American musicians before him, as well as allowing him to be a spur in the side of later funk artists.

Although the raw, visceral power of James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, and musicians who recorded for Stax Records are more directly identifiable as archetypal progenitors of funk, Lymon's emotional and sexual innocence, which sometimes seemed sincere and at other times more knowing and playful (as in "Mama Don't Allow It"), served as a catalyst for the youthful deviance that P-Funk would embrace and take to new limits. Danceable and jocular songs like "Little Bitty Pretty One" and "The ABC's Of Love" suggest a naïve, adolescent sexuality while also showcasing Lymon's melismatic vocalizations that stimulate musical, and possibly physical, pleasure for the listener. In "The ABC's Of Love," a swinging eight-bar form in cut time frames the alphabetically progressing lyrics, in which the narrator confesses his desire to be closer to the woman he loves. After the first complete verse, Lymon initiates an eight-bar vocalization that sets up a boisterous saxophone solo, reminiscent of the structure in "Why Do Fools Fall In Love"; this formula, then, seems to have carried aesthetic weight in its historical context. The non-lexical melisma between verse and solo seems to mediate a transition from a verbalized, filtered expression of emotion to unbridled passion that words would only stifle. This type of

¹⁴ George Clinton and Ben Greenman, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard On You?* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 12-13.

musical movement, which ostensibly signifies physical movement, satisfies the desire for fulfillment in a musical climax.

This same dynamic is also evident in other songs that Lymon recorded. In 1961, doo-wop singer Barry Mann released his recording of “Who Put The Bomp (In The Bomp, Bomp, Bomp),” a love song that uses humorous lyrics to convey an overarching sexual innuendo. If the suggestion is not clear enough by the end of the song, Mann recites a spoken outro that, primarily through his laborious use of vibrato and his diaphragmatic sound quality, becomes a rather explicit sexual signifier. Lymon’s recording of Mann’s song shifts the narrative perspective slightly. Whereas Mann asks, “Who put the bomp in the bomp ba bomp ba bomp?” Lymon, whose voice has aged considerably since “The ABCs Of Love,” replies to him—“*I* put the bomp...”—asserting his own sexual agency. Additionally, the outro is much more explicit in its eroticism than in Mann’s recording, especially with the emphatic, nearly orgasmic repetition of the lyrics. This dramatic type of expressiveness, not wholly representative of Lymon’s recordings, is present throughout his work to lesser degrees; in his vigorous melismatic bursts, as well as in the climactic instrumental solos and spirited vocal accompaniments provided by The Teenagers, there is a readily apparent libido. Frank sexuality and irreverence, themes prevalent throughout much African and African American musics since the nineteenth century, have made their way throughout history, as Robin Kelley has noted, from the “baadman tales of the late nineteenth century” to the blues, and eventually to gangsta rap. Black expressive vernacular culture, as he puts it, prioritizes such themes in traditions like Signifyin(g) and playing the dozens.¹⁵ Games and other forms of socializing are not the limit of these discourses, however;

¹⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 187.

instances of boasting, toasting, and comedy through subversive obscenities exist in African American literature, film, and the performing arts. Lymon’s musical commentary on Barry Mann’s song sustains that tradition, adding to a body of cultural texts, as would P-Funk’s notorious contributions: crude humor, sex, and grotesque imagery galore.

Even in those songs that seem outwardly innocent, in which Lymon courts a potential partner, much of the material is physical in nature or is contextualized by physically driving musical material. In some recordings, like “Why Do Fools Fall In Love” and “I Put The Bomp,” the accompanying vocal harmonies vocalize on the syllables “ooh wah,” the rhythmic pattern of which is balanced by the drummer’s backbeats. Rhythmic simplicity in the vocal accompaniment, rather than enabling musical stasis, drives the groove forward; the rhythmic counterpoint set up by the ensemble acts as a perpetual musical motor. See Figure 2.1 for a clear

The musical score for 'The ABCs of Love' (1956) by Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers is presented in two systems. The first system includes Vocals, Bass, and Drums. The second system includes Vox, B (Bass), and D (Drums). The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The vocal line consists of sustained chords on the first and third beats of every other measure. The bass line features a steady eighth-note pattern with accents on the first and third beats. The drum line provides a consistent backbeat on the second and fourth beats.

Figure 2.1: Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, “The ABCs of Love” (1956). Reduction of Verse 1. Note the rhythmic counterpoint: The bass emphasizes beats 1 and 3 of each measure; the drums emphasize beats 2 and 4; the vocals emphasize the first beat of every alternate measure. Before, during, and after Lymon’s career, this rhythmic formula has proven to be a successful one.

example of this effect in “The ABCs Of Love.” The transcription is a reduction, intended primarily to display the rhythmic motion of the voices, bass, and drums. This type of musical architecture, simple though it may be, left an impressive footprint, both the stability of respective parts and rudimentary rhythmic counterpoint in doo-wop and early rock and roll becoming characteristic aspects of P-Funk’s music; Clinton seems to have reveled in the balance between the musical stability and subversive thematic instability for which Lymon was adored.

Concerning P-Funk’s approach to rhythm and groove, one striking feature is their overall stability despite the interplay and layering of rhythmic parts. Essentially, the inherent rhythmic repetition in the drum track of a given P-Funk song underneath complementary rhythmic elements opens a space for musical, cerebral, and somatic explorations of those sonic relationships. In her study of funk grooves, Anne Danielsen emphasizes the salience of “the One” in P-Funk; the One, a signifier for the musical downbeat and a philosophical foundation for P-Funk’s cosmology, is given weight through repetition and an intense feeling of trajectory empowered by the band’s rhythmic counterpoint. The stability granted by the One, perhaps more than rhythmic intricacy, is viscerally compelling.¹⁶ Scholars including Danielsen and Rickey Vincent have linked many of the musical origins of funk music to comparable West African musics. While it is not the purpose here to trace specific phenomena to African music, it is interesting that John Miller Chernoff, in his groundbreaking ethnography *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, comments upon the role of musical and rhythmic stability toward the goal of a successful musical experience. Even patterns that might seem complex or unstable at a given moment are carried by a more skeletal foundation that governs the form of the music:

¹⁶ Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 125-35, 168-70.

Naturally, any [rhythmic] variation will stand out, bringing into sharper focus a particular rhythm and its corresponding relationships, but since the music is built from many rhythms, such a concentration of emphasis, if continued, would limit the dimensions of the other rhythms to one rhythmic perspective...highly accomplished musicians will often play an extremely simple rhythm throughout a dance without introducing any changes.¹⁷

There is, then, great significance in the rhythmic interplay and resultant stability of P-Funk. Like the music of James Brown, for instance, which explores rhythmic elements as cultural signifiers of black musical self-determination, that of the Family Stone and Funkadelic (as well as Parliament in later years) prioritized that rhythmic stability. To this, the latter two bands added intense sonic coloration. Furthermore, the synergistic nature of the ensemble allows for an even more compelling, imbricated texture; this feature is also characteristic of Motown's influence over P-Funk, which this chapter will soon address.

It is features such as these, not totally unique phenomena but definitive attributes of musical character, that became evident in P-Funk's formative years. In 1967, several years into The Parliaments' activities as a band, they recorded "(I Wanna) Testify" through Revilot Records, which became an instant hit. It became an iconic song for the group from 1967 through the early period of P-Funk, and is still recognized fondly by fans today as one of their classics. The song has seen numerous iterations in live and recorded formats, all exhibiting starkly different musical characters. The first iteration of the song, which The Parliaments pressed in 1967, shares many features with Lymon's recordings in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet the song's drum beat, indeed more compelling than some of Lymon's songs, approaches the groove from a very different rhythmic sensibility. The drums equally emphasize every beat, deemphasizing the

¹⁷ John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 59-60.

backbeats and allowing the One to gain more textural prevalence; over a rhythmically insistent groove, the vocals are syncopated, judiciously anticipating the beat amid a clearly confident assertion of love. Juxtaposing “Testify” with Lymon’s work reveals Parliament’s recording to be an allosonic-paradigmatic hypertext, in Lacasse’s terms: imitating the style of Lymon’s catalog rather than the substance.

The profound impact of Frankie Lymon on Clinton’s career cannot be overstated. In his autobiography, Clinton admits that Lymon’s dynamic performances, consistently captured in his recordings, largely inspired his drive to explore the musicianship and performativity of the Parliaments.¹⁸ In a similar way, Lymon also had an impact on Berry Gordy, Jr., of Motown Records, becoming a model for Motown’s songwriting and arranging. From their layers of background vocals and instrumentals to their playful love songs and charismatic stage presence, Lymon’s catalogue provided a template for Motown’s image and sound. To be sure, Clinton’s involvement with Motown in the 1960s strengthened Lymon’s influence, giving direction to P-Funk’s early trajectory. Although Clinton would take such sensibilities to cosmic extremes, the earthy physicality of Lymon’s recordings exists throughout P-Funk’s early stages—albeit with somewhat more unruly hairstyles and outlandish attire—and still remains intact today. Much of that experimentalism, evident in Funkadelic’s early music, can be attributed to the combined influences of Jimi Hendrix’s solo work, Sly and the Family Stone, and the later stages of the Beatles’ career. All of these acts were themselves products of the thriving counterculture in the United States during the 1960s. Funkadelic—which initially existed only as The Parliaments’

¹⁸ Clinton and Greenman, 12-13.

accompanying band—injected The Parliaments’ clean-cut innocence with edgy psychedelia that is immediately apparent both musically and visually.

In 1969, Parliament-Funkadelic made a television appearance for the *Say Brother* program (now called *Basic Black*) in which they performed “What Is Soul?” and “Testify.” The band’s sheer energy seems to drive wild a clearly intoxicated George Clinton, who eventually falls to the floor during the performance. “Testify,” here, is the same song that they recorded in 1967 only inasmuch as its lyrics, melody, and structure go. Beyond that, it is barely recognizable; the song’s tempo was raised dramatically, and the instrumental arrangement utilizes a distorted guitar, a testament to the likes of Hendrix and Cream. The psychedelic, climactic ending, which almost entirely departs from “Testify” and transforms into an extended coda, devolves into fascinating chaos: Eddie Hazel and Tawl Ross take advantage of distorted guitar feedback, employing harmonics and drones—Hazel even plays the guitar behind his head briefly, invoking Hendrix’s exhibitionism. Tiki Fulwood’s bombastic drumming foreshadows John Bonham. Indeed, the overall texture might remind one of Led Zeppelin or the early years of Pink Floyd. This was certainly a spectacle in 1969, as was their 1970 broadcast on the *Upbeat* television variety show that featured the group in their outlandish afro-naut garb performing “I Got A Thing”; to be sure, P-Funk would develop a reputation for the spectacular, eschewing the tame and the expected.

Parliament-Funkadelic’s peers Sly and the Family Stone were also steeped in the culture of psychedelia. While drug use eventually led to the Family Stone’s dissolution, it seemed to propel P-Funk forward with revolutionary momentum and became a characteristic element in many of their songs, from their inception, lyrics, and overarching concepts to the recording

process and performances. P-Funk is, of course, infamous for their tremendous concerts at which sobriety was exceedingly rare, as well as for their adventurous, often drug-induced recording sessions. The legendary anecdote about the “Maggot Brain” recording session is well known among P-Funk’s dedicated fans: during a particularly intense LSD trip in the studio, Clinton suggested to Eddie Hazel that he play his guitar solo as if his mother had just died.¹⁹ The result was one of Funkadelic’s most enduring and iconic tracks. The song is completely instrumental (excluding the spoken monologue before the music’s entrance), but Hazel makes his guitar truly sing; Oscar Bettison argues that the extemporized solo is heavily informed by gospel music, in which vocalists embellish simple lines with heavy ornamentations that largely obscure the melody, yet leave recognizable portions intact.²⁰ This approach to soloing is not unique to Hazel, and has been explored by countless musicians in genres from the blues to psychedelic rock (one notable example of this is Jimi Hendrix’s solo in “Machine Gun”). Additionally, gospel has informed the style of many P-Funk musicians; Glenn Goins’ powerful voice, as heard in “Bop Gun (Endangered Species)” and live performances of “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” suffuses the music with a striking sense of spirituality. Through several of its members, P-Funk in its early period was inspired by the improvisatory and timbral fire of gospel music, which was easily complemented by the synthesized spirituality psychedelic drugs offered to its users. The relationship between gospel and psychedelia is, in fact, historically remarkable for the way in which a culture characterized by mental and spiritual exploration was sounded via spiritually

¹⁹ Clinton and Greenman, 103.

²⁰ Bettison, 63-64.

informed music. For P-Funk, this was also achieved through the vast sonic palette cultivated by Clinton.

In a 1970 interview for *Creem* magazine, Clinton stated that among his goals as a career musician was for Parliament-Funkadelic—at that time often referred to as the Parliafunkadelicment Thang—to become the “black” version of the Beatles.²¹ Considering the direction in which his group was quickly headed, this was an appropriate analogy. By that time, the Beatles had turned to electronic music and avant-gardism as a guiding aesthetic; one need not do much more than name “Revolution #9” for familiar listeners to understand this. Before the release of “Revolution,” the Beatles had been experimenting with electronics, sound collage, and *musique concrète*. To contemporaneous listeners, their late period was uniquely accessible yet esoteric, comfortably familiar yet excitingly novel. In a similar vein, Funkadelic’s early releases, including their eponymous debut album (1970) and *Free Your Mind...And Your Ass Will Follow* (1971) involved Clinton exploring the limits of studio production: reverberation, panning, distortion, feedback—these sonic effects can be heard in various combinations in tracks like “Mommy, What’s A Funkadelic?,” “Free Your Mind,” and “Maggot Brain,” among others.²² Even songs redone from The Parliaments’ catalog, such as “Good Old Music” have morphed previously straightforward songs with the timbral colors of psychedelic funk.

By repurposing their own music in new musical environments, P-Funk actively interpreted its own context and historicized itself. Consider, for example, their song “Good Old Music.” Originally released in 1968, the song was redone in 1970 on Funkadelic’s debut album.

²¹ Geoffrey Jacques, “Parliafunkadelicment Thang,” in *Creem* (October 1970), 27. Retrieved from Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives, 23 March 2016.

²² Clinton and Greenman, 103-104.

The song, which has been sampled by hip hop artists Ice Cube, 2Pac, Slum Village, Kool G Rap, MC Lyte, and others, was embellished with a longer drum introduction, addition of electric guitars, and an extended form that features (unsurprisingly) a guitar solo. The trashy instrumental timbres, however, undergird largely the same choral parts heard in the original recording. The changes evident in the 1970 recording, as well as the similarities, indicate Funkadelic's effort to make their music relevant to contemporary rock consumers, many of whom were white. Their studious attention to current trends in the music industry would continue to the present day; in 1996, Clinton released *Greatest Funkin' Hits*, which included a reworking of "Flash Light" featuring Q-Tip, Busta Rhymes, and Ol' Dirty Bastard, "Atomic Dog" featuring Coolio, and "Knee Deep" featuring Digital Underground. However, P-Funk's ongoing reinterpretation and reinvention of itself began as early as 1969, and is an integral characteristic of its musical historicization. Whereas countless musicians would find their own ways to repurpose P-Funk's sound, the group always seemed to be changing its own parameters.

The Case For *Osmium* (1967–1974)

In 1970, Parliament released *Osmium* on Invictus Records, and set the stage for what both P-Funk groups would eventually become. Although the album was not commercially successful and is largely considered unfavorable by many fans, I argue that it exhibits a unique blend of The Parliaments' 1960s aesthetic and Funkadelic's early musical sensibilities, and offers a glimpse of what Parliament would sound like when they revived the name in 1974. From a historical perspective, *Osmium* is situated at an interesting aesthetic junction; it is an amalgamation of

genres, a mirror²³ that is at once its own discrete entity and reflective of that which surrounds it.

The album is, then, both a text from which one can read a thorough account of music history, and a crucible for new directions in funk music. Specifically, the musical environment surrounding Parliament-Funkadelic at the time of *Osmium*'s release included the fading power of doo-wop, the same psychedelia that gave Funkadelic its momentum, and the vibrant empire of Motown Records.

Motown's unique approach to songwriting was informed by Berry Gordy's time working for an automobile manufacturer in 1955; his affinity for assembly line production eventually found its way into all aspects of the "Motown sound": the ubiquity of the Funk Brothers on their recordings, the uniformity in attire and choreography—one of the reasons The Parliaments were not signed after their audition was their physical appearance, which was not homogenous enough for the label²⁴—and even the songwriting process itself. Holland-Dozier-Holland (HDH), the flagship writing team for Motown through most of the 1960s, was synonymous with Motown's formulaic process and product. 1964's "Where Did Our Love Go," as well as eight subsequent chart toppers, were all written by HDH and recorded by the Supremes, one of Motown's representative groups, who was eventually criticized by the public for their homogenous image and sound, and the sterile quality of their songs. Martha & The Vandellas' "Nowhere To Run" (1965) centralized automobiles as elemental to the Motown aesthetic with a music video that featured the singers strutting through an active Mustang factory.

²³ David C. Paul, in his book *Charles Ives in the Mirror: American Histories of an Iconic Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013) argues that the interpretive communities surrounding—or including—a given historical subject act as a mirror that reflects the subject's surrounding cultural sensibilities. As the Introduction and Chapter I explain, his work is one model upon which this study has been built.

²⁴ Clinton and Greenman, 35-36.

Gordy was not subtle about the parallelism between automobile culture and the musical empire he cultivated in Detroit, previously a city with no distinct musical identity; indeed, even the name “Motown” is an homage to the Motor City, and the prevalence of automobiles in the city—which, by association, implies a prevalence of car radios—prompted Motown to produce songs that were easy to listen to, compact in their form, and appealing across cultural lines. One of the characteristics of Motown that separated it from the Chicago blues scene through the early 1960s was its (at the time) purported colorblindness, which seemed to be in contrast to the raw soul perceived from record labels such as Stax or Chess. Shortly after the Detroit riot of 1967, Motown began releasing more socially conscious music and changing the image of their performers in order to more visibly connect with black listeners. The Supremes, for instance, became Diana Ross & The Supremes in an attempt to annihilate their perceived homogeneity, and their image shifted dramatically away from the glamorous attire and hairstyles toward a realistic and grounded fashion sensibility that more closely resembled Detroit’s black population.

George Clinton began working as a songwriter for Jobete, a publishing company owned by Motown through Berry Gordy, Jr., in the early 1960s²⁵ after The Parliaments’ unsuccessful audition for the record label. During his time with Motown, Clinton laid much of the musical groundwork for Parliament-Funkadelic. He wrote songs like “I’m Into Something And I Can’t Shake It Loose” and “I’ll Bet You,” songs that both P-Funk and other artists have recorded. The Parliaments continued to release records through Revilot during this time, including the 1968 single “Good Old Music”/“Time.” The single demonstrates a powerful contrast between the raucous, driving nature of early psychedelic funk in “Good Old Music”—albeit contained within

²⁵ This year is not verified in any scholarly or reviewed sources. It has been deduced from Clinton and Greenman, 36. Various unverifiable online sources have suggested 1962 as a possible year.

a three-minute track—filled in with distorted guitars, invigorating drums, and a Hammond organ, versus the easily digestible nonchalance of “Time,” a neatly trimmed love song with an ensemble of background singers and horns in a comfortable A major. While “Time” was certainly the product of Clinton’s Motown years, when one considers it alongside its A-side, “Good Old Music,” there is an apparent contrast in the group’s evolving aesthetic. The relatively tame, racially neutral repertory of the Parliaments²⁶ was a musical antithesis to the nascent Funkadelic. Yet, they initially found common ground as crossover music; the wide consumer appeal that Motown valued found its way into P-Funk through the unusual blend of psychedelic funk with song formats that retained the fundamental concision of contemporaneous pop music, but with extensions in the form of repeated riffs that kaleidoscopically (d)evolve, or elongated solo passages. P-Funk’s experimental ethos and inclination toward genre fusions would become blatantly conspicuous in *Osmium*, a phenomenon rendered possible only because of Clinton’s exposure to Motown’s process. Out of his experiences with conventionality came the possibility for musical deviance.

At the turn of the 1970s, The Parliaments had been prioritizing musicianship, showmanship, and innovative arranging over the simplicity of love songs or the relative musical cleanliness that Clinton picked up from Motown. This is not to say that Clinton had abandoned his past; in fact, his experience with Motown is likely what propelled him forward, beyond its rather confined musical borders. The meticulous songwriting in “Time,” for instance, is evident in the use of repetitive, simple motives that are most effective when the ensemble is engaged.

The opening horn line (see Figure 2.2) and the background vocals throughout the verses (see

²⁶ In his autobiography, Clinton says, “The racial neutrality of ‘Testify’ was in the tradition of Motown: if you don’t pick a side, you can go anywhere.” Clinton and Greenman, 58.



Figure 2.2: The Parliaments, “Time” (1968). Opening horn line.

Figure 2.3.a) are solidly in the tradition of Motown’s songwriting (as in Martha & The Vandellas’ “Dancing In The Street,” or The Velvelettes’ “Needle In A Haystack”). These figures, especially the song’s opening horn line, demonstrate the beginnings of an integral part of the P-Funk sound; their horn arrangements, notably those by Fred Wesley, which he would also contribute to the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ 1985 album *Freaky Styley*, have always been distinct for their mutable place within a given texture. Here, the horns take the spotlight in the song’s introduction, subsequently receding to an accompaniment role for the remainder of the song. Still, their rhythmic accents and harmonic support recall the simple, yet effective anticipations and textural foundation present in much of Frankie Lymon’s music. The background vocals in Figure 2.3.a emphasize beats 2 and 4, but are bare enough and buried in the song’s texture so as to not place undue stress on the backbeat. For the sake of comparison, Figure 2.3.b is a transcription of the accompanying horns in Tower of Power’s “This Time It’s Real” (1973), which play a similar role within the ensemble. It is noteworthy that these rhythmic figures are texturally additive, in that they are added during the second verse in order to build upon what was heard previously.

Underneath these figures lies a consistent groove featuring a drum kit, congas, guitar, and bass. These layers, arranged simply, completely fill in the texture without overemphasizing any particular instrument; each layer has its place in the texture, and is necessary for the completion of the song. The lead vocals, too, become part of the ensemble in the second half of each verse, when the background vocals join in rhythmic unison. This ensemble aesthetic is part of what



Figure 2.3.a: The Parliaments, “Time” (1968). Background vocals in Verse 2.

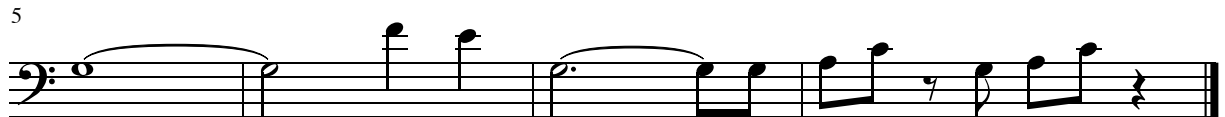


Figure 2.3.b: Tower of Power, “This Time It’s Real” (1973). Background horns in Verse 2.

made Motown’s sound distinctive, the extreme degree of homogeneity, which eventually attracted criticism. While the decentralizing nature of the ensemble has always been a vital component of P-Funk’s sound as well, employing the group vocal layers that characterized doo-wop and its subsequent incarnation in Motown, they redirected it with the technical proficiency and experimentalism of psychedelic rock in mind. This approach to sound blossomed through their middle period: “Placebo Syndrome,” the fifth track on one of Parliament’s most successful albums, *Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome* (1977), opens with a nonchalant horn arrangement in parallel thirds underneath a sinuous and penetrating synthesizer line (Figure 2.4),



Figure 2.4: Parliament, “Placebo Syndrome” (1977). Reduction of mm. 1-2.

the former lulling listeners into insouciance, the latter reminding them of Ohio Players' iconic "Funky Worm" (1972), whose synthesizer solo became equally associated with Snoop Dogg in 1993 when it was interpolated in "Serial Killa."²⁷ G-Funk, the subgenre of rap that Snoop Dogg represents, often highlights the use of high-pitched synthesizers with a portamento or pitch bend function, simultaneously enhancing the musical value of that timbral color to listeners who then equate it to the genre.²⁸ The disparate parts of the introduction to "Placebo Syndrome" merge to create a balanced overall texture. The balanced aesthetic of Motown is also allosonically palpable—although not ubiquitous—in Funkadelic's adrenalized jams, such as "Standing On The Verge Of Getting It On" (1974), "Stuffs And Things" (1975), and "One Nation Under A Groove" (1978). The aesthetic web expands considerably when the priorities of Motown and G-Funk converge in P-Funk's middle period, that nexus of historical continuity.

P-Funk seems to have successfully straddled cultural lines with their music; according to Clinton, the Parliafunkadelicment Thang was persistently searching for new audiences while still maintaining the interest of their established listeners.²⁹ With the release of *Funkadelic* and *Free Your Mind* in 1970, they proved that they could do this without diluting their musical substance. "We wanted to head back in the other direction," Clinton states in his autobiography, "to be a black rock group playing the loudest, funkier combination of psychedelic rock and thunderous R&B."³⁰ Although their approach drew a considerable fanbase, this led to some problems with

²⁷ Although this was predated by N.W.A's "Dope Man" (1987) and "Ain't No Future in Yo Frontin'" (1991) by MC Breed and DFC, "Serial Killa" was a very prominent use of the sample.

²⁸ From Snoop Dogg's autsonic-syntagmatic reproduction of the Ohio Players' music, and a paradigmatic gesture toward electronic funk music, G-Funk would borrow from the mid- to late 1970s all across Lacasse's hypertextuality axes through sampling, interpolation, and stylistic imitation.

²⁹ Clinton and Greenman, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

music critics, who did not quite understand how to categorize a group of black musicians that sampled from such a wide musical palette. Parliament did not help the situation with *Osmium*.

These phenomena, of course, cannot be isolated from their historical context. Throughout this chapter, P-Funk's developmental stages have been considered amid the musical-historical continuum that they share, and it is crucial at this point to acknowledge that they are not merely occupying the continuum, but are, by default, interacting with it through interpretations of their cohabitants. Historiographically, P-Funk at the turn of the 1970s was synthesizing their history to create something new, simultaneously borrowing from their predecessors for the present moment—necessarily accompanied by the starkly different cultural situation in 1970s America—and reinterpreting them with an ear toward the future. The framework of afrofuturism grants some space for appreciating their unprecedented degree of musical historicization; they have always exhibited a strong proclivity for fusing contemporaneous aesthetics with a novelty that kept them firmly among the vanguard of musical developments. The philosophy of afrofuturism, addressed in more detail in Chapter I, is predominantly an aesthetic one, seen in various artistic forms throughout the twentieth century. One of its essential tenets is the historicization of the past and present. This “sankofa effect,”³¹ as Discopoet Khari B. puts it, is the impetus behind afrofuturist productions, and depends upon a dialectic between the artist and their historical context; that gesture toward one's past in an effort to reinterpret it historically situates a given set of events, granting them meaning within a broader historical-cultural continuum. *Osmium's* particular

³¹ Quoted in Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 160. “Sankofa” refers to an Akan adinkra from West Africa that depicts a bird turning its head, reaching for an egg on its back. This signifies an Akan philosophy of reaching back to the past, and bring it forward to the future. The image itself represents the present moment. This is applicable to afrofuturist philosophy regarding musical productions, as Chapter I explains.

historical circumstances and musical features situate it as a prism through which one can view a unique synthesis of music cultures across time, and how P-Funk sounded their history. In the years leading toward *Osmium*, Clinton was “moving Funkadelic toward the edge, where [he] could make sense of where soul was going and where rock was coming from.”³² His ear always to the ground, Clinton made it his mission to be acquainted with his surrounding music culture, always recalibrating his group's musical trajectory accordingly.

Aesthetically, *Osmium* is difficult to pin down. There is a thoroughly integrated hybridity that defies categorization, exploring Funkadelic’s psychedelic eccentricities (“I Call My Baby Pussycat,” “Funky Woman,” and “Livin’ The Life”), the down-home sound of Memphis (“Little Old Country Boy”), and the outer limits of funk (“Moonshine Heather”). Even within each song, Parliament prohibits the listener from settling comfortably in the conventions of a given genre. “Little Old Country Boy,” the album’s third track and one of the farthest from P-Funk’s overall aesthetic (past or future), features a pedal steel guitar solo that one might think to find in the Stax catalog, as well as yodeling, choral hooks, and shouted vocals that are nothing if not comical. Despite the genre of the song being starkly distant from the rest of P-Funk’s repertoire, the musical features of “Little Old Country Boy” are not quite as anomalous as they may seem. The instrumentation is only ancillary to the cause; in fact, much of the song’s relationship to P-Funk’s developing aesthetic is to be found in the vocal parts, such as the yodeling. Myriad creative vocal utterances pervade their middle period: look no further than “Night Of The Thumpasorus Peoples,” “Aquaboogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadolooop)”, or Bootsy Collins’ “Rubber Duckie.” Of course, “Little Old Country Boy” is also notable for the rhythmic figure that opens

³² Clinton and Greenman, 83.

it, sounded by a jaw harp whose twangy yet boisterous timbre almost seems to foreshadow Bootsy Collins' distinctive wah-wah bass, audible in songs like "P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up)" and "The Pinocchio Theory." With the song's yodeling, these are known to golden age hip hop fans as prominent samples in De La Soul's "Potholes In My Lawn." It would seem that historically minded hip hoppers thought P-Funk's initial stages—not just their prolific and popular middle period—to be aesthetically significant. De La Soul, members of the Native Tongues posse, were known for the use of eclectic samples that branched out of the typical *Ultimate Breaks And Beats* compilations toward which other producers gravitated at the time. The result was the inclusion of an outlandish, cheeky country song co-written by one of funk music's icons and a British pop musician (Ruth Copeland) in one of hip hop's definitive albums.

Of course, other songs on the album exhibit similar intergeneric phenomena. "Oh Lord, Why Lord" opens with the infamous *Kanon und Gigue für 3 Violinen mit Generalbaß* of Johann Pachelbel, a syntagmatism which points to Bernie Worrell's classical piano training. The entire song is structured around the canon, with Ruth Copeland's soprano voice jumping out of the texture, and lyrics lamenting racism in the United States. A deeply spiritual song for many, it is even more of an outlier than "Little Old Country Boy," but again foreshadows P-Funk's trajectory in its spirituality. P-Funk would explore spirituality in various forms throughout their career; on one hand, their association with the Process Church of the Final Judgment during the *Maggot Brain* session garnered some apprehension and criticism, while the elaborate mythology framing their concerts induced religious fervor among their audiences. Their well-documented 1976 performance in Houston, Texas, in which Glenn Goins' vehement gospel-flavored voice famously welcomed the landing of the Mothership on stage, has consistently remained an

inextricable moment in P-Funk’s history, precisely because of its explicit spirituality.

“Mothership Connection (Star Child),” the title track of their *Mothership Connection* album and the hit that inspired the breathtaking (if not excessive) theatrics, is memorable for its chorus, “Swing down, sweet chariot, stop and let me ride,” a near-exact quotation of the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” For P-Funk, spirituality sounded musically is far from abnormal. In fact, the collective’s evolution as a quasi-religion, owed, in large part, to their devoted fans—who may rightfully be called disciples—stems from their highly eccentric concept albums that, despite taking listeners into outer space and the depths of the ocean, were startlingly real, often speaking directly to the musical and cultural sensibilities of their listeners.

The trashy, driving funk rock prevalent in Funkadelic in the early 1970s is immediately audible in “Nothing Before Me But Thang,” and “Funky Woman,” as well as “Red Hot Mama,” a Parliament single from the same period that was added to *Rhenium* (1990), the United Kingdom reissue of *Osmium*. “Red Hot Mama,” a rugged, edgy hard rock number with vocals somewhere roughly between speech and song, employs a primary riff (see Figure 2.5) that hovers on D, dipping down to C on the first beat of each bar. The offbeat rhythmic placement of each D gives equal weight to the remaining three beats, after the critical “one”; Anne Danielsen, whose study of Parliament’s rhythms does not consider *Osmium*, instead focusing on their middle period, emphasizes the significance of “the One” in P-Funk’s music, arguing for it as an



Figure 2.5: Parliament, “Red Hot Mama” (released 1990). Rhythm guitar riff.

essential structural unit that contextualizes the music dependent upon the initial stability of a downbeat as well as the listener’s experience of being “in the groove.”³³

The song includes prominent choral moments that are interesting for their historicity in the context of P-Funk’s overall catalog. The first recitation of the title, “Ride on, red hot mama/ Sure looks good to me,” is unmistakably similar to “Ooh, ooh luscious/ Sure been delicious to me” in “(I Wanna) Testify.” Additionally, the lyrical line illustrated in Figure 2.6 employs a melody that would be recycled in “Together,” from the 1975 album *Chocolate City*. P-Funk’s practice of recycling material is quite extensive. There are numerous instances of lyrics, motives, or entire songs being redone throughout the group’s career. “Red Hot Mama,” for instance, was rerecorded in Funkadelic’s *Standing On The Verge Of Getting It On* (1974), as was “I’ll Stay,” a reworking of The Parliaments’ “I’ll Wait,” originally from 1968. “Testify,” of course, has been redone multiple times; indeed, several songs originally recorded by The Parliaments were included on later Parliament-Funkadelic albums. Musical material within songs has also been recycled: the bass riff that opens Bootsy Collins’ “The Pinocchio Theory” on *Ahh... The Name Is Bootsy, Baby!* (1977) was interpolated in Parliament’s “Aquaboogie” from *The Motor Booty Affair* (1978). George Clinton, in much of his solo work, has interpolated—or outright sampled

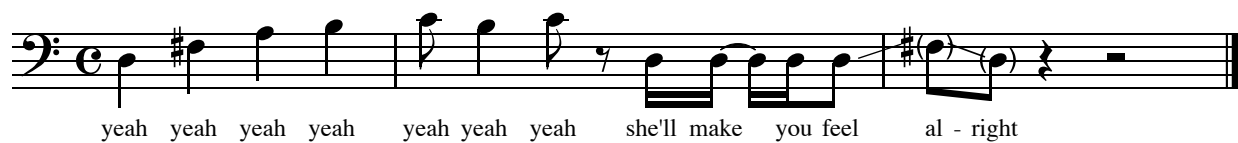


Figure 2.6: Parliament, “Red Hot Mama” (released 1990). Vocal melody. Pitches over “alright” are approximated.

³³ Danielsen theorizes the phenomenological and affective properties of “the One” throughout her book, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006). The most specific analysis that applies here is found in pages 168-171.

—previous P-Funk recordings. Such extensive self-referencing manifests P-Funk’s active role in their own historicization. Whereas hip hop artists would recontextualize the music of P-Funk’s middle period, P-Funk themselves musically documented their own place history, capturing both the fiery spirit of Frankie Lymon and Motown’s decentralization of the ensemble in songs like “Breakdown” (also a single added to *Rhenium*) and “I Call My Baby Pussycat”. While both feature particular voices or instruments, these songs are texturally and structurally made whole through the synergistic relationship between each musical layer. In fact, many of the songs on this album—like those within any given P-Funk album—employ similar instrumental and vocal forces, be it a chorus of men and women, fuzzy guitar distortion, Ruth Copeland’s stark soprano notes, or Bernie Worrell on piano, organ, or harpsichord; the album’s coherence is indeed the result of this, and the instrumentation across tracks relates the southern soul of “Little Old Country Boy” and the rockabilly “My Automobile” to Hendrix’s timbral unrestraint in “Livin’ The Life” and the Family Stone’s psychedelia-tainted pop aesthetic in “Breakdown.”

With the release of Parliament’s *Up For The Down Stroke* in 1974, the musical distinction between Parliament and Funkadelic became more apparent. Whereas Funkadelic released albums like *America Eats Its Young* in 1972 and *Cosmic Slop* in 1973, perpetuating the psychedelic funk aesthetic but with a socially conscious bite, Parliament took a back seat, not releasing any material after *Osmium*. When they resurfaced in 1974, however, it was abundantly clear that although Parliament-Funkadelic consisted of the same musicians, Parliament and Funkadelic were decidedly different bands. Funkadelic dominated P-Funk’s early period; only two months before Parliament released *Up For The Down Stroke*, Funkadelic squeezed out *Standing On The Verge Of Getting It On*, which famously features Eddie Hazel’s mastery over the electric guitar.

Standing On The Verge, though clearly showing signs of Funkadelic's progressive style, remained in the now-familiar territory they initially explored as The Parliaments' not-really-background band. There is an explicit musical departure, though, in *Up For The Down Stroke*. Parliament's modus operandi was shorter, more accessible R&B radio hits that invoked the concision of The Parliaments' 1960s recordings, but evinced within those forms the content of *Osmium*'s Funkadelic-infused edge.

The title track on *Up For The Down Stroke* gives considerable weight to the One, which, as Danielsen emphasizes, cooperates with the song's groove-based circularity. According to her, the One acts as the song's recurring center of gravity. A guiding principle in P-Funk (and a priority, considering the song "Everything Is On The One"), Danielsen demonstrates the critical stability that the One provides. "It is overwhelmingly explicit and unavoidable: we are being pulled toward an extended One with a force that makes it impossible to think of anything else before the metrical beat one has in fact passed...the One has grown so big, so heavy, that we may almost speak of a slow layer of pulses consisting of just one heavy beat, carrying enough power to influence the whole groove."³⁴ Indeed, the beginning of the song "Up For The Down Stroke" exposes the drums, striking a kick drum and open hi-hat on the downbeat of each measure. In accordance with Danielsen, the downbeat does, in fact, feel elongated, as if there were a rubato on each One. Yet there is none; the song remains in a consistent dance tempo, at 92 beats per minute. The effect is astonishingly elastic nonetheless, and the One indeed seems to consume the entire groove. This would make sense in P-Funk, which embedded the One in their philosophy

³⁴ Danielsen, 169.

(“Everything Is On The One” and “Mr. Wiggles”) and music (“Bop Gun (Endangered Species),” “P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up),” and “Gamin’ On Ya”).

The second track on *Up For The Down Stroke* is “Testify,” an updated recording of their 1967 hit. The song features a clavinet that provides the introductory passage, light horn arrangements primarily employing unison passages, drums that deemphasize the backbeats, and heavy group vocals that support the lead. Many of these features recall those heard in *Osmium*, while the horns and decentralized ensemble texture characterize Parliament’s music more than that of Funkadelic. In yet another version of the song, released with a 2003 reissue of *Up For The Down Stroke*, the texture of the verses are drastically stripped down, almost eliminating the background vocals and thinning out the horn arrangement. Although the chorus is still quite full-sounding, the reissued recording interestingly granted more attention to the lead vocals in the mix. Generally speaking, the alternate mix is more muted. It is no loss to the 2003 reissue, as a historical document, to have both versions. In fact, it provides further insight about Parliament’s developing sensibilities at the time the album was pressed. Although there is no particular information available as to why the original mix was chosen for the 1974 release, or why the alternate mix was included in the reissue, one might cautiously speculate that at the time, it was the most appropriate choice in the context of the remainder of the album, and perhaps in the context of the song’s chronology. The song had gone through different iterations over the past seven years, and the recording that ended up on the 1974 pressing was deemed aesthetically appropriate this time around. Reissues, alternate mixes, and unreleased takes are common in the recording industry; for such a historically persistent song, however, it seems especially intriguing that a particular recording was given precedence. One answer to this may be due another song by

The Parliaments that was rerecorded for the album, “The Goose.” A subdued love song, “The Goose” may have been one reason for choosing a more lush, boisterous mix of “Testify” for the album, especially considering the track listing; after the title track of the album, “Testify” and “The Goose” appear in succession.

Both versions of “Testify” are, of course, radically different from the 1967 recording, in that the original exhibited much less “funk”; it took time for Parliament-Funkadelic to develop the timbral and rhythmic vulgarities that funk music values. At the time *Osmium* was produced, the group began to explore the broad potential of funk, the many forms “pure funk” could take, and its vast sonic possibilities. It would seem that funk, in its purest, most elemental state, is not so “pure,” but a composite of music across time: it is the adolescent playfulness of Frankie Lymon and the lye in the hair Clinton styled in his barbershop, the steel in the car factories of Detroit, the LSD in countless bloodstreams, and the colorful array of music cultures across the country. Osmium, the densest naturally occurring chemical element, is often found within metal alloys, among the dynamic interaction of multiple elements. Its Greek root, *osme*, refers to an odor—or funk. As the namesake of Parliament’s peculiar album amidst a barrage of Funkadelia, it seems perfectly apt.

Cult of Personalities (1980–1989)

Musicians in a myriad of genres have incorporated or emulated P-Funk, reinterpreting their music for new contexts, just as Parliament did with “Testify.” By the time artists turned to P-Funk for musical material, the collective itself had declined; their popularity had not waned, but the group itself had effectively disbanded. Through their middle period, their staggeringly

prolific output generated countless innovations in the realms of song form, timbre, and lyrical themes. Artists across the board have extracted various fragments of P-Funk, developing them for new musical contexts and audiences. Sampling of the musical character, writing techniques, and cultural sensibilities of P-Funk can be seen across genres. The groups Living Colour and the Red Hot Chili Peppers merged funk with rock, kindred but dissociated after years of divergence, to remind listeners that psychedelic funk still holds musical-cultural currency in a new decade.

The Black Rock Coalition (BRC), of which Living Colour was the flagship band, is “a consciously created community for African Americans involved in rock,”³⁵ and a network of activists that work to destroy the political assumption that African Americans are outsiders to rock (or any) music. Many of their members are part of the chronologically defined “post-liberated generation...they grew up in the post-civil rights era of legislated racial equality...and developed a set of creative and political predilections specific to their generation.”³⁶ In short, the BRC represented a kind of blackness that was politically empowered and freely creative in the face of lived realities that too often still proved difficult and unequal. The latter point is vital here: the new cultural and political situation in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement, in which P-Funk thrived and BRC members-to-be were completing grammar school, created space for black creativities to which the music industry previously had not been accustomed. The experimentalism of P-Funk’s early period had made them difficult for critics to classify, but by the mid-1970s they had clearly forged their own musical parameters and paved the way for future novelty. Indeed, the BRC drew no lines in the sand and embraced all previous

³⁵ Maureen Mahon, *Right To Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

and contemporary forms of music, and the ways in which they might intersect. Maureen Mahon, in her study on the BRC, notes that artists as distinctive as Jimi Hendrix, John Bonham, and George Clinton are all progenitors of their coalition's ideology for the brazen musicality they exhibited along with their propensities for challenging aesthetic expectations.³⁷ A remark Clinton made in a *Vibe* magazine interview with Vernon Reid—the songwriter and guitarist for Living Colour—sums up this musical philosophy in retrospect: “We saw Cream and Vanilla Fudge and all them take the music that my mother liked, flip it around and make it loud and it became cool...we just speeded [sic] blues up and called it ‘funk’ ‘cause we knew it was a bad word to a lot of people.”³⁸ If the primary aesthetics that connect rock and funk are amplitude, rhythm, and irreverence, then there is certainly a basis for Living Colour's sampling of the character of P-Funk's music.

Vivid, the 1988 debut album of Living Colour, features fierce electric guitar and drum work that renders a convincing fusion of heavy metal and funk. Although “Cult of Personality” and “Middle Man,” for instance, embrace the rebellious spirit of hard rock that challenges status quo ideologies, as well as the virtuosity idealized by heavy metal, other songs on the album are less satiable simply as “rock” songs. “Funny Vibe” begins much like “Desperate People” does, but by the fifty-second mark, it becomes evident to the listener that this is quite a different song. In fact, the primary groove of the song is closer to what one might expect from the Red Hot Chili Peppers (“Subterranean Homesick Blues” [1987], “Get On Top” [1999], and “Hump de Bump” [2006] readily come to mind)—neatly trimmed rhythm guitar passages, a dialogue

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁸ Quoted in Vernon Reid, “Brother From Another Planet,” in *Vibe*, November 1993, 45-46.

between the bass guitar and drums that could easily stand on its own, and lyrics recited with vigor. The lyrics to “Funny Vibe” are simple enough:

No, I’m not gonna rob you
No, I’m not gonna beat you
No, I’m not gonna rape you
So why you wanna give me that funny vibe?

Funny, funny vibe (4x)

No, I’m not gonna hurt you
No, I’m not gonna harm you
And I try not to hate you
So why you wanna give me that funny vibe?

The relative simplicity of the song’s lyrics should not, however, be misconstrued as simplicity of content. Of course, the lyrics challenge stereotypical notions of black aggression, and question the nature of racial clichés. Repetition and predictability of the lyrical pattern, along with the chanting by which the lyrics are recited, appropriately fit over the groove’s equally repetitive hovering between F and C. This is a paradigmatic evocation of Funkadelic’s grooves, wherein harmonic motion is inevitably present, but merely consequential; the intrigue lies in the groove itself—or at least the groove as a holistic sum of harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic features—its repetition opening space for deeper cerebral, somatic, or even spiritual experience. As often as not, the lyrics in P-Funk are shouted. When melody is involved, it is never complex, and never openly draws attention to itself. Instead, the melody of the song is typically designed to be easily singable so that listeners can remember hooks from “Shit, goddamn—get off your ass and jam” to “Make my funk the P-Funk; I want my funk uncut” and “Everything is on the One,” among innumerable others. As a matter of course, where P-Funk is concerned, these hooks are repeated throughout their respective songs, and some are to be found throughout the group’s entire

catalog. These amount to more than a song's refrain or chorus; they constitute the building blocks of a song, the lyrical and musical materials around which the rest of a song is constructed.

In "Funny Vibe," the above lyrics, which convey the frustration of racially-based prejudice, are indeed the only words present in the track, other than a brief cameo appearance by Flavor Flav and Chuck D of Public Enemy. The juxtaposition of hip hop and rock is no longer new in 1988, as acts like the Beastie Boys and Run-DMC already opened the possibility of collaboration between the two genres. It is necessary to note that the cameo in "Funny Vibe" is not a true collaboration between genres, yet the appearance of Public Enemy on this track adds substance to the lyrical message. The lines recorded by Flavor Flav and Chuck D are as follows:

FF: Hey Chuck, we got some non-believers out there.

CD: Yeah Flav, I'm tired of them dissing brothers in the P.E. out there. We got to do something about this. You know what I'm saying?

The dichotomy of implicit and explicit social commentary, recited in a contagious chant over infectious instrumentals, can be understood as a valued approach P-Funk. In the often recognized triumvirate of funk—James Brown, Sly Stone, and George Clinton—there are discrete, identifiable strategies in sounding the genre's mission. Whereas Brown professed aggressive, hypermasculine self-determination and Stone embraced the potential for power through unity³⁹, Clinton preferred to immerse his music in the current social situation, encouraging the disorienting confrontation between the ideal, the real, and fantasy. Indeed, much of the saga laced throughout their concept albums is a story of confrontation: between Star Child and Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk, between Funkentelechy and the Placebo Syndrome, between Jasper Spatic and Barft Vada. For P-Funk, the act of confrontation—the dance, the musical experience, the

³⁹ Vincent, 90-91.

funk itself—is its own reward. Living Colour, abrasive yet accessible, understood this approach and they followed Funkadelic’s model to the front lines of the BRC.

Aesthetically similar to their BRC contemporaries, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have also been widely regarded for their adeptness in funk rock. Albums from throughout their career have been commercially and critically acclaimed⁴⁰, and since *Mother’s Milk* (1989), they have displayed a gradually changing aesthetic, but little fluctuation in technical quality and expressive potential; since the late 1980s, they have been consistently received positively by critics as well as a large fan base, receiving gold and platinum certifications in bulk. Their first couple of projects, however, were received with variable success on the charts: *The Red Hot Chili Peppers* (1984) “bubbled under” the Billboard Top 200 when it was released, and *Freaky Styley* (1985) only fared slightly better. The latter, which George Clinton produced, though something of an aesthetic outlier, is yet a testament to P-Funk’s hold over the band members, and an indicator of their musical trajectory in the following years. Clinton also performed on the album, and brought in Fred Wesley, who would lend to *Freaky Styley* the horn arranging experience he honed as a member of P-Funk. The resulting production was one that superimposed P-Funk’s signature horns over a crisp rhythm section, and irreverent lyrics and jocose allusions over punk rock or dance tracks. It would not be overstating the case to say that *Freaky Styley* is essentially a P-Funk album. Although the Red Hot Chili Peppers would eventually grow out of their P-Funk phase and refine their musical identity, there is no mistaking this album as anything else.

The horn arrangements on *Freaky Styley* are an important reason why the album sounds like P-Funk. “Hollywood (Africa)” is a cover of The Meters’ “Africa” (1974) with altered lyrics

⁴⁰ “Red Hot Chili Peppers, Chart History,” *Billboard*, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/364771/red-hot-chili-peppers/chart>.

and added instrumental layers. The horn arrangement, reduced in Figure 2.7.a, uses the same approach of closed intervals heard in “Placebo Syndrome” (Figure 2.4), and uncannily resembles Parliament’s 1978 track “Rumpofsteelskin,” firmly in Lacasse’s allosonic-syntagmatic category (Figure 2.7.b). Although the latter employs sixths instead of its inversion of closed thirds, the effect is largely the same, especially considering the rhythmic function of the horn lines in this context. Once again, we see a deemphasis of harmonic complexity in favor of other features. Nonetheless, the harmonic content present in these arrangements have served a particular musical purpose since Wesley’s work with P-Funk in the mid-1970s. The horn arrangements in “The Brothers Cup” and “Yertle the Turtle” follow a similar model, although in the latter, the horn section acquires a more melodic role throughout the track.

Despite having evolved significantly since 1985, the Red Hot Chili Peppers owe much of their trajectory over the past three decades to the extent they internalized P-Funk in their initial years of development. Much like Parliament-Funkadelic internalized their musical context and



Figure 2.7.a: Red Hot Chili Peppers, “Hollywood (Africa)” (1985). Excerpt of horns in Verse 1.



Figure 2.7.b: Parliament, “Rumpofsteelskin” (1978). Excerpt of horns in Verse 1.

used it as a launchpad to explore other aesthetic possibilities through the 1970s, so did the Chili Peppers in the 1980s and 1990s. They did not immediately shed their skin, either; music critic Robert Christgau said of *Mother's Milk* (1989) in one of his brief reviews:

Punks who loved Hendrix and P-Funk way way back, they're finally cashing in on their good taste, and though unbelievers dis their sincerity, execution's the problem. They didn't have the chops to bring it off then, and by pushing the guitar up front they sound even cruder now. But they're perfectly nice fellas, really—[they] mention "compassion" in the very first verse. C+.⁴¹

Despite a lukewarm review, Christgau perceived and elucidated a clear connection between the Chili Peppers and their predecessors. Their use of horns would diminish significantly after *Freaky Styley*, only making brief appearances in *Mother's Milk*; much of Funkadelic's essence, however—tight, driving rhythms, trashy, garage band instrumentation, expert studio production, and a robust, energized vocal delivery—persists throughout their career.

The Power of the P (1987-2015)

Yeah...This is another story about dogs
For the dog that don't pee on trees is a bitch
So says Snoop Dogg
So get your pooper scooper
'Cause the nigga's talkin' shit
Aroof!

With those lines, on November 23, 1993, the world was introduced to Snoop Doggy Dogg on his debut album, *Doggystyle*. In the album's first song, "G-Funk Intro," over a beefy synthesizer bass line, the leader of the Funk Mob introduces the rap game's newest contender. Not only did Clinton lend his voice to Snoop Dogg's inauguration, but he contributed his music

⁴¹ Robert Christgau, "Red Hot Chili Peppers" *Consumer Guide Reviews*. https://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=Red+Hot+Chili+Peppers, accessed 11 December 2016.

as well: the prominent bass line was unearthed from deep within the texture of Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep" (1979). "G-Funk Intro"—whose title is not quite accurate, considering that Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* launched the genre of G-Funk eleven months prior—does formally make the connection between P-Funk and this novel iteration of rap. The aforementioned track "Serial Killa," which features the "Funky Worm" interpolation, was co-written by Bootsy Collins; both "G-Funk Intro" and "Who Am I? (What's My Name?)" use the same bass sample from "(Not Just) Knee Deep"; "Who Am I?" also quotes Clinton's solo track "Atomic Dog" (1982); "Tha Shiznit" pays homage to the fictional WEFUNK radio station in "P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up)," replacing the station designation with "W-Balls," and quotes the ending of "Flash Light," changing the lyrics to "Everybody's got to hear the shit on W-Balls." How did so much of the P-Funk catalog become concentrated in *Doggystyle*, one of the foundational productions of the West Coast rap subgenre known as G-Funk?

In fact, P-Funk has been interwoven through the soundscape of hip hop since its early commercial years, especially in the work of Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force, which blend eclectic samples with the electronic timbre of synthesizers. The Afrofuturist sensibilities of Los Angeles electro hop in the music of World Class Wreckin' Cru and the parties hosted by Uncle Jamm's Army through the 1980s—and the attendance at those parties by such musicians as Run-DMC and Madonna⁴²—testify to this, on one hand providing basis for the essential but possibly overemphasized analytical framework of P-Funk as an Afrofuturist collective (see Chapter I), and on the other hand demonstrating the value of P-Funk in hip hop beyond its potential as sample fodder. Of course, it cannot go unacknowledged that some of the most

⁴² Gabriela Jiménez, "Something 2 Dance 2': Electro Hop in 1980s Los Angeles and its Afrofuturist Link," in *Black Music Research Journal* 31, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 138.

popular rap songs since the late 1980s make prominent use of P-Funk's music: for example, "I Know You Got Soul" (1987) by Eric B. & Rakim, "Get Up Everybody (Get Up)" (1988) by Salt-N-Pepa, and both "Me, Myself and I" and "Potholes In My Lawn" (1989) by De La Soul all prominently sample either Parliament or Funkadelic. Despite that, the focus of this portion of the chapter is on hip hop artists whose music exhibits more thorough integrations.

Hip hop is perhaps one of the most actively historiographic music genres in the United States since the initial developments of jazz in the early- to mid-twentieth century. In other words, hip hop musicians have developed a genre whose musical foundation lies in both autsonically and allosonically capturing, conveying, and reinterpreting audible history. And one of the histories most comprehensively explored through hip hop is funk music. Since the early 1970s, many DJs would spin breakbeats from James Brown records like "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" or "Funky Drummer." Brown's records were chosen largely for their danceable rhythmic qualities; additionally, however, many of the funk and soul records chosen by DJs were already part of their parents' record collections or were songs that aspiring DJs and dancers grew up listening to. In many ways, hip hop musically extended funk music, retaining its social and somatic aspects and only changing its method of production from live instrumentation to turntables and, eventually, digital samplers (although in the early 1990s, some G-Funk producers would interpolate samples re-recorded with live instruments).⁴³ These methods represent various ways that music could be historicized in a technological age. By prioritizing certain records or

⁴³ This information can be found in a multitude of sources to date. For the most comprehensive accounts of early hip hop to which this author refers, see Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005).

artists over others in their performance decisions, DJs historicized the music of their immediate past in a particular light, depending upon the DJ and the audience constituents.

Before long, however, many DJs searched for more obscure musical sources. The uncovering of lesser known artists and recordings began to illuminate unseen faces of a genre. In fact, the release of the first *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* compilation in 1986 likely did more to inhibit the historicization of earlier music. By grouping selected artists and songs because they were all used as breakbeat material, the compilations emphasized the new and particular relationships that these songs had to hip hop culture, decontextualizing them from their historical sources; furthermore, as the compilation became extraordinarily popular among DJs, their tastes—and consequently, the expectations of their audiences—would grow accustomed to those recordings. This should not be misconstrued, though, as any sort of limit to hip hop’s sonic palette. Compilations such as these were provided for the convenience they offered to DJs, and they did offer quality instrumentals to the consumer: Rufus Thomas, the J.B.s, Bobby Byrd, Syl Johnson, and Isaac Hayes are among the featured musicians. While this convenience was a major benefit for those who wanted to create new music, the historicization of the samples used would stop on the record platter.

In contrast to this purely aesthetic approach to sampling, the electro hop scene and alternative hip hop groups like Digital Underground took the concept of homage to its outer limit. When electro hop developed in the early 1980s, it presented an avenue for young African Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles to escape their lived reality via a social scene that incorporated futurism through music technology (i.e. synthesizers, samplers, and evocations of

electronic music acts like Kraftwerk) and an embrace of the imagination.⁴⁴ Much of this ethos was inspired by the cosmic adventurousness in the music of Parliament-Funkadelic, the nebulous and fractured productions of Lee “Scratch” Perry, and the challenges to social normativity offered by Prince. Performers at electro hop parties, by nature, were afrofuturist in their utilization of science fiction and black speculative fiction tropes, either referencing or incorporating technologies, outer space, and the cyberworld in their performances. Musical afrofuturism, as discussed in Chapter I, was influenced heavily by jazz musicians John Coltrane and Sun Ra, reggae producer Lee “Scratch” Perry, and George Clinton.⁴⁵ Alternately idealist, bleak, fantastic, or satirical, afrofuturist music is not a genre as much as it is a framework—or better yet, a mirror that reflects one’s interpretations of their surrounding culture. Afrofuturism’s penchant for escapism, however, should not be equated with how some (such as Vincent) perceived disco, which was a consumer trap that deepened the racialization of the music industry, alienated many artists, and provided little evidence of extramusical substance; where Afrofuturism is concerned, escape was offered via musical innovation, idealist philosophies about the cultural position of blackness, and inclusive social gatherings.

In a July 30, 2011, interview with Howard Kramer, director of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Education and Public Programs Division, George Clinton recalled his initial exposure to the parties hosted by electro hop crew Uncle Jamm’s Army. While it is nonetheless interesting that Funkadelic’s 1979 album *Uncle Jam Wants You* is their namesake, it is perhaps more significant that Clinton was already acquainted with the work of Dr. Dre, Battlecat, the L.A.

⁴⁴ Jiménez, 141.

⁴⁵ Womack, 58-66.

Dream Team, and N.W.A (the World Class Wreckin' Cru had disbanded by the time N.W.A established themselves, and by the time Clinton began visiting these parties in the late 1980s).⁴⁶

Digital Underground, originating from Oakland, California, quickly impressed Clinton. According to him, they were “one of the rap acts that was most open about the way they extended the P-Funk tradition.”⁴⁷ And open they were; many of their songs were either wholesale samples or overt references to P-Funk tracks, and they fully embraced the P-Funk mythology, Shock G going so far as to don an exaggerated fake nose and assume the persona of Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk. Many of their P-Funk sample choices were mainstream: clearly autonomic-syntagmatic inclusions of “Flash Light,” “Funkentelechy,” “Aqua Boogie,” and “Bootzilla” (Bootsy Collins, 1978) would be instantly familiar to serious fans, their immediacy not only substantiating Digital Underground’s extension of P-Funk, but leading fans of Parliament-Funkadelic—old and new—into modern sonic territories. “Rhymin’ on the Funk,” for instance, samples multiple portions of “Bootzilla” and “Flash Light,” and the lyrics elaborate upon one of the latter’s most recognizable hooks, “shinin’ on the funk.” The lyrics are also self-referential, which draw attention to the sound itself. See below for Digital Underground’s lyrics in “Rhymin’ on the Funk”:

⁴⁶ George Clinton, interview with Howard Kramer, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Education and Public Programs Division Records, 30 July 2011, <http://catalog.rockhall.com/catalog/RG-0004/rrhof:6773>. Accessed at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, 25 March 2016.

Even after the fall of the P-Funk empire, Clinton actively absorbed contemporary music, and would infuse it with his own, as his releases since 1980 demonstrate. The influence was mutual, of course, as Clinton’s cultural philosophies—inspired largely by a curious mixture of television programs *Star Trek* and *The Outer Limits*, and books including *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Clones*, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*—and their integration with the multimedia productions of Parliament-Funkadelic (e.g. music, liner notes, album covers, promotional materials, stage productions, costumes) found their way into electro hop clubs as well as the music of other hip hop artists in inventive ways.

⁴⁷ Clinton and Greenman, 322.

S-H-I-N-I-N on the funk
And listen to the MCs rhymin' on the funk
We solemnly swear to never bust a style that's bunk
So listen to the way that we're rhymin' on the funk
I really would like to ask you, have you ever heard this style before?
You gotta say no, 'cause there ain't no denyin'
And if you say yes, you're lyin'
People are always wonderin' what's up with the Underground
Are they down? Or is it just another new sound? (new sound)
We're saying things, and when we use a beat we use it right
Because we're not just playin' things
Spittin' rhymes like a tommy gun sprayin' things
So when you see us on stage, don't just stare us down
But compare our sound to any other crew you like, just how you like

Musically speaking, Digital Underground extensively chopped the instrumentals in “Flash Light,” but the source material is still quite recognizable, so perhaps their reference to a completely new sound is directed to hip hop fans that may not be completely familiar with P-Funk; indeed, the album containing this song, *Sex Packets*, was released in 1990. Teenagers and young adults, who likely constituted most of Digital Underground’s fanbase at the time, were too young to have become familiar with P-Funk at the height of their middle period, and thus would only be exposed to their music through their parents. In addition, “Rhymin’ on the Funk” does not rely on Parliament’s chanting of “flash light” to make the source sample known. Instead, they utilize the hook “shinin’ on the funk” to reference the flash light’s purpose, adding a layer of nuance to their rather conspicuous sampling practices.

Taking P-Funk philosophy in a different direction, Dr. Dre, who began his career with the World Class Wreckin’ Cru in the electro hop scene and subsequently as a member of N.W.A., released *The Chronic* in 1992 and initiated G-Funk. Envisioning a new lifestyle for African Americans in post-riot Los Angeles, Loren Kajikawa explains how G-Funk crafted a new hip

hop sound that emphasized easily digestible grooves and timbral choices that both optimized the listening experience and evoked the same afrofuturist essence that allowed P-Funk to reevaluate black experiences in the United States. Kajikawa notes the use of the Minimoog synthesizer in multiple tracks from *The Chronic*, including “Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thang” and “Let Me Ride,” stating that “George Clinton’s P-Funk collective [...] is central to understanding the way in which *The Chronic*’s hit singles reimagined gangsta rap. [...] Dre consciously sought to engage P-Funk’s outer-space sound and imagery.”⁴⁸ That engagement, through the autosonic-syntagmatic interpolation of Parliament’s “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” in Dr. Dre’s song “Let Me Ride” and the allosonic-paradigmatic use of the Minimoog, achieved this with an immediacy that was obvious to many historically aware listeners. The “rearticulation of race”⁴⁹ that Dr. Dre achieves through his interpolations of Parliament—notably in the chorus of “Let Me Ride,” the former featuring reworked lyrics from the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the song’s overarching Mothership metaphor—maintains the cultural salience of P-Funk’s ideology: “Funk not only moves, it can remove.”⁵⁰

Kajikawa elaborates further upon this point, emphasizing that Dr. Dre’s incorporation of P-Funk in his music was not merely an aesthetic choice, but one that carried cultural import.⁵¹ By adding the 1964 Chevrolet Impala to the chain of vehicular metaphors symbolizing African American transcendence (e.g. the biblical tale of Ezekiel’s wheel, the Mother Plane central to the

⁴⁸ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 106.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Parliament, “P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up),” *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7022, 1975.

⁵¹ Kajikawa, 109.

Nation of Islam, and Dr. Funkenstein's Mothership), Dr. Dre promotes transcendence via the street. Such social commentary is made more powerful in its delivery.⁵² The interpolation of "Mothership Connection (Star Child), the footage of a P-Funk concert in the "Let Me Ride" music video, and the potency of Dr. Dre's new "gangsta cool" image grounded in the Los Angeles streets elevated P-Funk's cultural currency to new heights. Justin Williams comments upon how Dr. Dre authenticated G-Funk through the interpolation of borrowed material instead of relying only on digital sampling. By re-recording samples in the studio, Williams argues, "Dr. Dre's emphasis on not textually signaling the borrowed material directly (i.e., not digitally sampling or making it sound sampled) helps contribute to this particular sense of realness."⁵³ Realness is accurate here, as P-Funk was not completely detached from lived realities—in concerts, Dr. Funkenstein comports himself as a pimp, and much of the group's mythos is rooted in realism. The commercial success of G-Funk ensured the continuing presence and relevance of P-Funk in popular music for the then-foreseeable future. The release of *Doggystyle* the following year cemented that presence.

Doggystyle, notorious for its explicit themes of drugs, sex, and the gangsta lifestyle initially espoused by Dr. Dre in *The Chronic*, positioned P-Funk in the foreground. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, George Clinton recorded the opening lines of "G-Funk Intro" for two probable reasons. First and most obviously, Clinton's cameo appearance on the album made the G-Funk/P-Funk connection more palpable. Second, "G-Funk Intro" is just as much Snoop Dogg's introduction to the rap industry; George Clinton, eleven years prior to *Doggystyle*,

⁵² Ibid., 110-11.

⁵³ Justin A. Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 94.

released “Atomic Dog,” which, according to the lyrics, “is a story of a famous dog.” This being ostensibly self-referential to Clinton, the Atomic Dog himself introduces a new dog(g). The primary choral hook on “Atomic Dog” is interpolated in “Who Am I? (What’s My Name?),” with syllable-for-syllable substitution of “Snoop Doggy Dogg.” Although the priorities of Snoop Dogg’s album do not engage in the same degree of social critique that *The Chronic* did, his album does reinforce the more fluid lifestyle and escapist behaviors of the post-riot Los Angeles gangsta, and Dr. Dre’s production of Snoop Dogg’s album again centralized P-Funk as the sonic channel through which the gangsta could assert agency. In other words, as far as G-Funk was concerned, P-Funk was equivalent to personal freedom, social transcendence, and a coolness that was at once retrospective, futurist, and highly appealing.

The appeal of P-Funk in hip hop music production has been persistent. Ice Cube, in his fourth post-N.W.A. album *Lethal Injection* (1993), included “Bop Gun (One Nation),” the title of which is a blend of Parliament’s “Bop Gun (Endangered Species)” and Funkadelic’s “One Nation Under A Groove.” Ice Cube’s song heavily samples the latter, and he extensively quotes P-Funk lyrics throughout his verses. He has paid tribute to P-Funk in his previous work, as well, releasing “Endangered Species (Tales from the Darkside),” whose title is also a reference to Parliament’s “Bop Gun,” and “Givin’ Up the Nappy Dugout,” a reference to the Funkadelic song “Nappy Dugout.” Ice Cube and his producers also liberally sampled Parliament-Funkadelic throughout his studio albums, zealously demonstrating the group’s importance to his musical career. He took the opportunity to collaborate with Clinton in 2014, when he provided a verse on Clinton’s track “Ain’t That Funkin’ Kinda Hard on You? - We Ain’t Neva Gonna Stop Remix,” also featuring Kendrick Lamar. Kendrick, who on his 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly* also

collaborated with Clinton, was considerably impacted by Clinton's work, and has continued the work of historicizing P-Funk, ushering their music into yet another new generation of popular music. In "Wesley's Theory," for instance, the unmistakable presence of P-Funk comes through in the bass synthesizer, instantly recalling "Flash Light" or "(Not Just) Knee Deep." Songs on his album also reminded listeners of other funk classics, from the Isley Brothers' "That Lady" to James Brown's "The Payback." In his autobiography, Clinton recalls his conversations with Kendrick about music and lineage:

When I met Sly Stone, he knew of P-Funk because he heard those records himself, as they came out. When I met Rakim, he knew of P-Funk because he listened to his brother's records. With Kendrick, it was his parents' records. He didn't just know the hits. He knew the deepest of the deep cuts. When you talk about your old work with a young man with an old mind, the work feels less old. We talked about my old songs and they were renewed. When the past comes rushing into the present that way, I can see clearly that artwork is a living thing. Younger artists teach me that I taught them. That's why I'm grateful to Kendrick Lamar, and anyone who is carrying on the P-Funk tradition, which itself carried on the tradition of Louis Jordan, the Beatles, Cream, James Brown, Smokey Robinson, Frankie Lymon. We talked about everything. We talked about nothing. We talked about my old songs and they were renewed. We talked about my old songs and we were renewed.⁵⁴

The extent of P-Funk's reach in hip hop does not end with the conclusion to Clinton's autobiography. In fact, much of Clinton's work in the 1990s has been greatly informed by hip hop. His 1993 album *Hey Man...Smell My Finger* opens with a rap song, "Martial Law," which itself samples numerous P-Funk tracks from throughout the 1970s and early 1980s including "Atomic Dog," "Funkentelechy," and "Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker)," to name a few. Disciples of the P abound in this track and the album as a whole, featuring Anthony Kiedis and Flea of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Shock G of Digital

⁵⁴ Clinton and Greenman, 355.

Underground, and even members of Prince's band. Clinton would collaborate with other hip hop artists as well, releasing a track called "The Lavishments of Light Looking" with Flying Lotus, Thundercat, and Shabazz Palaces in 2015, as part of the Adult Swim Singles program. Other members of the Funk Mob would also go on to participate in hip hop: Bootsy Collins would co-write "Serial Killa" with Snoop Dogg and appearing on the rapper's 2004 album *R&G (Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece*. Bernie Worrell contributed to Mos Def's album *The New Danger*, also in 2004, alongside members of Living Colour. The web continues to expand, and it is clear that P-Funk has remained relevant to popular music even after their 1970s middle period came to an end.

Beyond hip hop, other musicians since the 1990s have also engaged the ideologies and aesthetics of P-Funk. In addition to Living Colour, one of the most celebrated and unique BRC artists is singer and bassist Me'Shell NdegéOcello, whose extensively heterogeneous catalog spans R&B, neo-soul, funk, hip hop, rock, and jazz. NdegéOcello is widely recognized for her intergeneric tendencies, through which she invokes musics from the past; Jimi Hendrix, Larry Graham, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder number among the ranks of her influences, according to Maureen Mahon, as their technical, textural, or lyrical qualities have appeared throughout her recordings and live performances.⁵⁵ Yet there is a glaring omission in her accounting—the direct evocation of Parliament-Funkadelic in her music is not casual, nor is it only present by association with the likes of Hendrix or Graham. Rather, much of her musical eclecticism and public image conspicuously recall the ethos of P-Funk. Mahon states in *Right to Rock* that Living Colour, Me'Shell NdegéOcello, and "other postliberated generation black

⁵⁵ Mahon, 134.

American artists...demonstrated the commercial viability of styles that expanded the definitions of black music.”⁵⁶ NdegéOcello did exactly that, utilizing rhythm as simultaneously the impetus of her music, a musical-cultural referent, and a textural layer. For instance, her 2002 release *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*, is superficially a hip hop album. The drum beats and instrumentals provide a firm rhythmic basis for rapping and singing by NdegéOcello in virtually every track. Under the surface, however, there is more at play: “Jabril” is much more rhythmically understated than, say, “GOD.FEAR.MONEY,” but goes over the top in an inspired electric guitar solo that immediately signals psychedelic rock. The tracks “Dead Nigga Blvd. - Pt. 1” and “Dead Nigga Blvd. - Pt. 2” are more rhythmically assertive, but “Pt. 2,” which comes immediately after “Jabril” on the album, features a guitar solo by Michael Hampton, also known as Kid Funkadelic, the junior member of Funkadelic that joined the group after demonstrating to Clinton a note-for-note performance of Eddie Hazel’s “Maggot Brain” solo.⁵⁷ The solo in “Pt. 2” glides effortlessly over the underlying rhythm, sounding almost as if it were sampled from one of his featured tracks on Funkadelic’s *Let’s Take It to the Stage*. His fuzzy timbre, strategic employment of harmonics, and fluid nonchalance stylistically remind listeners of the aesthetic priorities of electric guitarists in psychedelia’s heyday, and Hampton’s particular sound in this recording specifically points back to P-Funk.

If that were not enough to draw a connection to P-Funk, “Pocketbook,” the fifth track on *Cookie*, establishes a clear lyrical dialogue with them. Over a sparse, yet weighty bass track, NdegéOcello comments upon hedonism, social and frivolous lifestyles, and more specifically,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁵⁷ Clinton and Greenman, 130.

materialism. The song makes various references to one's pocketbook and the monetary abilities that it suggests; this is confirmed by lines including "You like to have money in your pocketbook / That's alright," and "With the swerve in your hip, order / Can I get a drink? / Yeah, yes you can." Shortly thereafter, she sings "You know what you make after taxes / You like to get free / You've been to Cuba and you don't watch TV / You only get greedy for the power of the P..." More than mere alliteration, "the P" here is, immediately at least, a reference to the subject's pocketbook. However, NdegéOcello's particular decision to use the phrase "power of the P" connotes more than that. "The P" may even be an oblique reference to P-Funk and its accompanying self-indulgent lifestyle. If this is the case, then NdegéOcello's position on materialism or self-indulgence is neutral, or even positive. This can be supported by her public image, which has consistently been one that does not conform to industry standards or expectations, but instead slashes ideas about black music, black female bodies, and heteronormativity. She is, by nature, artistically self-indulgent, but not hedonistically. Rather, she is self-indulgent in her unique identity as a black, bisexual, female artist who produces eclectic music that resists third party classification.⁵⁸ This was undoubtedly a tenet of P-Funk philosophy. Parlet, a P-Funk spinoff act that featured female singers exclusively (Mallia Franklin, Debbie Wright, and Jeanette Washington), released *Pleasure Principle* in 1978. The title track, whose prominent strings situate the song closer to disco or disco-funk, begins with the lyrics "Happiness is in the pursuing / Don't you get bored of what you're doing / Every biting worth the chewin' / And the pleasure principle is for wooin'," emphasizing the necessity of both pleasure and healthy self-indulgence; the rest of the song follows in this ideology, in agreement

⁵⁸ Mahon, 134-138.

with the P-Funk axiom, which claims that “funk is its own reward.” The same sentiment is palpable in the album’s most obvious connection to P-Funk, a cover of Funkadelic’s “Better by the Pound” (1975), in which NdegéOcello adds her unique flair to an already provocative song that combines notions of spirituality with promiscuity and sexual indulgence.

Other neo-soul artists seem to have based their aesthetic choices on P-Funk to varying degrees. Erykah Badu, for instance, aligns in some ways with the anti-masculinist, anti-“normative” sensibilities evident in NdegéOcello’s music. Rising in popularity during the market shift away from rap music at the turn of the twenty first century⁵⁹, Badu’s music was imbued with layers that nostalgically look backward toward 1970s funk and soul, but with a filtered, cutting-edge sound that could only have been produced after 1997, when her debut *Baduizm* was released. In 2008, with her fourth studio album *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*, listeners were immediately brought back to 1975, the year Parliament released *Chocolate City*. Figure 2.8.a shows the pointillistic composite line formed by horns and electric guitars in “Amerykahn Promise,” which appears immediately after an explosive brass introduction. The melodic line in Figure 2.8.a—which also provides the rhythmic foundation for the song—is juxtaposed with Figure 2.8.b, a transcription of a strikingly similar line from the title track on *Chocolate City*, played on muted guitar strings.

Whether this similarity was premeditated or not is unknown. Nonetheless, the simmering textures underneath both tracks are nearly uniform, and the subject matter in each song is not dissimilar; whereas in “Chocolate City” Clinton celebrated blackness in urban centers, expressing a longing for a White House run by African Americans, Badu in “Amerykahn

⁵⁹ According to Jeff Chang, rap music sales plummeted by 15 percent in 2001. See Chang, 446.



Figure 2.8.a: Erykah Badu, “Amerykah Promise” (2008). Composite melody.



Figure 2.8.b: Parliament, “Chocolate City” (1975). Introduction.

“Promise” also celebrates blackness, but in the context of a cynicism that asserts how the “American Promise” has failed African Americans. This is demonstrated more clearly in a skit at the end of the song, in which a young girl asks, “Has anyone seen my forty two laws,” a reference to the forty two laws of the Egyptian deity Ma’at. Egyptian mysticism and other cultural values from North Africa and the Middle East have informed the Nation of Islam, to which Badu and many African Americans belong. The response to the young girl, “Oh I’m sorry, we’re not responsible for lost articles and things,” denies the young girl her identity as a young black woman in the United States, instead forcing her to conform to the predetermined expectations of American hegemony. Much like fellow neo-soul artists NdegéOcello, D’Angelo, and others, Badu is highly concerned with the circumstances surrounding blackness in the United States, particularly in a more globalized, digital, and politically fraught period of history. Therefore, making such connections to the past is essential; whether implied or overt, the “power of the P” is no illusion, and has informed much of the music that has been produced since 1980. Two final case studies will demonstrate that in 2016, musicians have consciously drawn upon the music of P-Funk in order to expand the horizons of popular music in an ever more rapidly evolving culture.

Funk After Death (2016—Funk Thousand)

It is evident that although P-Funk has been a potent force within the tangled web of popular music, the manifestations of their influence typically amount to selected musical or thematic fragments. Of course, acts from the Red Hot Chili Peppers to Digital Underground, Me'Shell NdegéOcello, and Erykah Badu have repurposed P-Funk, and the selected fragments thereof indicate these performers' place within a historical discourse; additionally, the aging original members of P-Funk still perform for nostalgic audiences, albeit less frequently. Until 2016, however, nobody probed the question of what the genre of P-Funk could sound like in a digital age of production, with forty years of musical development to draw upon, until Swiss-Italian bassist Alissia Benveniste released *Back to the Funkture* with her band, the Funkateers. The brief album—with six songs only adding up to twenty-three minutes—is densely packed with music and lyrical content that not only references P-Funk, but almost comes across as a genuine Parliament album.

Beginning with a tongue-in-cheek spoken introduction that situates the listener in a time travel machine whose destination is “the year funk thousand,” over a subdued rhythm section, Alissia (Benveniste's simplified stage name) already signifies Parliament's introductory track on *Mothership Connection*, “P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up),” which begins in exactly the same way. This introduction transitions into the song “Back to the Funkture,” an exuberant dance number whose lyrics suggest that although Alissia's time travel machine is the vehicle, the listener's (read as dancer's) body is the fuel:

Back to the funkture (2x)
Put your hands up in the air, and move them side to side
Break your hips down to the left, then move them to the right (2x)
Going to bring you back in time, a place you've never seen
Taking a ride to free your mind, and let your body speak

Going “back to the funkture,” of course, is a reference to the 1985 science fiction/adventure film *Back to the Future*. In this case, however, Alissia is bringing the listener back to a particular moment in music history, although the true destination of the voyage is indeed the future; this aligns with Clinton’s conception of humanity’s salvation through funk music, which indeed takes place in an unspecified future. Thus, by going back in time to capture the essence of P-Funk, the listener is brought into the future, the chronological position of “pure funk.” The final lyric transcribed above, “Taking a ride to free your mind, and let your body speak,” is a clear invocation of Funkadelic’s *Free Your Mind...And Your Ass Will Follow*, encapsulating an iteration of P-Funk ideology that the collective conceived early on. Other lyrical passages throughout the album speak to the P-Funk ethos, as well. The fourth track, “Get Down,” sounds as though it could have been pulled from a late 1970s Parliament album like *Gloryhallastoopid* (1979), and the lyric

Party people! (Yeah?)
Now whatcha gon’ do? (What?)
Let me hear you say, “We are a nation under this funky groove”

cites both the “party people” from that album, as well as Funkadelic’s *One Nation Under A Groove* (1978). “Take Off,” Alissia’s third track, features a spoken interlude that is unmistakable in its resemblance to Bootsy Collins’ cartoonish, caricatured voice as heard in many of the 1970s recordings with Bootsy’s Rubber Band. Indeed, Alissia has cited Collins as a significant

influence and even a casual mentor; on April 4, 2016, she even sat in with members of the original band to perform “Flash Light” on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*.

In Lacasse’s terms of musical borrowing, Alissia presents an interesting case: to be sure, on the reproduction axis of hypertexts, *Back to the Funkture* is solidly allosonic; on the syntagmatic-paradigmatic axis, however, there lies a degree of ambiguity. While on one hand, there are no direct quotations of P-Funk’s music—no syntagmatism, purely speaking—her music is not simply paradigmatic (stylistically similar). The musical substance itself, not solely her musical style, is allosonic. This is apparent in the drum tracks and horn lines for many of her songs, as well as the vocal style in songs like “Back to the Funkture” and “Get Down.” The album follows in P-Funk’s aesthetic footsteps through decentralization of the ensemble, a technique that Motown capitalized upon. Although Alissia’s bass is prominent in much of the album, there are no solo passages, and the ensemble arrangements depend upon every layer. The composite texture, which draws upon brass, synthesizers, and digital effects in addition to a rhythm section of bass, guitar, and percussion, uses each layer in a way remarkably homologous to those in Parliament songs. Harmonized brass passages are used for rhythmic complement; guitars, also utilizing chordal passages, serve as rhythmic support; the bass is brought noticeably to the foreground, providing a tonal foundation as well as syncopated accentuations that coincide with the drums. Generally speaking, no single line is more complex than another, but they all add up to the textural intricacy that characterized nearly every middle period Parliament album. Yet, P-Funk resists classification by nature, and as this chapter has demonstrated, there are innumerable characteristics that have defined their sound over many years of musical evolution. Alissia’s project—albeit expertly produced and remarkably powerful for an industry debut—

presents but one iteration of P-Funk. Hers is overtly preservationist; whereas hip hop artists have recontextualized P-Funk through samples or neo-soul and funk rock musicians evoked their aesthetics, Alissia attempts to replicate the sound itself, reviving the essence of Parliament for contemporary listeners.

In the spirit of revival, Childish Gambino (the stage persona of Donald Glover) released “*Awaken, My Love!*” in December 2016, in a musical statement that dismantles what listeners have come to expect from him. As *Billboard* writer Dan Rys notes in his article on the album’s production, about two minutes into the album, listeners realize that “this is not the Childish Gambino album [they] were expecting.”⁶⁰ Despite being previously established as a hip hop artist, Gambino’s latest project does not feature rapping, instead favoring adventurously disorienting sectional song forms, meticulous production by Ludwig Göransson that involved building a drum room from scratch for the song “Me and Your Mama” to achieve an autonomic reproduction of Funkadelic’s drum timbre on “Maggot Brain,”⁶¹ and a heavy handed dealing of psychedelic funk. The hypertextuality of Gambino’s album does not stop with the first track. “Riot” includes the only direct Funkadelic sample on the album from the 1975 song “Good to Your Earhole,” and Gambino’s “Have Some Love” reads like “Can You Get to That” redux. The latter comparison is readily audible in the group vocals, the persistent drum beat, and even the acoustic guitar prevalent in the Funkadelic and buried in the texture of Gambino’s second chorus.

⁶⁰ Dan Rys, “Producer Ludwig Göransson Explains How Funkadelic Helped Shape Childish Gambino’s ‘Awaken, My Love!’” *Billboard*. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7604448/donald-glover-ludwig-goransson-funkadelic-childish-gambino-awaken>. 7 December 2016. Accessed 6 January 2016.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The following track, “Boogieman,” collides Funkadelic’s “Super Stupid” with “Hit It and Quit It” (the latter also from *Maggot Brain*).

This arrangement of tracks on the album strikingly parallels *Maggot Brain*. The title track, “Maggot Brain,” an experimental number with its drug-induced guitar solo and reverberant drum track that seems to echo into nothingness, is followed by “Can You Get to That,” which then leads into the harder-hitting “Hit It and Quit It.” “Me and Your Mama,” initiating “*Awaken, My Love!*”, showcases an avant-gardism that matches “Maggot Brain” not in guitar virtuosity, but in the clashing aesthetics within the song’s form, juxtaposing an ambient, “quiet storm” track next to a distressed rock segment in which the distorted, thunderous aesthetic of heavy metal flirts with the wailing vocal qualities of passionate soul music; the track then returns to a subdued closing section. This is followed by “Have Some Love” in a clear musical homage to “Can You Get to That,” and “Boogieman” takes after “Hit It and Quit It.” The parallelism evident in the first three tracks is likely no coincidence. Quoted in the same article cited above, Gambino cites Funkadelic as a major influence during his early musical exposure:

I remember listening to songs my dad would play—albums by the Isleys or Funkadelic—and not understanding the feeling I was feeling...I remember hearing a Funkadelic scream and being like, “Wow, that’s sexual and it’s scary.” Not having a name for that, though; just having a feeling. That’s what made it great.⁶²

Gambino expresses an obvious desire to historicize and reinterpret Funkadelic in 2016. This is even evident in the album cover, which itself seems to be a technologically updated version of the *Maggot Brain* cover (see Figure 2.9). Although iconography and public media is the subject of Chapter III, in a study that treats musical productions as texts it is useful to consider the packaging of the music, which is conceivably (although not always) part of the

⁶² Ibid.



Figure 2.9: Album covers. Left to right: Childish Gambino, “*Awaken, My Love!*” (2016); Funkadelic, *Maggot Brain* (1971); Erykah Badu, *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* (2008).

consumer’s listening experience. Also included in Figure 2.9 is the album cover for Erykah Badu’s *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*. In all three of these album covers, the focus of the image is on the subject’s face. They each display unique expressions that achieve similar ends: the terrified, yet incongruously absurd head of fashion model Barbara Cheeseborough that appears from the ground on *Maggot Brain*; the ironic, dispassionate apathy on Badu’s face as she is surrounded by images that include chains, handcuffs, an infant with a barcode imprinted on its forehead, a television, and a dollar symbol, as well as her own empowering fists; Gambino’s cover depicts a pharaonic countenance that either portrays happiness, distress, or both. The irony in each image is also accompanied by afrocentric nods: although *Maggot Brain* is not explicitly afrocentric, the woman depicted here wears an afro hairstyle, which was indeed a statement of blackness in the fashion sensibilities of the 1960s onward—one so prevalent that it would even become a stereotype in American culture; the collage of images on Badu’s album cover also create the composite form of the same hairstyle; the perplexing visage on “*Awaken, My Love!*” replaces the hair with what appears to be a Pharaoh’s headdress or the collar depicted on Egyptian sarcophagi, accented with a neon blue outline. Badu’s and Gambino’s album covers

recall the shocking yet powerful statement that Funkadelic conveyed on their album cover, which drew attention to blackness as something to be celebrated via artistry, but whose contemporaneous position in American culture was (or is) warped and in need of rectification.

Where the music of Parliament-Funkadelic is concerned, there is hardly a more effective way to understand their reconstructions and historical potency than to place the music itself along a historical continuum. The continuum here, however, is only linear in its temporal progression. A musical historiography of P-Funk, which this chapter has demonstrated, is better understood as a web; although the center of a spider's web is critical to its construction, and any web is built in an outward direction, its true beauty and substance is in the way it extends from its center. Each new iteration of P-Funk's musical characteristics, of their ideology, or of their overall aesthetic has resulted in a unique and historically significant contribution to the popular music discourse *as told through music*. A musical discourse allows for greater immediacy in communicating the value of a musical subject through time; the members of P-Funk understood this early on when they recontextualized the music of Frankie Lymon and the songwriting priorities of Motown for a psychedelic audience. They took their musical experiments in purifying funk to audiences across cultural lines, to which the thoroughly intergeneric album *Osmium* testifies. And it would stand to reason that following their hugely successful middle period, musicians across those cultural lines would echo their intergeneric sensibilities and, upon finding fragments of P-Funk that appealed to them, ingrain the collective's legacy in the continuum of a popular music soundscape. This is not merely historical, but inherently historiographic in the way musicians *interpreted* P-Funk's position in popular music history. It is only appropriate that Clinton, at the center of this web, participated in the historiography of P-

Funk, observing the activities of his disciples and offering his own musical commentary. As he vehemently exclaims in “Martial Law” (1993), “If you’re gonna steal the funk, steal the motherfunkin’ P.”

CHAPTER III

ONE WITH REAL EYES, REALIZE: VISUALIZING P-FUNK IN POPULAR CULTURE

“[American comic book superheroes] not only identify with the political culture and goals of the United States of America, but are also capable of acknowledging that they inhabit a class system, and sometimes articulate an explicitly social account of ethics ... superhero comics can expose some of the unacknowledged contradictions of modernity itself, if we put the right questions to them.”

-Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*¹

“Let me put on my sunglasses here, so I can see what I’m doing.”

-George Clinton (as Star Child), “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” (1975)²

Although the second epigraph for this chapter might initially come across as arbitrary in light of the first, its power—and, in essence, the potential power of sunglasses—becomes truly apparent only after a deliberation upon the relationships and transactions occurring between popular culture and the interpretive layers of its multimedia productions. The dynamics of spirituality and consumerism, the philosophical implications of marketing tactics and iconography, and the blurred lines between modernity, realism, and fantasy find their common ground in the multisensory universe of P-Funk. From the outset of this chapter, one must keep in mind that the lofty, fantastic cosmogony and sensibilities espoused by P-Funk have not been groundlessly fabricated, but are in fact unavoidably entangled among the lived realities with which many in the United States—especially disenfranchised African Americans in urban centers during the 1970s—have had to contend; allegories depicting the extraterrestrial nature of the human spirit, epic battles over the fate of the cosmos, dance parties at the bottom of the ocean, and the unifying power of The One all serve to elaborate upon the grounded, all-too-real crises of

¹ Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 142.

² Parliament, “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7022, 1975.

a racialized, postindustrial America and its severe repercussions. Funk music and the subgenre of P-Funk (explored in the preceding chapter), the primary delivery mechanism of these potent concepts, explore those implications in an ironically palatable, attractive format—but only on the surface. The uplifting transcendence of P-Funk is presented only in part by their music; the variegated media that encompass the comprehensiveness of P-Funk comprise album cover art and liner notes, marketing and promotional materials, elaborate stage sets, garish and provocative performance attire, animated cartoons, a comic book, an arsenal of imagined and repurposed tools for the propagation of their principles (e.g., the Bop Gun, flash light, and sunglasses), and profound philosophical insights expressed via historically and culturally loaded linguistic choices.

In this chapter, all those facets will be considered in relation to the popular culture surrounding their invention, dissemination, and propagation. I will interpret and historicize these phenomena and their relationships to one another, and in Chapter IV I reconsider them historiographically in light of the interpretive communities that have invoked, evoked, and otherwise engaged them to various ends. In most cases, those ends speak either to politics, consumerism, spirituality, racial discourse, or combinations of these topics. Owing to the extensive overlap across the above aspects of American popular culture, the structure of this chapter does not address each one individually. The first section, for example, will consider P-Funk album covers that centralize the body and use sexuality to criticize popular culture and consumerism; the following section iconographically unpacks the Mothership as a historically grounded trope; and the final section is an examination of P-Funk's cultural ideologies and criticisms through their pervasive metaphor of sunglasses. A close companion to Chapter II,

which was an analysis of the specifically musical elements of P-Funk in a historiographic context, this chapter addresses the extramusical productions that accompany their music.

Bodies for Sale

In the second chapter of *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (2005), Robert Fink compares the way public advertisements and repetitive musics—namely, minimalism—engage patterns of American consumer capitalism. Consumer desires, he says, are mediated via a complex of objects (in this case, commodities) and systems that, in a postmodern economy, rely upon the forces of repetition and saturation for their own power, lest they deteriorate amid the sheer plurality of consumer subjectivities.³ He compares the mediations of consumer desires to those of sexual desires, whose mediations seem simpler in practice, but are actually remarkably imbricated, especially when negotiated through music (he discusses this topic at length in his preceding chapter on disco). Fink then engages theorists of consumerism and the politics of desire and pleasure in the realm of iconographic repetitive minimalism. Specifically, he considers the claim in Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* (1968) regarding the artificiality and ritualism of mass consumption; Fink’s interpretation of Baudrillard reads the mediating system of objects as inauthentic in its false invocation of “‘our’ innermost desires,” and asserts that the “consumption of objects, the ‘satisfaction’ of those desires, didn’t necessarily lead to anything immediately recognizable as personal agency or release of tension.”⁴

Baudrillard’s late-1960s sentiments were even predated by those of other writers, notably on both

³ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves, American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 80-81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

ends of the political spectrum (namely, William Whyte and Herbert Marcuse) who, in the 1950s, have polemicized the injurious interference of “technocratic capitalism [...] with man’s relationship to his ‘own’ subjective desires.”⁵ James A. Snead has also attempted to expose this condition:

[Jonathan] Swift said that “happiness...is a perpetual Possession of being well deceived.” We are not far here from a proper definition of culture. At least a type of “happiness” is found by a man through a perpetual repetition of apparent consensus and convention that provides a sense of security, identification, and “rightness.” Yet however fervently culture nurtures this belief, such a sense of security is also a kind of “coverage” [...] “insurance against accidental and sudden rupturing of a complicated and precious fabric, and also in Swift’s less favorable sense of a “cover up,” or a hiding of otherwise unpleasant facts from the senses.⁶

Upon some consideration, the cultural system described by these authors seems rather insidious: an institutional, ritualized, even Kafkaesque system in which individuals are coaxed into eschewing their own subjectivities for the sake of fulfilling what *seem* to be their own desires, when in truth those desires have been constructed and mediated by the very system they are pressed into service to maintain. That mediation is achieved through fabricated motivations driven by a repetitive saturation of language and imagery that s(t)imulates desire and subsequent pleasure. Agency, in this light, seems utterly impossible, our own sensory experiences merely tools for perpetuating a status quo. What happens, then, when such a system is turned on itself, its own processes repurposed to bring those machinations to light? Fink addresses repetition within process-based minimalism as cultural critique, the saturation of repetitious sonic information (as in the music of Steve Reich) repurposing this consumerist schema for

⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁶ James A. Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4, Black Textual Strategies, Volume 1: Theory (Winter, 1981), 147.

compositional (musical) ends. Fink also addresses popular culture and disco music; however, musical acts with overt political agendas—P-Funk, for instance—are not included in his analysis. P-Funk’s flash light, however, is not only one of the many visual markers of the collective’s brand; it is a tool that the group repeatedly suggests that its listeners and fans use for social critique. In fact, much of P-Funk’s “extramusical” imagery can be seen as an attempt to repetitively saturate their listenership with the concepts and ideas necessary to illuminate the crises of postmodern America.

Similar to the minimalist music Fink discusses, P-Funk often seems intent on turning the structures and modes of capitalist production against itself. The development of consistent messaging (i.e., branding) is one example of capitalist practices. Parliament-Funkadelic is by no means the only musical entity to utilize visual branding; the Red Hot Chili Peppers can instantly be recognized by their asterisk logo, Public Enemy by their crosshairs, the Rolling Stones by their “tongue and lips” logo, Nirvana by their “smiley face,” the Grateful Dead by their dancing bear, terrapin, and “lightning skull,” and of course, Prince by his “love symbol” (which even replaced his name between the years 1993 and 2000), all these symbols, of course, dependent upon the knowledge of the viewer.

Interestingly, P-Funk had no comparable “logos,” perhaps excepting the *Maggot Brain* skull used in stylized printings of Funkadelic’s name or the jagged, angular stylization of Parliament’s (see Figure 3.1). Rather, P-Funk’s visual branding is more extensive, employing both self-referential imagery drawn from album concepts developed through the 1970s in addition to iconographic citations of tropes embedded in African American culture and history. Their imagery is propagated in album art, live performances, and even in media publications

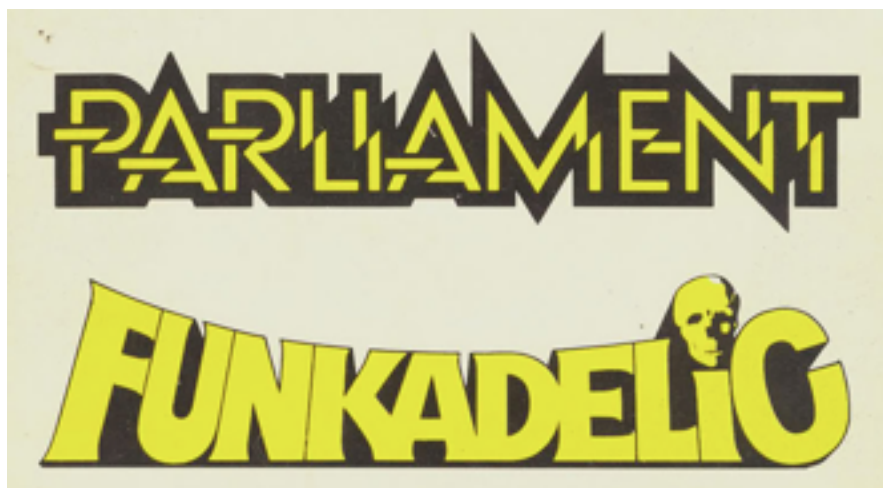


Figure 3.1: Parliament-Funkadelic logos.

about them. P-Funk made certain that their brand would be a multimedia one in the most comprehensive sense, and would, through a cartoonish futurism that never seemed to take itself too seriously, address the real world with a potency and immediacy that invariably challenges convention—musical and cultural, openly as well as indirectly.

One of the most accessible modes of visual delivery, of course, is P-Funk’s catalog of album artwork. In continuation of the discussion begun at the end of Chapter II, the early releases of Funkadelic laid vital groundwork upon which P-Funk built a visual brand, and from which post-P-Funk musicians have extracted motifs to substantiate their own imagery. In Figure 2.9, a juxtaposition of three album covers highlights the since-pervasive motif first portrayed by Barbara Cheeseborough on the cover of *Maggot Brain*. The pervasiveness of that image can be seen, of course, on the adjacent album covers by Childish Gambino and Erykah Badu, but also—and perhaps more meaningfully—on several Funkadelic album covers. In fact, most of Funkadelic’s releases throughout the 1970s depict, somewhere on the record sleeve, the likeness of an African American woman with an afro hairstyle, an immediate evocation of *Maggot Brain*

and an early instance of P-Funk's self-referentiality. From the nude woman depicted on the pre-*Maggot Brain* album *Free Your Mind* (1970) to a drawn reproduction of Cheeseborough's iconic visage as well as the central, surreal figure on *Cosmic Slop* (1973), the instrumentalist inside the gatefold of *Let's Take It to the Stage* (1974), the woman drawn on *One Nation Under a Groove* (1978), and the captive subject of *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* (1981), it is evident that Funkadelic's decision to perpetuate this motif was a conscious one (see Figure 3.2).

In all of these instances, however, the figures mentioned are more than just a face; in fact, in the majority of Funkadelic's album covers from the 1970s, the portrayals of those women are essentially portrayals of their bodies. That P-Funk encouraged total embrace of the body—or, more specifically, the sexualized body—is a truism made evident via repetitive dance music and recurrent visual themes. The depiction of sexualized female bodies in black popular music has a long history. The album covers of Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* (1968; UK release), Miles Davis's *Big Fun* (1974), Marvin Gaye's *I Want You* (1976), and The 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (1989) exemplify this trend in the latter portion of the twentieth century.

Although the example from The 2 Live Crew breaches the realm of exploitation (although no more than Funkadelic's *The Electric Spanking of War Babies*, the illustration displaying a nude woman encapsulated in a phallic vessel operated by a male character) these constitute a modest selection of music packaging in which the body—indeed, the visceral, sensual, and musical body—is, as Richard Leppert puts it, “simultaneously site [and] sight,” and in which the music at hand “is *inevitably* about the body.”⁷ As Leppert's work makes clear, the visual representation of music as a socialized activity—whether through dance in Gaye's cover, the (perhaps forced)

⁷ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), xix-xx.



Figure 3.2: Funkadelic album covers. Clockwise from left: *Free Your Mind...and Your Ass Will Follow* (1970, vertical gatefold cover); *Cosmic Slop* (1973, vertical gatefold cover); *Let's Take It to the Stage* (1975, inner gatefold); *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* (1981); *One Nation Under a Groove* (1978; front cover and inner gatefold).

aural reception of music in Davis's cover, or the consumption of a musical commodity in Hendrix's—speaks to the cultural functions of music within a given milieu.⁸

More specifically, the photographs and illustrations that centralize the sexualized body on Funkadelic album covers operate on four distinct, yet interwoven cultural levels. The first and

⁸ Leppert, "Seeing Music," in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, ed. Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

most immediate level is the fact that the image of sexualized bodies serves as a cohesive theme throughout P-Funk's visual catalog. On the aforementioned album covers, as well as that of Parliament's *Motor-Booty Affair* (1978), its accompanying cartoon advertisement for television, and visual references illustrated in many P-Funk song lyrics, considerable attention is given to the body. Much of the reason behind this originates in the second level of P-Funk's imagery, the prioritization of the body within the funk genre. This imagery can be related to an obvious musical perspective: funk is a dance music, and therefore does not celebrate an idealized, representative body, but rather a tangible, visceral one. Funk does not sublimate sex, self-indulgence, or social deviance, but embraces them as ultimately and unapologetically human. Furthermore, funk does not merely involve the body as a site of production (see Leppert), but as its central site of existence—the uninhibited body is the *raison d'être* of funk.

From here, we confront the third stage: the sexual body as a commodity in a capitalist economy, of which the music industry is an inexorable part. Not much later than Alex Steinweiss's conception of the album cover in the late 1930s as a response to plummeting album sales during the Great Depression, major record labels like Columbia began developing this novel addition to the consumer's musical experience. George Avakian, a leading jazz producer at Columbia, launched a series of albums in 1950 called "Quiet Music," whose albums were among the first to feature women who, other than their intended purpose of generating sales, had no relation to the music or musicians in the record itself. Avakian has even stated that the images had "nothing whatever to do with the music."⁹ See Figure 3.3 for two examples of jazz albums from 1957 that exemplify this discrepancy. This marketing strategy, encouraged by the axiom

⁹ Lara Peregrinelli, "The Women Jacketed by Records," *JazzTimes* 1 December 2001, <https://jazztimes.com/features/the-women-jacketed-by-records/>. Accessed 20 March 2017.



Figure 3.3: Two album covers from 1957. Left: Erroll Garner Trio, *The Most Happy Piano* (Columbia Records CL939). Right: André Previn & Russ Freeman, *Double Play!* (Contemporary Records C 3537). Surely, the women pictured here are neither Garner, Previn, Russ, nor any of their band members. The images originate from stock photograph collections.

“sex sells” heard throughout the entertainment industry, has indeed resulted in sales and made evident the embedded misogynistic tendencies of an economic schema whose modus operandi prioritizes the construction of the consumer’s “subjective desires.” On the one hand (from a top-down perspective), if popular musics are “of the body,” originally conceived as dance genres or derivatives thereof, then it would seem sensible to cater to that ethos. Yet on the other hand (from the bottom-up), either the desires constructed and embodied by consumers are in danger of becoming detached from the music itself (of which the album packaging is only intended to be one aspect), or the musical desires of the consumer become framed by the visual promise which generates expectations. In a market saturated by such visual stimuli, we witness a cultural system that has historically valued sexuality—not as something to embrace openly and equally (we typically see partially nude or otherwise exposed males when it is an image of the artist himself in an attempt to appear virile and hypermasculine, unlike images of women who are unrelated to

the actual musical experience), but as something one can purchase and use for one's own pleasure.

Enter Parliament-Funkadelic at the fourth stage, with an ever-critical eye toward their contemporaneous cultural environment, but also an unmitigated espousal of (funk) music's corporeality. P-Funk's emphasis on the body, however, is not a means toward ownership; rather, P-Funk celebrates the symbiosis of body and music, and has endeavored to implicitly caricature the suffusion of sexuality within music packaging. On their album covers, they remain authentic to their brand in the deliberate replication of the Cheeseborough likeness, typically with sexualized overtones, yet they often take their visual motifs to extremes, depicting alien courtesans, feminine figures with exaggerated curves, overtly phallic characters and objects variously interacting with women, and (always female) orgasms. On one level, this could certainly be read as misogyny—it is doubtful that the members of P-Funk were completely altruistic—and an outright exploitation of the aforementioned, ingrained “subjective desires.” However, considering their penchant for the ribald and the comical paired with their explicit critiques of American political circumstances and consumerism in their liner notes, it becomes rather apparent that there is more at work here: essentially splicing Baudrillard and Adorno with hedonism and intemperance (characteristics in supposed opposition to the two authors, but essential to funk), P-Funk employs images of the sexualized body as a vital intermediary between the surreal, extravagant mythologies in their concept albums and the grounded actuality of the real world. Parliament-Funkadelic's spinoff groups have also taken on the task of coupling satirical criticism with transcendent celebration of sexuality: Parlet's *Pleasure Principle* (1978) and *Invasion of the Booty Snatchers* (1979), Brides of Funkenstein's *Funk or Walk* (1978) and

Never Buy Texas from a Cowboy (1979), and Axiom Funk's *Funkronomicon* (1995) incorporate this motif, all these album covers emphasizing the lower half of the female body.¹⁰ Excerpts from the liner notes for *Cosmic Slop*, the first of several Funkadelic albums featuring the work of illustrator and writer Pedro Bell, explicates these sentiments in a comic register of pseudo-English, replete with fanciful vocabulary, dramatic pauses, and emphatic capitalization:

[...] No less alarming are the individual actions of this reactionary and wayward life form — exploiting each other for unworthy and selfish aims. Specific inspissated ignoramuses of cankerous audacity . . . engaged professionally and/or morally in the unique practice of PIMPAFICATION. And in truth, this is a most damnable lifestyle to witness with mortal eyes!

TOTAL domination of capital, material and creature comforts is ruthlessly sought through the exploitation of many.

The squishy pubic valleys of female denizens . . . become slitted receptors of instantaneous carnal fulfillment — for a price, controlled by a male legion of parasitical, prevariated, GODLESS PAGANS who exact their lifestyle to a terrible cost to their hosts . . .

[...] Premature ecological doom through the reactionary efforts of POLLUTING ENTERPRISES of capitalistic pimpism foreshadow Earth's demise. These cachetic mumruffians of madness continue to hasten total biological Armageddon for the "benefit" of consumerism. And WITHOUT SHAME — declare their eventual victims as the banging argle-bargles responsible for the ecological pimpster game that they cheerfully continue . . .

BE IT KNOWN, THEREFORE, THAT I HAVE FERULED to verbally ostracize these ostrobogulous oafs of occluded obliquity. The frenzied insipience of PIMPIFICATION hath risen to the point of cosmicide. Enough of this madness! CEASE!

[...] VERILY, those soulfulifically jaded swashbucklers of agitpropitic burnbabydom — FUNKADELIC — have descended from the Original Galaxy Ghetto to cleanse thy wayward souls THROUGH MUSIC worthy of the immortals themselves!¹¹

Written from the allegorical perspective of an extraterrestrial outsider, these liner notes provide a critique of the previously discussed cultural and economic environment through which humans (namely in the United States, or any politically and economically comparable society)

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Parlet and Brides of Funkenstein are all-female groups. The artwork for Parlet's *Pleasure Principle* features caricatured illustrations of the vocalists Mallia Franklin, Debbie Wright, and Jeanette Washington. Brides of Funkenstein's *Funk or Walk* similarly features an exaggerated illustration of the group's lead vocalists Lynn Mabry and Dawn Sylva.

¹¹ Pedro Bell, excerpts from liner notes for *Cosmic Slop* (1973; Westbound Records WB-2022), inner gatefold.

experience market saturation, consume resources in excess, and morally detach themselves from those around them; the latter circumstance, in the form of misogyny, pimp culture, and sexual deviance, is directly taken up in the third paragraph of the above excerpt, as is humanity's abuse of natural resources in the fourth paragraph. In a rhetorically effective gesture, the ecological concerns in the fourth paragraph continues the "pimpification" metaphor employed previously; this poetic manifesto seamlessly ties in with the sexual themes prevalent throughout *Cosmic Slop*. Although the narrative's delivery through humor obfuscates the definitive nature of Funkadelic's sentiments, there is certainly a critique here; whether it is completely genuine or in self-referential jest, one cannot absolutely verify. Yet, the presence of a critique plainly demonstrates an awareness of a cultural crisis, and P-Funk is seldom in the business of inadvertence. The centrality of (black) bodies here becomes all the more essential when Parliament introduces the Mothership in 1975, which grants the body enhanced mobility, enabling one to transcend the "frenzied insipience of PIMPIFICATION."

T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M.

In 1996, George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars released the album *T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M.*, an abbreviation for "The Awesome Power of a Fully Operational Mothership." Released around the time that the second Mothership was built—as the original was sold in 1983¹²—and clearly self-referential, the album concept suggests a revival of something essential about P-Funk. Of

¹² Kirstin Fawcett, "Watch George Clinton's P-Funk Mothership Get Reassembled for its Museum Debut," *Smithsonian.com* 10 June 2014, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/watch-george-clintons-mothership-get-reassembled-for-its-museum-debut-180951685/>. Accessed 11 March 2017.

course, this demands an examination of what “the awesome power of a fully operational Mothership” is, and why it was invoked.

Although the “Mothership,” the 1,200-pound aluminum behemoth that descended before spiritually ecstatic audiences in the 1970s, indeed began with Parliament, the concept it represents was by no means novel. The chorus section of the 1975 hit “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” makes a clear historical-cultural allusion: “Swing down, sweet chariot, stop and / Let me ride.” The referent 19th century African American spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” itself repurposed the biblical tale of Elijah, who, in the Book of Kings (or 2 Kings, according to the New Testament), is swept up from the banks of the Jordan River to heaven by a whirlwind accompanying a chariot of fire. The story is noticeably similar to that of Ezekiel, who witnesses a chariot of winged creatures driven by the “likeness of a man” (see Figure 3.4 for artistic representations of both tales). These visions of divine chariots, the inspiration for the

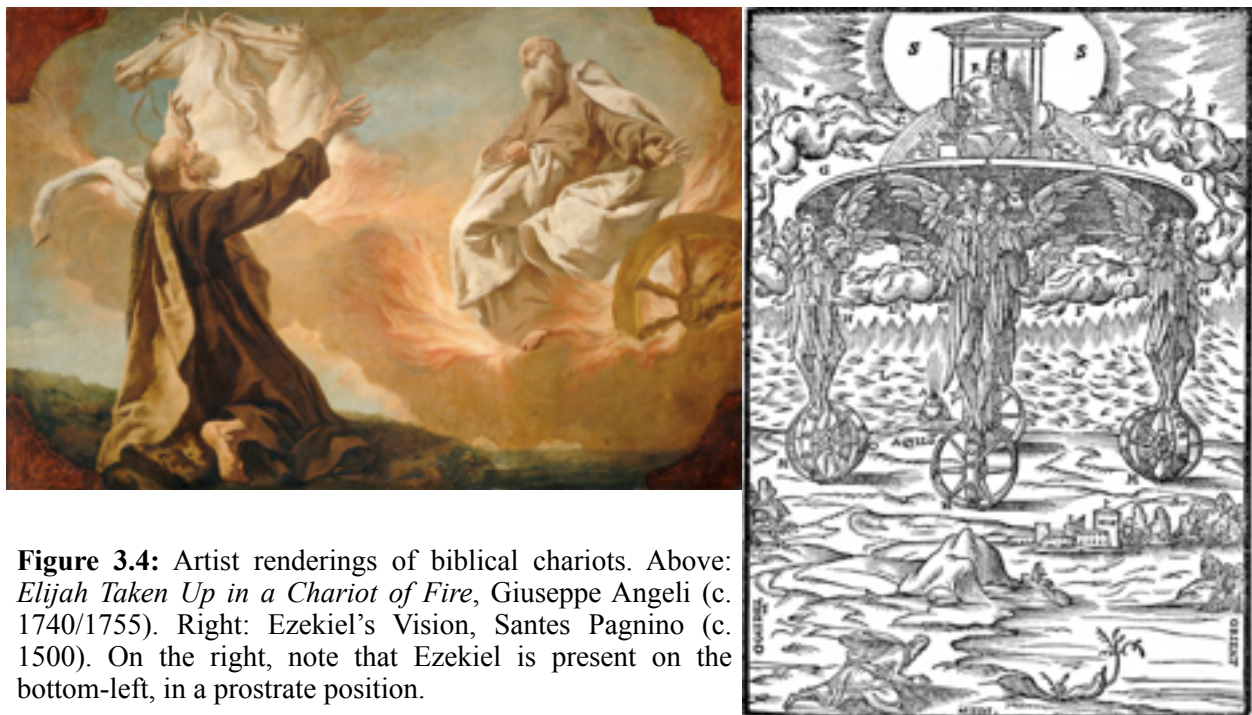


Figure 3.4: Artist renderings of biblical chariots. Above: *Elijah Taken Up in a Chariot of Fire*, Giuseppe Angeli (c. 1740/1755). Right: *Ezekiel's Vision*, Santes Pagnino (c. 1500). On the right, note that Ezekiel is present on the bottom-left, in a prostrate position.

spiritual's lyrics, appealed to members of the African diaspora during the latter portion of the slave trade, when slave owners began teaching their laborers about Judeo-Christian theology. In the early 19th century, slaves began singing and dancing in their isolated praise houses, particularly motivated by biblical passages from both the Old and New Testaments which addressed sentiments of displacement, longing for a "promised land" or one's home,¹³ and faith in the divine as a source of strength and potential. The "promised land," of course, refers to Africa in a literal sense, but more abstractly evokes desires for social liberation and spiritual transcendence.

Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., explains that the integration of the chariot as a trope in black music has been quite powerful as a cultural appeal to collective potentiality. The trope, with its divine force, implies the potential for transcendent mobility, a theme which would become central to various black musics, from the blues and jazz to soul, funk, and hip hop. Dr. Dre's 1964 Chevy Impala, for example, was his 1992 chariot, and enabled a new "gangsta cool" lifestyle that transcended both the N.W.A. sensibility of gang life in Los Angeles as well as the impositions of government and law enforcement upon black residents of the city.¹⁴ The "train to Jordan" that Curtis Mayfield & the Impressions sang of in "People Get Ready" (1965) signifies a yearning for the promised land itself, where Elijah was swept up. Floyd elucidates the origins of this appeal within black music:

From the end of the Civil War to the year 1873, thirty thousand miles of railway track were laid in the United States [...] Bluesmen were immediately fascinated by the trains that rode this track, and they wrote songs about them. [...] The railroad train represented independence of movement for newly freed slaves, a certain amount of autonomy and liberation, and it allowed rapid escape

¹³ The lyrics to the song include "Swing low, sweet chariot / Comin' for to carry me home."

¹⁴ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 106-17.

from threatening conditions. [...] These two chariots—the horse-drawn heavenly chariot and its steam-driven, land-borne, rail-riding descendant—have been celebrated in African-American myth and legend for more than a century. In African-American lore, both the chariot of the spirituals and the train of the blues are metaphors for freedom.¹⁵

Of course, as automobile culture became more widespread, trains were replaced with a more personalized, independent chariot that signified both social status and cultural belonging. In the 1960s, the street, rather than the railroad track, became the primary means for representing mobility. This move to the street, however, did not mean that automobiles stood alone as vehicles of empowerment. In some cases, the body itself became a vehicle by which one can achieve



Figure 3.5: Visual representations of the “chariot trope” and its derivations in the context of African American popular music. Clockwise from top left: Dr. Dre driving his 1964 Chevrolet Impala in the music video for “Let Me Ride” (1991); the logo for the *Soul Train* television program, which featured African American musicians; Martha & the Vandellas dancing in the street (n.d.); Martha & the Vandellas in a Mustang factory in the music video for “Nowhere to Run” (1967).

¹⁵ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 215-16.

transcendence. The 1964 Motown-produced song by Martha & the Vandellas, “Dancing in the Street,”¹⁶ encapsulates the promise of freedom offered by the street, both as a route for transportation and as a physical embodiment—perhaps even metonymic—of a (sub)culture.

It makes sense that such a powerful trope, already rather musically and lyrically graphic, would extend beyond a purely aural medium. Many instances of the “chariot trope” in popular music have been accompanied by visual representations (see Figure 3.5). Parliament-Funkadelic, adopting this trope and making it uniquely their own, brings the visual component of the trope to the foreground. Their development of the Mothership lampooned the Nation of Islam’s Mother Plane,¹⁷ an enormous and imposing vessel with the capabilities to shape the planet’s terrain and to level mountains.¹⁸ But there was more at work: before their listeners even heard the song “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” they saw the album packaging, both sides featuring Dr. Funkenstein in the doorway of the Mothership; the front side shows the Mothership in outer space, and the back is a superimposition of the Mothership in a city alley (refer to Figure 1.1, top right and bottom right). It is perhaps implied that ultimately, there is no distance between these two places, if one opens their “funky mind.” After all, the mobility offered by P-Funk is not merely physical—the only place in which you really *move* is the dance floor—but more

¹⁶ Martha & the Vandellas also recorded, “Nowhere to Run” in 1967, with an accompanying music video shot in an active Mustang automobile factory, concretizing the connection between Motown, automobile culture in Detroit, and the symbolism of mobility.

¹⁷ Despite its parodic nature, the association of the Mothership with the Nation of Islam’s Mother Plane led many to consider the Mothership a powerful spiritual symbol. Clinton recalls in his autobiography: “It was just another mythology to draw on [...] That’s why it was such a shock to look out into the crowd in Philadelphia and see all these guys with bowties in the front row, shouting up at me. ‘Teach the knowledge, Brother George,’ they were saying. The knowledge? Holy shit. It suddenly struck me that they were serious. When I looked at their faces, they were bowing down, praying almost. I started looking directly at them and saying, ‘Ain’t nothing but a party.’” In George Clinton and Ben Greenman, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain’t That Funkin’ Kinda Hard on You?* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 160-61.

importantly, it is a social, psychological, and spiritual mobility. Clinton would surely agree with Sun Ra that “space is the place,” and in fact much of P-Funk’s cosmogony concerning the origins of funk and humankind are derived from Sun Ra’s philosophies; however, the overt self-referentiality in P-Funk makes it clear that the nature of this space is a state of consciousness. Jazz musician Leon Q has said, “JB [James Brown] brought you to an elevated state of consciousness. Parliament/Funkadelic brought you to an altered state of consciousness.”¹⁹ As was addressed in Chapter I, Clinton chose outer space as a place where black audiences could imagine themselves; as a space for possibility, funk music—and, by necessity, dance—could serve as the vehicle to get there. The exclamation “partying on the Mothership” from “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” suggests that the Mothership is not independently transcendent, but depends greatly upon the comportment of its passengers. Hence the extent of aphorisms and allusions throughout P-Funk: “Free your mind and your ass will follow,” “Don’t fake the funk or your nose will grow,” and “Dance, sucka!”

Lest the significance of funk—or more appropriately, the Funk—not be sufficiently apparent, P-Funk extended the visualization of this trope to the space that the Mothership itself occupies. The whole of P-Funk cosmogony, which encompasses their interrelated concept albums, song lyrics, album artwork, and liner notes, was borne out of an attempt to create a coherent space in which listeners of funk music could achieve spiritual transcendence and, if extended to one’s lived reality, social mobility and political empowerment. Surveyed comprehensively, the cosmic themes began with “What is Soul” on Funkadelic’s first, self-titled album from 1970. The opening narration, “Behold, I am Funkadelic. I am not of your world”

¹⁹ Quoted in Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 63.

immediately situates the group's music in a framework of cosmic themes. However, it was when Pedro Bell began designing the album covers for Funkadelic in 1973 that the cover of *Cosmic Slop* became the first glimpse into the surrealist visual universe of P-Funk. Bell, likened to “an urban Hieronymus Bosch,”²⁰ has become renowned for the remarkably detailed and psychedelic characteristics of his artwork, from cohesive yet diverse and vibrant color palettes to characters that are as individually unique as they are numerous. Included are grotesque insects, lasciviously-dressed aliens, humanoids of all colors with angular limbs and exaggerated movements, and a variety of other creatures for which a brief description would be insufficient. Most of these characters are engaged in acts that are sexually explicit (or implicit), violent, musical or otherwise deviant (although considering the independent ethics of the P-Funk universe, “deviance” as we consider it may be grossly inaccurate). Owing to the kaleidoscopic nature of Bell's album artwork, the Bosch analogy is justified. For a juxtaposition of Bell's work on three Funkadelic covers with an example of Hieronymus Bosch's work, see Figures 3.6.a and 3.6.b.

In addition to his work as an illustrator, Bell is largely responsible for the aspects of P-Funk mythology that have been conveyed through Funkadelic's liner notes; the previously quoted excerpt from *Cosmic Slop*, as well as all of their liner notes through the 1970s, are attributable to him. The influences behind his contributions are surprisingly diverse: as a child, he was interested in the work of science fiction writers Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison, the books of Genesis and Revelations from the Bible, dinosaurs, and the cultural environment in

²⁰ Tym Stevens, quoted in Amy Nathan Wright, “Exploring the Funkadelic Aesthetic: Intertextuality and Cosmic Philosophizing in Funkadelic's Album Covers and Liner Notes,” *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013), 151.



Figure 3.6.a: Funkadelic album art by Pedro Bell. From top: *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On* (1974); *Let's Take It to the Stage* (1975); *Hardcore Jollies* (1976).



Figure 3.6.b: Detail of left triptych panel from Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490/1510).

which he grew up. Amy Nathan Wright notes that “[w]hile Bell was able to put an explicitly black, working-class aesthetic in his art that echoed the sound, look, and performances P-Funk produced, he combined that with the sensationalism and sci-fi elements of white underground comic book artists and the wild art of Big Daddy Roth and Robert Williams that accompanied his introduction to custom cars in the late 1950s.”²¹ In his accompanying liner notes, he would often explicate the meaning of the album title or other particular elements of the overall P-Funk concept; for instance, Bell writes that that the “electric spanking of war babies” indicated on their 1981 album—along with its borderline pornographic cover art—is a sexualized science-fiction rendering of the exploitation of mass American culture after World War II; remember, as we observed in Chapter I, that for all their absurdity, P-Funk seems to be intensely concerned with

²¹ Wright, 151-52.

sociopolitical affairs and the cultural wellbeing of the United States. Thus, Funkadelic does not come across as naïvely condoning the jaded escorts on the back cover of *Cosmic Slop*, the sexual domination on the cover of *The Electric Spanking of War Babies*, or the American eagle gripping a heroin syringe in its talon on *America Eats Its Young* (a pre-Bell album cover). Indeed, the brash uproariousness and satire of it all renders any alleged renunciation or acceptance of these activities tongue-in-cheek at best.

This type of double-voiced attitude toward both language and broader ideas could be described as an example of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., terms Signifyin(g), a practice in which the relationship between a signifier and its meaning is at best unstable, and at its most extreme, altogether illusory. Signifyin(g) texts, Gates explains, are often produced in a self-aware “meta” schema that draws attention to language itself and the nature of meaning. The rhetoric of Signifyin(g), Gates claims, “has supplanted semantics in this most literal meta-confrontation within the structure of the sign.”²² It exists at the liminal stage of discourse wherein words and ideas are in the process of being delivered and received, and takes advantage of the threshold where a signifier can be understood. A cultural insider—a member of the appropriate interpretive community—may readily comprehend that which is being communicated, but others (especially *Others*), unaware of any essential referents, may find themselves at a disadvantage. It is a subversive linguistic maneuver with a number of purposes, whether intended to disorient cultural outsiders, outsmart an adversary (as in “the dozens” or the classic tale of the Signifying Monkey), or perform commentary upon an existing text or circumstance by either shattering the signifier-signified relationship or flipping the script of social conventions. The liner notes of

²² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

Funkadelic albums often employ these self-aware meta-narrations which seem to simultaneously defy morality and decry vice, reach into an imaginary cosmos and yet be unmistakably of this world, and touch upon sobering political circumstances while laughing about them.

While Funkadelic reveled in the smoke and mirrors of a cosmic environment that seemed to combine the peculiarities of Bosch with the dreamlike, kaleidoscopic landscapes of Dr. Seuss and the amusing, yet often realist format of comic books, Parliament took a different approach, building the characters that would occupy much of the P-Funk mythos. Although the details of the narrative are not the subject of this chapter, the ongoing conflict between Star Child and his nemesis, Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk, is the setting from which the substance of Parliament's middle period concept albums originates. The narrative concerning Star Child begins in the *Mothership Connection* album, in which the characters of Dr. Funkenstein and his proxy, Star Child, seek to deliver the Funk to humankind. Sir Nose, their adversary introduced in *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (1977) actively resists this, refusing to dance and to swim (both actions being metaphors for yielding to the compelling spirit of funk music), his elongated nose a testament to a life spent "faking the funk."²³ Where the iconography of P-Funk is concerned (regardless of musical references), these characters and their narrative are personified primarily in two Parliament albums, *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* and *Motor Booty Affair* (1978). Although *Gloryhallastoopid* (1979) continues the overall P-Funk mythology—and Dr. Funkenstein also receives attention in *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976)—the characters are

²³ This concept was first presented in "The Pinocchio Theory," from the sophomore album by Bootsy's Rubber Band, *Ahh...the Name Is Bootsy, Baby!* (1977), several months before Parliament released *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. The line from the former, "don't fake the funk or your nose will grow," later inspired Clinton to develop the character of Sir Nose as a foil to Star Child. The aphorism implies "that funk represented some fundamental emotional honesty." Clinton and Greenman, 174-75.



Figure 3.7: Illustrations by Overton Loyd included in the original vinyl release of Parliament, *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (1977). Top: comic book insert, page 4. Bottom left: comic book insert, page 7. Bottom right: poster of Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk.

most memorably developed in the 1977 and 1978 albums, with other supporting figures variously introduced throughout the group’s middle period.

Although Pedro Bell’s Funkadelic work has been known to derive largely from comic books—the plots and overall tone indeed reading like a blend of *Weird Science* comics from the early 1950s and *Mad* magazine—the album artwork for Parliament between 1977 and 1980,



Figure 3.8: Excerpt of “The Almost Finished Comic,” illustrated by Overton Loyd for Bootsy’s Rubber Band, *This Boot is Made for Fonk-N* (1979).

done by Overton Loyd, is perhaps more closely related to the comic book genre; specifically, the Parliament concept albums may be considered comparable to the genre of American superhero comics in the way they episodically follow particular characters, whom they develop within the context of an overall story arc. In fact, in lieu of liner notes for *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*, Parliament released an 8-page comic book insert with the album and a poster of Sir Nose (see Figure 3.7). In the comic book, Loyd presents an episode in which Star Child shoots Sir Nose with the Bop Gun, whereupon the latter “gives up the funk.” Here, as well as in the Sir Nose poster, one can observe the more unrealistic, cartoonish aesthetic that Loyd used for Parliament’s artwork, which appropriately supported more buoyant dance music with a flippant temperament. In the same vein, Loyd produced an insert called “The Almost Finished Comic” for *This Boot is Made for Fonk-N* (1979) by Bootsy’s Rubber Band, which features the same



Figure 3.9: Illustrations by Overton Loyd included in the original vinyl release of Parliament, *Motor Booty Affair* (1978).

aesthetic (see Figure 3.8). The artwork for *Motor Booty Affair* employs a similar artistic style, preferring caricature over realistic proportions. The album also included a pop-up image of “downtown Atlantis,” where the narrative of the album is set, as well as removable cardboard figures of the characters mentioned in the music—Mr. Wiggles, Giggles, Squirm, Queen Freakaleen, and others; these illustrations, clearly designed for their comic affect, exaggerated body parts and present us with fantastical creatures like anthropomorphic fish and worms, a mermaid, and a promiscuous octopus (see Figure 3.9). These are not quite similar to the more elaborately unreal creatures conceived by Bell; Loyd’s creations are more easily understood and

intended largely to entertain, while abstractly drawing upon the pop culture surrealism of cartoons and comic books to grant his drawings social currency.

Contrary to what one may initially believe, setting *Motor Booty Affair* underwater does not break the continuity of P-Funk's cosmogony. Still considered by many to be an environment as unknown to us as the far reaches of outer space, for most people the deep sea is just out of reach, such that it can serve the same function as a place of imaginative possibility. Additionally, Adilifu Nama writes that the call to action printed on the *Motor Booty Affair* album jacket, "We got ta raise Atlantis to the top," in addition to the overarching concept of Atlantis being a lost city inhabited by black people and invisible to the majority of society, act as a metaphor for the visibility crisis of inner cities in the 1970s, and the desire of black communities to attain upward social mobility.²⁴

With such thoroughly comprehensive visual elements, P-Funk was able to immerse its fans in a total multimedia experience. Their visual and aural integration was most completely achieved, however, in the spectacles they presented to live audiences. The \$275,000 production budget for the P-Funk Earth Tour surpassed that of any previous black musical act,²⁵ and before the group began rehearsals, the funds spent or allocated for the Mothership alone exceeded \$83,000 (although that number would increase, accounting for electrician salaries, transportation, stage equipment rentals, and other miscellaneous costs).²⁶ Beyond the financial requirements,

²⁴ Adilifu Nama, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 163.

²⁵ Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 245.

²⁶ Mark Kruger, 20 July 1976 Memorandum to Charlie Bassoline, "RE: Budget Break-down, to date." Collection on George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

construction of the Mothership was an intensive project undertaken chiefly by Jules Fisher, a stage designer boasting a history with David Bowie, Kiss, The Who, and several Broadway productions. Some of the initial blueprints for the Mothership are available at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives²⁷ (reproduced in Figure 3.10.a, along with images of the completed ship on stage and in the National Museum of African American History and Culture at

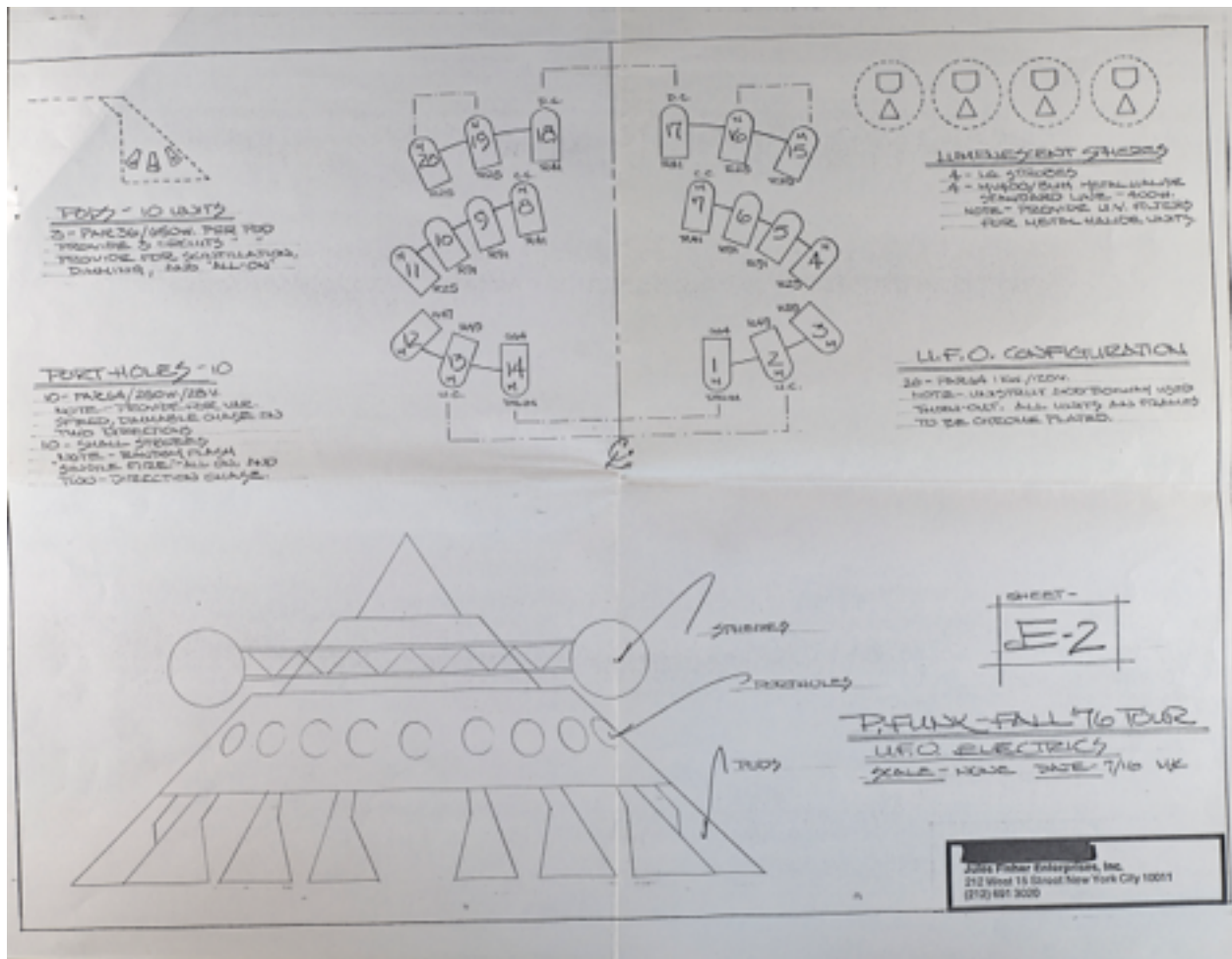


Figure 3.10.a: Blueprint of the Mothership, 1976, produced by Jules Fisher Enterprises, Inc. From the Jules Fisher Papers at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Library and Archives. Courtesy of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

²⁷ Jules Fisher Papers, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.



Figure 3.10.b: Two completed models of the Mothership. Left: the 1976 Mothership landing on stage during the P-Funk Earth Tour. Right: the rebuilt Mothership at the National Museum of African American History and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The latter model is smaller than the original.

the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in Figure 3.10.b²⁸). When the Mothership landed on stage during the Earth Tour, P-Funk maximized their iconographic potential; the historically compelling chariot trope, redone for the 1970s with an afrofuturist edge and presented on their album artwork as a still representation—a possibility—of what was to come, materialized with explosive force. Wright described P-Funk concerts as “a decadent, carnivalesque atmosphere,” which “provided a communal spiritual release at a time when society was becoming increasingly secular and disaffected.”²⁹ Interestingly, the spiritual climax of the performance—captured and disseminated by a video recording of the group’s 1976 concert in Houston, Texas—occurs in the absence of music. In the moments leading toward the

²⁸ The design of the Mothership went through several phases. Initially conceived to be the same vessel as that in the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), the design on the cover of *Mothership Connection* (1975) was altered slightly (see Figure 1.1). The version reproduced for stage performances, designed by Jules Fisher, also entailed some alterations.

²⁹ Wright, “A Philosophy of Funk: The Politics and Pleasure of a Parliafunkadelicment Thang!” in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 46.

Mothership's arrival, Glen Goins leads the crowd in a sing-along of the lyrics "Swing down, sweet chariot, stop and / Let me ride," with occasional gospel-style interjections exclaiming his anticipation of the Mothership. When it is seen flying overhead, the band increases their volume and pitch register, the trumpets soaring above the texture two octaves above middle C. When the ship descends, however, the music cuts out, leaving only the sounds of smoke machines, simulated exhaust fumes, exploding pyrotechnics, and the screams of a frenzied crowd. When the dust settles, Dr. Funkenstein is left standing at the threshold of his ship, the likeness of an "interplanetary pimp"³⁰ whose only business is salvation.

Consequently, when Clinton released an album in 1996 invoking "the awesome power of a fully operational Mothership," he was not merely expressing his excitement over the duplicate ship's construction. More importantly, he recalled decades—or more rightly, over a century—of imagined, potential, and embodied transcendence experienced by African Americans searching for a better life. For many, transcendence was found through music: "Funk not only moves, it can remove. Dig?"³¹ In effect, the Mothership is the iconographic manifestation of a particular historiography. As a visual depiction of the chariot's transformation in the context of African American history, the Mothership serves as a commentary upon the past, present, and potential future. The chariot itself, however, is only part of the package; it is the artistic totality of the P-Funk universe between Parliament, Funkadelic, and their side projects, that grant the Mothership its power. It is clear, then, why the album artwork for *T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M* involved the combined

³⁰ Rickey Vincent, notes to *Parliament Funkadelic: The Mothership Connection Live 1976*, dir. Brian Blum, 21 October 2008. DVD.

³¹ Parliament, "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7022, 1975.

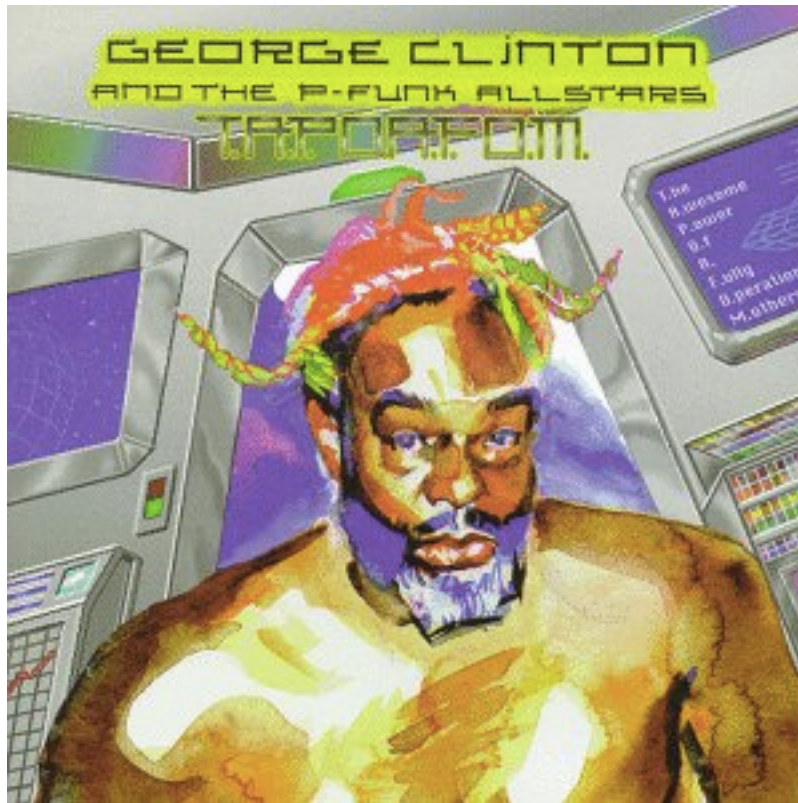


Figure 3.11: Album cover for George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars, *T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M.* (1996).

talents of Pedro Bell, Overton Loyd, and illustrator “Stozo the Clown” Edwards (see Figure 3.11), as well as the reunion of many original Parliament-Funkadelic musicians. The “fully operational Mothership” owes itself to the power of history, spirit, and communion. With this choice of album title and cover design, consumers were implicitly reminded of that. Just like any fully operational Mothership, however, Dr. Funkenstein’s vessel is not the end, but a means to it; it is a technology of P-Funk, with which the Funk can be engaged. In much the same way that album packaging and artwork are technologies of music production and consumption, P-Funk has incorporated unique technologies within their encompassing narrative, which allow them to properly deliver the Funk.

“You Got to Wear Your Sunglasses”

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed various critiques of how consumers subjective desires are managed within “technocratic capitalism.” As critics from Adorno to George Clinton argue, the saturation and utilization of technology in American popular culture has largely enabled a crisis that suppresses authentic subjectivity and agency. While funk music may rightly be considered a technology of culture or personal subjectivity, and album packaging a technology of music dissemination, P-Funk has presented us with their own technologies for use within their unique universe, applicable in the real world as metaphors for how people can embrace the Funk in their everyday lives. As previously claimed, the Mothership is one of those technologies, a vessel representative of the potential for deliverance. The other technologies used by P-Funk’s prominent characters notably include the Bop Gun and a flash light. Whereas the purpose of the flash light is more or less clear—to illuminate the reality that the “placebo syndrome” has veiled the true nature of our cultural condition, akin to emerging from Plato’s cave (see Chapter I)—the Bop Gun, which Star Child used on Sir Nose in 1977, is intended to directly enable its target to see the truth. In effect, the Bop Gun and the flash light are technologies of Heidegger’s *aletheia*. Although both are quite powerful and have received great attention among fans, they either operate indirectly (in the case of the flash light) or by force, from one person to another (as with the Bop Gun). Neither of these technologies enable personal agency. That is why, in this section, I am concerned with sunglasses, a technology of P-Funk that is widely recognized but scarcely discussed, and which allows for a subjectivity unparalleled anywhere else in the P-Funk universe.

Sunglasses pervade the music and imagery of P-Funk. Among the most iconic accessories in the collective are Bootsy Collins' star-shaped sunglasses (see Figure 3.12). In *Mothership Connection*, the first two tracks contain the lines "Let me put my sunglasses on. That's the law around here, you got to wear your sunglasses...so you can feel cool" and "Let me put on my sunglasses here, so I can see what I'm doing," respectively. In the comic book for *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (see Figure 3.7), every character is wearing some variety of sunglasses (Sir Nose's mask will soon be addressed). The face paint worn by Dr. Funkenstein on the *Mothership Connection* cover closely resembles sunglasses, and Uncle Jam (another of Clinton's alter egos) wears them on the cover of *Uncle Jam Wants You* (1979). Clinton is seen wearing sunglasses during the transferral of the rights for "One Nation Under a Groove" to the Music for UNICEF program in 1979, in innumerable newspaper and magazine photographs, on stage, and of course, on the front cover of his autobiography (see Figure 3.13). I argue that these



Figure 3.12: Bootsy Collins wearing his iconic sunglasses.



Figure 3.13: George Clinton wearing sunglasses. Clockwise from top left: Clinton with members of the P-Funk collective in a photograph for the *New York Times*, published 6 December 1981 (accessed at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives); Detail of Clinton performing on stage in an undated photograph for *High Times* magazine (accessed at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives); cover portrait for *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?* (New York: Atria Books, 2014); Clinton at the Music for UNICEF presentation, 1979.

representations are not merely for entertainment, nor merely to serve one’s public image—although sunglasses are often associated with “coolness” in popular culture—but are there to help identify a means by which the listener can engage or filter reality.

Traditionally, sunglasses are considered a technology for filtering out light. That process, while making it easier to see, actually obscures one’s vision slightly; colors are muted, and light

—especially sunlight—is nearly eliminated. In spite of this mainstream conception of the function of sunglasses, P-Funk repurposes them, transforming them into tools by which sight is *enhanced*. Sunglasses become a Signifyin(g) technology, subverting the conventional use of the accessory to achieve an opposite result. In fact, enhanced sight is a pervasive theme in P-Funk: take the above quoted lines from *Mothership Connection* regarding sunglasses; additionally, in “Mr. Wiggles,” the narration at the beginning of the track explains that “the real eyes lies in rhythm, and the rhythm of vision is a dancer [...] Going down you can see sounds of silence. Primal heartbeats could be seen with the naked eye. The one with real eyes realize that everything is on the One.”³² Wordplay aside, it is evident that, according to P-Funk, sight is vital to understanding the nature of the One, particularly as it relates to the body through rhythm. There exists a tangible parallel between the liberating, transcendent powers of sight and of the body.

Thereby understood as a technology for enhanced vision, the Signifyin(g) play of sunglasses turns them into a tool far more powerful than the Bop Gun, and more illuminating than the brightest flash light: as objects of one’s own agency—only the person wearing sunglasses can see through them—they reveal the essence of the Funk, which is to say, the potential for transcendence by seeing and acknowledging the reality of one’s condition. The agency thus granted filters out the concealment of a cultural schema that fabricates subjectivities. Furthermore, whereas the flash light is rather limited to a conical field of view and the object of its unconcealment appears the same to all, sunglasses are the only technology at hand which grants a total subjective experience. The field of view is panoramic and completely customized.

³² Parliament, “Mr. Wiggles,” *Motor Booty Affair*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7125, 1978.

It is not merely incidental that the characters in the P-Funk universe participate in fantastical adventures that explore confrontations between good and evil, employ otherworldly powers and technologies, and, of course, are rendered in a comic book and similar forms of media (as with the artwork for *Motor Booty Affair*, or if one considers Parliament's middle period concept albums akin to musical comic books). Star Child is essentially a superhero: his greatest power is embodiment of the Funk through the compelling force of the One; his utility belt features a Bop Gun, a flash light, and a pair of sunglasses; and his persistent nemesis, Sir Nose, is both his greatest rival and his character foil. Even Sir Nose's mask (see Figure 3.8, bottom-right) is in opposition to Star Child's sunglasses; his mask both obscures himself from Star Child's enhanced vision, as well as from the curative power of the Funk, the very thing sunglasses are intended to reveal. The mission of Star Child—after all, what is a superhero without a purpose?—to deliver the Funk to humanity is staged amid an intergalactic epic (as told through Funkadelic liner notes) which serves as the narrative backdrop of his adventures.

Perhaps one of the most indispensable aspects of this superhero story is that it bears a palpability that can instantly be recognized as allegorical. In his book *Do the Gods Wear Capes?*, Ben Saunders writes that superheroes “are not nomadic, country-roving warriors, but city-dwelling heroes, with powers and tools and ‘secret identities’ that arise in specific response to the cramped and crowded conditions of metropolitan existence.”³³ Concisely demonstrated in the back cover for *Mothership Connection*, the afrofuturist transcendentalism championed by P-Funk is unquestionably realist; in the true spirit of Signifyin(g), P-Funk's delivery of their mythology through the superhero genre, a calculated and self-conscious project, takes on the role

³³ Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 142.

of a pop culture meta-commentary. Based in Detroit, Michigan, the members of P-Funk were all too aware of the contemporary economic and political crisis of urban America, exemplified by the fall of Detroit's major industries and subsequent unemployment on a staggering level, *de facto* segregation which precluded the allowance of black families in suburbs, and the simmering tensions which eventually boiled over with 1967 riot. With such dire conditions facing the city's population—especially the black population, which found it more difficult to cope with many of these circumstances due to limited resources—P-Funk, like many others, chose to confront reality by placing their faith in possibility.

The possibility that comprised P-Funk's campaign, however, prioritized technology. Imbuing everyday technologies with special powers, P-Funk repurposes them as tools that grant agency to their audiences. The faith placed in objects like sunglasses, the Bop Gun, or the flash light seems to mirror an ideology found in comics, such as *Iron Man*, which Saunders calls "techno-faith."³⁴ Where the character of Iron Man is concerned, there is an inextricable relationship he shares with the chest plate that keeps him alive, the body armor that allows him to accomplish his feats of heroism, and the balance of dependence and agency that contextualizes his existence. Saunders explains that the techno-faith manifested in *Iron Man* can be seen through the lens of historical tensions between systems of faith and the agency of humankind since the Enlightenment. Published amid debates about the nature of humanity, the relationships between human-machine symbioses and theological-futurist affinities, and approaches to morality and the problem of human suffering within modernity and postmodernity, the lofty

³⁴ Ibid., 106.

implications of *Iron Man* comics, like P-Funk cosmogony, are presented within digestible fictions.

During the 1970s, a number of comic book characters were introduced by the major publishing houses Marvel and DC that paralleled the phenomenon of blaxploitation films, which centralized black characters. Films such as *Shaft* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), and *The Mack* (1973) featured black leading roles, often within a crime-fighting narrative. With the introduction of comic book characters like Luke Cage (Marvel, 1972), the Black Goliath (Marvel, 1975), and Black Lightning (DC, 1977), as well as earlier characters including the Black Panther (Marvel, 1966) and the Falcon (Marvel, 1969), the comic book medium began exploring the potential of black leading characters. Considering how extensively their album artists were influenced by comic books, it is no surprise that P-Funk began telling similar narratives—albeit caricatured—in their concept albums, and those concepts were eventually visualized in printed material. Employing technologies³⁵ and superhuman abilities to enable human agency, the comic books published by DC, Marvel, and even P-Funk take advantage of technology’s ability to straddle realities, using the fantastic to help us see and question the real.³⁶

Thus, through their utilization of the superhero comic book genre, P-Funk is able to elevate the power of technology to empower the human spirit with a compelling tangibility.

³⁵ In the case of traditional superhero comic books, “technologies” could be considered any means beyond typically human capabilities. To this definition, fictional powers such as flight and enhanced strength are just as applicable as the Bop Gun used by Star Child or the webs produced by Spiderman.

³⁶ In keeping with realism through the exploration of black culture in these comic books, the writers carefully crafted the character biographies to reflect unidealized circumstances. The character Bill Foster, whose alter ego is the Black Goliath, hails from Watts, California; Black Lightning, along with other DC characters, grew up in the Southside of Metropolis (a fictional city in the DC universe), otherwise known as “Suicide Slum”; Luke Cage was raised in Harlem, New York, a city historically synonymous with black culture; before becoming a superhero, the Black Panther was T’Challa, a village chief in the fictional African nation of Wakanda.

Additionally, the development of these technologies, contextualized within a format aesthetically and philosophically analogous to the superhero comic book genre, elevates P-Funk saga to the realm of meta-commentary; the self-aware and critical nature of their narratives is apparent, not only in the way they address real world concerns, but also through their participation in the blaxploitation genre and their delivery mechanism of the comic book medium, which itself brings fantasy down to reality, and draws particular attention to the forms of discourse themselves. Through their employment of the comic book format and exploration of hypothetical technologies, the members of P-Funk commented on their cultural environment; conversely, those who have manifested the empowering potential of personal and social technologies continue the discourse in which P-Funk participated. For example, the visor worn by the black, blind engineer Geordi LaForge in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) actually grants him more visual information than the naked eye; the boombox in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) makes blackness unavoidably visible and audible; automobiles, as in the videos for Dr. Dre's "Let Me Ride" (1992) and Flying Lotus' "Until the Quiet Comes" (2012) signify personal transcendence and upward social mobility. Such technologies, as compellingly demonstrated by P-Funk since the 1970s, are not confined to the imagination, but manifest themselves philosophically through a direct appeal to faith in funkentelechy, or the potential of one's personal agency. During his speech inducting P-Funk into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997, Prince, sporting shades of his own, recalled one of Clinton's most important lessons: "Everybody's got a little light under the sun."³⁷

³⁷ This line is originally from the Parliament song "Flash Light," on *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*, Casablanca NBLP 7084, 1977. The speech by Prince is available on YouTube: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, "Prince Inducts Parliament-Funkadelic into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," 10 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbS2dIADcsg>, accessed 31 January 2017.

CHAPTER IV

ONE NATION UNDER A GROOVE: A HISTORIOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION OF THE P-FUNK LEGACY

“[I]t is within the horizon of Dasein’s temporal constitution that we must approach the ontological clarification of the ‘connectedness of life’—that is to say, the stretching-along, the movement, and the persistence which are specific for Dasein. The movement [Bewegtheit] of existence is not the motion [Bewegung] of something present-at-hand. It is definable in terms of the way Dasein stretches along. The specific movement in which Dasein *is stretched along and stretches itself along*, we call its ‘historizing’ [sic]. The question of Dasein’s ‘connectedness’ is the ontological problem of Dasein’s historizing. To lay bare the *structure of historizing*, and the existential-temporal conditions of its possibility, signifies that one has achieved an *ontological* understanding of *historicality*.

-Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*¹

“Everything is on the One today y'all, now hit it
Everything is on the One today y'all, and don't forget it
Everything is on the One today y'all, that's where it's at
Everything is on the One today y'all, now get to that.”

-Parliament, “Everything Is On The One” (1976)²

In this concluding chapter, I will examine the last major interpretive community of P-Funk, which I have decided to label “funkateers”; this community will be considered in terms of P-Funk’s presence in popular media, from news outlets to the virtual spaces of the Internet. Then, in light of all the information heretofore presented, some final thoughts about the historiography of P-Funk and the nature of history will be addressed. At its core, this chapter is a synthesis of the ideas and cultural work of P-Funk and their interpreters. Taking into account the interpretive communities that have essentially created the history of P-Funk, this is a historiographic interpretation of their historical-cultural place—as it was, as it is, and as it might be—in the United States and abroad. Although their legacy is ever-evolving, the necessarily finite nature of

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1962; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 426-27. Italicization appears in the source text.

² Parliament, “Everything Is On The One,” *Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7034, 1976.

this study marks May 2017 as a tentative endpoint; however, I remind the reader of Collingwood's conception of a cumulative history: what happens today will inevitably factor into P-Funk's legacy tomorrow. The refrain for Parliament's "Everything Is On The One" (1976), quoted in the second epigraph for this chapter, highlights the momentousness of today through an intrinsic relationship with the One.

Funkateers in the World

In "The Pinocchio Theory" (1977) by Bootsy's Rubber Band, the refrain lyrics spell out a vital extension of the P-Funk collective by way of their public reception: "R-U-B-B-E-R / F-A-N-S / Rubber fans, and funkateers." Considering the wordplay already apparent in Collins' band name, as well as the title of their first album, *Stretchin' Out in Bootsy's Rubber Band* (1976), and even in the name of another P-Funk spinoff group, the Sweat Band, one can safely surmise that "rubber fans" are merely a playful way of referring to avid listeners of Bootsy's Rubber Band and, perhaps more generally, of P-Funk. Yet, the lyrics indicate some sort of semantic distinction between "rubber fans" and "funkateers." Thus, I propose that a "funkateer"³ is one who not only enjoys the music of P-Funk, but who has embodied funk as part of their lifestyle. Funkateers do not just listen to funk music. They walk with "a glide in [their] stride and a dip in [their] hip"⁴;

³ I have decided to name this group "funkateers" not because of any explicit connection to the word by fans, but because it seems to be the most appropriate label for them. Many P-Funk listeners have called themselves "maggot brains," but that term is also connotative of either drug use or an affinity for psychedelia; this does not necessarily describe everyone within this community. The term "P-Funkers" has also been used, but again, this is too specific and suggests that the indicated people can only be identified with P-Funk. While this is true to an extent, a "funkateer" does not solely embrace P-Funk, but a comprehensively "funky" lifestyle championed by the collective.

⁴ Parliament, "Mothership Connection (Star Child)," *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7022, 1975.

they are always wearing sunglasses (even when they're not); and "when [they] dance, it's always on the One."⁵ Many funkateers have seen P-Funk perform in their heyday, and many others have attended performances in the years since then; others may have never seen them perform in person, but can imagine themselves there when they listen to a recording or watch them on YouTube. To put it bluntly, funkateers are perhaps the most in tune with the essence of P-Funk, and without doubt the collective's best-equipped interpretive community. Complete, organized histories of P-Funk are few and far between⁶—scholarly studies of their music or sociopolitical engagements are available in greater numbers. Primarily, their story is transmitted orally and piecemeal through anecdotes or memories, and discourses regarding their cultural impact are most often performed in social forums, whether between two people, in a thread of YouTube comments, or in popular media publications. The public discursive stage of funkateers in the world comprises an undeniably significant interpretive community that has constructed P-Funk with more immediacy than any other. In this section, funkateers of the world receive their due credit.

The Internet, currently an effective gauge of popular culture sensibilities, is where this examination of funkateers begins. Although there are certainly problematic aspects of using a virtual space as the basis for such research—among which include the uncertainty of subject identities, cultural background, listening practices, and lifestyles—I argue that most discourses within popular culture occur in the forums provided by such platforms as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, as well as other readily accessible media outlets. Although funkateers indeed

⁵ Parliament, "Mr. Wiggles," *Motor Booty Affair*, Casablanca Records NBLP 7125, 1978.

⁶ Chapter I explores these in greater detail. They primarily include those written by Clinton and Greenman (2014), Needs (2014), and Vincent (1995). See Chapter I or Bibliography.



Figure 4.1: Detail of Comments section for YouTube video: TheOldSchoolMusic, “Parliament - Flash Light” uploaded 18 December 2009. Time indications in the comments are accurate as of 5 May 2017.

exist in the world itself, that existence (as with most extant communities concerned with popular culture) is active in a virtual realm; the Internet has become a virtual town hall, the conventional

means by which many communities interact. Therefore, my inquiry begins with YouTube, a forum based upon the accessibility of music and visual media.

A basic search of the words “parliament funkadelic” on YouTube, with the search filter set to include videos only (without playlists, channels, or other possible items) yields approximately 306,000 results.⁷ Sorted by view count, the first result is a video uploaded 18 December 2009 by user TheOldSchoolMusic, an audio-only recording of “Flash Light.” The video, titled “Parliament - Flash Light,” has received 7,901,510 views.⁸ That this is the most-viewed video with the search parameters “parliament funkadelic” is unsurprising, considering that “Flash Light” is among their most popular songs, especially among outsiders to the community of funkateers. Figure 4.1 shows a detail of the video page displaying an excerpt of the Comments section, sorted by “Top comments.” The comment with the most responses, by user Pineapple Farmer, has received 1,035 “thumbs up” and, to date, 61 replies. Other comments describe appropriate social occasions for the song which include driving a car, dancing, and a “black family summer cookout.” The comment by user Paige V, and its replies, memorialize the recently deceased Bernie Worrell, whose Minimoog track is featured on the song. Other popular videos on YouTube with the same search parameters include audio recordings of the Funkadelic song “Maggot Brain,” the full *Maggot Brain* album, the song “One Nation Under a Groove,” and the full video of their 1976 Houston concert. Videos of Parliament-Funkadelic and related subjects continue to be uploaded on a frequent basis, as do comments that substantiate the prevalence of P-Funk sensibilities; the overwhelming majority of comments on these videos

⁷ This number is accurate as of 5 May 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/results?q=parliament+funkadelic&sp=CAMSAhAB>.

⁸ This number is accurate as of 5 May 2017, but consistently increases. <https://www.youtube.com/results?q=parliament+funkadelic&sp=CAMSAhAB>.

confirm the musical talent of the performers, the enjoyment derived from the listening experience, the danceability and “funkiness” of the music, and the impact that P-Funk has had on the lives of their fans (the latter category being most common among those who claim to have attended their concerts in the 1970s).

Interesting examples of P-Funk’s YouTube presence include animated videos produced by the collective. The first, uploaded by CasablancaBookTV on 19 October 2009, titled “Parliament Funkadelic-Version 1-MOTOR BOOTY AFFAIR-1979 TV Commercial-RARE!!!” is a commercial produced by Casablanca Records, originally broadcast in 1979 advertising Parliament’s *Motor Booty Affair* album, released during the previous year. The illustrations by Overton Loyd echo the same aesthetic qualities of his album artwork, and the comments draw attention to the animated format itself, evinced in such statements as “This needs a movie treatment in the style of the Yellow Submarine” and “I love this style of animation!” in addition to one comment hypothesizing the possible existence of “a supposed animated Parliament series by Filmation.”⁹ Another video, uploaded on 30 June 2007 by PaulJD2006 titled “P-Funk commercial - Funkentelechy,” is of an animated television commercial released in 1977 for the album *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. Although the animator is not definitively known, the illustrations share a strong resemblance with Loyd’s (see Figures 3.7 and 3.8). Among the comments for this video is a particularly telling one by ATS68: “I remember this during one of the commercial breaks for Soul Train. Man, we ran outside like did y'all see that! Remember the big poster that came with the album. Man, it was great being a kid in the 70s.

⁹ Comments regarding the video uploaded by CasablancaBookTV, “Parliament Funkadelic-Version 1-MOTOR BOOTY AFFAIR-1979 TV Commercial-RARE!!!” 19 October 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pd1N6Xa8SqQ>. Accessed 5 May 2017.

George Clinton is the truth!”¹⁰; if nothing else, funkateers are unapologetically nostalgic. See Figure 4.2 for screen shots of these examples, in addition to a still from the 1982 music video for Clinton’s “Atomic Dog” (available in several YouTube videos uploaded by various users), for which Loyd received animation credits. The final example is a video uploaded by YouTube user bushtales on 18 November 2008 titled “Pedro Bell cartoon,” which consists of three segments animated by Bell in 1988. The segments feature a character—apparently a robot—named Larry Lazer, who narrates the hypothetical and absurd advertisements for fictional products: a “bad word scrambler,” a barrel of “fun sludge,” and a drug called “Jodybuster.” User uVueD2b



Figure 4.2: Stills from animated videos. Clockwise from top left: television commercial for *Motor Booty Affair*, illustrations by Overton Loyd (1979); television commercial for *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*, illustrations by unknown artist, possibly Overton Loyd (1977); music video for “Atomic Dog,” animation by Overton Loyd (1982).

¹⁰ Comment regarding the video uploaded by PaulJD2006, “P-Funk commercial - Funkentelechy,” 30 June 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwX069RA0vw>. Accessed 5 May 2017.

observes, “A George Clinton album cover (from the Capitol label era) coming alive,”¹¹ although the still in Figure 4.3 may just as easily have been inspired by Funkadelic’s album covers from the 1970s.



Figure 4.3: Still from animated video by Pedo Bell, 1988.

YouTube presence aside, P-Funk also boasts a formidable following across social media platforms, notably on Twitter and Facebook. “Parliament/Funkadelic” has over 66,000 Facebook subscribers; Reddit, a news and social media aggregate website, has an active subreddit dedicated to P-Funk, “r/funkadelic.” As Twitter is a much more loosely organized platform through which a user can either post their own updates, addressed directly, or be referenced in a subject “hashtag”—all of which makes it difficult to gauge the true extent of the collective’s presence on the website—Clinton himself has more than 84,500 followers, Bootsy Collins has more than 1,050,000, and hashtags applied to P-Funk include “#georgeclinton,” “#pfunk,”

¹¹ Comment regarding the video uploaded by bushtales, “Pedro Bell cartoon,” 18 November 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phwODVKQ9X0>. Accessed 5 May 2017.

“#funkadelic,” and “parliamentfunkadelic,” among others, all of which have received numerous instantiations. Because members of the collective still perform, most notably with Bootsy Collins, George Clinton, or the P-Funk All Stars, these performances are often the subject of such references on social media platforms. Discogs, an online database wherein music collectors can track their collections of recordings, buy or sell CDs and vinyl records, and find information about recordings (e.g., catalog numbers, lists of personnel, and country-specific data), is abundant with information about the major releases of Parliament-Funkadelic and their related acts, although the completeness of that information varies considerably depending upon the particular group or recording.

The prevailing sensibilities and attitudes of funkateers come largely from the music of P-Funk, of course, but publications about the group, especially during their middle period, have been equally influential, to which the collections at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives have granted considerable insight. A “Media Information” document published by Warner Bros. Records in July 1981 titled “Funkadelic Glossary,” composed of an alphabetical listing of words used throughout Funkadelic-produced media and their definitions, clarifies many of the linguistic decisions popularized by the group, from “Bop-u-late: To school a person on a reality vibe” and “Cosmic Slop: Survival gig; big city hustle. Working for the Mahn,” to “The Bomb: Embracing the ‘P’” and “Thumpasaurus People: Foot-stomping, hand clap Funkateers.” A line at the bottom of the document, “A Tip ‘O the Funk to Blues & Soul Magazine” provides a potential clue to the purpose of the document.¹² Reviews of Parliament-Funkadelic in newspapers and magazines have proven to be revealing, as well. A document titled “How’s Your

¹² Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library & Archives.

Funkentelechy?”—unlabeled other than a stamp indicating receipt by the Rolling Stone Music Department in January 1978—includes a series of quoted reviews by various authors from undated publications. Ed Ward of *The Village Voice* wrote “they’re a syndicated, systematic subversion of what people who make the rules think is good for you,” and Rob Patterson of *Newspaper Enterprise Association* recalled a Parliament-Funkadelic show “that would have left P.T. Barnum packing his big top.”

Other writers, however, did not consider P-Funk in the same way. In the above-mentioned document, Joe Nick Patoski of *Phonograph Record Magazine* described them as “the ultimate ’70’s riff. There are no requirements, no demands, no thinking, no nothing. This is entertainment—George Clinton’s stupid liberation movement that in essence fuses the post-Beatles search for meaning with neo-Disco sensibilities”; although not intended as a disparagement of the group, it would seem that Patoski’s regard for the music of P-Funk begins and ends with its entertainment value. John Rockwell, a music critic for *The New York Times*, has written rather unfavorably about the group on multiple accounts. On 12 September 1977, he published an article titled “Rock: A Funkadelic Yes and No,” in which he reviews the Earth Tour performance at Madison Square Garden in New York City. He writes that “there was an element of murky listlessness about some of the show,” and even criticizes the theatrical effects; a separate article by Richard J. Pietschmann titled “Pop! Flash! But Is Anybody Out There Actually Listening???” is similarly averse to the group’s stage sets. Although Rockwell does concede that the musicians are remarkably talented, his penultimate paragraph shares Patoski’s sentiments: “P-Funk is basically built for entertainment, not social message-sending like so many more self-consciously important

black bands. But Mr. Clinton gets his message across in his own way.”¹³ In an article from 6 December 1981, he reviews *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* with ambivalence, stating that Clinton “is showing signs of creative exhaustion—although the claims made for him have always seemed exaggerated in the first place.”¹⁴ Predominantly a classical music critic, Rockwell is not completely opposed to popular music, or even to P-Funk; having written on popular music rather extensively by this point, it is possible that Rockwell’s expectations for the group were rather high—not a symptom of any predilection for classical music, but the mark of an effective and objective critic. In fact, his writing in 1981 that Funkadelic’s new album “lacks snap and freshness” indicates a belief that the group is capable of those qualities in the first place. Additionally, his critique of P-Funk in the early 1980s does not stand alone, as many were disappointed with Parliament since the release of *Gloryhallastoopid*. Patoski’s above comments, however, are perhaps more symptomatic of the disparity between music cultures; in much the same way that fans of rap music must defend their listening habits to parents who see the music as senseless noise,¹⁵ fans of Parliament-Funkadelic likely faced the same struggle. Although Rockwell is not alone in his criticisms of the late period Parliament-Funkadelic albums, these examples, among other negative receptions of P-Funk, are firmly in the minority, which their undeniable and persistent presence in popular music and American culture—not to mention, the numerous positive reviews that their music has received in published media and, more recently, through online platforms—would seem to support.

¹³ John Rockwell, “Rock: A Funkadelic Yes and No,” in *The New York Times*, 12 September 1977.

¹⁴ John Rockwell, “Big Black Pop Bands Have Lost Excitement and Adventure,” in *The New York Times*, 6 December 1981.

¹⁵ Tricia Rose has commented on this situation in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 62-63.

Funkateers do not exist in isolation. They are remarkably in tune with their cultural milieu, and retrospectively, with their historical positionality. P-Funk is the foundation from which funkateers draw discrete aspects of their lifestyle, whether manifest in their musical preferences, their desire to dance, or their choice to wear sunglasses indoors. Funkateers celebrate bodies; they are suspicious of those who fake the Funk and critical of a social schema that propagates inauthentic subjectivities; they fancy themselves superheroes like Star Child or Dr. Funkenstein, with all the agency that entails; they are at once realist and transcendental. These concepts are encapsulated in the vividly provocative Parliament-Funkadelic album jackets, and are brought to life in performances for which the word “concert” is woefully insufficient. Funkateers are spiritual, even if their faith rests solely in “the One.” They are musical, even if they have never touched an instrument. They dance, no matter their age, size, shape, or color. As much as they have constructed P-Funk, they themselves have been constructed *by* P-Funk—their philosophy, their language, their gait. Yet for all their high-minded idealism (often in more than one sense of the word), funkateers are deeply concerned with the reality of cultural politics: its obfuscations, its flaws, its dire need of remediation. Funkateers do not exist in isolation, but are inseparably in—and of—the world.

How the Funk Was Cloned (and Cloned Again)

In alignment with Heidegger’s thoughts in this chapter’s first epigraph, the “historical P-Funk”—that is, P-Funk considered as a historical phenomenon, rather than the usual connotation of a musical collective—indeed “stretches itself along.” Its temporal nature is dynamic: the historical P-Funk not only exists in time, but is mutable, subject to a given context. Significantly,

its temporality is not always unilinear; to be sure, historical trajectory is usually considered to progress chronologically, but as deliberated in the preceding chapters, reverse and nonlinear chronologies are equally legitimate. Retrospection, a necessary condition for many interpretive communities, inevitably implies the imposition of an anachronistic subjectivity upon that which is being observed. Just as one cannot know what is to come, one can never truly “know” the past as it was; seemingly definitive conclusions are approximations complemented by narrative.

Chapter I explored the notion that historical progression is the result of a long-term accumulation of circumstances; this, of course, follows the notions of Collingwood and Bloch, both of whom, while not in complete agreement about all aspects of history, appreciated that a requisite fact of an event’s historicity is its relation to precedent events on the one hand, and subsequent events on the other, whether or not those events are immediately consecutive. This bidirectional quality betrays the equal validity and necessity of conventional and retrospective historical progression.

It is crucial to recognize that this relationship is indeed reciprocal: for instance, deductive reasoning is often a necessary approach for the historian, in order to construct a narrative; thus, present circumstances help to determine what (the historian believes) had to have happened in the past.¹⁶ In this way, the historical P-Funk is “stretched along,” occupying a thoroughly integrated continuum of temporal space. It does not “move” in time *per se*, but exists as the aggregation of related circumstances and events.

¹⁶ At the surface level, this would be in disagreement with the ideas of David Lewis as laid out in his article “Counterfactual Dependence and Time’s Arrow,” in *Noûs* 13 (1979), 455-476. Lewis asserts that the state of present or future events depends upon preceding events, but that this is not so in reverse. However, this is applicable primarily in terms of factual knowledge, or that which one can come to know. In history, a field wherein the results must be constructed to some degree by the historian, the reverse must be applicable, at least when the determination of events via deductive reasoning is required.

Causation, a consideration separate from pure temporality, also works in two directions. This was addressed previously; P-Funk not only contributed to the construction of funkateers as a powerful interpretive community, but the interpretive community itself has retroactively (re)constructed P-Funk, specifically in the ways their public presence has been maintained and perpetuated, the ways in which their music has been received, and regarding discrete sensibilities of P-Funk deemed applicable at a given point within the temporal space they cohabited. In spite of any organized, coherent history—even that published by Clinton himself—funkateers have conveyed the story of P-Funk on their own terms; this approach to history exemplifies agency, one of the primary concerns of Chapter III. In this chapter, I synthesize an interpretive and critical historiography of P-Funk from the ideas heretofore presented and the encompassing circumstances surrounding the telling of their history.

In his article “On Repetition in Black Culture,” James A. Snead posits that repetitions within a culture are unavoidable, that consistent progress sans repetition is virtually impossible:

[W]hen we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we indeed are not viewing “the same thing,” but its transformation, not just a formal ploy, but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history. But even if not in intentional emulation of natural or material cyclicity, repetition would need to manifest itself. Culture as a reservoir of inexhaustible novelty is unthinkable. [...] [One] way in which repetition enters the dimension of culture is in the necessity for every culture to maintain a sense of continuity about itself.¹⁷

Substantiating the notion of accumulative, long-term history, Snead explains that repetition—which is always to say, repetition with a signal difference,¹⁸ because circumstances may never be

¹⁷ James A. Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4, Black Textual Strategies, Volume 1: Theory (Winter, 1981), 146-47.

¹⁸ This is also fundamental to Gates’s conception of Signifyin(g) as commentary which depends on the necessary transformations of a sign in the process of repetition. See Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51.

precisely duplicated—inevitably occurs in cultural productions, and that repetition ensures continuity within that culture. Clinton was cognizant of this necessity, endeavoring to be novel while expanding the scope of a continuous P-Funk concept; despite their unceasing stream of musical and conceptual invention, P-Funk remained faithful to a unique formula that, while impossible to define concretely, set the parameters for the development of a coherent universe. On the creation of P-Funk characters following *Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976), Clinton muses in his autobiography, “there was still the matter of the broader P-Funk empire, and what other characters might rise out of the democratic murk of Funkadelic. How would the funk be cloned and cloned again? What were the productive mutations?”¹⁹

Cloning the Funk is performed on multiple levels. The “productive mutations” that Clinton seeks to replicate address the possibility of novelty in the face of repetition as well as its opposite, the possibility of repetition in the face of novelty, because despite the staggering degree of novelty that P-Funk explored, coherence could only have been accomplished through the productive possibilities granted by repetition. But how can one be novel in spite of that dependence? As Chapters II and III elucidated, novelty was achieved both musically and in pop culture media. Musically speaking, Parliament-Funkadelic continued the tradition of earlier and contemporary funk musicians James Brown, Sly & the Family Stone, and Jimi Hendrix, and fused those recognizable, immediate repetitions with the aesthetics of Motown and the performative approach of Frankie Lymon, pumping those sensibilities with psychedelic drugs, musical experimentalism, and wild imaginations. The result, of course, was a set of concept albums and live performances whose musicality was simultaneously accessible (due to the

¹⁹ George Clinton and Ben Greenman, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 150.

working repetitions of musical aesthetics) and completely new. Later musicians, after the collective's middle period, have cloned the Funk with comparable mutative productivity. Of course, hip hop music has taken on the musically repetitive nature of funk music for its aesthetic foundation, the act of sampling itself a readily apparent repetition. Some hip hop acts, like Digital Underground, have specifically cloned P-Funk itself, essentially becoming a musical extension of P-Funk's evolution. Artists within the G-Funk genre have repurposed P-Funk for an updated, 1990s "gangsta cool" which iterated a repetition of the same movement toward upward social mobility. The effect of these repetitions, however, does not end with the recorded track; such recurrences are intentional, actively addressing a musical—and, by necessary association, cultural—history to which the music is unavoidably bound, and drawing attention to that historical process.

Clinton—for once himself, and not one of his performative alter egos—has cloned himself musically: outside of his P-Funk productions (in which I include his catalog of solo releases, which are part of the collective by chronological proximity as well as personnel and style attributes), Clinton has appeared on numerous hip hop recordings. For example, on his 2014 R&B/hip hop crossover single "Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?" he collaborated with rappers Kendrick Lamar and Ice Cube. Die hard fans watching the music video would likely find much satisfaction in the historically loaded gesture of featuring a Mothership digitally updated with CGI (computer generated imagery) graphics. In fact, the introductory sequence of the music video follows a man portrayed by media personality Michael Colyar driving his car, when he is (from his perspective) unexpectedly abducted by the Mothership, with Kendrick at the helm. Our unwitting protagonist finds his wardrobe

transformed from a t-shirt into an expensive suit, fit for a party on the Mothership at which Clinton and Ice Cube are also in attendance. The two rappers handle the verses of the song in their own unique aesthetic approaches; Kendrick with a post-G-Funk listlessness, Ice Cube with his recognizable timbral bite. Visual cues and lyrical references recall the heyday of P-Funk, the topos of nostalgia being the song's foundation. In a more psychedelic fashion, Clinton recorded a single with the session group WOKE, comprised of Flying Lotus, Thundercat, and the duo Shabazz Palaces, for the *Adult Swim Singles Program 2015* produced by Adult Swim, a television broadcasting entity that has expanded into multimedia forms in recent years. The single, titled "The Lavishments of Light Looking" is of a cryptic quality typical of Shabazz Palaces, the lyrics more poetically evocative than anything; the musicality and production, courtesy of producer Flying Lotus and bassist Thundercat, are texturally lush and have been mixed with a crisp precision unmistakably characteristic of Flying Lotus, of which Clinton, ever the perfectionist, undoubtedly approved. Clinton's spoken-word lyrical contributions in the midst of this musical kaleidoscope, "Runnin' round the center of a square / You can see it / Sittin' in the corner of a circle" are strikingly reminiscent of the spoken words on Funkadelic's "Free Your Mind...and Your Ass Will Follow" (1970). It is clear that Clinton never abandoned the foundational aesthetic of P-Funk, but rather cloned it; updating his musical comportment with the help of fellow clones, the original subject—patient zero, so to speak—reinvents himself, engaging the possibility of novelty within productive repetitions, this phenomenon itself a repetition of Clinton's modus operandi since the original conception of the Parliaments.

Chapter III dealt predominantly with the manifestations of P-Funk within popular media. The funkateers that have shaped the construction of the collective over time are indeed clones in

their own right. Their approach to the Funk as an encompassing philosophy is not merely a gesture of fandom, but an embodiment of P-Funk. In Heideggerian terms, the “being-in-the-world” demonstrated by funkateers is one in which there is no inherent distinction between one’s everyday life and the comportment with which they approach music. Additionally, it is a being-in-the-world which understands existence as possibility. Specifically, the parameters of a funkateer’s existential possibilities are determined in advance—rather than retroactively, as with reverse causation enacted in deductive reasoning—through the circumstance of repetition. Although the details within those parameters cannot be known in advance, future conditions are thus arranged when a repetition is initiated (with Heidegger in mind, one could further claim that all conditions are already established, in the context of Dasein’s “stretched along” nature). Thus, a funkateer is not just a clone in a playful, imitative sense, but is in fact the embodiment of a cultural repetition.

Repetition, however, does not preclude the subjectivity that so many funkateers found compelling in the first place; this is where the possibility for novelty comes in. Although impossible as an “inexhaustible” phenomenon, as Snead determined, the possibility of novelty exists, and is perhaps even multiplied, when contextualized by repetitions. Funkateers, then, have the ability to recreate themselves and their reality in each moment. As Dasein (the funkateer’s being-in-the-world) stretches itself along, a continuous evolution takes place, within which one can constantly renegotiate their relationship to the world. The P-Funk collective—or perhaps more rightly, P-Funk as an encompassing phenomenon—also exists as Dasein, in that it is stretched along historically, and experiences a thoroughly grounded being-in-the-world. P-Funk’s Being is not discrete unto itself; it is inextricable from the world in which it exists, in the same

way that funkateers do not exist in isolation. Over the course of five decades, P-Funk has renegotiated its relationship to a world undergoing rapid metamorphosis on several fronts. That relationship, determined in part by preceding circumstances, in part by circumstances after their middle period, and in part by communities of interpreters past and present, is immediately reflective of their world, and more specifically, of American popular culture. The fictional world that P-Funk created, within which agents explore their own Being, is an acute testament to the degree that the collective is in and of our world.

The fundamental characteristic shared by every clone of P-Funk is that they constitute the interpretive communities of the collective. Whether reconstructed in literature or in music, by oral transmission or by embodying a way of life, the collective has lived multiple lives in five decades, some being of their own creation, others having been developed by their clones with assorted variability; their histories are no less numerous than their fans. The clones of P-Funk bear an existence which is not without intent or direction. Their being-in-the-world, even if not completely contextualized by P-Funk (as is the case with funkateers), has been affected by a relationship to the collective that can never be revoked.

The Agency of Interpretive Communities

The foundational underpinning of the methodology behind this thesis has been the work of Stanley Fish regarding the authority of interpretive communities. Applied to the musical subject of Charles Ives, David Paul demonstrated the extension of Fish's ideas to an entire historiographical study; Paul's reception history of Ives consults interpretive communities as they have engaged Ives and the implications of his music in a loose chronology since the early

twentieth century. Although this study of P-Funk's interpretive communities has not taken a chronological approach—excepting Chapter II, which more closely follows the architecture of Paul's book, albeit with a sole focus on musicians—the focus on interpretive communities toward the end of a reflexive historiography was indeed inspired by Paul's work. In all of these studies by Fish, Paul, and myself, the agency of interpretive communities is critical to the understanding of a subject, its meanings among interpreters, and the ways in which those meaning reflect upon them as much as they do upon the subject at hand.

The primary basis of Fish's stance regarding interpretive communities lies in the subjectivities which contextualize language. He acknowledges a semantic variability at the moment of communication, in which meaning is determined. The meaning of an utterance, he says, is dependent upon the previous experiences of “those whose categories of understanding” permit them to hear the utterance in a certain way.²⁰ Additionally, the meaning constructed by an interpreter is not defined, either; as the interpreter only arrived at a particular meaning because of certain structures of understanding in place for the context to which that person is accustomed, or in which the topic at hand makes sense, it is feasible to change the derived meaning by altering one's notion of appropriate parameters. “The change from one structure of understanding to another is not a rupture but a modification of the interests and concerns that are already in place,”²¹ he writes, and because they are already in place, they need only be revealed. This opens the door for a semantic relativism in which multiple interpretations of a given text are possible, a disturbing idea for some literary theorists at the time Fish's book was published. Although total

²⁰ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 308.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 316.

pluralism would dissolve our very systems of communication, the idea that a degree of relativity exists across the discourses of certain communities is a crucial one that ultimately points to the instability of a signal-signified relationship.²² This discrepancy could also occur within communities. According to Fish, in any community, the boundaries and parameters of knowledge and the formation of meaning are being perpetually adjusted as new experiences and knowledge are encountered and new frameworks for discourse are investigated.²³

With their power to derive meaning, then, interpretive communities wield a powerful agency that necessarily does not end with the meanings of utterances and texts, but extends into lived experiences, the realm of social spheres and cultural production. Paul explicates the way in which those communities, often comprised of “the social realities of ordinary people,” have been the subject of investigation by historiographers of the Annales school, which did so in order to reveal the collective mentalities, or *mentalités*, of a milieu in the context of a cultural history.²⁴ Going further, Paul demonstrates how culturally shared mentalities about a musical subject shape ideas about themselves in a direct sense, but also how the construction of the subject at hand shapes not only the subject, but in turn, the subjectivities of those within the interpretive community. Paul cites Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby Dick* as an example of the retrospective historical agency of certain interpretive communities. He writes that while “the symbols of a culture,” or its communicative means, are ingrained within the texts produced by

²² In addition to the quotation by Snead, this idea is also fundamental to Signifyin(g) as posited by Gates, in that the act of Signifyin(g) either destabilizes or reveals the instability of language to convey definitive meanings.

²³ Fish, 343-44.

²⁴ David C. Paul, *Charles Ives in the Mirror: American Histories of an Iconic Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 144.

that culture, the act of producing those very objects is “also enmeshed in the symbolic order, as [is] their interpretation by readers past and present.” Therefore, while *Moby Dick* was not well received by contemporaneous readers, it has since become part of an American literary canon, a phenomenon that “spoke more to present-day symbolic orders, to the humanist convictions of literary scholars and their conventions of analysis.”²⁵ In effect, it was not Melville himself that made his book a classic, but his readers, enabled by a temporally distanced critical perspective.

Does a necessity for scientific detachment preclude the possibility of close temporal proximity to P-Funk—indeed, contemporaneity—in a historiography? I argue that this is not so. In *Foundations of Music History*, for instance, Carl Dahlhaus deliberates upon the role and approach of a historian studying a musical subject, and posits that the objects of a music historian’s study are confronted “within frames of reference that are integral” to such an examination²⁶; despite an apparent dilemma in which historical proximity allows for misreadings while an accurate understanding belies a sense of detachment, he grants that one should look to the music of their own time as a means of reflexivity. He says that it is not contradictory for a historian to consider contemporary music with impartiality, as one would music of the past.²⁷ To the contrary, Marc Bloch has also written on the boundaries between past and present, but with greater censure. Acknowledging the position of some who take the present as an object of scientific investigation, he maintains that this is not the business of a historian.²⁸ However, he

²⁵ Ibid., 144-45.

²⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J.B. Robinson (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 74.

²⁷ Ibid., 63.

²⁸ Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 37-38.

limits his argument to a view of those who only consider the present as a distinct, self-contained phenomenon (i.e., sociologists, economists, and publicists of the present); therefore—and I write this at the risk of deviating from Annaliste sentiments—he fails to recognize the possible ways in which the present is not merely dependent upon the past, but is itself a viable historical object of study. Although he is correct in his assessment that “whoever lacks the strength [...] to rid his mind of the virus of the present may readily permit its poison to infiltrate even a commentary on the *Iliad* or the *Ramayana*”²⁹ (the word “virus” being effective, if severe), Bloch seems reluctant to entertain the possibility of maintaining a critical distance when the present occupies the same *longue durée* continuum as past events. I submit that while P-Funk is not historically “past,” it is a viable and solidly established historical entity whose historicity is unquestionably integrated in the *evolving* history of American culture. With such a culturally potent subject as P-Funk, it is easy to decrease the critical distance of a historian. Nonetheless, to “understanding the present by the past” and “the present by the past,” investigational priorities of the Annales school, is to investigate that very puissance; the integrated nature of P-Funk’s historicity is the result of their affective relationships within American culture, and cannot be understood as such without a direct interrogation. P-Funk is historical by way of its relationships to the interpretive communities that make it such. Of course, any subject that exists in time can be made historical by a community of discourse in which the subject’s historicity is formed and interpreted.

Interpretive communities, then, are not consequential or incidental to history; rather, they are the creators of history itself. Although the existence of historically-oriented interpretive communities is impossible without the event(s) or circumstance(s) that contextualize them, they

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

immediately take on a life of their own, which in turn contextualizes and reconstructs the same circumstances. A child cannot come to be without conception by its parents, but once in existence, the child's life is its own, and in many ways becomes a determinant force in those of its parents. The communities formed around P-Funk have certainly attained that power, exhibiting an agency whereby they not only tell, but in the first place create histories. In the way that they have delineated those aspects of P-Funk that have enjoyed cultural potency and longevity, as well as the ways in which they have elucidated multimedia accounts of their history, these interpretive communities are effectively an extension of the Funk Mob, as responsible for the conceptualization of “the Funk” as the members of Parliament-Funkadelic themselves, constructing it in a manner they deemed necessary. Considering together archival curators, biographers, inspired musicians, illustrators, and otherwise dedicated funkateers, the subjectivities at hand each command agencies as unique and distinct as they have been influential. This is fitting, of course, since the prevailing concern of the P-Funk philosophy is the power of subjective agency. The communities of interpreters who thus engage P-Funk actualize their funkentelechy; they harness the power of the One to construct a partial history of the United States—“one nation under a groove,” indivisible.

P-Funk Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

When the names “P-Funk” or “Parliament-Funkadelic” are mentioned, many people—especially those who were born before the 1990s—express a nostalgic excitement. Some, having inquired as to the nature of this thesis, even offer interesting insights about their own experiences as fans of the group. More common, however, are those who know a few of the hits (e.g., “Flash

Light,” “Mothership Connection,” “We Want the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker),” “(Not Just) Knee Deep”) often indirectly, through hip hop samples, passive listening on the radio, or a general working knowledge of American popular culture. Occasionally, people only know or refer to “Parliament” or “Funkadelic,” rather than as an inclusive collective. Interestingly, the name of Bootsy Collins tends to elicit more recognition than Clinton’s, which possibly has to do with Collins’ comparative youth, his origins in the Famous Flames, and his continued successes after Parliament-Funkadelic. Although such a small sampling of conversations cannot reflect the entirety of American culture, it is rather apparent from those experiences in addition to the language used by media publications—which invariably draw attention to words like “bizarre” and “futuristic,” and the striking imagery of the Mothership or Garry Shider wearing a diaper on stage—that the extent of P-Funk’s existence beyond music is largely unknown. Of course, this does not undermine the gravity of their transactions with popular culture, but it does reveal the curious cultural position that P-Funk currently occupies.

Of course, there has been a reasonably consistent, albeit sparse, stream of publications about the collective since the turn of the millennium, and even a couple in the 1990s, all of which approach P-Funk from a historical or otherwise analytical perspective. However, it is also an unfortunate truth that most such publications will never escape the walls of academia. These articles are typically published in periodicals such as *Popular Music*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Black Music Research Journal*, and *American Studies*—all highly esteemed publications in their respective fields of research, but largely unknown or thought to be inaccessible to a general public. While books and monographs are more likely to be found and accessed, most monographs are unapproachable due to the authors’ use of scientific language which one must

belong to an appropriate interpretive community to understand, and due to the depth of analysis that disinterests many who wish to read for leisure, especially on a topic they find enjoyable. This is why the books about P-Funk by Rickey Vincent, Clinton and Greenman, and Needs will inevitably be more widely read than most. This situation has nothing to do with quality, since most academic publications indeed have much to offer if one is willing to digest them (assuming one knows where to look in the first place), but originates in the author's initial approach to the writing project; the readership for which the author makes structural and linguistic choices are paramount considerations in determining a text's transmission, especially at a time in which media saturation positions easily accessible and digestible information—as offered, for better or worse, by the Internet—as preferable over other options. In 1994, Scot Hacker wrote an article titled “Can You Get to That? The Cosmology of P-Funk” which was posted to the website *Stuck Between Stations* in on 11 January 2011. The article, written in an unchallenging and often amusing register, explicates the philosophies of P-Funk in a compact, multimedia format. Its posting to *Stuck Between Stations* makes it easily searchable—it appears as one of the first results in a Google search for “P-Funk mythology,” possible due in part to the article's popularity since its publication. Misstra Knowitall, a writer on *Blogspot*, has published a number of entries related to P-Funk, and has achieved a considerable following. Published scholarship is by no means a futile endeavor, as it is often the source from which ideas are propagated and challenged, or tested and explicated. Yet, their primary means of reaching public eyes is by way of mediation through the channels of popular culture.

In a 1991 interview with Bev Smith on the *Our Voices* television program, broadcast by BET (Black Entertainment Television), George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and Bernie Worrell

discuss their place within the music industry, including contemporary concerns from their early musical influences to the sampling of P-Funk in hip hop. They also address what seemed to be their fading popularity, predominantly resultant of the group's informal separation. In response to inquiries about this, Clinton explains that the perception of their dissolution was most likely because of the abundance of P-Funk samples being heard on the radio—"Me, Myself, and I" by De La Soul (1989) and "I Know You Got Soul" (1987) by Eric B. & Rakim being highly visible examples—in spite of a relative disappearance of P-Funk on the R&B programs they used to occupy. Additionally, he explains that although Parliament-Funkadelic proper has discontinued their activities, several of the band members remained active, collaborating with other artists, exploring opportunities as solo acts, or engaging a variety of other projects in the music industry: Worrell had recently released *Funk of Ages* (1990); Collins released *Jungle Bass* that year with Bootsy's Rubber Band, and was, along with Worrell, working with the supergroup Praxis on the forthcoming album *Transmutations (Mutatis Mutandis)* (1992); Clinton's album *The Cinderella Theory* (1989) was met with considerable success, and at the time of the *Our Voices* interview, he was in the midst of producing the initial 1992 installments of his Family Series collection, *Go Fer Yer Funk* and *Plush Funk*. It is clear, then, that contrary to public perception, P-Funk was anything but dormant, even if the loosely formatted collection seemed to become disentangled at the time. Collins offers the explanation that after working together so intensely, they had become comfortable with each other, and perhaps even complacent with their current situation. This is rather evident in the "creative exhaustion" coming across in their music in the early 1980s, which music critic John Rockwell indicated (see Chapter III); he speculates that separation can allow for a "fresh [musical] perspective." They expressed a firm awareness that they had faded from

popular culture, but Clinton, in accordance with Collins, did not wish to contradict that belief, stating that “it lets them get us out of their mind” in preparation for a future with P-Funk.³⁰

With the year 2017 as a vantage point, what does a future with P-Funk look like? Despite the impossibility of any concrete foresight, one could extrapolate possibilities based on previous trajectories and contemporary circumstances. First of all, one must face the inescapable fact of mortality: to put it quite frankly, the original members of P-Funk are dying. Garry Shider succumbed to cancer in 2010, as did Bernie Worrell in 2016. Collins and Clinton are both in their 70s; however, their performances remain frequent and vibrant, which indicates that, at least for the foreseeable future, P-Funk is not losing any momentum. The P-Funk All Stars perform consistently around the United States and abroad, with a remarkably enthusiastic following in Scandinavian countries and in western Europe.³¹ Yet, in anticipation of their eventual passing, a promising breed of younger musicians is poised to carry the torch. Vanguard artists including Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino, and Alissia Benveniste have already exhibited clear attempts to perpetuate P-Funk, even if not by name. With the relatively recent canonization of hip hop in American universities—a rapidly expanding phenomenon which tends to emphasize early hip hop—inevitably brings P-Funk to the ears of a generation otherwise largely unfamiliar with them.

³⁰ Interview with Bev Smith on *Our Voices*, broadcast on BET, 1991. FunkyKev1, “P-Funk Interview (Part 1 of 2),” 25 November 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AspK_BSU0r8. Accessed 03 March 2017.

³¹ Anne Danielsen, a scholar based in Oslo, Norway, and author of *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (2005) writes on her personal following of Parliament. Additionally, concerts in Norway and the United Kingdom, for example, are both recent and frequent occurrences.

Despite the problematic situation of P-Funk in academic scholarship, studies concerning the group have increased in recent years, especially since the publication of Anne Danielsen's *Presence and Pleasure* in 2005 and Tony Bolden's edited volume, *The Funk Era and Beyond* in 2008. While most of this scholarship deals with their carnivalesque aesthetic (Wright 2008) and afrofuturism (Rollefson 2008; Jimenez 2011), authors have more recently begun exploring other aspects of the P-Funk universe: Bolden authored an article in 2008 concerning the epistemological nature of funk music; Amy Nathan Wright published a 2014 article on Funkadelic album art; Horace Maxile, Jr., published an extensive article on the Mothership and the historical chariot trope in 2011. Additionally, Clinton's autobiography (2014) and the biographical study by Needs (2014), although published recently, are sure to become standard texts concerning the history of P-Funk.

Hence, there is no reason to think that P-Funk will perish anytime soon; if anything, it is as vital now as it has ever been, sustained through the clones that have reconstructed the group through time, enabling its "stretching along" a historical continuum. The work of interpretive communities, whether overt or implicit, has not only perpetuated the collective's longevity, but constructed it in specific ways that determined perceptions of its current condition. Essential here is the fact that these communities, even if through the pleasures of play, took certain aspects of P-Funk seriously enough such that they could plant their roots in American culture. This is precisely what I have endeavored to do in this study: regardless of the collective's intentionality, the fact is that they have left a deep musical footprint, irrevocably altered innumerable lives, and have established themselves as paragons of both funk music and cultural production holistically considered; this alone is worthy of serious analysis, and I maintain that a historiographic view of

their activities, as well as of those who received them, is fundamental in understanding their cultural place, which inexorably entails their historical place. Marc Bloch, in his *Les Rois thaumaturges* (1924), studied the supposed ability of a king in the Middle Ages to cure scrofula by touch; specifically, he did not study the king's ability, but the *supposition* of it as an anthropological phenomenon. He approached a spiritual and political situation, surely nonsensical from the perspective of modernity, under the relativistic assumption that the belief itself was legitimate. It is precisely from his investigative comportment that this project was derived. The spiritual ecstasy instigated by uproarious performances, the lifestyles modeled after playfully subversive rhetoric and imagery, and the ineffable musical force generated by a combination of primal dance rhythms and futuristic timbral experimentalism all coalesce in P-Funk, a cultural phenomenon which gathered not mere fans, but disciples.

Although the story of P-Funk begins with the forming of the Parliaments in the 1950s and ends today (whenever that may be), its history extends well beyond those limits. In a contemporary popular culture distinctive by overwhelming musical saturation and accessibility, it is remarkable that such prominent artists as Kendrick Lamar and Childish Gambino decided to bring P-Funk to the foreground of their musical aesthetics. This indicates that there is a compelling salience about the music of P-Funk that has given it life beyond itself. Outside of hip hop, musicians active in the genres of neo-soul, R&B, and contemporary funk such as Erykah Badu, D'Angelo, Janelle Monáe, and Alissia Benveniste have proven the continued vitality of Parliament-Funkadelic as both a musical and conceptual source. The way in which P-Funk "stretches itself along" musically and culturally is palpable from songs expressing agency and transcendence to the lowrider in Flying Lotus' music video for "Until the Quiet Comes," from

the Middle Passage to the dance floor, from Hieronymus Bosch to blaxploitation comic books. All of these independently and uniquely embody funkiness, demonstrating that the unifying force of the One is perhaps not so far-fetched a concept. In the *Our Voices* interview, Smith asked Clinton about his claim in “P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)” regarding the concept of “funk after death.” His answer is at once profoundly simple, and simply profound: “It will be here forever. It was always here. It’ll be here when we leave.” That sentiment was concretized in 2016 with the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., where the Mothership stands as a permanent exhibit. If the Funk is here to stay, I urge the reader to embrace it. Funk is not merely a genre of music that one might enjoy or detest; it is a comportment toward life which celebrates the visceral and the transcendental, questions modernity, and realizes agency. Music—especially P-Funk—can allow the listener to “get to that,” to actualize one’s funkentelechy, to make real one’s fantasy. This is the ultimate goal of Pure Funk, and the reason it is so historically compelling—although Clinton would probably just say, “ain’t nothing but a party.” The party is on the Mothership, and all are invited. Just don’t forget your sunglasses.

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