

Disruption and DisFunktion:  
Locating a Funk Sensorium in Twentieth-Century African American Literature

by

Casey Rachel Wasserman

Department of English  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Karla Holloway, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fred Moten

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sheila Smith-McKoy

\_\_\_\_\_  
Priscilla Wald

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the way in which funk music, in the context of twentieth-century African American literature, operates as a means of stimulating the sensorium. Funk, narrowly defined as a musical form, once carried negative connotations. Whether understood as depression, a genre of popular music, an odor, or as a euphemism for sex, the genre is concerned with attitude and visible emotions. Much work has been done in the field of African American literature regarding jazz and blues, and studies of hip-hop are gaining traction. Funk, however, has not fulfilled its potential for investigating its affect of musical performance or its connection to narratives. This project is an examination of the aesthetics of this musical form, which will generate more nuanced readings of musical and literary narratives of the 1960s and 1970s through an analysis of sound and its sensorial variants. I examine the function of music in a literary text as opposed to how it is described.

Funk operates as a link between the jazz- and blues-inspired poetry and novels of the early twentieth century on the one hand and the emergence of “urban,” “street,” or “hip-hop” narratives on the other. Its artistic intervention in social relationships brings the aesthetic and political into conversation. I argue against the binary differentiating “serious” and “popular” musical forms; funk bridges the gap between these two designations in an important context, which creates a sonic and social space to examine the idea of difference both in terms of the general and the specific. A misconception of “sameness” is the site of theoretical and ontological difference or disruption.

Funk’s ability to disrupt resides in its paradoxical nature. Rhythmically, the musical genre departs from soul of the 1960s and is fundamental to the development of hip-hop in the

late-1970s and early 1980s. Though rooted in distinct rhythmic patterns, Funk seeks to dismantle conceptions of rhythmic expectation and production common in popular music by pushing back against previously popular forms. Prior to Funk's popularity, most musical forms ranging from jazz to rock and roll emphasized the second and fourth beats in a measure. Funk compositions typically emphasize the first and third beats, which changes the momentum of the music. Though it is a genre geared towards dance and therefore rooted in the body and movement, Funk gravitates towards transcending the physical limits of the body by addressing discourses of sensorial perception. Funk (both as a musical genre and an aesthetic) is something of a sensory ensemble—each sense a part of the whole, complex experience. The five senses are brought together in an all-out attack on what hegemony comes to represent. Each chapter presents a different mode of assault on the body's ability to process the sensorium. I demonstrate the way Funk disrupts through a fusion of ethnomusicology, socio-cultural analysis, and literary criticism in the act of reading, hearing, watching, smelling, and tasting musical performances, cultural events, and works of literature.

## Contents

Abstract.....	iv
List of Figures .....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: “Can’t You Smell That Smell?” The Etymology of an Odor .....	18
Chapter 2: One Novel Under a Groove: Ellison’s <i>Invisible Man</i> and Multidimensional Rhythm .....	54
Chapter 3: Spontaneous Combustion: Spectacle, Pleasure, and Containment.....	85
Chapter 4: “Pass The Peas”: In Search of Musical Nourishment .....	125
Biography .....	171

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Still image from MC Hammer’s “U Can’t Touch This” Video.....	14
Figure 2: Ron Cosley cartoon featured in <i>Black Books Bulletin</i> .....	35

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## Introduction

The click of a mouse. A hand reaching for a radio knob. The swivel of a plastic jewel case. The delicate placement of a needle on vinyl. Fingers moving along the frets located on the neck of a guitar if there is music. Performing and listening requires a physical relationship between the body and the music's source—be it a car stereo, a computer loaded with mp3 files, or the strumming of a guitar. The sense of touch grounds our initial interaction with music almost as much as our ability to hear. However, once physical contact with our music or instrument ends, the affect or feeling begins. It is in the complicated interplay between sound and sense that music sustains its power as that which “touches” an audience.

In this project, I build on Toni Morrison's use of “Funk” as a symbol of a variety of human emotions, experiences, and passions antithetical to the soulless, sanitized behavior middle class characters revere in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. The ever-present threat of an eruption of “Funk,” as Morrison describes it, is a battle that must be fought all the way to the grave. Such an outbreak could undermine a character's reputation of respectability. While writing at the height of funk music's popularity, Morrison was invested in using a specific musical genre to speak to the 1940s setting of her novel—something transcending its historical moment. *The Bluest Eye* led to me to consider the ways music, specifically funk in the context of this project, erupts from the confines of a text. This novel was the source of my interest in considering what music *does* in a text as

opposed to simply how it is *described*. I view the eruptions in Morrison's text as disruptions of the sensory affect connected to a host of other works invested in similar textual and extra-textual response. I argue authors such as Ralph Ellison, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison, for example, cast the act of reading as a performance that engages with music to elicit an emotional response. Such a reaction disrupts the text and allows the reader to connect with other senses simultaneously.

Touch, much like funk music and its imperatives, is contradictory. It is both active and passive in terms of mediating that with which it engages; one's sense of touch requires action in order to trigger the passivity of receptivity. This receptivity is what sets it apart from the classical understanding of the five senses as being extroceptive.<sup>1</sup> Just as there is no single organ associated with touch in the way that taste is linked with the tongue, for example, there is also no singular understanding of its relation to sensory perception. The kinesthetic or physiological sense of touch is often linked with the empathic sense of touch typically referred to as "feeling." Touch is unique among the senses for working literally and figuratively. It engages with our everyday tactile world while empathically creating a form of communication to convey emotion.<sup>2</sup> Touch is "a metaphor for conveyance into the interior of the subject, particularly the capacity to arouse emotion (registered in the figurative sense of "touching" as kindling affect). Touch evokes at once agency and receptivity, authority and reciprocity, pleasure and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Paterson, 2-3.

pain, sensual indulgence and epistemological certainty.”<sup>3</sup> The connotations of seemingly paradoxical pairs such as pleasure and pain, for example, echo the question in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* of how something can be both neat and nasty simultaneously. Funk, like touch, can take on contradictory needs such as the refusal yet desire for order or regulation.

Reading and writing are inherently tactile and regulated; the etymology of the term “write” is linked with scratching.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 1, “Can’t You Smell That Smell? The Etymology of an Odor,” I lay the groundwork for an investigation into literary representations of multi-sensory engagements with funk music. I trace the etymological origins of “funk” and place the music within its historical context through an examination of its use in several popular press outlets during the 1960s when the term gained significant social and linguistic traction often associated with African American political activism. The socio-linguistic use of funk was expressed almost exclusively through language tied to olfactory notions and the idea of body odor, which over time shifts from carrying negative to positive connotations. In this chapter, I examine the ways the ontology of funk moves from belonging to social outsiders to becoming a commodity utilized by the mainstream as businesses and record executives, for example, slowly recognized the novelty or cultural cache associated with this music and its aesthetic. To capitalize on funk’s apparent popularity and reduce it to novelty is a means of managing a certain level of cultural anxiety surrounding its popularity. It is in this chapter that I

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Constance Classen, *The Book of Touch* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 6.

begin to work through the complex ways funk speaks to both national and personal narratives and the ontological states they produce. The authors examined in this project are part of a legacy in which “through the production of their literary narratives, they participated in the imagining of a community and transformed that imagining into a contemplation of the consequences and ambiguities of their own participation.”<sup>5</sup> This groundwork allows me to consider funk in more nuanced and specific ways in subsequent chapters.

Furthermore, in this project I turn to James Brown, one of funk’s musical and aesthetic innovators as an objective correlative or touchstone to address some of the more abstract aspects of funk through an analysis of his music and career. Chapter 1 introduces Brown’s career and initial political imperatives with regard to funk and the language associated with its ethos. In later chapters, I examine his performative utterances (Chapter 2), showmanship and public image (Chapter 3), and even some of his earliest memories of cooking with his father around a campfire while living in the woods or a series of failed fried chicken restaurants (Chapter 4). Brown’s career trajectory traces the rise and fall of funk, and it is only fitting he be included in a study of literary works and cultural moments engaging with the senses as they relate to funk music and its aesthetic.

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<sup>5</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3. Wald writes of the relationship between personal and national narratives and the anxiety of language pertaining to social, legal, and political debates in American literature with an emphasis on the works of Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Harriet Wilson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Gertrude Stein.

Following my extended analysis of the etymology and general olfactory associations with funk in Chapter 1, I turn to the relationship between the written and the oral in Chapter 2. Here I examine the use of the phonograph and its role in Ralph Ellison's interplay of sound and hearing in relation to subjectivity in *Invisible Man*. When the narrator sits in his cave on the social and geographic periphery, his desire for an ensemble—be it musical or social—is moved towards the collection of phonographs in order to play a single recording simultaneously. The etymology of “phonograph” signals the tension between the oral and written. It as if the “body controls, conducts, coordinates, having itself to transcribe what it reads, making sound and meaning, the body as inscriber and not just transmitter, simple receiver.”<sup>6</sup>

In the context of *Invisible Man*, the narrator relies on writing and touch to contest his place in the social hierarchy as well as a means of communication of his experience and emotions as a social outsider. Furthermore, his desire to listen to a recording of Louis Armstrong's “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” played simultaneously by five phonographs invokes touch in its connection to vibration. The sound waves wash over the narrator as he ponders existential questions. Lyrical content is as emotionally important as the sensation of vibrations tickling his skin as he listens to his phonographs. For the narrator, sound is linked with the experience of feeling sound physically and emotionally. His appreciation for music is linked with his ontological state.

Following my discussion of Ellison's use of the phonograph and subjectivity through an examination of Louis Armstrong's song, “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 149.

and Blue,” I look at the way typography and punctuation become rhythmic signifiers in the text. This discussion shifts my analysis to the ways James Brown uses alternative rhythmic conventions to “invent” funk music as a genre using his own forms of sonic punctuation in the form of grunts, wails, and moans. More specifically, I look at the way these performative utterances shape one of his early funk recordings, 1967’s “Cold Sweat.”

Unlike the typical musical production in which touch triggers or generates sound as Ellison describes it in his masterwork, Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz* begins with sound and ends with touch when the narrator directs the reader’s eyes towards the location of his hands. *Jazz* opens with the onomatopoeic and moves towards the affective: “Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deep down, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, the tongue click or sound associated with “Sth” is one of recognition and dismissal. It is an affective noise.

*Jazz* concludes with a command: “Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.”<sup>8</sup> The reader is directed toward understanding his own physically intimate and emotional relationships to the text. As Karla Holloway notes, “The intimacy of this reminder is a metaphor for the relationship that exists between a body and text—an acknowledgement

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Plume, 1992), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Morrison, 229.

that text can incorporate desire.”<sup>9</sup> What begins as a physical interaction between hands cradling or touching bound paper (a commodity) becomes an exercise of affect—the desire to continue reading; to experience the sensation of closing a book following its final words; the emotional relief at the conclusion of the story.

Between the opening sound of “Sth” and the concluding directive, the reader discovers that this is a novel chronicling the pitfalls of excessive affect. Joe Trace longs to recreate the feeling of falling in love with his underage lover. Following her murder at the hands of his wife, Joe is incapable of basic interactions because he is consumed by memories of emotional encounters with his mistress:

Now he lies in bed remembering every detail of that October afternoon when he first met her, from start to finish, and over and over. Not just because it is tasty, but because he is trying to sear her into his mind, brand her there against future wear. So that neither she nor the alive love of her will fade or scab over the way it had with Violet. For when Joe tries to remember the way it was when he and Violet were young, when they got married, decided to leave Vesper County and move up North to the City almost nothing comes to mind. He recalls dates, of course, events, purchases, activity, even scenes. But he has a tough time trying to catch what it felt like.<sup>10</sup>

The plot of the novel is driven by characters’ desires to recreate certain feelings or emotions. For Joe, the sense of touch is one that should be able to transfer to sensory memory. What he cannot fathom is the extent to which his emotional response is, in fact, a public response visible to all. Touch cannot exist as a private act because of its role as “a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values

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<sup>9</sup> Karla Holloway, *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Morrison, 28-29.



and hierarchies.”<sup>11</sup> Joe seeks to quite literally burn an emotion into his mind and memory without considering the consequences of his actions. It is as if the feeling of loving and being loved has become his drug of choice, and he cannot live without the emotions these memories trigger.

What drives Joe’s wife, Violet, to murder his lover is an infatuation with the interplay of the senses. For the scorned wife in the novel, her great fear is that her husband engages in a complete sensory relationship with his young lover, Dorcas. She worries and fantasizes that his relationship with Dorcas is sensory and sensual in ways that their own relationship is not. The thought of their interactions is rooted in brief descriptions of inherently intimate activities, which engage the senses independently and collectively. Morrison writes

Did he ask her to warm with her own body his spot in the bed on cold winter nights before he slid in? Or did he do it for her? He probably let her put her spoon into his pint of cream and scoop off the melty part, and when they sat in the dark of the Lincoln Theater he wouldn’t mind a bit if she stuck her hand down in his box of popcorn and came up with a fistful of it the sonofabitch. And when “Wings Over Jordan” came on he probably turned the volume down so he could hear her when she sang along with the choir, instead of up so as to drown out her rendition of “Lay my body down.”<sup>12</sup>

Violet’s fantasies of her husband’s adulterous behavior are rooted in singular visions of sensory engagement—the texture of melting ice cream, the sound of Dorcas’ voice in relation to the radio, warmth radiating from a body or the look and feel of a handful of popcorn in a dark theater. Though all of the senses are engaged in this fantasy, the

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<sup>11</sup> Classen, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Morrison, 94.

predominant sense is that of touch and tactility as well as its affective nature. What begins as the thought of a body warming the bed for another shifts to images concerning hands—the movement of the spoon, a hand plunging into the depths of a bag of popcorn, and the adjustment of a radio dial. These movements begin with the hands and end with other senses as the contents of the spoon migrate to the mouth and taste buds, the popcorn is consumed, and the lover listens to Dorcas sing along with the radio.

I address these themes of the visual and fantasy suggested by the passage from *Jazz* in Chapter 3, “Spontaneous Combustion: Spectacle, Pleasure, and Containment.” Focusing on a different Toni Morrison novel, *The Bluest Eye*, I examine the way in which visual spectacle operates within a narrative of containment. For Morrison’s characters, emotional responses to stimuli demand a private response aching to become public and shared. Funk seemingly demands freedom and regulation, and this tension is apparent as characters navigate the complex social hierarchies of the novel. Here, funk becomes simultaneously a source and relief for cultural anxiety. Following my analysis of the dissemination of perceived standards of beauty and their visual consumption of these images, I turn to *The Bluest Eye* to examine the ways characters are unable to reconcile the need for both liberation and containment of the aesthetic these images disseminate.

This conflict central to Morrison’s text is then extended in this chapter to a consideration of two pivotal moments in James Brown’s career. First, I look at his 1968 performance at the Boston Garden on the evening following Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. The concert was televised in an attempt to regulate and restrict pedestrian movement in the city to avoid potential rioting. Brown’s music, at this juncture, was

used to regulate bodies and emotions in the spirit of containment. However, the order and regulation Brown extended to the city of Boston was not the extent of his dalliances with these sensory experiences or impulses. I next examine his 2004 mug shot following his arrest for domestic violence. In this photo, which appeared in numerous news outlets, Brown's hair is unkempt and indicative of his emotional state. His hair reminds the viewer of the process required to maintain orderly hairstyles but also of a certain level of societal expectation that extends from behavior to appearance.

Morrison's emphasis on the visual cues of tactility (the spoon in the cream, the fistful of popcorn) gives fresh meaning to literary representations of cooking, which I address in Chapter 4, "Pass The Peas': In Search of Musical Nourishment." Cooking and literary representations of culinary activity demonstrate the ways in which textures and emotion interplay with one another similar to the sensual vision of placing a spoon in a lover's pint of melting ice cream in *Jazz*. For actress, activist, and chef Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor and author Ntozake Shange, the task is to take the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and textures of the kitchen and adequately translate them into prose. In this chapter, I examine the way these authors use soul food to examine the ontological experience of creating, documenting, and consuming soul food in both genre defying works that are part cookbook and part autobiography. For these authors, recipes become extensions of self and memories are undeniably a part of the process of culinary creation.

As the reader sits and holds each text, the author must convince her that these recipes are worthy of re-creation—that they are as captivating as a novel's characters or plotlines. Once a recipe intrigues a reader, the transition from reader to chef commences.

Perhaps it begins by propping open the text while searching for a knife and cutting board to prepare ingredients while simultaneously skimming through the author's recipe. The memories Shange and Smart-Grosvenor share in their texts become a part of the dish as the reader is moved not only by the anecdotes accompanying the recipes but also by the feeling of the knife as it cuts through vegetables and thuds against a surface or the sizzle of onion as it is added to a pan of hot oil. The sense of touch, much like the act of reading about cooking, requires both active and passive reactions. Cooking, like writing, is inherently tactile. Reading about cooking is likewise tactile but the book comes to stand in for the tools of the trade or the initial actions required to create a meal or dish.

While Morrison, Ellison, Shange, and Smart-Grosvenor all tackle elements of touch and the intimacy pertaining to the interplay of the literary and sonic, what is missing from this project is a consideration of dance. After all, one of the byproducts of a funky beat is the movement of the body in reaction to what is heard. In Chapter 3, the police sought to contain the audience present at the Boston Garden on the evening of April 5, 1968, in their movements unrelated to dance. As James Brown began performing his latest single, "I Can't Stand Myself (When You Touch Me)," audience members began climbing on the stage to be in closer proximity to the performer and perhaps even dance on stage beside him. When bouncers and police officers quickly surrounded the performer, the message was clear: physical contact between the audience and Brown would not be tolerated. In this instance, avoiding touch was as significant as the act of touching. Contrary to the title of his then-current single, Brown appeared to have no problems with his fans reaching out to touch him or dancing alongside him on

stage until it presented a logistical problem in which too many people occupied too small a space or threatened to diminish his capacity as the featured performer. Brown could not dance or move because of the spatial constraints of bodies in contact. It was at this point that the performer allowed the police to begin regulating the interactions of bodies attending his concert. Brown, as well as concert organizers, considered the implications of chaos in the Garden; if a captivated audience in the same room as Brown began to become agitated, could the same be said of the at-home audiences watching the concert on television? This musical event and the scenes described in Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* are concerned with the regulation and restriction of bodies to prevent any intimate contact that could potentially result in touching. While Brown's concert was marked by police presence to deter stage climbers, it was televised to limit the number of people on the streets in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination to curtail any form of rioting or violence. City leaders sought to capitalize on Brown's ability to connect with his audience emotionally to prevent damage created when emotion gives rise to violent behavior. Touch, here, is linked with spectacle and the visual.

While touch may take precedence over dance in Chapter 3, the peculiar relationship between these two elements as they pertain to one of James Brown's musical progeny, MC Hammer, and his signature song, 1990 hip-hop/pop single, "U Can't Touch This," teases out the relationship between touch and dance. For Hammer, his song is a platform for spotlighting his dancing abilities and transitioning to the medium of the music video in spite of his rather pedestrian lyrical abilities. When he sings or raps "U Can't Touch This," he is referring to his showmanship and skills on the dance floor as

well as the catchy hook of his song. The title signifies a sense of superiority or supremacy unmatched by his peers; this music is supposedly something beyond itself. However, Hammer cannot demonstrate his showmanship without a spectacle or visual component to supplement his lyrics. The dance moves he so desperately wants to display are quick and light much like two key figures in popular music who came before him: James Brown and Michael Jackson.

With several extended dance breaks, the single alone cannot convey Hammer's dance skill without an accompanying music video in which to actually demonstrate his abilities. This video emphasizes the untouchability or distance between the listener/viewer and the performer. This song has become inexplicably linked with the images of MC Hammer dancing rather than his insistence of being "dope on the floor and magic on the mic."

For Hammer, his fans cannot actually touch him because of his presumed speed and finesse. Neither can his musical rivals for that matter. While the lyrical content of the single is lacking, Hammer is clearly using the video to create an entire career based on dance and bravado. He begins the song with the declaration, "My music hits me/So Hard." The basis of his skill as a dancer is rooted in what he describes as a physical relationship between himself and his music. Lyrically, his rivals *can* touch or approach his skill, but not to the extent that his emotional or affective relationship with music can be approached.

The video for "U Can't Touch This" is a series of shots featuring MC Hammer dancing with a host of background singers and dancers. His ostentatious wardrobe ranges

from spandex jumpsuits to his signature parachute pants. Each garment, both in the case of MC Hammer as well as his accompanying dancers, is selected to emphasize his footwork and skill. Women wear tight spandex or other form-fitting apparel to emphasize their silhouettes. The parachute pants worn by both Hammer and a number of male dancers, for example, draw attention to the fluidity of his movement as well as the quickness of his feet and lower legs.



**Figure 1: Still image from MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This" Video.<sup>13</sup>**

While the video is characterized by movement and dancing, very rarely do any dancers touch each other in the process of executing their routines. Each dancer occupies

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/88184-MC-Hammer-Working-On-A-Secret-Project-With-Activision>

an individual space and performs as an individual as well as simultaneously part of an ensemble. Only near the end of the video does Hammer engage with one of his back-up dancers in an intimate manner as if to briefly “touch” vis-à-vis dance. Periodically, he raps direction for his audience in terms of raising their hands, running fingers through their hair, or even encouraging them to momentarily take part in a dance known as “The Bump” in which partners lightly bump hips to the rhythm of the music. For Hammer, his musical project is designed to showcase movement in any capacity.

However, Hammer’s hit almost failed to gain any traction due to potential copyright infringement. “U Can’t Touch This” uses an endless loop of a riff from Rick James’ 1981 hit “Super Freak.”<sup>14</sup> The very beat Hammer informs his audience they “can’t touch” was initially taken illegally using new musical technology and digital “borrowing.” The bravado and affect carrying Hammer’s tune is rooted in the practice of sampling or “touching” something that did not belong to him in the first place. His success, though, is undeniable. James’ hook inspires movement and some form of recognition or response whether it is happiness or outrage at the use of the sample.

Touch, it seems, addresses the difficulties and wonders of writing about the senses. No one sense functions independently of another. The narrator of *Invisible Man* fixates on the notion of five phonographs while thinking about the vibrations felt while listening to a recording. The visual and oral cues in Brown’s concert concern the interactions of bodies and lack thereof. Cooking privileges the sense of taste but not

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<sup>14</sup> Ricky Vincent, *Funk: The Music, The People, and the Rhythm of the One* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 9-10.



without the supporting senses. For MC Hammer, music is about using affective qualities of touch to incite movement or dance.

This project began with an interest in how the musical and oral (in the form of funk) work within a literary framework. As this project morphed, the conceptual framework of affect and the senses seemed most appropriate because by default two of senses were engaged in the process—sight and sound. Soon, I realized that funk engages with the senses as an ensemble rather than independently. What begins as sonic is simultaneously affective or “touching.” Funk, in its multiplicity of sensory engagement is perhaps closest to the sense of touch precisely because, as demonstrated throughout this project, it is rooted in emotion and affect. It encompasses so much: “Touch being a manifold of sensations, ‘feeling’ involves not only perception by touch, as we have seen, but also perception of our whole bodily state, involving interoception and somatic sensations.”<sup>15</sup>

In a 1991 *Nation* article, James Brown attempted to explain a similar theory of the mind-body sensory connection:

Y’know, one thing about music: It’s the key to *everything*, the universal language of man’s commitment to be together. Yeah, a baby can *feel* before it can *see*, so the feeling is far beyond sight, sound is far beyond sight, um-hmm. So that we ought to have music *everywhere*, in the churches, in the political meetings, in the hospitals and dentists’ offices. ‘Cause, see what the music is doing? It’s so *vast*, so *beyond* our thinking, because it reaches your soul and you can feel before you can see, that it’s mind over matter. You say “ouch” and you don’t even know where the pain is coming from, but the *feeling* is *real*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Paterson, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 24.

For Brown, the sonic gives way to a greater understanding of human interaction and subjectivity. Feeling, or touch, is the primary sense engaged while all others become a part of a greater sensory ensemble. Music is not only the language of man's commitment to togetherness, but it is also an attempt to explain or clarify man's ability to understand the interconnectedness of the senses. For Brown, it appears, music is significant for its ability to make listeners feel as opposed to merely hear, yet sound cannot be severed from other sensory elements. As this project demonstrates, the act of reading a novel or hearing a song is ultimately an engagement with the entire sensorium simultaneously as something other than itself.

## Chapter 1:

### “Can’t You Smell That Smell?” The Etymology of an Odor

*In 2002, I saw James Brown perform live for the first time. I convinced two friends from my college dorm (one was another fan, the other merely a good sport) to travel across Washington, DC, to see The Godfather perform. We arrived at the venue when the doors opened at 7pm to mill around, stake out a spot front and center, and engage in a bit of small talk with the other concert goers, including a local firefighter who professed to being a “big fan.” Two hours later, Brown took the stage with much fanfare. Only two people separated us from The Godfather of Soul, and we were exhilarated. After several minutes of aggressive dancing and singing, Brown had the crowd raising their hands slowly towards the ceiling in unison as he promised to take us “higher” according to the lyrics of “Doing it to Death.” A few minutes of vigorous movement later, he had worked up a healthy sweat. He turned his back to the audience, and, in the process of spinning and flipping his hair, launched his sweat toward the audience.*

*Now, of course, when I think back to this night, the following occurs in slow motion: as the sweat headed towards me, glistening in the stage lights, the fireman I spoke with before the concert leapt in front of me like a Secret Service agent taking a bullet for the President, and the sweat flying towards me was absorbed into his chest. My friends and I stared in disbelief as the firefighter began to jump up and down shrieking*

with glee, “I have James Brown’s sweat ON ME!” The intensity of his fandom astounds me to this day.

While this scene was perhaps one of the most bizarre moments I have ever witnessed at a concert or social gathering, the most significant part of the evening was at the conclusion of the show when my friends and I talked about the concert as if we had been caught up in some sort of strange religious experience. The Cult of James Brown? (Cold) Sweat as communion? What had we witnessed? I tried explaining the scene to my religion professor several days later only to receive a semi-scoffing chortle—neither a pure chuckle nor a pure snort. While it was a moving concert experience that cemented my love of James Brown, I was also slightly troubled by the scene with the firefighter in part because of his desire and happiness to be covered in another person’s smelly sweat. The evening, I realize now, was a case study of the funk’s contradictory nature. As funk scholar Rickey Vincent has written, “funkiness...is an aesthetic of deliberate confusion, of uninhibited, soulful behavior that remains viable because of a faith in instinct, a joy of self, and a joy of life.”<sup>1</sup> Here, as living proof, stood a man who was completely uninhibited in his joy because he was covered with another man’s bodily secretions.

Funk is paradoxical in its simultaneous unification and rejection of the sacred and profane, the beautiful and the repulsive, the familiar and the disruptive. Funk holds the power to “make you feel like you want to do something nasty like waste some chicken gravy on your white shirt,” as Rufus Thomas sang in his 1969 hit, “Do the Funky Chicken.” Funk leads its listeners to ask, as the narrator Claudia does in Morrison’s *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, The People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 4.

*Bluest Eye*, “How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time?”<sup>2</sup> Whitman-esque in its contradictions and broad embrace, funk and its innovators speak to our basest impulses while simultaneously engaging with our deepest philosophical and ontological questions. The origin of the term itself is fraught with paradoxical combinations, which poses the potential for generating confusing connotations as to what is or isn’t characteristically funky. The term contains the power to offend some while for others its appeal is in its sensory embrace.

In the foreword to Rickey Vincent’s seminal text *Funk: The Music, The People, and The Rhythm of The One*, George Clinton, one of the most visible creators and masterminds of the genre, writes, “Funk is something that one feels, and everybody has the ability to feel it. The irony is: The more one thinks about it, the harder it is to get the feel of The Funk. It’s just done.”<sup>3</sup> His comments are in league with a 1972 declaration by *The Washington Post*: “Funk Is in the Eye Of the Beholder.”<sup>4</sup> This declaration appears at the height of the genre’s popularity. Funk, like other abstract concepts, is known upon sight but difficult to define.

Funk is a useful tool for the study of twentieth-century African American literature precisely because it builds upon the foundations of blues and jazz to musically

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<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970. New York: Penguin, 1993), 11. Claudia, the young female narrator, is describing the color and movement of vomit on her pillow as it drips onto her sheets.

<sup>3</sup> George Clinton, Foreword to *Funk: The Music, The People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Allen, “Funk Is in the Eye Of the Beholder.” *The Washington Post* 11 Jan 1972. B1+. Allen claims funk is “what may become the hottest cultural property since organic food.” His tongue-in-cheek approach includes examples of what may be considered *funky*. He writes, “If Republican cloth coats are funky, the Nixon Checkers speech in toto is nearly off the scale” thereby fusing funk with the political. Furthermore, Allen describes funk as “doing what your peer group will greet with puzzled loathing. If you’re William Buckley, for instance, funk might be sending out UNICEF Christmas cards.” Funk is irony.

speak to or sound out the aesthetic found in literary texts of the same period. This is particularly true in terms of understanding the political and stylistic imperatives associated with literary encounters with musical aesthetics. This chapter presents a brief history of funk as a musical genre to historicize the term and its implications before moving on to an analysis of funk in different contexts in subsequent chapters. Each section in this chapter addresses a different aspect and component of funk's overall place in the context of African American musical and cultural history. The first section, "Talk that Talk," examines the current linguistic use of funk as it circulates in African American communities and the connotations associated with the term. Because language is rarely without political associations, I use the second section, "The Politics of Style," to address the political roots of funk with particular emphasis on its etymology in relation to the term's circulation in American, more specifically African American, popular discourse. As the term developed traction in the popular press and mainstream news outlets, funk's association with odors and the relationship between the music and the sense of smell is cemented into the vernacular. The section "Synaesthetic Funk" investigates the means by which authors describe this link to odor before I move to an introduction to James Brown, one of the originator's of the genre, and his place in a larger appreciation of funk's evolution. As stated in the Introduction, James Brown figures prominently into this project because he serves as a touchstone and exemplar of the funk aesthetic. Following my interrogation of Brown's relationship to funk, I will explore funk's cultural capital as a tool for marketing to examine alternative ways the term circulates in popular media.

## Talk that Talk

In *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, linguist and scholar Geneva Smitherman presents a collection of words and phrases “in current use by Blacks from all walks of life: blue- and white-collar workers, professionals and businessmen/women, preachers and other church folk, Hip Hoppers, political activists, musicians, hustlers and gangstas, senior citizens.”<sup>5</sup> This dictionary, which differs from “standard” dictionaries, does not include the etymology of terms or the identification of its first use—“risky propositions,” she argues, “when dealing with an oral language such as African American Language.”<sup>6</sup> However, much like funk as a musical and cultural force, Smitherman’s dictionary brings together seemingly disparate ideas, entities, and terms in an attempt to document the ways cultural elements circulate linguistically. Smitherman’s project crosses generational and class boundaries. Some terms, she argues, are slang, whereas others are not:

[T]he language within the African American community goes beyond mere slang, encompassing words and phrases that are common to generations, social classes, and both males and females. True, Black slang is Black Language, but all Black Language is not Black slang. (And what is Black slang today often becomes mainstream American English tomorrow)... slang refers to language that is transitory and that is generally used by only one group... African American Language, however, has a lexical core of words and phrases that are fairly stable over time and are familiar to and/or used by all groups in the Black community.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* Revised Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), xii.

<sup>6</sup> Smitherman, xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Smitherman, 2.

“Funk” has, over time, mutated from a slang term common among pimps and the socially disreputable to mainstream American English. It has come to signify cross-generational, cross-class, and cross-racial appeal.<sup>8</sup> Iceberg Slim, for example, uses “funky” to signify something contemptible or repulsive. He dismisses one of his prostitutes as a “funky zero” while later referring to his sexual assault at age three as “the funky ritual” in his 1969 semi-autobiographical novel *Pimp: The Story of My Life*.<sup>9</sup> He uses both instances of the term to connect with odors pertaining to sexuality or sexual behavior as well as the negative connotations linked with these associations.

Two of the words Smitherman provides a working definition for as examples of distinct African American Language are *funk* and *funky*. She defines them as follows:

FUNK

1) The musical sound of jazz, the blues, work songs, Rhythm ‘n’ Blues, and African American music generally. 2) The quality of being soulful, FUNKY. 3) A bad smell; an unpleasant odor. 4) Euphemism for *fuck*, in its sexual meaning.

FUNKY

1) Very soulful; by extension, down-to-earth, the real nitty-gritty or essence of life. 2) In touch with the fundamental essence of life; in touch with one’s body and spirit. 3) Describes the sound of FUNK, used as early as 1900 in the New Orleans jazz scene. 4) Having a bad smell; an unpleasant odor. 5) Acting unpleasant, disagreeable.<sup>10</sup>

These definitions clearly link music and odor in ways that are tied to the disagreeable as well as the union of body and spirit, which one imagines would connote a desirable,

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<sup>8</sup> Though this project focuses on the ways in which the funk aesthetic appears in African American literature, one cannot ignore the success of the all-white funk/rock band Wild Cherry’s song, “Play that Funky Music.”

<sup>9</sup> Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck), *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969. Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2006), pp. 13 and 19.

<sup>10</sup> Smitherman, 140.



unified state. Funky is also strongly linked with sexuality and is characterized by a lack of pretension or as being “down-to-earth.” Despite her protests, Smitherman’s definitions do not vary significantly from those found in the Oxford English Dictionary. These definitions range from “a strong smell or stink”<sup>11</sup> to “depression”<sup>12</sup> to “spark.”<sup>13</sup> While the cultural and sociological connotations regarding funk may be rooted in African American discourse and practice, the term’s formal definitions do not vary from more authoritative sources such as the OED.

Smitherman and the OED are not alone in attempting to define *funk* or locate its meaning within the context of a fusion of odor and sound. Anthropologist Robert Farris Thompson, in an attempt to draw parallels between Kongo religion and art in America, uses “vernacular English and singing” to draw attention to the Kongo presence in the United States.<sup>14</sup> He uses *funky* as one of his primary examples:

The slang term “funky” in black communities originally referred to strong body odor, and not to “funk,” meaning fear or panic. The black nuance seems to derive from the Ki-Kongo *lu-fuki*, “bad body odor,” and is perhaps reinforced by contact with *fumet*, “aroma of food and wine,” in French Louisiana. But the Ki-Kongo word is closer to the jazz word “funky” in form and meaning, as both jazzmen and Bakongo use “funky” and *lu-fuki* to praise persons for the integrity of their art, for having “worked out” to achieve their aims...For in Kongo the smell of a hardworking elder carries luck. This Kongo sign of exertion is identified

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<sup>11</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def. 2.1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 1 Dec 2008 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>. All subsequent references to the OED were accessed simultaneously.

<sup>12</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def. 3

<sup>13</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def. 1.1.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 104.

with the positive energy of a person. Hence “funk” in black American jazz parlance can mean earthiness, a return to fundamentals.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Thompson draws connections among smell, sound, and discourse. Thompson attempts to define the term by linking it with its etymological origins as well as its use in the context of jazz parlance. All definitions, however, attempt to map funk onto the body through the distinct odor generated by sweat. Funk carries a distinct social currency and, according to Thompson, is characterized by integrity in its function as a point of transmission of the voice and body. Odor is also part and parcel of this transmission of the body, and in attempting to map odor as well as other sensory manifestations, I attempt to give structure and a location for this abstract, potentially unmanageable aesthetic.

### **The Politics of Style**

James Brown attempted to find a middle ground between his signature “funky” sound and the popularity of disco when in 1979 he sang, “It’s too funky, funky in here/ Gimme some air... The air’s polluted with a funky, funky sound.”<sup>16</sup> Brown, the earliest funk icon, aligns sound and odor in this particular single, “Too Funky in Here.” In truth, this song was a failure because of the fact Brown pandered to a disco audience (and thereby straying from the essence and integrity of his art crucial to the definition provided by Thompson). According to one music historian, even Brown admitted the album, *The*

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<sup>15</sup> R.F. Thompson, 104-105. Furthermore, Thompson continues, “In Kongo today it is possible to hear an elder lauded in this way: ‘like, there is a really funky person!—my soul advances toward him to receive his blessing’ (*yati, nkwa lu-fuki! Ve miela miama ikwenda baki*). Fu-Kiau Bunseki, a leading native authority on Kongo culture, explains: ‘Someone who is very old, I go to sit with him, in order to feel his *lu-fuki*, meaning, I would like to be blessed by him’” (104).

<sup>16</sup> James Brown, “Too Funky in Here,” *The Original Disco Man* (Polydor, 1979).

*Original Disco Man*, which featured the single, was “horrible.”<sup>17</sup> However, funk historian Dave Thompson argues, “it was a determined soul indeed who could stand outside the gates of disco and continue to look the other way.” Brown’s interest in funk was more than simply artistic. The failure of this particular album was in his investment in the financial gain of recording in the commercially driven genre of disco as opposed to adhering to the artistic impulse of creating something that speaks to an audience in a specific way without necessarily reaping financial reward. Funk at this particular historical juncture, had begun to lose its distinctive cultural odor. As the term began to circulate more widely in national discourse, its cultural currency suffered the effects of inflation.

As the term gained traction, the negative associations with odor became less frequent. Several scholars noted the potential for African American language to lose its currency through a systematic appropriation by mainstream (read: white) America. Smitherman’s interest in the ways in which African American language becomes mainstream is predated by Stephen Henderson’s analysis of the circulation of the term “funk” in a 1973 article. He argues “funk,” much like its predecessor “soul,” has been deliberately co-opted by mainstream America for the sake of cultural control. He writes:

For although one may dismiss the emergence and popularity of words like these as linguistic fads, and the white imitations as merely innocuous, commercial, racist, or sick, that would be a grievous error, for this concern with Black language is part of a subtle system of cooptation and control

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<sup>17</sup> Dave Thompson, *Funk* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001), ix.

which involves all major aspects of Black culture. If examined even with cursory attention, in fact, it epitomizes this system.<sup>18</sup>

One of the main tools for appropriation is the media, which is responsible for “the dilution and distortion of Black meaning. The net effect is political control.”<sup>19</sup> Words do not simply become mainstream or popular among the masses for the sake of expanding conversations; they serve an overtly political purpose for potential cultural control and the marginalization of demographic groups. Smitherman appears to overlook the political currency of some “slang” terms that are co-opted or strategically employed by the dominant cultural forces in her work documenting African American language. This act of appropriation, Henderson argues, echoes the historical imperialistic interest in the African continent and signals the systematic appropriation of language and culture.<sup>20</sup> He also notes that once a word carries significance within the African American community, it will eventually be “useful or titillating to the white community. Then a process of justification and sanitizing begins. The media, the critics, and eventually the scholars take their roles. The chief thing, however, is to deny the original Blackness of the new usage out of ignorance or by design.”<sup>21</sup> Invoking the “titillating” language of the African American community systematically undermines an entire community’s ability to generate potential linguistic and social change. However, what Henderson ignores is a level of cultural specificity. His argument is rooted in a general discussion of appropriation without a necessary level of detail.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen E. Henderson, “Inside the Funk Shop: A Word on Black Words” in *African American Literary Theory*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>19</sup> Henderson, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Henderson, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Henderson, 98.

This is not merely an exercise in manipulating class perceptions, as *The Washington Post* article “Funk is in the Eye of the Beholder” suggests. Henderson deconstructs the article to reveal its social agenda: “Reduce the whole thing to a game played with ‘class’ values—not racial ones—then retreat from the real world of the present to the nostalgic world of ‘O Mein Papa,’ in which everyone returns to the mythical melting pot of musical comedy and television commercials.”<sup>22</sup>

The manipulation of the terms “funk” and “soul” are a means to control social and cultural identities in such a way that they are quickly aligned with nostalgia or adopted as quaint. Immediately associating funk with nostalgia undermines its power. Funk has now reached the point at which it is nostalgic yet now more for its musical or stylistic quirks as opposed to its social utility in the twenty-first century. Funk cast alongside disco in this “everything old is new again” marketing attempt. A casual listener may not reach the level of concern or interest to investigate the political ramifications or impetus of the music and instead remain content with the novel aspects of the music and its relationship to the rise of disco in the 1970s.

The political implications of the linguistic poaching Henderson suggests when addressing society’s appropriation of these titillating terms, specifically in the case of the term “funk,” suggest some value in exploring its etymology. The Oxford English Dictionary, when defining “funk” as “a strong smell or stink,” traces its use as far back as the 1700s, primarily in terms of the odor emanating from ships’ holds or cargo.<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>22</sup> Henderson, 99.

<sup>23</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def. 2.1.

strong odor calls to mind narratives documenting the stench of sick or dying persons aboard a trans-Atlantic slave ship. Olaudah Equiano, for example, describes the wave of odors emanating from the cargo hold as distinctly overpowering in his *Narrative*. He writes, “I was soon put down under the decks and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relive me.”<sup>24</sup> The odor is such that it impairs the consumption of food and the will to live; death is preferable to the existence in these close quarters overpowered by the smells of human decay and excrement. Equiano’s description links the ontological connections between olfaction, life, and food, which I address in Chapter 4. Funk, as odor and ethos here, is rooted in the Black Atlantic experience Equiano describes. This OED entry also notes the term is obsolete except in dialects of the United States thereby making funk a distinctly American phenomenon in the present day.

The first use of the term *funk* to connote depression appeared as Oxford slang and possibly derived from the Flemish *fonck*.<sup>25</sup> The first listing for the noun *funk* in the OED traces the etymology as follows: “Corresponds to Middle Dutch *vonke* (Dutch *vonk*), Old High German *funcho* (Middle High German *vanke*, modern German *funke*)” meaning “spark.”<sup>26</sup> The English word may be an adaptation of the Dutch or possibly the Old English *funca*. However, a grammatical assessment of modern German dialects reduces

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<sup>24</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself*, ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston: Bedford, 1995), 54.

<sup>25</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def. 3

<sup>26</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def. 1.1.

the likelihood *funk* originates as a diminutive of the Gothic *fôn* meaning fire.<sup>27</sup> When all elements are combined, funk is a fusion of odor and sparks, which in turn operate as a form of (odoriferous) cultural memory. Funk, as music and lived experience, serves as a repository for cultural memories associated with the 1970s and the rise of political activism in the form of a “funky revolution.” The “spark” is political and cultural nationalism, as in the case of the Black Arts Movement, linked to the music and its aesthetic. In the foreword to an analysis of James Brown’s social import in relation to the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, Chuck D writes, “Yes, James Brown was a man, but he had the boundless spark of a kid.”<sup>28</sup> Spark, in this instance, is not necessarily tied to flames so much as it is charisma and enthusiasm; this character trait attracts the audience and is directly responsible for the singer’s cultural and musical appeal. Yet this “spark” is potentially Dutch or German in origin. The difficulty tracing the origins of the term, be they German, Dutch, or Ki-Kongo, complicates Henderson’s concern about the whitewashing of the term if, in fact, it was European in origin. Regardless of its etymological origin, *funk* has come to be inextricably linked to the African American community and the personification of a musical, social, or literary rebellion.

This literary and social rebellion returns us to Smitherman’s critique of funk as a mechanism of drawing attention to the connection between the 1960s and the call for “linguistic Black pride” as socially relevant and significant. She writes:

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<sup>27</sup> “Funk, *n.*” Def 1.

<sup>28</sup> Chuck D, Foreword to *The Hardest Working Man: How James Brown Saved the Soul of America* (New York: Gotham Books, 2008), ix. Chuck D is the leader of the hip-hop group Public Enemy, whose popularity in the 1980s and 1990s was rooted in a new call for black power and activism.

The emergence of the Black Freedom Struggle marked a fundamental shift in linguistic consciousness as Black intellectuals, scholar-activists, and writer-artists deliberately and consciously engaged in an unprecedented search for a language to express Black identity and the Black condition...And although a conscious call for Black pride had existed in other historical periods—for example, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s—the era of the 1960s Freedom Struggle was the first to call for *linguistic* Black pride. It was a call characterized by the learning of African languages (notably Swahili), by efforts to reinvent the Africanized language of the Black community, and by other forms of linguistic experimentation. Poet Haki Madhubuti put it this way: “black poets [will] deal in...black language or Afro-American language in contrast to standard english [sic]...will talk of kingdoms of Africa, will speak in Zulu and Swahili, will talk in muthafuckas and ‘can you dig it.’”<sup>29</sup>

Funk, it follows, is the union of Ki-Kongo, using Robert Farris Thompson’s etymology, with the “funky zero[es]” of Iceberg Slim. Funk, according to *The Washington Post*, “is the self-conscious adoption of value systems previously considered antithetical to one’s social position.”<sup>30</sup> That said, the European origins of the term do not betray the ethos of the aesthetic. Furthermore, Black Arts Movement poet Madhubuti’s prediction of authors and poets speaking in Zulu, Swahili, and profanities is antithetical to the aspirations of a generation of respectable middle-class African Americans who “were quietly integrating formerly all-white occupations, business, neighborhoods, and social clubs. Black middle- and working-class families were moving out of all-black urban neighborhoods and into the suburbs.”<sup>31</sup> It directly invokes the connotation that “funkiness...is an aesthetic of deliberate confusion, of uninhibited, soulful behavior that remains viable because of a faith in instinct, a joy of self, and a joy of life, particularly

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<sup>29</sup> Smitherman, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Allen, B3.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.



unassimilated black American life.”<sup>32</sup> This joy and deliberate confusion is crucial to later examinations of other aspects of the sensorium. Furthermore, the Freedom Struggle’s call for a sense of linguistic nationalism, interest in African languages, and the reinvention of an “Africanized language of the Black community” all facilitated the acceptance and dissemination of funk alongside Black nationalism in resistance to cultural hegemony under the umbrella of the Black Arts Movement during its ten year prominence.

Funk, however, has exceeded its etymology as a Ki-Kongo, Dutch, or German term. Funkiness is as much an aesthetic as it is a means to a specific style.<sup>33</sup> To sanitize funk of its aesthetic and stylistic characteristics, one also removes its potential as an alternative political force:

Funk is deeply rooted in African cosmology—the idea that people are created in harmony with the rhythms of nature and that free expression is tantamount to spiritual and mental health. If we were to look into this African philosophy, the African roots of rhythm, spiritual oneness with the cosmos, and a comfort zone with sex and aspects of the body, we would find that funkiness is an ancient and worthy aspect of life. Thus, funk in its modern sense is a deliberate reaction to—and a rejection of—the traditional Western world’s predilection for formality, pretense, and self-repression.”<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely this rejection of formality, pretense, and self-repression that makes funk such an important and intriguing aesthetic. In this form of disruption, the distinctive characteristics aligned with sex, the senses, and personal freedom become more prominent as well as significant. This is a rejection of the predilection for formality

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<sup>32</sup> Vincent, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent, 4-5.

found in the OED's meticulous explanatory notes of the etymological sources of *funk*. In turning against formality, funk does not embrace and embody bodily odor and smell as a signifier of that which is undesirable, but instead suggests pleasure tied to the body through the creation of sweat through dancing, among other means.

Funk is not only a rejection of formality and pretense in aesthetic terms, but it is also the rejection of political formality as well. In his letter from Folsom Prison dated October 9, 1965 (later titled "Soul on Ice" in his collection of letters and essays of the same title), Eldridge Cleaver writes:

In beginning this letter I could just as easily have mentioned other aspects of my situation; I could have said: I'm perfectly aware that I'm tall, that I'm skinny, that I need a shave, that I'm hard-up enough to suck my grandmother's old withered tits, and that I would dig (deeper than deeply) getting *clean* once more—not only in the steam-bath sense, but in getting sharp as an *Esquire* square with a Harlem touch—or that I would like to put on a pair of bib overalls and become a Snicker, or that I'd like to leap the whole last mile and grow a beard and don whatever threads the local nationalism might require and comrade with Che Guevara, and share his fate, blazing a new pathfinder's trail through the stymied upbeat brain of the New Left, or how I'd just love to be in Berkeley right now, to roll in that mud, frolic in that sty of funky revolution, to breathe its heady fumes, and look with roving eyes for a new John Brown, Eugene Debs, a blacker-meaner-keener Malcolm X, a Robert Franklin Williams with less rabbit in his hot blood, an American Lenin, Fidel, a Mao-Mao.<sup>35</sup>

Cleaver, here, seeks to recast the image he initially created in the opening of the letter in which he states he is "perfectly aware that [he's] in prison, that [he's] a Negro, that [he has] been a rapist, and that [he has] a Higher Uneducation."<sup>36</sup> The act of rape, which he viewed as insurrectionary, is substituted with new, alternative systems for protest.

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<sup>35</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (1968. New York: Delta, 1992), 38.

<sup>36</sup> Cleaver, 37. However, in a previous letter dated June 25, 1965, Cleaver notes that although he initially viewed rape as "an insurrectionary act...upon the white man's law" (33), he came to recognize the extremity and despicable aspect of his actions.

Cleaver claims rape as a “funky” act in terms of being disagreeable or unpleasant according to Smitherman’s definitions and in league with Iceberg Pimp’s sexual assault.

However, Cleaver shifts to an overtly political form of revolutionary funk. He juxtaposes the steam-bath and *Esquire*-esque Harlem garb with the mud, sty, and insurrectionary capabilities of Berkeley, Malcolm X, and Fidel Castro. Furthermore, he aligns bib overalls with members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Overalls, however, also recalls the garb of the sharecropper. Cleaver fuses many of the cultural elements of funk in a single passage. To “don whatever threads the local nationalism might require” is to wear the cloak of the local revolution. Cleaver’s interest in revolutionary action is not limited in scope; it merely requires donning the recognized uniform or costume of the local revolutionary group. Style, cleanliness, filth, revolution, and sexuality are brought together in a meditation on engaging with political activism. He shifts from the disreputable aspect of rape as a form of (funky) insurrection to a (funky) union of mind and spirit mentioned in the same entry.

The political implications of funk are clearly not limited to Cleaver’s writings. In the original publication of Henderson’s treatise in *Black Books Bulletin* concerning Funk and the systematic exploitation of African American slang, for example, a cartoon depicting a young African American male in two different scenarios appears alongside the text.<sup>37</sup> In the left panel, the man is wearing an Army uniform and is walking through the jungle while carrying a large gun. In the right panel, the same man is carrying a small handgun while walking near an overflowing trashcan. He is posed similarly. The caption

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<sup>37</sup> *Black Books Bulletin* was a quarterly journal established in the mid-1970s as an outlet to address literary and social concerns by African American writers in response to a white dominated publishing community.

reads: "TRAINED TO BE 'THE FINEST FIGHTING MAN IN THE WORLD.'"<sup>38</sup>

Inherent in each scenario is the presence of odors. In the panel on the right, the man is walking past an alley with overflowing trashcans, which one assumes would overpower the sense of smell of those passing nearby. The jungle, the setting for the left panel, would be overwhelmed by natural smells as well as the odors associated with dead bodies.

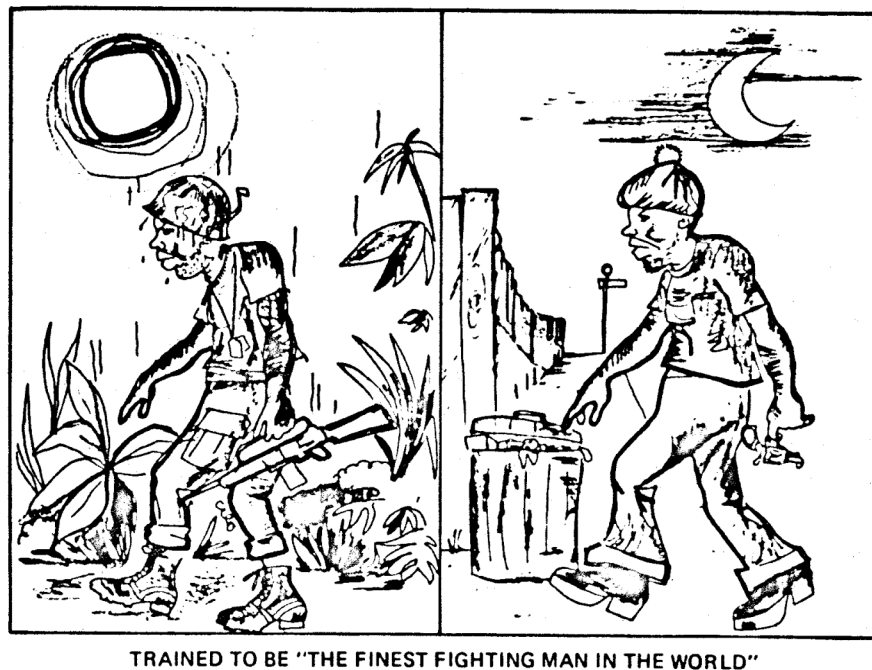


Figure 2: Ron Cosley cartoon featured in *Black Books Bulletin*

Western reading practices dictate the panels be read from left to right, yet the movement of the figure is from right to left. The image supercedes the order of literacy by working left to right and right to left. On the one hand the movement of the image is

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<sup>38</sup> Ron Cosley, "Trained to be 'THE FINEST FIGHTING MAN IN THE WORLD,'" *Black Books Bulletin* (1.4 [1973]), 11.

propelled by a visual groove from right to left, yet the standardized method of reading is oppositional to this approach. Visual transmission is potentially disrupted in this moment, and it complicates a reading of the relationship between street life and the jungle setting of military action. Do the skills of the military translate back to street life, or has street life assisted in the transition into military service? Has the training taken place in the jungle or the streets? In reading the panels from left to right, the cartoon becomes a commentary on his training in violence by the United States government.

Furthermore, the figure on the left is clearly sweating in the afternoon sun. The odors of the street and funky styles of the man on the right have been transmitted to the new setting in the jungle in which the sweat is not artistic or serving a stylistic purpose but still attended to physical exertion. Of course, the aim of the cartoon is to draw parallels between the uses of guns in the street to the cultivation of these pastimes into a distinct skill set. The man walking down the street at night is turned into a “respectable” soldier patrolling the jungles of Southeast Asia on behalf of American democracy. To remove the man from his natural habitat in an urban area and transport him to fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia is funky in the sense of being undesirable while simultaneously signifying on the de-funkifying of the man through his indoctrination into the lifestyle and practices associated with serving in the Army. He is forced to conform as opposed to exercising a funky lifestyle.

Given this image, one understands Henderson and Cleaver’s interest in the political ramifications of funk and its relationship with activism and social protest. James Brown’s position on the musical and social periphery allowed him to make bold artistic

statements and politically motivated songs (critics typically point to “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud”<sup>39</sup> as the prototypical example of this action), particularly in combination with his interest in the rise of Black Nationalism. Marginality, feminist scholar bell hooks argues, is a locale presenting “radical possibility and resistance.”<sup>40</sup> The social periphery is “a site of creativity and power, an inclusive space for recovery of self where movement occurs to erase a colonizer/colonized mentality.”<sup>41</sup> Brown recognizes the periphery as an inclusive space despite the larger exclusivity at work in the social realm; he uses funk as a tool at hand in an attempt to dismantle personal and political indoctrination.

### **Synaesthetic Funk**

Funk, as a musical genre, is a fusion of jazz, soul, and the blues that creates polyrhythmic songs, which are often danceable. Musicologists define funk as “a style of music in which elements of jazz, pop, rock, gospel and the Blues are fused to create a rhythmic, soulful sound. Funk thrives on rhythm, and the art of it depends on the level of togetherness between the performers. It is, in essence, togetherness in motion.”<sup>42</sup> Fred Wesley, one of the engineers of early funk, wrote in his autobiography that although jazz and funk share numerous musical similarities, funk, as opposed to jazz, is “bold, arrogant,

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<sup>39</sup> James Brown, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud,” (King #6187, 1968).

<sup>40</sup> bell hooks, “marginality as site of resistance” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Cambridge: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 341.

<sup>41</sup> hooks, 341.

<sup>42</sup> Howard C. Harris, *The Complete Book of Improvisation/Composition and Funk Techniques* (Houston: DeMos Music Publications, 1980), 114. Harris’ book presents a series of exercises and explanations to “teach” improvisation for jazz and funk soloists. Here, again, funk is engrossed in the paradoxical.

and aggressive...and tends to appeal more to the booty-shaking listener.”<sup>43</sup> This “togetherness in motion” is made visible by the occupation of dance floors by “booty-shaking” listeners, who most likely in the act of dancing generate sweat. In most funk bands, but with special emphasis on James Brown’s musical collectives, nearly all instruments are treated as sources of percussion. More important, instruments work together to create an intense, dynamic, danceable sound. Rickey Vincent, perhaps the most highly regarded funk critic and fan, describes the significance of the intricacies of musicianship in funk bands:

Every instrument contributes to this sound. Rhythm instruments often create melodic lines, and melodic instruments often pulse with percussive strength. The bass line, the guitar line, the horn lines in funk often deliver such complete melodic phrases that each could be the primary melody of a simpler soul or R&B tune. (Soul and R&B grooves are generally composed of one primary melody, which is simply accented by the other instruments, not “countered,” as in funk.)<sup>44</sup>

Vincent’s description of the significance of bass, guitars, and horns touches on the complexity of this genre. These instruments are not merely accents but instead key contributors to a musical pulse or groove in their fungibility as percussive forces. The “countering” of several melodies creates a complex, multi-faceted sound that may appeal to a number of different listeners much like the multiple definitions of “funk” may serve different users depending upon the need. The key, here, resides in the importance of a sonic community. The fusion of different instruments and sounds plays with definitions

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<sup>43</sup> Fred Wesley, Jr., *Hit Me Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 191. Wesley’s memoir traces his origins in jazz and involvement with several significant funk bands including several manifestations of variations of James Brown’s core band as well as having worked with George Clinton’s numerous bands and groups.

<sup>44</sup> Vincent, 14.

of musical togetherness or unity. Funk is “the moment when two, four, any number of musicians stop playing *with* one another and begin playing as one, driven by the beat, working inside the rhythm.”<sup>45</sup>

The coalescence of sound, however, hides the significance of the concept of a larger social community hinted at by the cooperation of musicians when they begin playing as a single entity instead of “with one another.” Regarding this form of solidarity, Vincent also argues,

As a study of music, as a study of society, and as simply a study of the way *black folks be*, an understanding of The Funk can help explain the continuity of the black folk experience in America since the 1960s. With the many changes within black America since the mid-1960s, it can be helpful to find a reference point from which to interpret the results we are witness to today. The Funk brings it all together.<sup>46</sup>

Funk is a window into the cultural moment in which it arose. Funk, it may be argued, is the musical counterpart to the rising interest in linguistic nationalism of the 1960s Smitherman addresses; it is the musical exemplar of Haki Madhubuti’s “muthafuckas and ‘can you dig it.’” The genre turns against traditional notions of popular music orchestration and performance practices, and this point is critical to an understanding of subsequent sensorial analyses in this project. Vincent argues that funk is more than a musical genre but also a lifestyle and “grassroots philosophy of self-development” accepted as a “part of the affirmation of the human condition in America.”<sup>47</sup> Yet this affirmation appears to be most closely aligned with the condition of African Americans. The choice of phrasing in terms of aligning funk with a philosophy tied to “the

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<sup>45</sup> D. Thompson, vii.

<sup>46</sup> Vincent, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Vincent, 5.



affirmation of the human condition in America” is in stark contrast with his stance that “Funk is the means by which black folks confirm identity through rhythm, dance, bodily fluids, and attitude.”<sup>48</sup> Which is it? Is funk “the means by which black folks confirm identity” or is it an aspect of affirming the human condition in America? This ambiguity is at the core of the ontological associations of funk and the sensorium and becomes critical to later arguments in this project.

Funk, in this sense, emanates outwards much as African American language, slang, or linguistic trends eventually take root in popular culture more generally and become more frequently used by white audiences. Who gets to be funky depends on who is doing the defining. For example, in his *Washington Post* article “Funk is in the Eye of the Beholder,” Henry Allen writes, “Nikita Khrushchev was funky. Anyone who could get that much pleasure out of visiting a U.S. turkey farm in 1959 could be nothing else.”<sup>49</sup> While few historians would associate Khrushchev with funk or funkiness, Allen, as definer, may extend the definition as he sees fit. Why? Therein lies the power of funk.

### **The Musical Origins of Funk**

No single American musician personifies the funk aesthetic in the way James Brown does. Born in Barnwell, South Carolina, in 1933, Brown first gained national popularity following the 1956 release of the single “Please, Please, Please” on the Federal label, which placed into the top ten on the R&B charts. Prior to this successful single,

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<sup>48</sup> Vincent, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Allen, B1.

Brown spearheaded numerous local bands with little success. His career skyrocketed in the mid-1960s with such hits as 1964's "Out of Sight,"<sup>50</sup> and 1965's "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag"<sup>51</sup> and "I Got You (I Feel Good)."<sup>52</sup> "Papa" and 1967's "Cold Sweat" gave a taste of the funk that was soon to come. Brown himself recognizes the significance of these songs: "'Papa's Bag' was years ahead of its time. I was still called a soul singer, but I had gone off in a different direction... Later on, they said it was the beginning of funk. I just thought of it as where my music was going. The title told it all: I had a new bag."<sup>53</sup> What is important to pick up on in Brown's retrospective analysis of his work is his tone and general attitude. Brown postures himself as "naturally" developing funk out of his own interests. He fails to mention any of his contributing band members thereby undercutting the general view of funk as an ensemble-oriented genre. Brown, maintaining his posture as extraordinary and perhaps even superhuman, suggests he developed funk without assistance. Brown is also quick to point out the difference in genre labels indicating he was known as a "soul singer" at the time of funk's emergence sonically despite the fact he clearly "had a new bag."

Following the success of these releases, Brown began to create music that also served as social commentary touching on concerns such as education, self-respect, and political action. Rickey Vincent describes Brown's funky musical and social influence as something almost other worldly:

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<sup>50</sup> James Brown, "Out of Sight," (Smash #1919, 1964).

<sup>51</sup> James Brown, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," (King #5999, 1965).

<sup>52</sup> James Brown, "I Got You (I Feel Good)," (King #K6015, 1965).

<sup>53</sup> D. Thompson, 11.

The Godfather of Soul, James Brown, dropped *The Bomb* on America in an aesthetic fashion that many irate African-Americans were wishing they could do in real terms. The force, the flavor, and the funkiness of the James Brown experience affirmed and validated the African-American experience at the dawn of the 1970s...Later, artists like Stevie Wonder and George Clinton assumed the role of the avatar of a black nation's dreams, but the central locus of all funk, the representation of the total and complete *black man*, was James Brown. Brown represented the political black man, the successful black man, the sexual black man, the relentless black warrior that was "Black and Proud."<sup>54</sup>

Brown's role as emblem of the funk aesthetic manifests itself in his ability to represent multiple facets of the African American experience ranging from the political to the sexual to the successful to the militant. Brown's strength came from his ability to channel the origin of funk from "the depths of black American life, particularly that aspect of black American which never got around to integrating. Funk and funkiness was a part of the lifestyle of those whom Malcolm X described as the 'Field Negroes.'"<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, Brown's music became more overtly political, a move that signaled his position as "the one person who captured and *personified* the attitudes and aspirations of the 'wild guys.'"<sup>56</sup> Wild, of course, signifies the disreputable, rebellious component of funk, yet Brown's reputation as a difficult bandleader with a drill sergeant's demeanor made him anything but wild. Brown resists the disorder embodied by these wild political figures to regulate his orchestrations. His music represents the tension because of its seemingly untamed rhythms, which were carefully constructed for explosive effect. The release of such singles as "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" (complete with interracial children's chorus) and "I Don't

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<sup>54</sup> Vincent, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Vincent, 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> Vincent, 7.

Want Nobody To Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door and I'll Get it Myself)" signaled Brown's interest in black nationalism despite some inherent contradictions.<sup>57</sup> Here again, funk contains multitudes.

"Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" was Brown's black power magnum opus. Various accounts of the recording session circulate, but one origin story places the impetus for recording in Brown's invocation of black pride to his band and entourage.<sup>58</sup> The phrase had circulated among various political and activism organizations, but it was Brown who set the phrase to music. Additionally, his introductory grunt and utterance, "With your bad self" is as much a call-to-arms as the song's chorus.<sup>59</sup> One well-known New York DJ suggested, "James Brown knows the problems we have. Mayor Lindsay is not saying 'with your bad self' to these people in Harlem."<sup>60</sup> Brown's ability to speak directly to his audience in the vernacular is what guaranteed his musical and cultural legacy.

By the end of the 1970s, disco had eroded much of his radio airplay and fan base as well. Brown's music career began to decline, although it was briefly resurrected several times over the course of the next thirty years thanks to a variety of film appearances and notable arrests for charges ranging from domestic violence to drug possession. In his 1986 autobiography, *Godfather of Soul*, Brown refers to this lackluster

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<sup>57</sup> James Brown, *Godfather of Soul: An Autobiography* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986), 200.

<sup>58</sup> James Sullivan, *The Hardest Working Man: How James Brown Saved the Soul of America* (New York: Gotham Books, 2008), 166. Brown's autobiography and Fred Wesley's memoir offer similar stories with a few minor details differing. All sources, however, agree on the interracial children pulled from the neighborhood to offer the chorus. This also appears to be an on-the-spot decision on Brown's part.

<sup>59</sup> Sullivan, 168.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Sullivan 168. Sullivan argues Brown's opening phrase was a means of "acknowledging his fellow man's struggle."

period as a “semiretirement” and notes that his label was “trying to soften up” the “good hard funk records” he was creating in order to appeal to white audiences interested in music without “substance.”<sup>61</sup> The very substance Brown’s alludes to during this era is characteristic funk and its “blackness”; the records are essentially losing the characteristics identifying the genre as “black” in an effort to appeal to a crossover audience that may not value these qualities. Brown, it seems, became a victim of marketing, which sought to eliminate the personification of a musical aesthetic. Though at this stage in his career Brown had lost a good deal of his white audience, his concern for the artistic integrity of his work is the platform he presents as primary.

Cultural Studies scholar Valerie Boyd writes of Brown’s relationship to a perception of a specific form of blackness and substance:

But James Brown – processed hair and all – is the ultimate eruption of The Funk. James Brown represents the connection between educated black folks, who recognize his masterful contribution to music (black, white, and otherwise), and those other black folks, sometimes thought of as members of an outlaw underclass, who listen to JB’s music but who read Donald Goines instead of Toni Morrison and who sometimes actually wear their hair like James Brown.

James Brown’s funky music brings both these groups of black folks – and everybody in between – together. And his grunts and rhythms, familiar as our own heartbeats, help us to recognize our commonalities rather than harp on our differences. James Brown – with all his soul, his splits, his screams, his cold sweats, his grittiness, his swaggering ego, his contradictions, his pride and his appeal – is The Funk personified.<sup>62</sup>

Boyd views Brown’s physical embodiment of “The Funk” as an expression of his reinvention as well as his ability to speak across class divisions. She emphasizes the

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<sup>61</sup> Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 243.

<sup>62</sup> Valerie Boyd, “The Ritual: An Afro-American Woman Gets Her Hair Done.” *African American Review* Spring (1993): 43-45. Boyd’s article first came to my attention for its commentary on Brown’s hair in relation to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

potential for unity through Brown's music as well as the significance of his ego, contradictions, and his personal hair/style as emblematic of funk. The intersections of funk with two seemingly disparate authors, Donald Goines and Toni Morrison, as well as the ways in which Brown's hair is in itself a funky entity will be addressed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

Brown's embodiment of funk is not limited to his hair or style of dress. Brown is described as an all-encompassing musical entity: "the singer's physical exertion and hip vernacular, the raucous brass voices filling the places where backup singers would once have crooned, the radical emphasis on syncopation and musical space."<sup>63</sup> Brown's career was most influential during the late 1960s coinciding with the rise of Black Nationalism. His ability to musically and culturally affect society at-large cannot be overlooked much like the expression "I'm black and I'm proud" cannot be ignored precisely because it is spoken loudly. This vocal projection is part of the identification with the ontological significance of the musical genre and its relationship to the sensorium and self.

Though Brown's role in the creation of funk is occasionally downplayed in favor of George Clinton's involvement with the fundamentals Brown brought to the forefront and his eccentric cast of Parliament-Funkadelic characters, the importance cannot be overstated. Brown's musical and public personae are the counterparts to the authorial inflection Haki Madhubuti spoke of. Brown's political and social clout is undeniable. Though labeling music, or any other art form as "political" no doubt generates any

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<sup>63</sup> Sullivan, 118.

number of concerns for a critical listener, in this instance, I use the term to designate that which serves or struggles against institutions and entities dominating cultural, political, and economic production and is the result of socialization.<sup>64</sup> “Political,” therefore, suggests a peculiar, uneven power dynamic.<sup>65</sup> In this case, the subordinate group or individual uses music as a method of speaking against cultural or political domination. Political music, however, is not necessarily preoccupied with institutional or governmental difficulties but is more invested in addressing the emotional needs of its disenfranchised or disheartened audience by constructing a safe space—a sonic “safe haven.”<sup>66</sup> The creation of this secure space is viewed by some, such as Paul Gilroy, as the work of the “spiritual and moral guardians of the inner meanings not merely of black music but of black American culture as a whole...They were a priestly caste...represent[ing] a political community’s sense of its history.”<sup>67</sup> Gilroy explicitly refers to Brown several times in his analysis and clearly links the importance of music to the political activity of more visible leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr.

## **Marketing Funk**

In a perfect world, artists would be able to subsist on love of craft alone, living the expression “art for art’s sake.” However, bills must be paid and food must be purchased. The daily physical needs of the individual cannot be acquired without capital, and for an

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<sup>64</sup> Robin Ballinger, “Politics” in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, eds. Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 57; 68-69.

<sup>65</sup> Ballinger, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Ballinger, 67.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 177.

artist, the goal of producing artwork is coupled with the need to sell what is produced. As funk's popularity increased, more than the music was responsible for the level of financial and cultural success performers witnessed. Funk became about performing or marketing a style or attitude as much as it was the production of a specific sound. A good deal of interest in the music was rooted in the performance of this style and ethos.

In 2002, Nike began airing a series of commercials in which colorful funk personalities such as Bootsy Collins, former bassist for James Brown, and George Clinton, architect of the funk conglomerate Parliament-Funkadelic, transported the National Basketball Association (NBA) back in time to the 1970s in an attempt inject the current configuration of the league with a dose of the funkiness found in the now-defunct American Basketball Association (ABA), the "rebel league that people loved to hate. They didn't like the big Afro's, they didn't like the goatees."<sup>68</sup>

One commercial begins with a press conference set in 1975. A reporter asks, "Coach, you were 5 and 79 last year. Why the playoff talk?" The coach responds, "Well, we made a couple of key trades...and we got the funk."<sup>69</sup> The players are then shown making incredible shots, demonstrating on-court tricks, and swaggering into various off-court settings wearing 1970s-style clothes. Current NBA commissioner David Stern notes that part of the appeal of the ABA, which merged with the NBA in 1976, was the

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<sup>68</sup> Leon Wynter, "NBA Funk" *On the Media*. 14 June 2002. Transcript and audio from Wynter's piece found at: <[http://www.onthemedial.org/yore/transcripts/transcripts\\_061402\\_nba.html](http://www.onthemedial.org/yore/transcripts/transcripts_061402_nba.html)>. *On the Media* is a program produced by National Public Radio. The show's manifesto states the program "casts an incisive eye on fluctuations in the marketplace of ideas, and examines threats to the freedom of information and expression in America and abroad." The program is concerned not only with the change in ideas but also the way in which the ideas are presented.

<sup>69</sup> Wynter.



fusion of on-court prowess with fashion and personal style.<sup>70</sup> The success of the advertising campaign was the strength and presence of funk. One commentator argues, “Funk sells because it’s about the essence of having a unique style of expression. That’s why it works to reach a generation that seems to prize individuality above all things, even race.”<sup>71</sup>

The under-40 demographic Nike sought to reach is no different from other social demographics targeted for marketing purposes. In his musical and socio-economic history of rhythm & blues, Nelson George examines how the 1950s deejay Alan Freed “sold” rock & roll to white American teenagers. Freed, using the handle “Moon Dog” while invoking black slang, began playing black music during his programming slot.<sup>72</sup>

However, Freed “masked” his musical selections through linguistic channels. George writes,

By applying the term “rock & roll” to what he played, a phrase that often appeared in black music as a euphemism for fucking, Freed tried, with some initial success, to disguise the blackness of the music... Calling it rock & roll didn’t fool everybody, as Freed would ultimately find out, but it definitely dulled the racial identification and made the young white consumers of Cold War America feel more comfortable... That term made it acceptable for whites to play the music by removing the aura of inaccessibility.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Wynter.

<sup>71</sup> Wynter.

<sup>72</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 66. Freed, according to another deejay, made a practice of emulating “every black artist you could think of. He didn’t copy off any one black deejay, because there weren’t any around that I knew of that he could sound like, but anything that was black he would say. Any slogans, he would say them” (66). Freed appears to have crafted an on-air persona based on the appropriation of black cultural elements.

<sup>73</sup> George, 67.

By presenting his young white listeners with a carefully crafted musical package, Freed was able to sell rhythm & blues much like Nike and the NBA were later able to sell tickets and shoes by celebrating the funkiness of old school basketball. The perceived acceptability of rock & roll as opposed to rhythm & blues simple meant greater sales of records. Alan Freed was well aware that this music was not significantly different but was more of a marketing idea that had the potential to morph into a lifestyle.<sup>74</sup> Aligning himself with the sale and marketing of this new lifestyle meant greater publicity as well as more lucrative contracts and endorsement deals for Freed. The deejay's promotion of the genre as well as his involvement in its public acceptance and cultural cultivation was rewarded in the form of songwriting credits or financial payment.<sup>75</sup> Rock & roll, then, was the systematic exploitation of white teenagers by Freed and marketing strategists for financial gain.<sup>76</sup>

Part of the appeal of Freed's sales pitch for rock & roll was its novelty. In "whitening" rhythm & blues, Freed was able to appeal to a new demographic just as Nike was able to reinvigorate its shoe sales (as well as NBA ticket sales) through its innovative funk advertising. Innovation is part of the appeal because not only does it offer a sense of

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<sup>74</sup> George, 67. George argues Freed never seemed to know what rock & roll was in the first place since so many of the albums released under his name as dance party compilations were closer to swing music than to rhythm & blues. For Freed, according to George's analysis, no musical characteristics defined the genre of rock & roll.

<sup>75</sup> George, 69. Freed's musical marketing empire eventually came crashing down in the 1960s when evidence surfaced he was engaged in a payola scandal and received royalties from songs he was credited for co-writing though he played no part in their creation. Chuck Berry's "Maybelline," considered by some music historians to be the "first rock & roll song" was one of these royalty-generating songs. Of course, the peculiar fusion of race and financial transactions makes it almost as though Freed were a musical pimp.

<sup>76</sup> George, 67. Later, George states that the appeal of rhythm & blues as opposed to rock & roll was in its ability to reach both young and old simultaneously whereas rock & roll was geared more towards younger listeners. The strength of rhythm & blues was its ability to connect with black listeners in the spheres of the "musical and extramusical" (68-69).

individuality, it also creates a sense of group inclusion in the process of consumption.

Commentators of consumer culture have noted, “even the most rebellious subcultures are on some level consumption based, grounded in the world of leisure rather than work.”<sup>77</sup>

Listening to funk is a means of participation in a leisure activity with a community of fellow music listeners. Funk, both in the 1970s and during 2002, operates as something outside of the mainstream allowing fans the illusion they are a part of a novel, alternative community different from previous generations’ approaches and affinities for musical culture. Funk, then, is as much of a reactionary “brand” to Freed’s working definition (or lack thereof) of rock & roll as it is a musical genre. Consumers choose to align themselves with funk as a brand for cultural cache or to be viewed by peers as cutting edge.

Inherent in the novelty of this genre is its dismissal of the traditional. It begins with a disregard for common rhythmic patterns and moves to an investment in creating dynamic stage shows rooted in alternative cosmologies (in the case of George Clinton’s Parliament) as well as the creation of musical and performance personae (in the case of James Brown). The goal is to create a “purple cow” among a sea of the mundane.<sup>78</sup> Funk is, in truth, not radically different musically from soul, the blues, jazz, or any other genre falling under the umbrella of “African American music” resulting in part from the

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<sup>77</sup> Rob Walker, *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are* (New York: Random House, 2008), 30.

<sup>78</sup> Walker, 7. The author recounts business analyst Seth Godin’s anecdote about driving through the French countryside with his family. Initially, the “storybook cows” grazing alongside the road entranced them, but after a brief period, the family was no longer impressed. Godin notes the cows had lost their novelty, but were a purple cow to appear, that would have been exciting.

fact that it is a fusion of multiple styles. Fred Wesley recalls working on several tracks with Bootsy Collins' Rubber Band and the way jazz and funk were fused:

I made the horns add color by using every chord voicing possible on the home chord of the vamp, other voicings that I made up, and groups of notes that I put together just for the sound of it. In some cases I would use melodies and counter-melodies against the rhythm track or even against the vocals or alternate horn tracks if the opportunity presented itself. Sometimes I used counter-rhythms to add what I termed "snap and jiggle" to an already funky groove. In most cases, you could say without contradiction that I was using jazz theories for the horns against funk rhythm tracks. What made it gel was the attitude with which the horn parts were played... This injection of attitude made the difference between a part simply laying across the track with no consequence and a part locked in like a hand in a glove, adding punch, color, snap, and jiggle.<sup>79</sup>

What sets funk apart is its creation of a remarkable spectacle and aesthetic that is designed to shock, titillate, and get people moving their bodies. In the process of describing the creation of a musical entity, Wesley uses language that suggests movement ("snap and jiggle") while also indicating spectacle in the guise of playing with "attitude" and using instruments to add "color" or "flavor" to the recording through the implementation of jazz theories.

The difference between funk and jazz, using Wesley's anecdote, is a technical one. The music industry, however, sought to pigeonhole the genre for the sake of financial gain:

The unifying essence of funk music, which was in reality a celebration of the entire spectrum of the black music tradition, was not appreciated by the music industry. The industry, in fact, made a killing by separating black acts into Motown-style soul, pop-jazz or jazz-funk, and token rock or pop acts. Unless you were living at the bottom of America's class

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<sup>79</sup> Wesley, 191.

structure and feeling the funk (or playing it), you may have missed the funk movement altogether.<sup>80</sup>

While industry marketing departments sought to classify musical acts into sub-genres or styles, the music reprised the role of rhythm & blues in the Freed example. Funk is often overlooked precisely because of the way in which marketing “diluted” or decreased the potential political and cultural capital found in the music and its performers. James Brown, as preeminent maestro of The Funk, began to embody the attitude and ethos of the genre as he attempted to move beyond the confines of industry marketing practices.

Whether selling basketball shoes, tickets to sporting events, or compilation albums, funk is an unstoppable cultural entity. Its use in marketing and sales grows out of the characteristic nature of funk to be all things to all people. The evolution of the term from invocations by jazz musicians as positive to pimps and the socially disreputable’s use of the term as undeniably negative and undesirable sets the stage for authors such as Toni Morrison to ask how something can be so neat and nasty at one time. While this chapter has attempted to address the abstract nature of funk and provide an all-too-brief history of the music and the man responsible for its key innovations in the guise of James Brown, subsequent chapters address the literary components of funk. This analysis is more than a mere look at lyrical content but instead looks at the way African American literature represents the tensions inherent in the definitions and cultural origins of the term as it surfaces in other discussions of sensory affect. The conflation of seemingly contradictory definitions and ideas that funk so keenly embraces is what gives

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<sup>80</sup> Vincent, 23-24.

weight to its credibility as an alternative aesthetic impulse for readings of such disparate authors as Toni Morrison and Donald Goines. Funk's ability to speak or sound out across differences becomes significant to its ability to engage with the sensorium.

## Chapter 2:

### One Novel Under a Groove: Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Multidimensional Rhythm

groove (noun):

1. A long narrow furrow or channel.
2. The spiral track cut into a phonograph record for the stylus to follow.
3. Slang: A settled routine: *got into the groove of a nine-to-five job*.
4. Slang: A situation or an activity that one enjoys or to which one is especially well suited: *found his groove playing bass in a trio*.
5. Slang: A very pleasurable experience.

—American Heritage Dictionary

Common parlance leads us to believe a “groove” is ubiquitous and easy to define. A casual glance through a music library can attest to the prevalence of the term in song titles—“Let’s Groove Tonight” (Earth, Wind, and Fire), “Into the Groove” (Madonna), and “One Nation Under a Groove” (Funkadelic) to name a few. Author Terry McMillan told us *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, but what exactly is a groove? Perhaps, to paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, we only “know it” when we hear—and occasionally see—it.<sup>1</sup> Numerous entries and varying definitions for the term or its derivatives (anyone “feeling groovy”?) can be found in dictionaries and literature, but in what ways can a groove function aesthetically? We may play fast and loose with this

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<sup>1</sup>In the 1964 Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, (378 U.S. 184) addressing pornography, Justice Potter Stewart famously stated, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [hard-core pornography]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.” Perhaps funk, much like pornography, is something one knows when he hears it or its aesthetic is known upon sight. Regardless, both funk and pornography have undeniable links to a form of public sexuality.

concept in casual conversations, but there are distinct manifestations of what I refer to as a “groove” in Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*.

This chapter is concerned with the ways funk operates as a source of disruption to one’s sense of sound and ability to hear. I locate *Invisible Man* as a proto-funk novel that calls for a new analytical way of reading and “hearing” literature in much the same way that James Brown’s 1967 proto-funk song, “Cold Sweat” called for a new way of listening to American popular music. The disruption of standard narratives of reading and listening run parallel in these two works. Ellison’s novel, with particular emphasis on the prologue, asks readers to consider new ways of listening vis-à-vis reading his prose descriptions of what he hears and experiences as he listens to phonographs. Furthermore, Ellison asks the reader to depend on his ear to differentiate race and class differences within the text. The “Blackness of Blackness” sermon in the prologue, for example, asks the reader to visualize and hear certain speech patterns on the page. Cadence becomes a crucial component of this episode. Here, Ellison translates the oral (and aural) qualities of call and response to the visual medium of printed matter. He uses reading as a means of addressing the emotional and interior aspects of listening to music or speech more so than the mere physiological or technical processes associated with the transmission of sound.

James Brown uses “Cold Sweat” as an introduction to his new musical directive. The birth of “Cold Sweat” occurs around the same time Brown comes to be known as “Soul Brother Number One.” Brown, in his 1986 autobiography *Godfather of Soul*, states, “I think Soul Brother Number One meant I was the leader of the Afro-American



movement for world dignity and integrity through music.”<sup>2</sup> Not only was Brown altering the dominating rhythm of popular music, but he also viewed himself as a social leader using his music to disrupt seemingly normative societal relationships.

My discussion begins with an analysis of the key technology pertaining to both authors—the phonograph. This machine figures prominently in Ellison’s novel, particularly as it relates to a discussion of subjectivity and listening practices. For Brown, the phonograph is the primary means by which his music circulated. My interest in the phonograph also ties together Brown and Ellison because it unites writing and sound to create a sensory ensemble that privileges the aural. The phonograph will serve as an introduction to my analysis of a “groove” as it applies to both authors.

I move from the phonograph as a material object used to project sound to a discussion of Ellison’s text, particularly his references to Louis Armstrong’s recording of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?” While listening to this recording, the narrator is able to descend into the depths of the recording or slip into what Ellison calls “the breaks.” These breaks serve as moments between moments or points at which the rhythm or groove is disrupted. These disruptions are the loci of revelatory moments of personhood and subjectivity in which the relationship between self and society come into conflict.

The discussion of “the breaks” and subjectivity transitions into an analysis of the way Ellison uses punctuation and typography to create a spatial component to this advanced theory of temporality. Not only does he create a literary space for the

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<sup>2</sup> James Brown, *Godfather of Soul* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1986), 173.

discussion of listening and musical practices, but Ellison also creates physical space on the page for an alternative musical composition in which commas, ellipses, and italics add a certain rhythmic flair to his prose.

Following this examination of Ellison's rhythmic punctuation, I turn to James Brown and the creation of his popular 1967 two-part, proto-funk recording "Cold Sweat."<sup>3</sup> The song builds on the foundations Brown established in 1965 with the release of "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" but pre-dates the rise of funk music as a distinct genre of African American popular music prominent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The searing vocals and wailing horns of "Cold Sweat" serve as punctuation marks in an otherwise extended rhythmic jam. The origin of Brown's single is tied to a performance of disruption as well as a disrupted performance. Brown's bandleader at the time, Pee Wee Ellis, describes the composition of the song as the performance of grunts: "He grunted the rhythm, a bass line, to me. I wrote the rhythm down on a piece of paper. There were no notes. I had to translate it."<sup>4</sup> Brown's musical vision is a language all its own requiring a translator before it can become a formal performance in the recording studio. Pairing Brown's music with Ellison's novel brings the musical and literary intersections of grooves and funk as a genre into a shared focus concerning spatial, sonic, and psychological spaces that are precisely those locations that text occupies.

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<sup>3</sup> James Brown, *Cold Sweat* (King, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Harry Weinger with Alan Leeds, "It's a New Day," in *The James Brown Reader* Eds. Nelson George and Alan Leeds (Plume: New York, 2008), 37.

## **An Apparatus of Musical Desire**

Several of the most striking components of Ellison's prologue and epilogue are the oblique references to the technological innovations of the phonograph. Though Lucius Brockway, the mysterious man beyond the success of optic white paint, tells the narrator that they, as employees, are "the machines inside the machine" in reference to their importance at Liberty Paints, the most significant machine within the context of the novel—itsself a machine of sorts—is the phonograph.<sup>5</sup> The work of the record player is akin to the paradoxical nature of the lyrical beam of sound and sensory experiences created by Louis Armstrong's music. The narrator cannot engage with a groove without the technology to do so. The specific groove, in this instance, refers to the literal channels and indentations on the surface of the records he plays in his underground home. The indentations on an otherwise smooth surface are much like the appearance of print on a blank page, which I consider at a later point in this chapter. This groove later becomes vital to his social commentary concerned with the formal act of writing, documenting, and maintaining the historical record.

In *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, literary critic Alexander Weheliye examines the connections between twentieth-century black cultural production and the development of new forms of technology related to the construction and distribution of sounds with a keen interest in African American literature. Weheliye devotes a chapter to interrogating the importance of the phonograph to the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as well as the larger concern of the potential to remove

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<sup>5</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952. New York: Vintage, 1995), 217. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

sounds from their original, easily recognizable sources due to the circulation and popularity of phonographs. He argues, “By drastically re/constructing the flow between sounds and an identifiable human source, the technology of the phonograph worried the complex intersection of orality, music, and writing.”<sup>6</sup> The etymology of the term signifies this tension:

*Phonê* in Greek denotes sound and voice; *graph*, on the other hand, signifies writing. Thus, the oral and phonetic are written down (recorded) by the phonograph (sound writer), imploding the originary aperture between writing and sound by calling attention to the improbability of writing sound in any commonsensical manner...[T]he words used to designate many other nineteenth-century technologies...suggest that inscription seems to be at the root of any kind of recording.<sup>7</sup>

Through the process of writing and telling his story, Ellison’s unnamed narrator is writing himself into the historical and social record. Sound must rely on the process of writing—or in this case writing furrows or grooves on vinyl—in order to exist. The music our protagonist hears coming from his phonograph is paradoxically visible and invisible. The grooves on the record are written documentation, but they are only “legible” in terms of our ability to hear the recorded music after they have been “read” by the phonograph’s needle.

But where and how does an audience figure into this conversation? Weheliye argues that sound, music, or other forms of orality “require an audience to guarantee, legally, epistemologically, and ontologically, their continuing being.”<sup>8</sup> This brings to

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Afro-Sonic Modernity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Weheliye, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Weheliye, 25. I find it interesting Weheliye invokes legality into a discussion of epistemological and ontological perceptions of being. Sound, using his definition, is somehow related to basic human rights and

mind Jesse Jackson's 1971 poem "I Am – Somebody." Jackson recited the poem in call and response fashion for an episode of *Sesame Street* in 1971 as well as a year later for the Wattstax concert in Los Angeles, which served as a celebration of African American culture using funk and soul music as the event's centerpiece. Both performances feature Jackson leading a group of listeners, who also serve as participants, through a call and response meditation on personhood and identity. In the context of Wattstax, Jackson's recitation is an interlude between the "Star-Spangled Banner" and the Black National Anthem, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." Wedged between these two performative moments of personhood, Jackson attempts to educate, as in the case of his initial *Sesame Street* recitation, while also empowering and celebrating, as in the Wattstax performance. The film juxtaposes concert footage with street scenes and commentary on unemployment, crime, African American identity and history all the while demonstrating the importance of the audience's function in terms of transmitting a message through active engagement in the oral give-and-take form of call and response.

In writing himself into "the groove of history" (443), the protagonist of *Invisible Man* assumes an eventual audience—the same audience Weheliye argues is necessary for legal, epistemological, and ontological existence. As an experienced speaker, our narrator knows that, as John F. Callahan suggests, "he must speak *to* us, his audience, in

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recognition of those rights along the similar vein of John A. Williams' novel *The Man Who Cried I Am*. The emphasis on legality underscores the way language (spoken or written) is viewed by the law as a complex and distinct notion pertaining to personhood.

order to speak *for us*” (emphasis original).<sup>9</sup> Invisible Man must pull together an audience of willing listeners before he can proceed to speak for a group even on the “lower frequencies.”

The suggestion of lower frequencies leads to the possibility of eventual higher frequencies. The novel concludes with the following passage:

“Ah,” I can hear you say, “so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!” But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?  
(581)

Ellison, here, draws connections to the tension between written and oral transmission and history. The narrator is engaging his audience directly through the use of the pronouns “you,” “us,” and “your.” Furthermore, the protagonist acknowledges himself as “a disembodied voice”—a voice bearing a striking similarity to the voice and trumpet playing of Louis Armstrong on the phonograph. A disembodied voice is again seeking a likeminded audience. Weheliye suggests “the protagonist and Armstrong are joined not only by their social concealment as black subjects but also in their reliance on sound to enact this condition—Armstrong by projecting his invisibility and the protagonist by listening to Armstrong.”<sup>10</sup>

The “disembodied voice” and invisible music of the text require not only an audience but also additional musicians as well. The protagonist cannot improvise or

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<sup>9</sup> John F. Callahan, “Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*” in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O’Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 87.

<sup>10</sup> Weheliye, 55.

engage in call and response if he does not have willing artistic partners or witnesses. In an artistic manifesto, Ellison wrote,

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Numerous literary critics argue Ellison's novel plays with a jazz aesthetic and reiterates the author's claim: "A jazz group achieves its full effect only if the musicians test each others' skills and, through improvisation, explore the full range of each member's untapped potentialities."<sup>12</sup> "True jazz" is a cooperative effort. Interestingly enough, this would be in stark contrast to the commercial appeal and power of Armstrong's (popular) recording in which improvisation is decidedly absent. Despite his immense popularity, Armstrong comes to be viewed as a major commercially successful figure within the history of jazz and its traditions. Armstrong commits to true jazz in terms of social themes but not necessarily artistically in this particular performance.

To return to the closing passage of the novel concerning frequencies, the protagonist's question appearing as the final line of the text is, one may argue, an appeal for additional members of an ensemble. The narrator's abilities as a leader and orator can only improve with practice and a community of invested persons. John Callahan argues the novel's prologue and epilogue demonstrate the protagonist's "continuing, obsessive

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison, "The Charlie Christian Story," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 267.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Radford, "The Invisible Music of Ralph Ellison," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 23.1 (Summer, 2003), 51.

pursuit of an audience.”<sup>13</sup> Embedded within his phrasing is the longing for partners with which the narrator may both challenge and be challenged musically, philosophically, and ontologically. The reading audience becomes an important part of the ensemble necessary for *Invisible Man* to be read as a manifestation of true jazz.

Since, as Weheliye notes, Armstrong’s music lacks a visual component (or, for that matter, an ensemble of fellow musicians he can see), the narrator’s “desire migrates to the apparatus itself.”<sup>14</sup> Simply put, phonographs carry certain cultural capital. (Who hasn’t browsed through a music library or bookshelf upon entering an acquaintance’s home?) The protagonist informs his audience of his plans to listen to recorded music in a very specific way in Ellison’s prologue:

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue”—all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. (7-8, original emphasis)

*Invisible Man* plans to acquire five phonographs not to amplify the sound but instead to increase the visible component of the music. The ice cream and sloe gin dessert in conjunction with the multiple phonographs provide the necessary material component the protagonist craves and needs in order to feel a connection with a society placing emphasis

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<sup>13</sup> Callahan, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Weheliye, 55.



on visual literacy or visual coding. His desire is transferred to these objects, which, in turn, become his ensemble.

Ellison also draws attention to the need for a visual component by juxtaposing the presence of the phonograph in the “hole” with 1,369 light bulbs—yet another version of “the electrical currents of modern technologies.”<sup>15</sup> Surely it is no coincidence Thomas Edison, one of our protagonist’s “thinker-tinker” heroes, invented both the phonograph and the light bulb.<sup>16</sup> A groove is inexplicably linked with not only a set way of life but also with the need to lock eyes on a visual manifestation of one’s personal approach to mediating and understanding music and subjectivity. He is creating an overly illuminated space to ward off the darkness, or blackness, which threatens to overwhelm his space.

The blackness referenced in Armstrong’s song and suggested by the abundance of light bulbs is more than a simple racial signifier. Blackness, when viewed writ-large, is a way of life. Literary critic Craig Werner argues a similar point in his commentary on influential funk mastermind George Clinton and his involvement with assorted musical configurations:

[I]n a cosmic chess match. . . Grandmaster Clinton beats the binary at its own game. Clinton most definitely plays the black pieces, although he shares James Baldwin’s sense of “blackness” as an approach to life rather than a color of skin. The “white” pieces represent a frowning, judgmental, static, uptight, nondancing, unfunky world. In short, “reality.” The “other” side really isn’t. It isn’t “real” in any simple sense and it isn’t “other” in any sense at all.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Weheliye, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Weheliye, 52.

<sup>17</sup> Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & The Soul of America*. (New York: Plume, 1998), 228.

Ellison and Clinton channel the same paradoxical relationships. The poetry of Armstrong's music resides in its combination of mass appeal and cultural critique. Life is a type of groove. We simply take different approaches to understanding and elaborating on the tempo utilized in order to better be heard or unheard as the case may be.

But what truly matters is the groove itself. Werner continues:

Never getting too far away from the beat, [Parliament-Funkadelic's] vision of redemption incorporates...cultural references and in-jokes, as in "Aqua Boogie" from *The Motor-Booty Affair*. The subtitle is "A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloo" which, if you take it apart, articulates a theory of musical neurophysics or physio neuromusicology. Or something. Clinton weaves in references to different types of brain waves...with mind/body references: psycho for thinking, disco for dancing. You think and you dance and you get all of your brain operating, let the energies flow across the mind/body barrier and you'll find yourself in places you didn't even know were there.<sup>18</sup>

Dancing—or the recognition of distinct rhythmic patterns—is one method of coming to terms with conceptions of reality. To invert the Funkadelic title: Free Your Ass and Your Mind Will Follow. Ellison's narrator, though he argues his invisibility gives him greater insight into Armstrong's lyrics, must get inside the music vis-à-vis the breaks and beats before he can understand what is going on. He must literally feel the music—either through dancing or the vibrations emitted by the phonograph—in order to comprehend the meaning and experience the beats. The groove hits the listener before he hears the lyrics.

### **Reading Between the Lines and Climbing into the Breaks**

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<sup>18</sup> Werner, 229.

In *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture*, poet and literary critic Edward Pavlic argues that several works of literature, namely African American novels utilizing modernist techniques, use the intersection of various subjectivities as the point of reference. Pavlic is primarily interested in pitting William James' articulations of self and society against the psychoanalytic approach of Sigmund Freud when reading novels with a critical eye. Were the intersections of James and Freud to be rendered graphically—say, in the Cartesian coordinate system—the horizontal axis would represent James' emphasis on society and the vertical axis would represent Freud's interest in the self. Pavlic explains,

For James, personal “identity” was nonidentical. Instead of an autonomous, singular self, James argued that one's identity is plural, a montage of one's immediate relationships to social contexts. In [*Crossroads Modernism*] we will discuss these social and performative interactions in terms of *horizontal* processes...Pioneering the more secluded terrains of the modernist self I shall discuss in terms of vertical processes, Sigmund Freud uncovered a multi-layered consciousness that asserted powerful influence over, while being fundamentally veiled from, conscious awareness.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, appearing on the horizontal axis are points representing the transition of time or beats. The area between beats or markers extends vertically in either direction to denote an event, moment, or notion between these beats or, to use Ellison's language, “the breaks.”

Ellison's novel serves as an excellent example of Pavlic's thesis. The prologue of *Invisible Man* quickly draws the reader into a musical state of mind. The protagonist's extensive contemplation of what constitutes “existence” or social recognition casually

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Pavlic, *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5. Emphasis original.

references the notion of sound early on in this meditation. He states, “You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you” (4). Sound is explicitly related to both existence and pain vis-à-vis the creation of noise and vocalizations associated with a negative experience (i.e. cursing and swearing); this moment of existential crisis gives rise to a consideration of temporality in relation to subjectivity as articulated by Louis Armstrong.

Cultural critic Tony Bolden, theorizing the relationship between funk music and its significance in a socio-cultural context, brings the complexities of the multiple uses of the term “funk” more generally into conversation with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s analysis of “signifying” in the African American community. He writes,

Gates suggests that blacks engaged in cultural resistance when they revised the English language: “I am thinking here of terms such as down, nigger, baby, and cool, which snobbishly tend to be written about as ‘dialect’ words or ‘slang.’ There are scores of such revised words.” “Funk(y)” simply adds one more to the list. While it may be true that “funk” denotes “[n]othing on the *x* axis of white signification” (47), it’s readily apparent that “funk(y)” has come to signify almost “everything on the *y* axis of blackness” (47).<sup>20</sup>

The significance of “the *y* axis of blackness” Gates speaks of is the area between “the breaks” Ellison describes in his prologue and the same space Pavlic analyzes. This axis of blackness is defined by a (funk) groove or rhythm.

It is important to pause here for a moment. Seven years prior to the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison wrote an essay entitled “Richard Wright’s Blues” for *The Antioch*

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<sup>20</sup> Tony Bolden, “Theorizing The Funk: An Introduction” in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 15. Cited page numbers in the passage refer to quotes Bolden references from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*.

*Review.* This essay, later reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, contains one of Ellison's most frequently quoted passages:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.<sup>21</sup>

The sound and anguish the narrator describes in relation to existence and social recognition, it follows, is a form of the blues. Sound in this case stands in for a form of the groove commonly found in the blues as a genre. On the level of prose narrative, the protagonist's depiction of his experiences in *Invisible Man* as "near-tragic, near-comic," and perhaps even catastrophic at times, functions as a form of a blues narrative for our consideration of the intervention of funk elements in Ellison's novel. This near-tragic, near-comic lyricism is an attempt "to transfigure his conceptions and his sense of rhythm and form into the specific and sometimes restrictive medium of writing."<sup>22</sup>

This "restrictive medium of writing," specifically in the prologue of *Invisible Man*, creates a space for our unnamed narrator to use the concept of musical breaks to wax poetic on the significance of his invisibility and subjectivity over the course of his introductory remarks. This restrictive space is actually a complex site of potential freedom and difference:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 129.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Yukins, "An 'Artful Juxtaposition on the Page': Memory, Perception, and Cubist Technique in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*" in *PMLA* 119.5 (2004), 1248.

aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. (8)

Ellison utilizes this notion of nodes and breaks as the overarching structure of *Invisible Man*. The prologue and epilogue function as the distinct hatch-marks, beats, or nodes situated on the horizontal axis Pavlic and Gates describe; the remainder of the novel constitutes the intersection, and perhaps even violent clash, of self with society through a series of tales highlighting specific moments that lead the narrator to an understanding of where he is currently geographically and ontologically located. It is almost as though the events described in between the formal sections of the prologue and epilogue occur in the blink of an eye. We cannot understand or appreciate these two sections or their philosophical basis without experiencing or reading the middle passages, both in terms of the formal words on the page as well as the relationship of music to the legacy of personal subjectivity in terms of the larger narrative pertaining to the Middle Passage of the Atlantic.

In this particular quotation concerning invisibility, the protagonist is articulating the need to go beyond understanding the rhythmic conventions of music and consider the metaphorical performative possibilities of embodying the music itself. Not only does one hear the groove (or bass line), one *is* the groove.

Performative sentences and utterances such as “I bet you a dollar” demonstrate the way in which actions and statements may fuse. Words are the action as opposed to merely describing the action about to take place but are, rather, the action itself.<sup>23</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

stating, “I bet you a dollar,” the speaker is wagering a dollar as opposed to suggesting an action that will occur at a later time. The act of listening is a meditation on subjectivity that works in a similar manner; this clash represents a moment in which funk comes to the forefront and where Pavlic’s thesis proves most useful. The act of listening gives the sense of sound its power. Listeners are performers in the sense that the interiority necessary for music, or any sound wave for that matter, to have a significant effect necessitates their participation and action. The act of listening, in the context of *Invisible Man*, is a way of experientially embodying the ensemble in terms of music as well as a fusion of the senses.

Furthermore, for listeners, the appeal of funk is located in its rhythmic groove, which functions as a musical heartbeat and backbone to performance. In the context of funk, musicians typically emphasize the first and third beats in a four bar measure. When layered with several different instruments, this ensemble generates a full-bodied, unified sound propelled by percussive first and third beats. This syncopation and rhythmic power flies in the face of the standard Western musical practice of emphasis on the second and fourth beats per measure.

From a musicological standpoint, “These meters [emphasizing the first and third beats] ‘funk’ together in building an overall oneness of rhythmic feeling, called a ‘groove.’ The papa meter is the center of propulsion and permeates the overall motions.”<sup>24</sup> In this context, funk is both a verb (used in the sense of unity) and a genre of music. The clashes Pavlic and Ellison toy with are moments in which characters seek to

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<sup>24</sup> Howard C. Harris, *Complete Book of Improvisation/Composition and Funk Techniques* (Houston: DeMos Music Publications, 1980), 114.

enter society on equal footing or be a part of a unified community or ensemble.

However, musically the genre takes Western elements and turns them upside down while these same funky blips on society's radar seek to unify the community by calling into question the standard narrative. Funk, it follows, is a form of inversion. Given Ellison's interest in jazz and blues, *Invisible Man* is a proto-funk novel in the way it builds upon jazz principles and gravitates toward what is later labeled funk. As a musical genre, funk, much like Ellison's novel, is a form of repetition with a difference. Both utilize earlier musical and literary conventions while putting a distinct twist in the process. These inversions open up new musical and social spaces for consideration.

Pavlic's attention to the intersection of self and society in African American modernist works is vital to an understanding of articulations of space in *Invisible Man*. As the narrator notes, listening is an active pastime involving the bodily process of slipping into these musical and philosophical breaks in addition to the mental process of finding one's way into and out of these spaces. Spatiality, it follows, is as important as temporality in terms of how Ellison examines the practice of listening. Our narrator says,

I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night, I found myself hearing not only in time but space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco.* (8-9, emphasis original)

Under the influence of marijuana, Ellison's protagonist descends into the musical break and hears that which was previously unavailable to be heard. The character's recognition



of this change in “the rhythm of juxtaposition between call and response, oral and written, [which allows him] to sound in/out new ways.”<sup>25</sup> The narrator, here, invests in the personification of call and response while describing the deeply personal way in which he hears Armstrong’s music. He simultaneously draws on his other senses to create a more complex presentation of perception and experience. In turn, Ellison’s readers must “hear” the sound of Armstrong’s voice vis-à-vis prose and, in the process, must step back to realize the ability to hear is as significant as the ability to see and read at this particular juncture.

### **Connecting the Dots of Performative Punctuation and Typography**

In the passage describing the narrator’s descent into the sonic cave, Ellison signifies the transition from listening to music and moving deep within the recorded notes through the use of italics. Furthermore, *Invisible Man*, as a work of art, “explores...how the aspiring novelist and jazz musician share an alternative, skewed sense of time and a pioneering approach to tempo for the purposes of sensory inspiration and aesthetic fulfillment.”<sup>26</sup> Ellison’s uses of variable typography are significant: “Typography becomes ‘song’ in its excessive expression...Ellison’s gestural use of typography seeks to liberate and ‘free’ such markers from their conformist strictures. They are in fact part and parcel of the novel’s improvisational impulse and provide the page with a pulsing

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<sup>25</sup> Pavlic, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Radford, 40.

visual rhythm.”<sup>27</sup> The aural and the visible form a new conception of an ensemble of the senses.

The relationship between sound and the printed word is of consequence in light of Ellison’s method of composition. When writing, he made a practice of reading his work aloud into a tape recorder as he wrote to capture the linguistic quirks of his characters when played back later. Jennifer DeVere Brody writes,

In voicing his text, Ellison relies on the technology of the voice, as well as the recording machine. This kind of temporal disjunction appears again and again in Ellison’s novel. In other words, Ellison’s use of the recording device points out the simultaneity of what is too often taken to be a binary opposition between orality (spoken speech) and textuality (written word). In contrast, I want to think of orality and textuality as co-conspirators—simultaneous mechanical actors that maintain and produce movement.<sup>28</sup>

Ellison referred to reading aloud as “acting,” which recalls the idea of performative sentences and speech acts, yet the implementation of mechanized means of reproduction suggests there “is no priority here in the circulation of the ‘text.’ Hearing the ‘unheard’ music of *Invisible Man* requires us to respond with ear, eye, and mind.”<sup>29</sup> Reading and hearing are thereby conflated in keeping with Ellison’s background as a jazz musician and “composer of sound and visual rhythm.”<sup>30</sup>

As if it were sheet music, the aural and visually rhythmic composition takes its form with the appearance of black type on white paper, and with this comparative reference, italics, alongside other typographic tools such as punctuation and spacing for example, “serve as the dramatic guidelines for the written word” just as musical notation

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<sup>27</sup> Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 77.

<sup>28</sup> Brody, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Brody, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Brody, 75.

on formal sheet music provides artistic guidance for musicians.<sup>31</sup> These guidelines include a time signature, which tells the performer how many beats are included in each measure.

Ellison's prologue follows similar temporal guidelines. Our narrator describes the change in spatial orientation by beginning the next sentence with a coordinating conjunction—"And"—which suggests both the balance of language and independent clauses while simultaneously making a quick transitions to italics. The use of this particular type of conjunction suggests the "slower tempo" and movement into the cave are as important as the more discernable "swiftness of the hot tempo" suggested by the italics. The change in font suggests a change in the significance of the prose. The "And" of the sentence additionally serves as a beat or pause allowing for the italicized "Blackness of Blackness" episode to appear between distinct "beats" in the text. What's more, this key conjunction signifies the thematic and stylistic importance of this specific moment within the text as a whole. "And" operates as a time signature signaling the reader to pay attention to what is to come. The non-italicized conjunction is the last fragment of the slower tempo before the italics increase the speed of the prose through a visual disruption.

The visual disruption of the text forces the reader to join the narrator as he descends into the rhythm of the music between beats. Literary scholar Fred Moten notes the complexity of such a notion, "if we imagine a space between repetitions then we imagine something impossible to locate. The moment between moments presents massive

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<sup>31</sup> Brody, 64.

ontological problems, like the attempt to establish the reality of pure mathematical objects (for instance, a set, an ensemble).”<sup>32</sup> Moten’s reading further complicates Pavlic’s thesis but uses the idea of an ensemble, which carries a musical connotation. This space is liminal as opposed to locative. Again, the reader, in order to truly engage with the text, must become a participant in this ensemble. Now Pavlic’s two-dimensional diagram appears to shift into a three-dimensional, multi-sensory experience requiring the consideration of both sight and sound. Moten writes,

Ellison knows that you can’t really listen to this music. He knows...that really listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken ark of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn’t alternate with but is seeing; it’s the sense that it excludes; it’s the ensemble of the senses. Few really read this novel. This is alarming even though you can’t really read this novel. That’s why it calls for and tries to open a new analytic way of listening and reading, an improvisation attuned to the ensemble of work’s organization and production...the ensemble of the senses from which it springs and which it stimulates.<sup>33</sup>

The “Blackness of Blackness” episode raises the question of “how to activate the noise’s transcendence of the ocular frame” because the function of the music is carrying something deeper—“the inability of linger and the rationalization of that inability.”<sup>34</sup> Guitarist James “Blood” Ulmer once said, “Jazz is the teacher, funk is the preacher.”<sup>35</sup> Given the conflation of musical, aesthetic, and political imperatives, Ellison’s novel is a proto-funk narrative in which jazz challenges readers to “read” sound and “hear” printed matter. The “black is...an’ black ain’t” (9) sermon illustrates the way Ellison’s novel

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<sup>32</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 69.

<sup>33</sup> Moten, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Moten, 68, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Werner, 226. Ulmer is a noted jazz, blues, and funk guitarist.

relies heavily upon the paradoxical nature of hearing the unheard and the hypervisibility of invisibility.

Jennifer DeVere Brody, however, attempts to provide Moten with a solution for locating the moments between moments. She focuses on Ellison's use of the ellipsis in the "Blackness of Blackness" sermon in *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play*. She posits, "Emphasizing the performative aspects of punctuation, neither purely functional nor merely figurative, helps us to read punctuation as a mediator between speech and writing, performance and gesture...punctuation need not be thought of purely in terms of its proper use, but rather may be valued for its expressive, artistic use."<sup>36</sup> Key to *Invisible Man*'s source of improvisation and ensemble-oriented impetus is the improvisatory nature and multiple interpretations of punctuation.

For example, Brody suggests an ellipsis may be read as either a single mark or as multiple marks in the sense that "the ellipsis, in its singularity, is not a 'single' mark but rather a triple 'one' or a 'complete multiple.' Here, one can extrapolate and read the ellipsis as a figure that is at once singular and collective."<sup>37</sup> Each dot or individual point suggests a node or "the literal points, where time stands still or which and with which to enter the theatricalized space of time."<sup>38</sup> An ellipsis, then, is syncopation in the form of punctuation. It alters the dominant rhythm of the narrative by instantiating a passage of time or a transition in the time and space on the page. This syncopation or change in rhythm is a move towards an alternate sense of time. Brody quotes rule number 21 of

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<sup>36</sup> Brody, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Brody, 76.

<sup>38</sup> Brody, 82.

Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* in which the authors state writers should "Prefer the standard to the offbeat."<sup>39</sup> This imperative "cautions against the peril of using the crossbred 'language of mutilation.' Such temptations are carried by sound and rhythm, something emphasized by the use of onomatopoeia: a trope that stresses the commensurability of sound and 'word.'"<sup>40</sup> The offbeat, however, is where funk grounds itself. It moves towards making the offbeat the new standard of musical and temporal measurement. Funk generates a tension between location, line, and visibility that Strunk and White find problematic as it pertains to rhetoric.

Literary critic George Kent argues the narrator of *Invisible Man* is allegorical, heroic, and most importantly, the person entrusted with the duty to affirm Reality—maybe even the personification of the groove—for both himself and readers. Kent also argues that the presence of "Armstrong and his jazz reflect an articulated self and a mode of breaking through the ordinary categories of Western clock time."<sup>41</sup> This groove moves at an altogether different pace and operates under different notions of temporality. It is both a measure of time and yet also outside of time much like an ellipsis is both a singular unit and a collective ensemble. It has the same performative function of Ellison's

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<sup>39</sup> William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, Fourth Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 81. Strunk and White bemoan the fact that "Young writers will be drawn at every turn toward eccentricities in language. They will hear the beat of new vocabularies, the exciting rhythms of special segments of their society, each speaking a language of their own. All of us come under the spell of these unsettling drums; the problem for beginners is to listen to them, learn the words, feel the vibrations, and not be carried away."

<sup>40</sup> Brody, 83.

<sup>41</sup> George E. Kent, "Ralph Ellison and the Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition" in *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Robert J. Butler (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 53.

sermon and consequently occupies a similar space of contradiction and the offbeat Strunk and White so strongly warn against.

### **Recording History/The Historical Record**

The narrator's moment of clarity and revelation in the text occurs shortly after the murder of Tod Clifton. This discovery is informed by a sudden understanding of the practice of recording history and the process of constructing the historical record. He comes to this realization upon exiting the subway at 125<sup>th</sup> Street—a specific point of reference in Harlem—where he becomes

aware of other men dressed like the boys [hipsters in the subway], and of girls in dark exotic-colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles. They'd been there all along, but somehow I'd missed them. I'd missed them even when my work had been most successful. They were *outside the groove of history* and it was my job to get them in, all of them. I looked into the design of their faces, hardly a one that was unlike someone I'd known down South...I moved with the crowd, the sweat pouring off me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. I stopped. *Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words?* (443, emphasis added)

History ignores these members of society. They, too, are invisible and unwritten. More importantly, history is aligned with capturing and commercializing sound, in this particular moment, as represented by the record shop. The reference to the languid blues emitted from the loudspeaker “voices” this musical “autobiographical chronicle,” or to use Ellison's definition of the blues in *The Antioch Review*, the “painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness.” Will the blues, or

any musical form for that matter, be the sole historical record of what constitutes the “Black Experience” insofar as the narrator understands it?

Weheliye views this moment of revelation as serving several purposes. He argues these grooves

displace—once again it is necessary to insist that they do not replace—a historicist model of time, but they also sharply suggest how in the processes of sound recording and reproduction, the production of black history transmogrifies from absolute erasure in writing to sounding from loudspeakers on any given urban corner. And these amplifiers echo not only “turgid and inadequate words” but also predominately nonlinguistic sonic marks. In this way, black subjects are not intrinsically outside of history, as Hegel would have it a century before Ellison, but are actively and oftentimes ferociously “recorded out” of it, which, in turn has led to forging other means to record black history.<sup>42</sup>

The difficulty in positioning history as a rhythmic groove lies in, as he notes, the nonlinguistic components. The power of the loudspeaker blaring music in Harlem lies in its connection with affect and the senses as opposed to pure linguistic communication.<sup>43</sup>

While the protagonist adores his phonograph of Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” the sensations associated with that lyrical beam of sound are far more important than the actual lyrical content of the song. The groove, in terms of history and recording, resides in the emotions and sensations it generates. Recording an alternative history calls on the creation of new spaces between the breaks. Here, the post-soul aesthetic begins in the breaks and as a consequence of a history that is inherently non-linear. If, as he suggests, they are outside of the groove of history and it is his responsibility to get them into the groove, his inclusion may take the form of

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<sup>42</sup> Weheliye, 80.

<sup>43</sup> Weheliye, 81.



syncopation. These seemingly offbeat personae are simply changing the rhythmic structure of history in much the same way James Brown altered the dominant rhythmic pattern of contemporary American popular music. Pulling people into the groove of history is another way of rethinking the predominant views of rhythm and subjectivity.

In the process of being “recorded out” of history, African Americans, as Weheliye suggests, must conceive of alternative means of generating a historical record or attempting to write themselves into the story when at all possible. Though music serves as a potential avenue for giving voice to the voiceless, not all members of the community are as conscientious listeners and social critics as the narrator. However, as Ellison appears to suggest in his commentary of “true jazz,” commodification and commercial appeal of musical and creative ventures threatens the ability of a subversive historical record, in the case of *Invisible Man*, to be created and disseminated. The narrator’s final question—“ Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581)—suggests that the act of recognizing the paradoxical grooves of invisibility and hypervisibility is, in fact, a means of correcting and recording one’s history. This is precisely why, as Callahan suggests, the protagonist “must speak *to* us before he can speak *for* us.”

### **The Birth of Funk**

In describing the “mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words” on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, Ellison the oracle presents a vision of future funk in the guise of James Brown, who in his own right is a Rinehart-esque

character and Funky Everyman able to win the hearts of middle America with the song “Living in America” featured in the film *Rocky IV* just two decades after rallying the African American community with “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud).” Brown is, much like Ellison’s elusive Rinehart, an enigma of late twentieth-century U.S. popular music. His public successes and failures both professionally and personally are difficult to separate from the rhythmic and symbolic complexities of his music. Brown’s public persona as a troubled soul singer presents a gray area, or groove, where art and personal drama intersect. Cultural critic Nelson George has suggested that “it is simply impossible to resolve all the contradictions” surrounding Brown as a professional, and finds that it is, in fact, Brown’s unwillingness to address the contradictions himself that make him an exemplar of all that is America.<sup>44</sup> Much like Rinehart, Brown was “a living symbol of black self-determination” known to many but understood by few.<sup>45</sup>

In 1967, James Brown released the single, “Cold Sweat.” Using drums, bass, and rhythm guitar, Brown steers his band into a complex groove punctuated with horn riffs at dramatic intervals. Brown sings, pleads, and shrieks as he addresses his lover and the physical reaction (a cold sweat) he experiences in her company. Brown uses horns to complement and echo his vocals. After shouting for his saxophonist Maceo Parker to take a solo, Brown chirps praise and encouragement as Maceo blows his horn. Brown’s grunts of “hah!” and “huh!” punctuate Maceo’s solo in much the same way the horns originally serve as an important counterpoint to Brown’s earlier vocals. Here, Brown and

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<sup>44</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 104.

<sup>45</sup> George, 98.

his band change roles while supporting the underlying groove of the song. Brown screams and growls, “Let him have it” and “Put it on him” as the saxophonist plays.

While only Maceo and the drummer receive solos in this piece, (“Give the drummer some!”) Brown acknowledges the two primary sources of dramatic punctuation in the performance. The syncopation of the drums and wail of the horns heighten the tension of the song as Brown screams and wails instead of singing clearly. To do so would be a failure to express his emotional state at the moment. However, Maceo’s solo becomes the primary “vocal” providing an alternate wail to that of Brown when he takes the secondary role of backing vocals and encouragement for Maceo’s performance.

Rhythmically the song breaks from other popular music of the era, but it is in Brown’s emphasis on his musicians and soloing that truly calls for a different way of listening to genre. Brown challenges his listener to privilege the rhythmic groove his musicians have established but also steps away from the microphone for an extended period to allow his drummer and saxophonist the opportunity to steal the show. The song is less about lyrical content than it is rhythm and the performance of an ensemble in the spirit of Ellison’s vision of “true jazz.” The punctuating riffs of the horn section become the overwhelming “vocal” of the song as they echo Brown’s wails and screams. Just as punctuation enhances a reading of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the horns and drum of James Brown’s “Cold Sweat” reconfigure a musical composition to bring rhythm to the forefront as opposed to some supplemental role. The groove and its effects on the singer—in the form of dramatic shouts and pleas—move away from the idea of a song you can sing along to and instead present something that is supposed to give the listener a

physical, bodily reaction. Once Brown establishes the emphasis on rhythm and groove, future songs, such as “Sex Machine” and “Soul Power,” refine the formula to present a sleek, more developed examination of funk and its relation to the senses—a theme I address in subsequent chapters as well. Brown’s performance of “Cold Sweat” inverts expectations of commercially successful music much like Ellison’s description of descending into the depths of blackness inverts standard reading and listening practices.

### **Outro: Slipping out of The Groove**

Though Ellison eloquently describes the descent into the groove of Armstrong’s recording, neither he nor his narrator provides an adequate description of the ascent back to reality. Disappearing into music is akin to the narrator’s hibernation—“a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). The overt action, one may surmise, is the foolhardy attempt to articulate that which is inherently nonlinguistic and nearly impossible to effectively and persuasively communicate. Perhaps the ascent necessitates an examination of other sensory experiences.

Photographer Roy DeCarava juxtaposed a series of street photographs with images of musicians and poetry composed in the 1960s in *The Sound I Saw*, which was published in 2001. He introduces his work by explaining the subjective aspect of the collection:

This is a book about people, about jazz, and about things. The work between its covers tries to present images for the head and for the heart, and like its subject matter is particular, subjective and individual. It represents pictures and words from one head and one heart.

Jazz to me is a musical expression of subjective individual emotions by particular individuals in their own unique way. Everything a

jazzman feels, sees, hears, everything he was and is becomes the source and object of his music.<sup>46</sup>

DeCarava, as photographer, attempts to capture what he hears in the form of an image. The “source and object” of the musician’s composition is the conflation of multiple sensory experiences, which are, in turn, experienced by DeCarava, listeners, readers, and so on, in a variety of sensory experiences. The effects appear to ripple outward. As Moten argues, “listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken ark of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn’t alternate with but is seeing; it’s the sense that it excludes; it’s the ensemble of the senses.” Listening, as a key portion of this ensemble in my discussion of funk, will emerge in other discussion of the senses since funk is, first and foremost, a musical form that needs to be heard. Once the brain engages with these funky sounds and rhythms, other senses begin to react.

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<sup>46</sup> Roy DeCarava, *The Sound I Saw: Improvisation on a Jazz Theme* (London: Phaidon, 2001).

### Chapter 3:

#### Spontaneous Combustion: Spectacle, Pleasure, and Containment

“Those of us who are enlightened (or enblackened) beyond the point of straightening our hair worry about the edges of our collective hair, too. We are shamed by James Brown's aesthetic; we wish the brother would get a haircut.”—Valerie Boyd<sup>1</sup>

In her reading of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, feminist scholar Stephanie Demetrakopoulos suggests the ugliness overwhelming the text works as a companion to the idea of invisibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Pecola Breedlove, the “ugly,” sexually abused girl who desires blue eyes, cannot access a level of black self-consciousness critical to an understanding of subjectivity needed by the narrator of Ellison's novel because of her abuse and age. Pecola, Demetrakopoulos argues, “is also obstructed and deflected from higher consciousness because she is female. Pecola, certainly, is expunged from human society even before she has awakened to a consciousness of self. Pecola stands for the triple indemnity of the female Black child: children, Blacks, and females are devalued in American culture.”<sup>2</sup> Demetrakopoulos' argument serves as an interesting point of entry into a consideration of how Morrison's novel uses funk aesthetically to consider notions of social exclusivity alongside troubling

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Boyd, “The Ritual: An Afro-American Woman Gets Her Hair Done.” *African American Review* Spring (1993): 43-45.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, “Bleak Beginnings: *The Bluest Eye*” in *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*, eds. Karla F.C. Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), 34.

descriptions of normativity and regulation. Writing at the historical moment in which the term “funk” begins to gather traction, Morrison invokes the connotations of freedom associated with the word in a tightly constructed and restricted work to examine social regulation and restriction in ways Ellison’s text could not. Morrison’s decision to use the concept of funk as it gains mass linguistic and cultural appeal in a different historical era as opposed to considering the use of the term in its own perhaps more relevant time period is intriguing.

Though often interpreted in connection with an interrogation of racial self-loathing, for the purposes of this project investigating the relationship between funk and the senses, Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* is also invested in connections between spontaneity and control. In its earliest pages, the text is concerned with the thin line separating chaos and order. After presenting a typical section from a “Dick and Jane” primer in the opening pages of the novel, two subsequent representations of the same paragraph illustrate the progression from order to literary chaos after she first removes punctuation marks and in repetitions of the initial passage she removes all punctuation, capitalization, and spacing between words. At the heart of the novel is the conflict between spontaneity and emotional response, on the one hand, and society’s demands to contain these feelings on the other. The removal of punctuation is a means of disrupting the legibility and orderly nature of the earliest pages through the elimination of regulatory dots, dashes, and letters. The over-determined narrative becomes a stream of letters and words. The chaos of funk, in Morrison’s novel, is identified as a means of disrupting the reader’s sense of normativity by examining the characters’ feelings of alienation and

subsequent attempts at recovering a feeling of spontaneity or sensuality (depicted visually vis-à-vis hair, clothing, and performed behavior in the mode of the “cool pose”) society has deemed unacceptable or even vulgar. Funk resists the regulation it periodically needs be it social or grammatical.

I begin this chapter with an examination of Morrison’s investigation of the dissemination of perceived standards of beauty as well as the fragmentation of society as a result of the visual consumption of these images. In the context of *The Bluest Eye*, funk is primarily evident in the visual medium. The Breedloves are visual representations of the conflict between emotion and restriction. The downfall of the family, most evident in Pecola’s longing for blue eyes, is the inability to reconcile the need for both liberation and containment. Characters must navigate spaces in which funkiness erupts and necessitates the need for regulation. The conflict central to Morrison’s text lends itself to a reading of James Brown’s 1968 performance at the Boston Garden on the evening following Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Boston city leaders televised Brown’s famous April 1968 concert in an effort to expand his audience from his base in the Boston Garden to the entire city in an effort to curb rioting in the hours after news of the assassination spread. Brown’s pivotal role in avoiding rioting and curtailing violence in Boston is one of the numerous professional moments in which the singer negotiates between emotional eruptions and the need for order and regulation.

Following my discussion of Brown’s concert, I end the chapter with a turn to Brown’s 2004 mug shot, which gained the singer notoriety for his disheveled appearance running contrary to his imperative to always look like someone the audience would pay



to see. This encounter is symbolic of the struggle at the heart of artistic production and consumption. Brown's processed hair is unkempt and indicative of his emotional state. His hair reminds us not only of the processes required to maintain orderly hairstyles and public personae but also of the significance of process in terms of a system of regulation to ensure a certain level of standardization. Brown's hair, then, demonstrates the potential for disorder—when funk refuses regulation. As Valerie Boyd reminds us, James Brown's stylistic imperatives have a bearing on larger social perspectives as well. Brown, as a performer but also as an individual, has an effect on an entire community's attitudes and behaviors. Morrison's novel in conjunction with Brown's concert and 2004 arrest photo provide moments of encounter in which funk, through the visual medium, sound, and speech, become a spectacle combining political insurgency and emotional interactions.

### **Spectacular Policies of Literary Containment**

If one understands spectacle to encompass a large-scale public display or more generally speaking anything visually striking or impressive, instances of such events are numerous in *The Bluest Eye*. The restriction of such events is critical to the society Morrison describes. By setting her novel in 1941 on the eve of America's involvement in World War II, Morrison draws parallels between the United States' involvement in international conflict and its own domestic issues. Though most characters look at young Pecola Breedlove with disdain, the three prostitutes on the periphery of the narrative express a minimal degree of maternal concern for the young girl. Marie (alternatively

known as The Maginot Line), China, and Poland are treated with contempt much like their young friend and neighbor. Ironically, the members of society who loathe these women with the most vengeance are the same people The Maginot Line, China, and Poland respect above all others—the “good Christian colored women.”<sup>3</sup> These women complicate the notion of domestic respectability on the level of citizen and nation as well as trouble the distinction between respectability and indecency on an international level.

The names Poland and China are references to the European and Asian fronts of World War II while Maginot Line refers to the failed fortifications along the French border. By entering the war and taking part in a campaign rooted in international ethnic oppression, the United States can ignore or at least displace its own torrid past with these very same causes. Participation in the war ensures international respectability but presents a difficult set of issues domestically in terms of dealing with its own problems with race and oppression.<sup>4</sup> The names of the three prostitutes allude to problems with geographic and political containment and policies of restriction. These three women maintain a position on the social periphery because of their profession, yet they appear to have a greater understanding of the town’s social dynamic through their interactions with the men who allow themselves to be shamed and abused at their hands. Morrison writes of Marie, Poland, and China: “Their only respect was for what they would have described as ‘good Christian women.’ The woman whose reputation was spotless, and who tended

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<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. (1970) (New York: Knopf, 1993), 56. Subsequent references will be indicated by in-text citation.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Gillan, “Focusing on the Wrong Front: Historical Displacement, the Maginot Line, and ‘The Bluest Eye’” in *African American Review* Summer (2002): 283-298.

to her family, who didn't drink or smoke or run around. These women had their undying, if covert, affection. They would sleep with their husbands, and take their money, but always with a vengeance" (56). Only the three prostitutes can see the conflicting range of responses regarding social interaction in the town; their own behavior, for the most part, is driven without care or concern for others. They allow themselves to become the visual displacement of an entire society's values towards fidelity and propriety. The town needs these women as signifiers of what they want to avoid just as the United States needs Poland and China as international venues in which to deflect its own faults and to potentially contain its own faults for the purpose of generating an international view of moral superiority.

An exposure of moral failings or shortcomings is a constant threat in this American town. One of the great fears of Lorain, Ohio, is the possibility of the outdoors, a condition that results from personal excess or when one's ability to contain desires and wants ultimately fails. Claudia, the young narrator, explains:

Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days. Every possibility of excess was curtailed with it. If somebody ate too much, he could end up outdoors. If somebody used too much coal, he could end up outdoors. People could gamble themselves outdoors, drink themselves outdoors. Sometimes mothers put their sons outdoors, and when that happened, regardless of what the son had done, all sympathy was with him. He was outdoors, and his own flesh and done it. To be put outdoors by a landlord was one thing—unfortunate, but an aspect of life over which you had no control, since you could not control your income. But to be slack enough to put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one's own kid outdoors—that was criminal.

There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and

complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with—probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn't change, and outdoors is here to stay. (17-18)

The idea of being outdoors is the forced embrace of funk in a paradoxically unnatural yet organic engagement with nature. Outdoors represents the consequences of one's inability to curtail impulses. Outdoors also refers to the sense of isolation from the home or site of security and protection. Funk may potentially lead to the condition of being outdoors because it encourages spontaneity and emotional responses; however, outdoors reinforces the notion of the periphery or what happens when funk fails to remain in check. If, as Claudia suggests, African American citizens were inherently peripheral to begin with, to be placed outdoors, which is to say beyond the scope of societal parameters, is a sign one has violated the imperative to stay orderly and in control. The threat of this spatial placement is its nothingness; it presents the opportunity to be twice excluded or removed. The threat of this traumatic displacement, as Claudia notes, is used to keep children and adults alike in check. Its threat is real and easily visualized as opposed to abstract and mysterious. Excess, characterized by an emotional eruption or a loss of control, leads to exclusion because it works against the social policies of good behavior or containment. Outdoors represents complete and utter displacement—a metaphysical condition that represents the end of being, time, and recognition. For all intents and purposes, the

condition of being placed outdoors is akin to social damnation and outside of the security or barriers of the four walls demarcating the domestic sphere.

Social recognition and propriety is vital to this community of middle-class African Americans. On the opposite end of the social spectrum utilized by the prostitutes sits “proper” and exceptionally problematic middle class African American women who use every ounce of their being to avoid slipping over to the other end at a significant cost. They fear the stigma currently latched to the prostitutes. Morrison describes these fearful women at length:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man’s work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children into obedience; music to sooth the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson...how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

Whenever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for rear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (83)

Understanding behavioral expectations is the remedy for an eruption of “this Funk.” For these Southern girls who seek to gain a foothold in Northern society, funk undermines their ability to “do the white man’s work with refinement.” The emphasis is on the signifier “white” which connotes the distinct absence of color or in this case funk. Morrison uses funk to tease out the abstract items that make life worth living. Ridding themselves of funkiness means joining the Dick and Jane world of Morrison’s

introductory section devoid of any significant cultural identifiers outside of regulatory punctuation marks. Submitting to conformity and a bland existence is a world without emotion, which along with physicality threatens these women. The sound of laughter, the outline of lipstick, and the movement of hips as their bodies cross the floor are eruptions that undermine refinement and obedience. Their very bodies seek to betray them; enunciation and gestures, for example, represent a natural order that drips, flows, and clings to their bodies and becomes as natural as breathing. Accents and country enunciations are signifiers of class and mobility. Blackness, which is suppressed as a result of aspirations to “do the white man’s work with refinement,” takes the form of a multi-class entity that produces these details. In seeking to curtail passion and human emotion, these women develop a deep sense of repressed sexuality that ultimately affects the family unit as women become cold or absent despite Morrison’s insistence that these proper women are appealing because they generate a feeling of security for those around them. Paradoxically, these women become alienated as they mold the household into a place of comfort and security. The sense of security associated with domesticity comes at a cost to these particular women.

In her reading of the novel, Susan Willis writes of the use of funk and domesticity in terms of a loss of sexuality:

Morrison’s aim in writing is very often to disrupt alienation with what she calls eruptions of “funk” (*TBE*, 68). Dismayed by the tremendous influence of bourgeois society on young black women newly arrived from deep South cities like “Meridian, Mobile, Aiken and Baton Rouge,” Morrison describes the women’s loss of spontaneity and sensuality...Morrison translates the loss of history and culture into sexual

terms and demonstrates the connection between bourgeois society and repression.<sup>5</sup>

Funk, in the context of the narrative, operates as a means of disrupting alienation and recovering a sense of spontaneity and sensuality. Funk works to recover a certain Lacanian jouissance vacant from the Dick and Jane primer passages and the lives of little girls wishing for blue eyes. Funk is a mantra as much as it is a means of reclamation. For Willis, however, this eruption is directly linked to sex. In her analysis, an eruption of funk is orgasmic. While sexuality is without question attached to funk as an aesthetic and musical genre, I read these funky eruptions as primarily significant for their visually disruptive abilities—gesture, hair, and physical presence for example. Sexuality does indeed permeate *The Bluest Eye*, but I am more interested in the ways in which funk operates as a visual spectacle in terms of personal style and conceptions of beauty. This spectacle becomes a means of representing one's identity in a visually arresting form.

Funk, in my reading of this novel, is the experience of emotions and an understanding of identity—a grittiness; a sense of self; an attitude; an understanding and vision of what blackness *is*, *should be*, *shouldn't be*, and *could be* in various contexts much like the blackness spoken of by the preacher in *Invisible Man*.<sup>6</sup> Funk becomes an ontological conception. Pecola Breedlove embodies the problematic understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 87. In her chapter on Morrison, Willis is primarily concerned with historicizing the author's work. Her analysis of *The Bluest Eye* centers on sexuality and sexual encounters.

<sup>6</sup> In a sermon given on the "Blackness of Blackness," an unnamed preacher juxtaposes a series of conditions of blackness. He says, for example, "black is...an' black ain't;" "Black will git you...an' black won't;" "Black will make you... an' un-make you" (Ellison 9-10). Funk, like blackness, may appear contradictory at times.

blackness and her place on the cusp of becoming one of these “proper” repressed women from Meridian, Mobile, or Baton Rouge. The work associated with these young, educated women is aligned with white society subsequently magnifies cultural difference. It isn’t enough to merely do the work associated with this racial group—one must do it with refinement and finesse. The undertone of this line of work is that of obedience or restraint. According to the author’s list of subjects at relevant institutions of higher learning, to become a teacher is to become versed in the instruction of obedience, particularly as it relates to rearing well-behaved, children devoid of any appreciation of funk or in tune with a vibrant emotional life. Teaching proper behavior, in this context, eliminates or reduces the likelihood of any form of social or public spectacle or failure to adhere to practices or policies of bodily containment.

As the women build families and instruct their children in the ways of fighting that which seeks to undermine order, clear class divisions emerge, particularly as they relate to differences in hairstyles. Hair is a key signifier of class difference to characters in *The Bluest Eye*:

[Junior’s] mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to [Junior] the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber... The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant. (87)

James Brown’s hair, as I will discuss later, though processed and piled high, bears a closer resemblance to the wooly haired class of citizens Junior’s mother despises than to



the cropped and neat follicles preferred by the maternal figure. The young man's mother alludes to the practice of racial performance: acting or looking "white." She cannot conceive of re-fashioning white hairstyles with a decidedly black twist to emphasize difference; instead, Junior must conform and beat back any sign of erosion, eruption, or even a difference in follicle textures. The length and texture of Junior's hair is a growing example of funk and the reason why this particular class of African American women obsess over the edges of their hair as a potential site of an eruption of difference even among members of the same racial group. Even eruptions are carefully controlled to minimize disturbance on the part of the characters. Morrison, as architect of the story, tightly controls these eruptions to the point where even moments of spontaneity in the text are part of a larger framework of regulation and control. Seemingly placed as narrative asides, passages such as the one describing ideal African Americans are careful authorial orchestrations to provide a seamless transition from exposition to character analysis. In this instance, characters aligned with "colored" in *The Bluest Eye* are pushed back against the embrace of cultural difference. Junior's mother seeks to uphold the values of land grant colleges and lessons of obedience. Her son, despite his clean white shirts and closely cropped hair is anything but obedient; he hurls his mother's cat at the face of the novel's protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, as a means of acting out against his repressed and absent mother. Patriarchy as well as class aspirations produce this lack of emotion and insistence on social and personal regulation. Geraldine insists Junior maintain a process or design for regulating his hair in the formal sense of order and

neatness as opposed to the literal process of straightening one's hair to remove any sign of difference in texture or racial signifier.

Though Morrison's novel is filled with instances and examples of spectacle, the on-going struggle between perceptions of beauty and ugliness with regard to eruptions grounds my reading of *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola Breedlove, the central figure of the novel, is convinced that if her eyes were blue, she would be considered beautiful. Pecola's family is known for the spectacle of their "unique" ugliness:

No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. (38)

It appears as though the ugliness "put on" by the Breedloves cannot be removed. While this ugliness belongs to an outside source, the "why" behind their perceived ugliness remains elusive. How did this family become a spectacle of objectionable appearances? Pecola, in one instance in the novel, is tortured by Junior, the son of a solidly middle-class African American woman who extols the virtues of white culture and a distinct lack of funk. Pecola's presumed ugliness is what makes her a prime subject for Junior's diabolical plans of embarrassment and humiliation. Her physical beauty, or lack thereof, makes her unusual and an entirely different type of spectacle or peculiarity. Pecola's insistence on her own ugliness is due to the consistent mistreatment by those around her; she views herself as ugly because she has been told it is so. She cannot fathom a reason to challenge this view.

Cholly, her father, has become a spectacle of ugliness because he resisted an

imperative to be obedient or to follow social expectations regarding the containment of specific behaviors. His ugliness developed behaviorally because he was no longer able to experience a variety of emotions. In his youth, Cholly lived a life of immense freedom. As an orphan with few ties, his mobility was unparalleled. Along with the ability to move around the country on a whim, Cholly felt the freedom of emotion associated with his movement. He was

[d]angerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. Free to sleep in doorways or between the white sheets of a singing woman. Free to take a job, free to leave it. He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer. (159)

Cholly's ugliness stems from the suppression of funk or the full range of human emotions. His marriage to Pauline is stagnant. Neither partner feels any connection unless provoked to feel an extreme emotion at the hands of the other.<sup>7</sup> The senses have been dulled over time in the effort of attempting to keep eruptions of spontaneity at bay as opposed to embracing the waves of sentiment triggered by these moments before they lead to physical violence. Cholly's ontological and psychological freedom translates into sensorial affect.

However, the restriction on Cholly's early experiences with freedom accelerates his seemingly physical deformity or ugliness once he settles down into a domestic routine with his new wife, Pauline. Regarding the rest of the family's source of ugliness,

Morrison writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Pauline and Cholly routinely engage in fistfights or pan-throwing melees in front of their children to the point where neither child seems particularly phased by their interactions. Their fights are a means of (violently) breaking up the monotony of life.

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes,” they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Dealing with it each according to his way. Mrs. Breedlove handles hers as an actor does a prop: for articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers—martyrdom. Sammy used his as a weapon to cause others pain. He adjusted his behavior to it, chose his companions on the basis of it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it. And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask. (39)

The Breedloves embrace their ugliness because they have no reason to do otherwise. For each family member, ugliness is elastic and fungible. Ugliness is the ultimate tool for martyrdom, pain, and concealment; in the case of the Breedloves, it means accepting the status of social pariah. More generally, ugliness is the resistance to normative values that have potentially positive or negative consequences. If, as critic Susan Willis argues, on the level of sexuality “alienation is the denial of the body” and funk is the remedy for such denial, perhaps embracing the antithesis of beauty is in itself a beautiful act.<sup>8</sup> However, embracing ugliness or difference gives the Breedloves a sense of being through anger. Morrison writes, “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging” (50). The Breedloves are angry because they are ugly and continue to be ugly because they are angry. It is a self-perpetuating cycle. Anger or spontaneous eruptions of emotion are a way of validating

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<sup>8</sup> Willis, 88.

their self-worth. Mrs. Breedlove, for example, initially views her misshapen foot as a unique visual identifier that sets her apart or makes her special; the foot, as well as the ontology, are reconfigurations of normative values. As she becomes more self-aware, what she formerly viewed as a special, positive characteristic becomes a cross to bear and generates resentment in her psyche and disrupts the ontology. This awareness comes as she spends more time attending movies and contemplating celebrities.

After moving North with her husband, Pauline Breedlove found herself experiencing an immense sense of isolation. Her isolation is rooted in geographic as well as cultural difference. While her husband worked, Mrs. Breedlove sought refuge in movie theaters after being ridiculed by Northern women for her use of Southern syntax and refusal to straighten her hair. These darkened spaces allow her to judge those around her as opposed to being judged. She is the antithesis of Geraldine, Junior's mother, or any of the other women who went to land grant colleges. In her loneliness, Mrs. Breedlove begins to "converse" with film. Scenes trigger memories and long-forgotten hopes and aspirations she held before meeting her husband. Along with her renewed imagination, Mrs. Breedlove becomes more aware of personal relationships as portrayed on film.

Morrison writes

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusioned. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simply caring for. (122)

The more movies she attends, the more Mrs. Breedlove falls into the hype of beauty in relation to what she perceives as her own spectacle of ugliness. Until Pauline can

appreciate her own self-worth, she will remain vulnerable to feelings of aesthetic inferiority. It comes as no surprise her daughter Pecola follows in her footsteps regarding this ontology.

Mrs. Breedlove's frequent attendance at films is escapism at its finest. Sitting in the movie theater offers her the opportunity to be a voyeur. With each screening she is offered a glimpse into other people's relationships and lives—to see how others contain or liberate their emotions or feelings of insecurity. She is presented with an alternative reality readily available for easy visual consumption: "*White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard*" (123, italics original). With each subsequent film viewing, the disparity between fiction and reality becomes increasingly difficult for Mrs. Breedlove to process and distinguish. Upon exiting the theater, Mrs. Breedlove carries some of the darkness of the movie house with her, and her feelings of resentment toward her current life increases significantly. Soon, Mrs. Breedlove begins adopting the hairstyles worn by current starlets simply to attend the films in an effort to increase the emotional distance between her life and the life of those on the screen. She attempts to wear the beauty of the starlets just as she and her family wear the cloak of ugliness. After partaking in this practice for some time, while five months pregnant she faces the ultimate challenge when her voyeuristic escape comes to a crashing halt. Film becomes a medium to experience the freedom of a variety of emotions (envy, lust, shame, and pride for example) her current life cannot allow. While viewing these films, Pauline is washed over with the emotions

that used to please Cholly before he became ugly and cynical.

One feature presentation Pauline favored starred Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. After seeing Harlow on the cover of a magazine, Mrs. Breedlove attends a screening with her hair styled the same way as Harlow's cover shot. Pauline initially informs her audience it looked "just like her" only to quickly offer, "Well, almost just like" (123, italics original). She knows that adopting the same hairstyle will not allow her to star in a film with Clark Gable but it nevertheless enables her to feel special or different—perhaps even beautiful if just for a day. Her emotions are not restricted in this moment. Hair styling is an extension of the visual escapism in which she partakes with each trip to the movie theater. Mrs. Breedlove has a history of taking pleasure in arranging items. This pleasure is in making things orderly and restricted. However, while watching the film, Mrs. Breedlove's orderly appearance is shattered because she lost one of her front teeth while eating candy. She describes the incident with a tone of immense resignation and sadness:

*I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. I don't believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a font tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled own to just being ugly. (123, italics original)*

Losing the tooth cracked the veneer of her fantasy of social conformity and subsequently encourages her to give up on the spontaneity or funkiness of life. Mrs. Breedlove immediately realized that despite wearing her style in the same manner as Jean Harlow, she was not, in fact, Jean Harlow. At this juncture, Mrs. Breedlove is forced to confront

the disillusion of pretending to be a celebrity, and her world is never again the same. She refuses to style her hair with such precision and begins to view herself as ugly because she will never look like the starlets she views at the movie theater. The ridiculous quality of her situation becomes apparent at the moment she recognizes that she is missing a highly visible front tooth, has adopted the latest hairstyle of a white movie star, and is eating candy while five months pregnant in a movie theater. The loss of the tooth is a very real, tangible and tactile reminder of her current life in Ohio and not her imagined life of glamour on celluloid. She can no longer avoid the harsh reality of her condition. The emotions rendered visible through film attendance cannot sustain her to bear the bleakness of her home life with Cholly. This is the crucial moment in which Pauline ceases to view herself as a source of spontaneity or fun; at this juncture, she begins to deny any range of emotion aside from periodic bouts of anger.

While her mother and brother use their ugliness as tools for inflicting pain either on oneself or others, Pecola uses her perceived ugliness as a means of constructing a sense of invisibility and self-loathing. Using her ugliness to conceal and veil herself is a means of making herself as invisible as the narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The Breedloves use their understanding of their familial condition of pain, ugliness, and perhaps even blackness to construct an alternate reality. The Breedloves fall prey to the same misconceived cultural view as the women who attend land grant colleges and instruct children in the art of obedience to white masters. Make no mistake, the Breedloves live passionately and experience a range of emotions, but they are limited because they are using a different set of cultural measuring sticks. Though they embody



certain funky characteristics, they consistently compare them to white expectations of propriety and beauty. Pecola cannot conceive of herself as beautiful if she cannot fathom blackness as that which is capable of beauty or emotionally positive or anything other than a source of contempt for that matter. From there, it is only natural Pecola should desire the blue eyes belonging to Shirley Temple found on her favorite glassware.

Even her appeal to a local “Spiritualist and Psychic Reader” is itself a spectacle. Young Pecola visits Soaphead Church and asks him to miraculously turn her eyes blue, which, she reasons, would make them beautiful and by extension, she herself would be different and perhaps even beautiful (46). Church, however, is a child molester. What begins as a bleak story becomes even more extraordinarily so when Pecola appeals to a child molester for assistance or a miraculous work. Morrison writes: “Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people” (46-47). Morrison’s novel is an argument for knowing one’s own worth and not using societal expectations as a unit of measurement.

Upon hearing her plea for blue eyes, Soaphead Church experiences his own range of emotions:

He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. (174)

Blackness, here, functions as a commentary on identity but also as an ontological state—without hope, bleak. Blue eyes are a means of entering the sanitized primer, which is truly a bleak world devoid of emotion. Pecola views her blackness as the source of distaste with which all white people view her (49). Her understanding of self is no different from that of her classmates. When bullied by her African American schoolmates, Pecola is called a “Black e mo.” Claudia, Pecola’s friend, notes that, “It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth” (65). Claudia, the young girl who also refuses to admire Shirley Temple and Greta Garbo, is quick to note that the source of this slur is self-loathing. The children are just as susceptible to societal expectations and views of what constitutes beauty as their parents and adult figureheads.

Church knows Pecola is a victim of the propaganda surrounding white beauty but is powerless to do anything to alter the public’s perception. The irony of Pecola’s appeal to Soaphead in assisting her as she works through her inability to feel the range of emotions found in an eruption of funk is that this adult contains and restricts his emotions to an extreme. Soaphead Church lives a cloistered life because he cannot tolerate decay or the range of emotions produced from interacting with the world. His engagements are contained and limited in his role as “Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams.” His interactions with patrons are minimal. Church craves objects that once served as personal belongings, but he cannot withstand interactions with people. These objects become totems or ways of interacting with humanity without subjecting himself to actual physical or emotional connections with people:

It was as though his disdain of human contact had converted itself into a craving for things humans had touched. The residue of the human spirit smeared on inanimate objects was all he could withstand of humanity. To contemplate, for example, evidence of human footsteps on the mat—absorb the smell of the quilt and wallow in the sweet certainty that many bodies had sweated, slept, dreamed, made love, been ill, and even died under it. Wherever he went, he took along his things, and was always searching for others. This thirst for worn things led to casual but habitual examinations of trash barrels in alleys and wastebaskets in public places. (165-166)

Soaphead Church's need for visual order and containment is an extreme version of the policies of order and restriction found in the text. Church is the end point of the progression of this desire. This psychic adviser has reduced his interactions with humans to the point where the desire for human interactions and cultural appreciation has migrated to the items people discard. It appears that that actual eruptions of funk are too overwhelming for Soaphead Church. His ability to understand the human condition is through an interaction with the psychic and physical residue left clinging to items such as quilts, tin cans, or doormats. For Church, funk can only be interpreted and appreciate through other sensory engagement—the look of footprints or the smell and feel of a family quilt. He seeks to slyly view the detritus of the eruptions women such Junior's mother, Geraldine, beat back with extreme aggression because of its threat to order. In the context of his abuse, his interactions with people vis-à-vis their objects and totems becomes a way to mediate the world at large. Morrison largely ignores his pedophilia and instead focuses on the intensity of his relationships with objects and the lingering human residue they contain. Perhaps Morrison allows her readers to gloss over Soaphead Church's role as child molester because in the context of the community which has condemned Pecola to a view of herself as ugly, he is no better or worse than the other

citizens complicit in the act. Demetrakopoulos reminds us, “No one is indicted for Pecola’s destruction, but then in another way we all are. If no one is guilty, there is no scapegoat; the vision becomes more akin to the ancient Necessity, the bleak, irrevocable, futile-to-resist, faceless impingement of an inescapable destiny.”<sup>9</sup>

The root of Soaphead Church’s desire to grant Pecola her wish for blue eyes is in his understanding that she is treated as if she is human debris but is perhaps also rooted in his pedophilia. She becomes the human form of the totems he seeks in alleyways and garbage pails. Her fractured psyche is the result of “All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us” (205). Pecola is the fusion of neat and (perceived) nasty; she is the link between Soaphead Church’s need for cleanliness yet his desire to root through garbage in search of items upon which humans have left affectual fingerprints. This quest, he reminds us, is not so confusing after all: “The most exquisite-looking ladies sat on toilets, and the most dreadful-looking had pure and holy yearnings” (173).

### **Social and Spatial Containment in Cities and Follicles**

In the 1920s, boxing was the most lucrative sport in America. Architect and boxing promoter Tex Rickard envisioned arenas across the country that promoted a level of intimacy between spectators and athletes so much so that fans should be able to see

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<sup>9</sup> Demetrakopoulos, 36.

“the sweat of the boxers’ brows.”<sup>10</sup> The Boston Garden was one of his creations and opened for business in 1928. This sense of intimate space was critical to the success of James Brown’s April 5, 1968, concert at the Garden that helped quell rioting in the city the evening after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. As one critic of Brown’s concert has noted, the distance between spectators and performers was considerably less than in most comparably sized arenas. The compact scale contributed to a distinct home-court advantage for the city’s professional athletes, but it also meant that hostile situations were impossible to ignore.<sup>11</sup> Concert promoter David Atwood has been quoted as saying, “The old Garden was great. It had a wonderful intimacy. You could smell the people.”<sup>12</sup>

Brown’s concert took place as scheduled on the evening of April 5. However, city officials pleaded with the singer to televise the concert in an effort to keep people off the streets. The move is “at once a calculated distraction and a conciliatory gesture toward the city’s black population.”<sup>13</sup> Brown becomes a conductor or figurehead for the city in its attempt to keep the city quiet despite the anger and threat of violence. In *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti writes that a great conductor’s attention

is everywhere at once. He is inside the mind of every player. He knows not only what each *should* be doing, but also what he *is* doing. He is the living embodiment of law, both positive and negative... Thus for the orchestra the conductor literally embodies the work they are playing, the

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<sup>10</sup> James Sullivan, *The Hardest Working Man: How James Brown Saved the Soul of America* (New York: Gotham, 2008), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Sullivan, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, 10.

simultaneity of the sounds as well as their sequence; and since, during the performance, nothing is supposed to exist except this work, for so long is the conductor the ruler of the world.<sup>14</sup>

In taking on the responsibility of the city's safety, Brown must speak to those few thousand fans that attended the concert as well as the thousands if not million fans watching from home during the initial broadcast as well as its replay several times throughout the night. Brown must contain and sustain his audience's attention to guarantee a peaceful evening where nothing takes greater prominence than his performance. Over the course of the concert, Brown leads three orchestras—his Garden audience, the televised audience, and his backing band The Famous Flames as they perform for both groups of viewers.

Brown is able to entertain and assuage his audience throughout most of the performance until the end. His concert ran contrary to most perceptions of his abilities as performer. *Soul* magazine, for example, described Brown's performances as instigating chaos: "What James Brown does to audiences has been keenly observed by psychologists. It is a study in inciting mass, frenzied hysteria."<sup>15</sup> After building tension throughout the evening only to release the anxiety through a series of his signature screams, Brown's audience was not placated. Near the conclusion of his set, Brown transitioned into his current hit, "I Can't Stand Myself (When You Touch Me)." For the bulk of the telecast, the audience was invisible but occasionally heard. At this point, the audience is excited and visible. As Brown began performing "I Can't Stand Myself," the

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<sup>14</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* Trans. Carol Stewart. (New York: Viking, 1962), 396.

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan, 31.

primary camera pulled back to expose the silhouettes and a few faces of front-row spectators reaching up to touch Brown as he strutted across the stage. The small audience heightens the intimacy of the Garden further in attendance. As Brown begins singing, one young man launches himself on stage and attempts to touch the singer before two bouncers shove him back into the crowd. Others soon follow the young man's lead and attempt to climb on-stage. As dozens of other young fans follow suit, Brown stops performing altogether as police and security swarm the stage to tell them he can fend for himself. The audience cheers loudly as each individual moves toward Brown.

One young man takes advantage of the moment to stand on the stage next to his hero and get his attention. Nearly a dozen other young men do the same, which is when Brown realizes he has lost control over the situation. Not only does he need to placate the fans in his immediate presence, he must ensure viewers at home are not going to walk away from their television sets. Brown recognized a need to keep his audience engaged and in order as well. When dozens of adolescents began climbing on stage to dance with Brown, he ordered the police to leave them alone and asked the stage-climbers to return to their seats after recognizing he could not continue the performance with so many fans surrounding him on the stage and speaking into his microphone. The houselights come on and Brown pleads with his fans to allow him to finish the show. They fail to listen to him, and he adopts a stern tone when an increasing number of fans storm the stage. He sternly tells them,

We gotta show that we're young men and young ladies... This is no way. We are black. Don't make us all look bad. Let me finish doing his show.... Let's represent our own selves. Let's represent ourselves. You're making me look very bad because I asked the police to step back, and you

wouldn't go down. You're not being fair to yourselves and me either and all of your race. I asked the police to step back to get some respect for my own people. Now are we together or ain't we?<sup>16</sup>

Brown actively chooses to assume responsibility for his audience's behavior. While he mentions several times his concern for looking "bad," Brown's overall emphasis is on the depiction of African Americans as a whole. He earlier shouted that the audience should "stand up and be counted" and is here forcing the audience to consider the implications of not acting with the goal of group solidarity and maintaining the dynamic in mind. Brown refused to allow his audience to be depicted or interpreted as a collectively disruptive entity that would undermine the goal of televising the concert—containing an audience and encouraging orderly behavior. Despite making a career out of driving listeners and viewers to the point of frenzy and emotional outbursts, Brown cannot stand to witness *this* audience on *this* evening become a spontaneous eruption of chaos or emotional response. The order he has been called in to establish has been undermined by his inability to contain the emotions and hysteria generated in his audience. Whereas on other evenings the issue of a rowdy audience would be an annoyance perhaps, on the evening following King's assassination, a chaotic audience poses a palpable political threat. Funk, in this instance, is linked with political insurgency and the emotionally aggressive behavior triggered by this insurgency. At this moment of vulnerability, funk becomes a force to both incite riots or riotous behavior while also seeking to instigate order and regulation. This is a career-defining moment that forces Brown to negotiate regulation and spontaneous eruptions of funk or fail publicly.

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<sup>16</sup> James Brown, *Live at the Boston Garden: April 5, 1968* (Los Angeles: Shout Factory, 2008).



Nowhere is the constant need for negotiation between regulation and eruptions of funk more visible and more publicly vulnerable than in Brown's hairstyles. If one were to track Brown's changing styles from the beginning of his career until the late 1970s, his hair—and perhaps even his clothing to a certain extent—follow the major male trends of each era. He eventually adopts what became his trademark helmet of longish, straightened hair that perhaps mimics the fashion of the “mod” style prevalent in the 1960s. Brown retained this distinctive cut for roughly the last twenty years of his life, and it became as important to his public persona as his infamous onstage cape routine. In fact, he referred to his hair and clothes as his “trademarks” in interviews.<sup>17</sup>

Though later in life Brown may not have possessed as much cultural capital as he did during the height of his popularity in the 1960s around the time of the Boston Garden concert and early 1970s, his style remained, at the very least, distinct and memorable. As the self-proclaimed “Godfather of Soul” and “Minister of the New Super Heavy Funk,” his style exemplifies the “funkiness” the characters in Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* attempt to rid themselves of—the very funk found at the edges of their hair and in the texture of their hair.

Brown's processed hair was his signature look throughout his extended career. Straightened, processed hair requires a series of steps (or a process) to ensure consistency. This level of consistency was vital to the creation of a signature public image or persona for Brown. When describing his first “conk” or hair straightening,

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<sup>17</sup> Aldore D. Collier, “James Brown ‘The Godfather of Soul’ Celebrates 50 Years in Showbiz and Is Still Going Strong!” *Jet* 8 May 2006: 54-55.

Malcolm X describes the physical transformation he experiences in conjunction with physical pain. Malcolm describes the experience processing his hair as follows:

The congolene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire. I gritted my teeth....My eyes watered, my nose was running. I couldn't stand it any longer; I bolted to the washbasin....My scalp still flamed, but not as badly....My first view in the mirror blotted out the hurting....The *transformation*, after the lifetime of kinks, is staggering....On top of my head was this thick, smooth sheen of shining red hair....as straight as any white man's.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of removing kinks using chemicals, a man's hair becomes longer and able to be styled more intricately. Malcolm X and James Brown cannot adopt the popular pompadour style of the era without first straightening and, as a result, lengthening their hair. The "transformation" Malcolm X experiences may be read as a painful transition to a new persona characterized by smooth, shiny hair. Though his hair is coded as similar to that of a white man, his appropriation of the style does not serve as an example of racial treason as Malcolm X later suggests but instead signifies a form of repetition with a difference. The re-inscription and transformation of style signifies the birth of a new persona or public personality. The manipulation of one's hair is a means of translating the phrase "This is who I am" into a visually arresting form. James Brown is no different in terms of allowing his hair to "speak" to the position he has attained just as Pecola Breedlove allows her perceived ugliness to speak to her lot in life.

Brown's hair speaks to a number of issues, as Valerie Boyd suggests:

But James Brown—processed hair and all—is the ultimate eruption of The Funk. James Brown represents the connection between educated black folks, who recognize his masterful contribution to music (black, white,

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<sup>18</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965.) (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 55-56. Italics mine.

and otherwise), and those other black folks, sometimes thought of as members of an outlaw underclass, who also listen to JB's music but who read Donald Goines instead of Toni Morrison and who sometimes actually wear their hair like James Brown.

James Brown's funky music brings both these groups of black folks—and everybody in between—together. And his grunts and rhythms, familiar as our own heartbeats, help us to recognize our commonalities rather than harp on our differences. James Brown—with all his soul, his splits, his screams, his cold sweats, his grittiness, his swaggering ego, his contradictions, his pride and his appeal—is The Funk personified.<sup>19</sup>

Boyd writes views Brown's physical embodiment of "The Funk" as an expression of his reinvention as well as his ability to potentially speak across racial, gender, and class divisions. This embodiment is the creation of a visually arresting presence or spectacle. After spending an extended period of his childhood in a brothel and shining shoes to raise money for groceries, Brown's ability to pay to have his hair carefully styled signifies social mobility and the potential for perpetual transformation. Once again, Brown must constantly negotiate between eruptions and regulation—even down to the hairs on his head. Boyd's invocation of Brown's "splits...screams," etc. reminds us his appeal resided in the ability to perform and manipulate the audience into believing his persona was extraordinary. The Funk, it follows, is the defining characteristic of Brown's on-stage persona—the one required to appease angry Bostonians following Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination—as well as the trait that marks Toni Morrison's characters as socially and stylistically undesirable to a specific set of middle-class African American women.

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<sup>19</sup> Boyd.

In November 2003, Brown commemorated the fortieth anniversary of his groundbreaking *Live at the Apollo* recording by returning to perform at the Apollo Theater for two evenings. In his 2005 autobiography, *I Feel Good*, the artist recalls the performances with a sense of satisfaction:

[T]his latest edition of my Revue... proved to be one of the greatest triumphs of my career. I'd lost weight, I was in fighting-style thin and trim, my face was not as hard-looking or as bloated as it had been in recent years, my mustache was gone, my voice was stronger, and I still had what some call charisma—and what I call soul. I mean, brother, I was *ready* and I was *there*.<sup>20</sup>

What Brown emphasizes is his physical appearance at the age of seventy. His description is brimming with masculine overtones from his “fighting-style” weight to facial hair or lack thereof. His body has been transformed back into his visually arresting persona, James Brown the Performer. His voice is described as “stronger”—perhaps more commanding or deeper—than it had been. These characteristics are signifiers of control and command of his public image. More importantly, however, these descriptors are designed to emphasize a certain level of youthful vitality.

In January 2004, just a few months after the transformed soul singer returned to the Apollo, Brown was arrested on charges of domestic violence. His mug shot appeared on national news outlets as well as major newspapers. What was particularly damning about this image was the way in which Brown violated his imperative to always look like someone extraordinary and put together. Here, his hair is disheveled; he sports whiskers and is wearing only a colorful bathrobe. His appearance is completely unkempt and

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<sup>20</sup> James Brown, *I Feel Good: A Memoir of a Life of Soul* (New York: New American Library, 2005), 42.

visually disruptive. His wife/accuser informed a local newspaper she attempted to give the police a comb and clean clothes for the singer as he was taken away from his South Carolina home. When asked about her husband's peculiar appearance, she stated:

I asked them not to take the Godfather out looking like that... We had gone for three days with no power and no heat and we were freezing to death. Mr. Brown woke up that morning disheveled and I wanted to leave. I wasn't allowed to. That's when I made the 911 call, that's when the chair was raised over my head and that's when the police came.<sup>21</sup>

Details of the circumstances leading to his bizarre appearance, such as those provided by Brown's wife, were noticeably absent in most articles and captions accompanying the image. Instead, Brown's image circulated not as an emblem of the former "Hardest Working Man in Show Business" but as that of a tired, deranged, old man with minimal sex appeal—a far cry from the commanding man of the Apollo concerts several months prior. All previous efforts in establishing a polished visual representation throughout his career were quickly undermined if not altogether ruined as this came to be the dominant image his persona embodied in the mainstream media and consciousness. Brown shifts from using the visual medium as a positive component of his spectacular persona to facing the consequences of his images used in a negative manner. Without his own funky say-so, his image becomes a spectacle of humiliation and consequences as opposed to a spectacle of pride and positive publicity not to mention the repercussions for an arrest on charges of domestic violence.

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<sup>21</sup> Guylaine Cadorette, "James Brown's Wife Explains Wild Mug Shot, Britney's Tour Bus Takes a Wild Ride, J.Lo's Mom Wins \$2.4 Million Jackpot." 6 April 2004. Internet. <<http://www.hollywood.com/news/detail/id/1748354>>.

Tomi Rae Brown's comments are curious in several additional ways. Brown's wife, when speaking to the press, refers to her husband as "the Godfather" or "Mr. Brown" as opposed to other signifiers or descriptors such as "my husband" or "James." It is almost as though Brown is being taken off-stage—here, his home—with a different form of his usual satin cape: what appears to be a colorful, fleece bathrobe. At this moment, the order and regulated appearance he has worked nearly 70 years to maintain has been disrupted. His appearance is indicative of the struggle of his art: the negotiation between visual or emotional eruption and the need for regulation.

The irony of this photograph lies in the circulation of the image and monetary transactions. Both fans and detractors paid to consume the image by purchasing newspapers or mass-produced items featuring the image on Internet auction sites. Though Brown would argue that at this moment, he does not appear to be the extraordinary figure one would want to "pay to see," some consumers are indeed paying to catch a glimpse of his peculiar presence. This invocation of a financial transaction may be viewed as a form of visual prostitution. Angela McRobbie notes, "[Walter] Benjamin returns repeatedly to fashion, though it is significant that he links fashion with prostitution and that he also takes it as emblematic of the trivial and of course of the feminine."<sup>22</sup> Brown's notion of maintaining an appearance worthy of payment appears to have some resemblance to the pornographic. The price of admission guarantees his audience a look at his hypersexualized stage performance of funk and soul. In this instance the general public operates voyeuristically to take in Brown without hours of

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<sup>22</sup> Angela McRobbie, *Post-Modernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 113.

styling as well as his moment of public humiliation regarding not only his appearance but also the accusations of domestic violence. America once again had conflicting views of Brown. Some relished the moment of his fall while others were embarrassed because of the potential humiliation of an entire community. Just as Brown was confused and disgusted with the behavior of some Boston teens on the evening of April 5, 1968, so too were some Americans in light of his arrest and appearance.

Returning to Tomi Rae's commentary, her use of "Mr. Brown," especially in conjunction with the accusation of domestic violence—a crime motivated by power and dominance—is curious. As one journalist has noted, "the exposure of his bullying abuse of women might seem to have made squalid hypocrisy of his calls for universal love and self-respect."<sup>23</sup> Regardless, Tomi Rae's refusal to mention her husband's first name indicates some form of protection, social posturing, or a power relationship. The order and process of their relationship dictates she publicly refers to him by a title or performance moniker.

The ubiquitous 2004 photograph of Brown calls to mind another infamous mug shot—that of philosopher and social activist Angela Y. Davis. Due to her affiliation with the Black Panther Party as well as her involvement in an attempt to free George Jackson from a California courtroom at gunpoint and subsequent evasion of the police, she was placed on the FBI's Most Wanted List. Davis was later acquitted of all charges, but the legacy of the iconography of the hairstyle featured in her mug shot—an Afro—has become what she is most often remembered for as opposed to the motivation or

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Lethem, "Being James Brown" *Rolling Stone*, (29 June 2006), 59.

importance of her actions. Davis' affiliation with the Black Panther Party is curious considering the overtly masculine tone of the organization and its mission.

In an essay reflecting on the legacy of her 1970 FBI poster in which she sports a large Afro, Davis notes that the unprecedented circulation of photographs and films in contemporary society has led to the proliferation of singular images and encourages spectatorship.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Davis' politics and historical impetus were subsequently reduced to a fashion trend; in this case, the politics of liberation are reduced to a single hairstyle—the Afro.<sup>25</sup> She writes, “it is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo.”<sup>26</sup> In her essay, Davis notes that stylistically she was merely mimicking “a whole host of women—both public figures and women [she] encountered in” daily activities.<sup>27</sup> The activist is not remembered as a person but as an organization and styling of tresses. She is remembered for the process by which she styled her hair. Davis cannot escape the legacy of her FBI poster, but Brown could not avoid a similar fate of the reduction of his body of work and significance to the single image of him sporting a wild hairstyle or even slowly limping off-stage draped in a shiny, satin robe. Brown's most recent mug shot overshadows his importance as a musical innovator or perhaps even other career highlights such as his groundbreaking Apollo concerts or appearance at the Boston Garden.

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<sup>24</sup> Angela Davis, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia” in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*. Eds. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green. (New York: NYU P, 1998), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, 23-24.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, 24.



The question at the heart of these mug shots is whether or not hair has become an alternative method of addressing concerns with the concept of race. Kobena Mercer argues the recognition of “good” hair, i.e. straight, European, and smooth, only strengthens the perception that “within racism’s bipolar codifications of human worth, black people’s hair has been historically *devalued* as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin.”<sup>28</sup> Recall Pauline Breedlove’s need to straighten her hair and arrange it in the same style as Jean Harlow. Does Brown’s hair in his mug shot signify that he is not only black but out of control and perhaps even dangerous? Hair, it follows, is raced in the same way in which skin color becomes a means of racial classification. One could presumably “pass” as ethnically or racially signified “non-black” based on hair texture in combination with skin pigmentation. In relation to unspoken social codes, “hair functions as a key *ethnic signifier* because, compared with bodily shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening. Caught on the cusp between self and society, nature and culture, the malleability of hair makes it a sensitive area of expression.”<sup>29</sup> This site is precisely where Brown crosses racial, gender, and class lines to transform into James Brown the Performer. Furthermore, in these photographs, both Brown and Davis are caught in a moment that calls to mind Saidiya Hartman’s exploration of the slave coffle as theater in

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<sup>28</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 101.

<sup>29</sup> Mercer, 103.

*Scenes of Subjection*.<sup>30</sup> In both instances crime becomes a heightened spectacle for public consumption.

Cultural critic Kobena Mercer argues black male identity is perpetually reshaped by the historical and cultural dialectic of power and subordination.<sup>31</sup> That said, Brown's various hairstyles represent a continuous reworking and reconfiguration of these relationships as manifested in power of the rebellious pompadour to the subordinate, unkempt style characteristic of his 2004 mug shot in which he possessed little to no control over his image. Like Malcolm X, each styling represents a new persona.

The dynamic concerning power is further complicated when one thinks of Brown's mug shot in relation to the "cool pose." Majors and Billson describe this pose as "poise under pressure and the ability to maintain detachment, even during tense encounters" as well as

the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control....They manage the impression they communicate to others through the use of an imposing array of masks, acts, and facades....Creating the right image—the most impressive persona—is part of acting in a theater that is seldom dark.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7. Here, Hartman discusses a letter from John Rankin to his brother in which he describes his disgust at the sight of "the obscene theatricality of the slave trade." Hartman also writes of the potential enjoyment in feelings of empathy.

<sup>31</sup> Mercer, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington, 1992), 2 and 4.

Using this description, Brown's hair and stylistic choices allude to his stage performances as a modification of the cool pose. His onstage bravado in conjunction with carefully crafted and manipulated hair suggests the "array of masks, acts, and facades" Majors and Billson mention. These are mechanisms of containing and restraining emotions; this is the process by which he avoids emotional disruptions and maintains control. Utilizing the cool pose is a means of containing and restricting emotion rendered visually; it is an exercise in emotional and physical restriction. In a *Rolling Stone* profile of Brown, bestselling novelist Jonathan Lethem alludes to the singer's use of the cool pose:

The shadow of his abuse of musicians and wives, disturbing as it may be, is covered in the larger shadow of his self-abuse, his torment and unrest, little as James Brown would ever admit to anything but the brash and single-minded confidence and pride he wishes to display. It is as though the cape act is a rehearsal onstage of the succor James Brown could never accept in his real life. It is as though, having come from being dressed in potato sacks for grade school and in the drab uniform of a prisoner to being the most spectacularly garbed individual this side of...Liberace, James Brown found himself compelled also to be the Emperor with No Clothes.<sup>33</sup>

The cool pose is a totalizing means of social reinvention centered on restraint and stoicism, yet Brown appears to adopt ostentatious clothes and elaborate hairstyles in an attempt to create a three-dimensional persona beyond a mere pose. However, this posturing occasionally reveals the problems beneath the façade: "Cool pose helps him achieve a stern, impersonal masculinity in the face of adversity."<sup>34</sup> This is precisely what Lethem unearths in his profile of the soul singer—Liberace with the mentality of the

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<sup>33</sup> Lethem, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Majors and Billson, 28.

Emperor with No Clothes. This combination contributed to his occasional failure to maintain a cool pose or poise under pressure. Brown uses the cool pose the way the Breedloves use their ugliness in *The Bluest Eye*. Such behavior must be mitigated by personal control to minimize spontaneous eruptions or cracks in the façade of put-togetherness.

Few things are simple with Brown—“a man who is also an idea, a problem, a method”<sup>35</sup>—and his emphasis on style is but another example of his many complexities and contradictions. His personal need for control and to contain emotions often conflicted with his production of funk eruptions musically and in the reactions of his audience as evidenced on the evening of April 5, 1968 in Boston. The desire to contain and restrict these eruptions, often rendered visually, connect Brown’s performance as well as his 2004 arrest for domestic violence with the underlying necessity for regulation and containment in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Funk, as a force of imagination and emotional output, necessitates the need for the regulation of hair as well as music.

Despite being one of the earliest innovators of funk, Brown’s hair represents a desire to suppress an eruption of funk found in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. The force which terrifies the children (and even some adults) in the novel more than any other is the fear of being turned outdoors and devoid of the security and regulation of the home. The Breedloves were on the verge of living outdoors because they could not control their emotional excess or tame their anger regarding their ugliness. Their domestic existence lacked security and was instead overwhelmed by the fears typically associated with the

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<sup>35</sup> Lethem, 55.

outdoors. The four walls could not provide adequate protection to deflect any negativity generated by their emotional outbursts or abuse.

James Brown's 2004 mug shot and later career trajectory suffered a similar fate. During one of his weaker moments, Brown could not contain his anger and rage regarding his current condition. Instead of reacting logically or thoughtfully to his wife's query and desire to leave their home, the singer was forcibly removed after attacking his wife with a chair. Brown's abusive behavior was an act of excessive aggression and thoughtlessness. As a result, he experienced his own version of the outdoors. His image circulated with the same level of shame as Morrison's characters who violate the social imperative to maintain an orderly, well-behaved existence. Much like the characters of *The Bluest Eye*, Brown experienced the range of public humiliation associated with behavior that refused containment. As the physical embodiment of funk according to Valerie Boyd, Brown became too much for even himself to contain just as Pecola Breedlove became so overwhelmed by society's insistence on her ugliness that she retreated into a world of her own making. Both dissolved into respective states of rage and madness.

## Chapter 4:

### “Pass The Peas”: In Search of Musical Nourishment

“Hey Bobby! Why do you like soul food?”

“Because it makes me haaaappy”

--The J.B.’s “Pass the Peas” (1972)<sup>1</sup>

“The dude is as down as a chitlin’.”

--Unknown African American teenager upon exiting a James Brown concert (1970)<sup>2</sup>

Emotional eating. Comfort food. We eat to live, and for some of us, food is tied to how we feel about ourselves and what happens to be going on around us. In 1971, James Brown’s bandleader, Fred Wesley, Jr., and a mix of studio musicians and other members of Brown’s band entered the studio to record a number of instrumental tunes. The album, *Food for Thought*, contained a number of food-oriented songs, one of which was “Pass the Peas.” The spoken word introduction to the song sums up the appeal of soul food—the happiness that results from its consumption perhaps due to taste or even to the thoughts or nostalgia these food-oriented feelings may provoke. Funk can encourage the reader or listener to consume a particular body of work as if it were truly edible. As the J.B.’s suggest, food offers emotional and well as nutritional sustenance.

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<sup>1</sup> The J.B.’s “Pass the Peas,” Polydor, People 607, 1972. The song was released as a single in April of 1972.

<sup>2</sup> M. Cordell Thompson, “James Brown Goes Through Some New Changes,” *Jet* (December 30, 1971), 56.

For figures such as actress and activist Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor or funk leader James Brown, food serves as a reminder of a familiar time and place. Brown recalls his childhood and the meals he shared with his father near a turpentine camp and was later in life known to always have a trunk filled with Dinty Moore canned beef stew on hand while traveling overseas as his career began to skyrocket. Once, after performing in Gabon, Brown and his band were invited to a banquet and reception in their honor held at a high-ranking dignitary's home. Fred Wesley, Jr., Brown's bandleader at the time of the incident, recalls the event and Brown's response to the elaborate banquet:

After the show, we all were treated to a reception and an elaborate dinner during which champagne flowed unceasingly and the food was prime everything—from lobster to some elegantly prepared local dishes. Mr. Brown, who always traveled with a trunk full of American canned goods and nabs, had his man Leon Austin—a jack-of-all-trades friend of his from Augusta who did everything from singing to hairdressing to cooking—open up a couple cans of Dinty Moore beef stew for him and his immediate entourage. [The host of the event], who could have very well been insulted, took it as funny and graciously asked to taste the canned delicacy. He patronizingly said, with his French-African accent, “very good.”<sup>3</sup>

For Brown, a man overwhelmed by a sense of paranoia, asking his valet to open a can of Dinty Moore beef stew provides a sense of security and familiarity. Despite the allure of champagne, lobster, and any number of carefully prepared local delicacies, Brown was more inclined to dine on his own preferred comfort food—or food for the soul. Food, in this instance, offers a source of refuge and familiarity due to the consistency of canned products. Every can of stew should maintain the same consistency and taste, especially if it is prepared in the same manner by his friend Leon Austin. This “common” food

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Wesley, Jr., *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 177-178.

Wesley and the event's host appear to mock is a symbol of regularity on an otherwise chaotic concert stop in a foreign country; for Brown, to forgo the lobster and other delicacies in favor of a private stash of Dinty Moore is a sign of a complex blend of resistance to the hospitality of the dignitary and consistency regarding his diet that appears contradictory. In recounting the story of Brown's refusal to take part in such a grand occasion, Wesley undermines his employer's authority by casting him as a difficult guest unwilling to take part in celebratory meal and mocking him for his questionable gustatory choices. Brown, in the description presented by Wesley, insists on eating canned goods much a like a child who refuses to eat the family meal until he is served a can of Chef Boyardee.

For activist, actress, and chef Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, memories of family hunting trips segue into recipes for smothered squirrel. In the case of both Fred Wesley, Jr., who recounts the Dinty Moore episode, and Smart-Grosvenor, specific foods are associated with memories and the emotional responses triggered by their recollection. These associations generate an altered ontological state on the part of the person reminiscing. The difference, however, is that while Brown may recall specific meals or even keep those meals close at hand, Smart-Grosvenor isn't content to merely comment on what she ate at a specific moment in her lifetime; to experience the full range of emotion associated with the memory, she must document the recipe and encourage her readers to join her in consuming both the dish as well as the sensory experiences of cooking and eating these fondly remembered dishes.



Reading a cookbook bears a striking similarity to listening to a musical performance in that it calls for a physical reaction—to get in the kitchen and demonstrate a creative response or perhaps conjure memories of past meals. Musicians ranging from James Brown to Coolio have entered the gastronomic world in an effort to raise money for social justice concerns or to recast the kitchen as no longer an exclusively feminine space.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter I investigate the ways in which funk engages with culinary production through recipes, celebrity food endorsements, and the mythology surrounding soul food to create an eruption of emotional response.

Throughout this chapter I tease out the way “soul food” in conjunction with funk music serves as shorthand for the “link between psychic identity and eating.”<sup>5</sup> Authors such as Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor and Ntozake Shange demonstrate the ways in which both fiction and autobiography may be told through recipes, anecdotes, and poetry while musicians enter the kitchen to play with masculinity and the role of emotional response to culinary adventures. Smart-Grosvenor and Shange are intriguing authors due to the complexity of their views on soul food; they emphasize the Diasporic origins of soul food to include African, Southern, Caribbean, and Hispanic foods. Both authors address the issues pertaining to the valuation of food as tied to cultural preconceptions.<sup>6</sup> While including alternative origins of soul food and calling for a more all-encompassing view of soul food as a culinary genre, Smart-Grosvenor also pushes the limits of genre through a

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<sup>4</sup> In the wake of a string of arrests in the 1990s, Brown began selling a line of prepackaged cookies. A portion of the proceeds went to charity.

<sup>5</sup> Rafia Zafar, “The Signifying Dish: Autobiography and History in Two Black Women’s Cookbooks,” *Feminist Studies* 25.2 (1999), 463.

<sup>6</sup> Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 160.

work that is part cookbook and part autobiography. Her story is interconnected with that of soul food. The fascinating aspect of Smart-Grosvenor's culinary and publication career is her wavering public opinions regarding soul food. She cries out for a more inclusive look at the genre in terms of geographic influence but periodically shies away from addressing soul food in relation to Black Power. Her investment in documenting her story and writing about cooking African American or soul foods in Europe "implicitly acknowledges European connections and affiliations. Yet like many other African Americans, she tries to keep a distance from 'white' ancestry. To affirm 'down-home' food in the belly of 'Western civilization' thus keeps Smart-Grosvenor's priorities as a Black activist clear" if not always explicit.<sup>7</sup>

Shange approaches soul food from a variety of angles—poetry, novels, and cookbooks. The exhaustive collection of different variations on the recipe serves as an invitation to "the reader to participate, to use the recipes to create her own versions, adding to the repertoire of knowledge cataloged in the novel."<sup>8</sup> For this chapter, I chose to focus on Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* as well as her cookbook that, much like the work of Smart-Grosvenor, incorporates elements of autobiography alongside recipes to expand the discourse surrounding what constitutes soul food. Furthermore, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor contributed the foreword to Shange's cookbook *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*.

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<sup>7</sup> Zafar 456.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia E. Clark, "Archiving Epistemologies and the Narrativity of Recipes in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*" *Callaloo* (30.1 2007), 156.

## Good Vibrations: Soul Food or Food for the Soul

Consider the intricacies of the cuisine itself. Chef Bob Jeffries notes that as of 1969, he had been “cooking ‘soul’ for over forty years—only we did not call it that back home. We just called it real good cooking, southern style. However if you want to be real technical on the subject, while all soul food is southern food, not all southern food is ‘soul.’”<sup>9</sup> Jeffries touches upon some of the key issues related to considerations of soul food which typically fall into three camps: African American intellectuals arguing for the distinctive nature of soul food wrapped in an intellectual debate regarding cultural property; white intellectuals arguing that soul food is merely Southern regional cuisine; and the Nation of Islam, natural food advocates, and college educated African Americans who view soul food as toxic and not worthy of celebration or study.<sup>10</sup>

I am less interested in whether or not soul food is Southern, toxic, or sifting through the baggage of intellectual property so much as I am invested in the ontological response triggered by the engagement with the preparation and consumption of what is identified as soul food in the sense that it is “food for the soul.” Cookbook authors Pearl Bowser and Joan Eckstein describes soul food as music:

Soul food is a kind of music. The melody has been shaped by the land, mellowed by the many who have played its different tunes—from the chefs and cooks in the kitchens of the South, to the black cowboy cooks of the Old West, to the average momma keeping her own kitchen—and interwoven with the themes of many cultures.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bob Jeffries, *Soul Food Cookbook* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), vii.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog & Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 138.

<sup>11</sup> Pearl Bowser and Joan Eckstein, *A Pinch of Soul* (New York: Avon, 1970), 11.

Furthermore, “Soul food grew in the way that soul music grew—out of necessity, out of the need to express the ‘group soul.’”<sup>12</sup> The authors emphasize the collective identity of those who prepare and consume soul foods in their various forms. Soul food appeals to different demographics precisely because of its origins in necessity and expression. Soul food possesses an elasticity that can expand according to need. Bowser and Eckstein continue their definition to state,

Soul food arouses a nostalgia for Sunday evening church dinner or for sitting around the kitchen table just being together over a pot of something. It represents a legacy of good eating bequeathed to us by our parents and grandparents, not in the grand style, but rather what we call ‘homestyle.’<sup>13</sup>

While James Brown’s taste for Dinty Moore beef stew may not fall under the category of soul food in any traditional sense, the utility of the food serves the same purpose as traditional soul foods in terms of generating nostalgia and a sense of community.

One concern I have noticed in the literature surrounding this particular type of cuisine, which I find relevant to my analysis, is the way in which soul food’s origins are tied up in either a defense or feelings of indignation concerning poverty or class. Though soul food is quickly and often identified alongside southern or plantation cooking, this cuisine is usually described in terms of poverty and its relationship to white consumers:

Many of the dishes on a soul food menu could also be found on southern white tables, particularly those of working classes and Appalachian mountain residents—cornbread, macaroni and cheese, rice, biscuits, butter beans, black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, fried chicken, greens, cakes, and pies. Some foods became iconic celebrations of the hardships of the past, symbolizing the resourcefulness but also the poverty of their lives as these

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<sup>12</sup> Bowser and Eckstein, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Bowser and Eckstein, 12.

were foods that were undesirable (in some cases even discarded as garbage) or inexpensive—chitlins, pig’s feet, cornbread, catfish, collards, or turnip greens. In 1958, The National Council of Negro Women published a cookbook, *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*, that helped establish a canon of soul foods.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, historian Lucy Long identifies “canonical” soul foods and links them to class issues from which many contemporary chefs, activists, and authors seek to distance themselves. Poverty becomes downplayed as resourcefulness is touted. Of the numerous soul food cookbooks I have read, most emphasize the economical aspects of choosing specific cuts of meat or ingredients. Coolio, for example, offers suggestions to save money using certain ingredients as options and does not assume his audience lacks the availability of premium ingredients in *Cooking with Coolio: 5-Star Meals at a 1-Star Price*. While Long and others emphasize a certain level of “undesirability” to specific foods, Bob Jeffries reminds us that to different palates, including his own, this particular cuisine produces “real good cooking.” Taste is subjective, and my interest resides in the subjective components of its production and consumption.

James Brown, for example, only references any food let alone soul food with any sort of regularity in the early parts of his autobiography *The Godfather of Soul* when discussing his childhood, which was marked by poverty and isolation. Shortly after his mother ran off with another man, Brown and his father lived a transient life on the outskirts of Barnwell, South Carolina. He recalls these early years,

Life out in the woods with my father was rough. We lived in a series of  
shacks all around the Barnwell and Elko areas. We lived in one as long as

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<sup>14</sup> Lucy Long, *Regional American Food Culture* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 23-24.

the people gave my father work. When he lost a job or tried to find better work, we moved on. The shacks were unpainted, didn't have windows except for shutters that you could pull together; and there was no electricity or indoor plumbing. But we did have plenty of firewood for the stove. My father chopped it, and we threw in some kerosene or fatty pine to start the fire.

We ate black-eyed peas and lima beans, fatback and syrup, polk salad that we picked in the woods, and corn bread. Although the diet never varied, there was almost always enough. But I was unhappy because I was alone all the time.<sup>15</sup>

Brown sandwiches his memory of meals between two competing thoughts of transience and isolation. Brown, here, is describing the condition the children in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* fear the most—being outdoors. He is without the security of boundaries separating nature and the comforts of home. He emphasizes the lack of plumbing and electricity alongside his perpetual loneliness yet contrasts them with the ontological security found in black-eyed peas and the like. These specific foods stand out to Brown as being characteristic of his youth but also serve as a source of comfort. Despite whatever housing situation he and his father may have faced or any feelings of loneliness consuming him, James Brown always had enough food to eat, and these nutritional and emotionally restorative victuals were canonical soul foods. The chaos of his early years was mitigated by the consistency—perhaps even rhythm—of food and regular meals. Ironically, Brown never once mentions the notion of “soul food” in either of his autobiographies despite linking his name and musical “brand” with subsidized songs referencing soul food for his bandleader Fred Wesley, Jr.<sup>16</sup> Brown, it should be noted,

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<sup>15</sup> James Brown, *The Godfather of Soul: An Autobiography* (1986. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>16</sup> In *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), Wesley describes the process of recording and composing notable tunes such as “Pass the Peas,” “Watermelon Man,” and “Giving Up

places his earliest gustatory memories in the context of his relationship with his father's ability to secure employment and housing as opposed to rooting these memories in relation to his mother or other maternal figure.

What Brown omits from his autobiography is another significant food venture. In the 1960s, celebrities began opening any number of roadside restaurants, many of which sold fried chicken. After the success of a restaurant using the likeness and name of country singer and entertainer Minnie Pearl, a number of African American celebrities ranging from Aretha Franklin to Muhammad Ali to Mahalia Jackson dabbled in endorsements.<sup>17</sup> Not to be outdone, after hearing of Franklin's success, Brown opened his own chain of restaurants under the name Golden Platter.<sup>18</sup> The menu consisted of soul and Southern food staples such as fried chicken, cole slaw, cornbread, catfish, hushpuppies, and "less cultured hamburgers and cheeseburgers"—all served on gold platters.<sup>19</sup> Brown concedes to the growing popularity of hamburgers in the 1960s, but his menu is hinged on soul food staples. By serving these dishes on a golden platter, Brown elevates the "low" food to a higher status through presentation while also cementing his image as a showman even in the dining room. The platters are a nod to his musical and professional success, yet for all his hard work, the restaurants were nearly immediate

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Food for Funk" among others as a source of freedom from the controlling grasp of Brown. Though he alternates between happiness and displeasure at the memory of recording many of these songs under the band name "Fred Wesley and the J.B.'s," it is worth noting that a number of songs Wesley recorded on behalf of James Brown's musical empire reference food in some capacity.

<sup>17</sup> John T. Edge, *Fried Chicken: An American Story* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 66.

<sup>18</sup> Edge, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Opie, 136.

failures. Perhaps Brown refuses to acknowledge his venture in the world of restaurant management and culinary contributions precisely because of their immediate failures. While the foods may invoke a pleasant sensation of nostalgia, the memory of this failed business venture appears to eliminate any happy feelings, and Brown seeks to distance himself from any public disappointment.

What is intriguing about the number of celebrity-endorsed restaurants in the 1960s and 1970s is the predominance of women linked with these chains. In *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*, Doris Witt argues that throughout the twentieth century, African American women and food have frequently been connected and indeed conflated. She argues that this connection has structured “twentieth-century U.S. psychic, cultural, sociopolitical, and economic life” through an investigation of the marketing techniques behind Aunt Jemima pancake mix, the “emergence” of soul food, and the production of cookbooks by African American authors, among other culinary phenomena over the course of the century.<sup>20</sup> She identifies the prevailing theme of African American cookbooks, particularly those written during the 1960s as insistent on the notion that African American culinary arts were improvisatory in nature and therefore unable to be written.<sup>21</sup> This echoes criticism of the production of African American musical forms such as jazz, soul, and funk in the mythology surrounding their inception and continued artistic creation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Witt, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Witt, 13.

<sup>22</sup> A number of cookbook authors and critics compare the evolution of soul food to the creation of jazz in its paradoxical relationship to European traditions. Bob Jeffries, a chef and cookbook author, insists the



Witt points to cookbook author, activist, and actress Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor in particular for propagating this notion as well as identifying this precept as a form of resistance. Witt writes, “Grosvenor herself participated in the development of this culinary precept, which has operated not only as a strategy of resistance to white appropriations of black culture, but also as a means for upwardly mobile African Americans to affirm their racial authenticity.”<sup>23</sup> Smart-Grosvenor’s 1970 “underground classic” cookbook/memoir, *Vibration Cooking, or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, for example, omits oven temperatures or exact measurements for certain ingredients and instead encourages readers to cook by “vibration” or intuition. She writes in her introduction:

And when I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration. I can tell by the look and smell of it. Most of the ingredients in this book are approximate. Some of the recipes that people gave me list the amounts, but for my part, I just do it by vibration. Different strokes for different folks. Do you thing your way.<sup>24</sup>

This cooking method, therefore, is much like its musical counterpart funk. Cooking by vibration encourages the chef to use the full spectrum of the senses to compose a meal as an experience in the kitchen. The vibrations emitted from one’s kitchen or guitar insists that culinary production and musical production are similar artistic ventures resulting in a multi-sensory experience rooted in feeling. One “feels” while cooking and one “feels”

culinary style “was created and evolved almost without European influence” (*Soul Food Cookbook*, [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969], ix).

<sup>23</sup> Witt, 13. Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor has written and published under a number of different surnames. I use “Smart-Grosvenor” throughout my text because that is the surname she used for the publication of *Vibration Cooking, or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, the text I examine.

<sup>24</sup> Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking, or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*. 1970. (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 3.

while remembering. The author's description of cooking combines vision and scent to the tactility of memory and intuition. The vibrations, of course, are undeniably musical as well. Smart-Grosvenor, who occasionally distances herself from the label of "soul" food chef, writes, "White folks be talkin' about classic and they mean Beethoven (he was supposed to be a brother, anyhow) and French cooking. Classic to me is James Brown and soul food."<sup>25</sup> Soul food plays by its own rules and cooks with a variety of rhythm, much like Smart-Grosvenor in her ambivalence towards culinary classification and standardized cooking practices. Beethoven, as popular memory recalls, was deaf and could only "hear" his compositions through the vibrations emitted from his instrument.

Ralph Ellison also addresses issues of vibration and culinary composition and consumption in *Invisible Man*. In a key passage, the author links music, food, and the literal vibrations emanating from a phonograph. The protagonist informs his audience of his plans to listen to recorded music in a very specific way in the prologue of *Invisible Man*:

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"—all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952) (New York: Vintage, 1995), 7-8, original emphasis.

The pairing of sloe gin and vanilla ice cream, in the narrator's mind, is connected with the experience of listening to Armstrong's rendition of "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue." The fusion of sound, physicality, and food instantiates a multi-dimensional sensory experience of aural and oral consumption, highlighted by the fact he desires five phonographs representing the five senses. The combination of the vapors from the sloe gin—the liqueur soon to be ingested—and the vibrations produced by the phonograph's needle following the grooves on the record create a psychological groove, so to speak, for the narrator to better comprehend the "lyrical beam of sound" and poetry of invisibility Armstrong creates. The protagonist is on a mission to expose the truth of reality to the masses and food, here, serves as one of the triggers necessary for self-realization. This moment of revelation, of course, comes at a symbolic juncture—the protagonist is eating white ice cream topped with red syrup while listening to the blues. The invocation of these three colors is not a coincidence. Ellison cannot introduce the paradox of race and invisibility without reference to its distinctly American characteristics or even positioning his character to literally consume America—the very entity threatening, in fact, to consume his personhood, rights, and psyche. What matters, for the sake of this chapter, is the fusion of food with the vibrations associated with musical content. Our narrator has a specific vision of what the consumption of ice cream and music should look, feel, and sound like. While Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor speaks of figurative vibrations in the process of culinary invention, Ellison plays with the concept of literal vibrations in the fictional creation.

Ellison's description of five phonographs blaring Louis Armstrong while his narrator eats ice cream is a description bordering on the anecdotal. It is a vision of what a perfect future entails following its creation. All of Smart-Grosvenor's recipes are predicated by anecdotes and tales of who originated the dish, the context of its creation, or the family history pertaining to the recipes. Perhaps they are the non-fiction counterparts to Ellison's scene. In Smart-Grosvenor's text, each recipe takes the form of an anecdote or a part of her larger work of "travel notes." For example, following an extended tale about hunting with her father at a young age and being offered "corn likker," Smart-Grosvenor concludes the story by segueing into meals she associates with these trips. She writes:

One of my favorite meals after a hunting trip was grits and

#### **SMOTHERED RABBIT**

Take a rabbit, cut him up and let him stand in salty water for 30 minutes. Dust him with flour and salt and pepper and brown in a heavy skillet (using  $\frac{3}{4}$  oil and  $\frac{1}{4}$  butter). The pan's got to be very hot...

Or

#### **SQUIRREL**

Brown the squirrel just like you do the rabbit...

The winter that I was nine we went hunting and brought back

#### **VENISON**

Soak several hours in salt water... The meat of a young buck is more tender than the meat of a doe.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 10-11. Although Maya Angelou's cookbook *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (New York: Random House, 2004) is also rooted in specific family memories as well, her collection is full of glossy photos and uses anecdotes for context unlike Smart-Grosvenor, who emphasizes the significance of the memories to the actual recipes by including them in the prose. Angelou's cookbook is a compendium of anecdotes and recipes with a clear distinction between memory and recipe.

Mid-thought, Smart-Grosvenor delivers recipes that supplement her story. To simply provide the recipes after concluding the tale with “One of my favorite meals after a hunting trip was grits and smothered rabbit or squirrel” does not put the reader into the psychological or emotional time and space the author occupies with regard to the memory or the event in and of itself. Smart-Grosvenor spends time developing the anecdote to transition into the recipe, which ultimately completes the thought process of recalling the memory. The tales from her youth are important contextual details relevant to these recipes. For the author to write or say “smothered rabbit” or (smothered) “squirrel” is to conjure the memories of the recipes that accompany these stories of family activity as well as the memories of *making* these dishes. The notion of creation becomes so powerful that it interrupts the story to demand the reader (and speaker) pay attention. Making physical space on the page for a recipe is the implementation of order and clarity. As Smart-Grosvenor inserts anecdotes or commentaries, she disrupts her own culinary narrative or recipe for the sake of creating an ontological space to examine the cultural and symbolic elements of the items she introduces for consumption. Yet through the insertion of these anecdotes, the author creates an entirely different conception of what constitutes a recipe—one that embraces the disorder antithetical to the standardized format. In this linkage between memory and recipe, Smart-Grosvenor provides an important correlation between recipe and result. Here, she not only explains

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how to produce specific dishes, she provides the all-important reason why these recipes are vital to her personhood, community, and audience.<sup>28</sup>

Ntozake Shange uses the same stream of consciousness technique to insert recipes in her novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. Recipes are interspersed throughout the narrative and ultimately become “historical and literary narratives that form an archive that preserves the epistemological and aesthetic connections among black women in the Diaspora” through the production of food.<sup>29</sup> The magic potions, letters, journal entries, and poetry all function as “recipes” in the novel regardless of whether or not they pertain directly to the production of a meal or dish. Furthermore, “what is ultimately created, who creates, and how one is fed, using all the recipes Shange presents in her novel, yield a complex of issues that confound the differences between writers and cooks and readers and eaters.”<sup>30</sup>

For example, after singing a medley of Tina Turner and Marvarettes songs, Cypress announces plans for a party that evening at her home following her dance performance. While riding the bus to the dance, Cypress describes her desire for “a whoop-la get-down after the show at her house, with lots of good wine, and good, good food. Like maybe...”<sup>31</sup> Following this ellipsis, Shange inserts four different recipes that, as readers, we interpret as the direct thoughts of the character Cypress. The four recipes are “Three C’s: Cypress’s Curried Crabmeat,” “My Mama & Her Mama ‘Fore Her:

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<sup>28</sup>Zafar, 450-451.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Clark, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, (New York: Picador, 1982), 111.

Codfish Cakes (Accra),” “De Floats Be-fore de Fish,” and “Cypress’ Sweetbread: The Goodness.” The ellipsis, discussed in Brody’s analysis of punctuation in Chapter 2, is a means of creating a psychic and theatrical space to address both language and time; the punctuation is a way of making the ontological associations of these recipes rendered visually.

The creation of this ontological and theatrical space is akin to the significance of the establishment of the earliest formal soul food restaurants. These “mom-and-pop operations, bus stop lunch counters, and bars and grills represent the modern origins of the restaurants that started appearing with the phrase ‘soul food’ in their signage and other marketing materials in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.”<sup>32</sup> These spaces grew out of the need to feed hungry travelers in the age of Jim Crow. These restaurants and honky tonks served as the foundation for what became known as the “chitlin circuit”—a number of black-owned nightclubs, restaurants and theaters throughout the South and Midwest.<sup>33</sup> The name of this concert circuit is rooted in chitlins and soul food dishes sold to patrons and performers.<sup>34</sup> Embarking on a tour of these concert spaces and restaurants guaranteed traveling African American performers a source of sustenance as well as a regular series of performances for pay.

Summoning the psychic as opposed to theatrical connection to Cypress’ recipes conjures the mental list of ingredients in addition to the smells and textures of the ingredients that make up the dish as well as the phantom taste of the meal soon to be

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<sup>32</sup> Opie, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Opie, 121.

<sup>34</sup> Opie, 122.

enjoyed based on previous iterations of the meal. Reading or speaking the titles of these recipes offers a musical interlude as well through the alliteration of “Cypress’s Curried Crabmeat.” The title of the codfish cake recipe suggests intergenerational connections (“My Mama & Her Mama ‘Fore Her”). “De Floats Be-fore de Fish” emphasizes the vernacular as well as specific pronunciation. Shange is insistent that the reader recognize the significance of “Be”—to exist, have a place—in relation to “fore.” Each recipe heading suggests a deeper relationship to the self as well as the history behind each recipe as well as a reference to the vernacular pronunciation of the word.

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor and Ntozake Shange occupy similar culinary spaces in terms of the formal structure and themes of their works. Smart-Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking* bears a striking similarity to Shange’s 1992 work, *If I Can Cook/ You Know God Can*. Both works include anecdotes and recipes that include more of a global influence. Just as Smart-Grosvenor includes recipes with European or South American elements in tribute to the African Diaspora, so too does Shange. Whereas Smart-Grosvenor’s cookbook is packed with recipes, Shange’s work is more concerned with the psychology behind the food: how it makes her feel to be in the kitchen, what certain smells conjure in her mind, etc. For Shange, food, alongside music, song, and dance, is a vital component of her understanding of “the rituals of community we call culture.”<sup>35</sup> Culture, in turn, is concerned with how a group expresses itself. In the closing paragraph of *If I Can Cook*, Shange writes, “What and how we cook is the ultimate implication of who we are. That’s

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<sup>35</sup> Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 88. All four rituals figure prominently in this culinary memoir as well as in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. Food, music, song, and dance take on mystical qualities in both works.



why I know my God can cook—I'm not foolish enough to say I could do something the gods can't do. So if I can cook, you know God can."<sup>36</sup> Preparing food is an art form and a specific type of performance for one's self as well as for others that possess, in some way, spiritual connotations. This sentiment recalls the common suggestion that "Soul and soul food, according to one scholar, developed out of a larger black power project that called for creating black cultural expressions different from white society."<sup>37</sup> The difference is in the details and impulses.

Smart-Grosvenor and Shange use recipes and the origins of family foods to connect gastronomic interests with folklore and artistry; both link foods to musicians as well. Shange writes, "I eat okra. I eat okra a lot. I think we should free the okra, the way we freed the watermelon. And Duke Ellington freed bass and treble clefs, feet and torsos, and any constricting images of royalty."<sup>38</sup> Okra, Shange argues, carries a certain social stigma in terms of the public perception of who consumes it and in what capacity. The reference to Ellington suggests his role as jazz innovator for taking formal European musical notation or performance styles and "swinging" the music to appeal to an (African) American audience. Shange is comparing the potential for a cook to "free" okra from the constraints of specific preparation or limited consumption into something more accessible or perhaps even more palatable. But while Shange dances around the racial component of okra, she cannot escape the problem of its palatability or ease of preparation for those new to the food. Okra is slightly furry on the outside, and

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<sup>36</sup> Shange, *If I Can Cook*, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Opie, 125.

<sup>38</sup> Shange, *If I Can Cook*, 77.

sometimes somewhat slimy on the inside. Liberating okra must take into account the problems surrounding its textures and tastes to those unfamiliar with it. It isn't enough to suggest okra needs an expanded audience or a new understanding of its universal or Diasporic appeal, one must find a way to appeal to the greatest number of eaters before a true culinary liberation can occur. The discourse surrounding the liberation of okra is such that it suggests a form of culinary imperialism from which the very name, recipes, and associations of the food must be freed. This is all part of Shange and Smart-Grosvenor's imperative to create a running commentary on cultural and culinary history in America.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of liberating food from social connotations as well as the liberating aspects of culinary consumptions brings me back to Ralph Ellison. The combination of food and a moment of self-realization are critical to *Invisible Man*. Nearly midway through the novel, the protagonist comes across a street vendor selling baked yams in Harlem. The unnamed narrator tells his audience he

took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought. If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be! I'd push them into a side street and smear their faces with the peel. What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not *all* of us, but so many. Simply by walking up and shaking a set of chitterlings or a well-boiled

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<sup>39</sup> Zafar, 455.

hog maw at them during the clear light of day! What consternation it would cause! And I saw myself advancing upon Bledsoe, standing bare of his false humility in the crowded lobby of Men's House, and seeing him there and him seeing me and ignoring me and me enraged and suddenly whipping out a foot or two of chitterlings, raw, uncleaned and dripping sticky circles on the floor as I shake them in his face, shouting:

"Bledsoe, you're a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! And not only do you eat them, you sneak and eat them in *private* when you think you're unobserved! You're a sneaking chitterling lover! I accuse you of indulging in a filthy habit, Bledsoe! Lug them out of there, Bledsoe! Lug them out so we can see! I accuse you before the eyes of the world!" And he lugs them out, yards of them, with mustard greens, and racks of pigs' ears, and pork chops and black-eyed peas with dull accusing eyes.<sup>40</sup>

The significance of the recognition of freedom lies in its potentially transgressive nature—the freedom to eat publicly and without care or concern for those surrounding the scene or the content of the meal. Not only is the narrator experiencing personal freedom but he is also undergoing a moment of gastronomic freedom as well; he is eating a form of “soul food” on the streets of New York while psychologically transporting himself back to his southern school which disapproved of such behavior. For his former classmates and the college president, Dr. Bledsoe, the combination of public eating—with the potential for looking unkempt and disorderly—is as dangerous a threat to social propriety as what is eaten. The transgressive nature of the act is located in a moment of para-fugitivity. Here, he is a fugitive from the college and its rigorous standards of behavior yet he is trapped by the social paradigm the college creates and perpetuates. He is free to consume food on the street but not without the psychological baggage associated with the lessons learned at school. The narrator's college has taught him to be

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<sup>40</sup> Ellison, 264-265.

ashamed of his culinary history and food preferences. Certain foods have obtained the status of a guilty pleasure or socially unacceptable for public consumption; these are dishes that should neither be spoken of nor consumed at the risk of consternation or humiliation. For the narrator, there's a sense of liberation in eating a yam on the street as opposed to sneaking it back to his room at Men's House to eat in private as if he should be ashamed of the food or his tastes. The most damning accusation he wishes to sling against Dr. Bledsoe is not that he eats chitterlings (chitlins) but that he does so in private while publicly shaming those who enjoy the food or perhaps treat it as something worth relishing. In his vision, the narrator's accusation pertaining to chitterlings morphs into a revelation of other foods—pork chops, greens, and black-eyed peas. The invocation of chitterlings opens up an entire menu to examination. The newfound feelings of freedom rooted in the yam raise the question of why these foods result in a source of embarrassment. In this moment of personal revelation, the narrator refuses to be ashamed of his food choices because of the way the consumption of certain foods—at this juncture it is the yam—satisfy him. The public consumption of the yam disrupts the mantra of a whole host of social figures attempting to recast an entire race based on their food choices or at least what is publicly acknowledged as an ethnic cuisine.<sup>41</sup> For our narrator, it is time to reclaim the yam, the chitterling, and a whole host of other foods in

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<sup>41</sup> In David Schaafsma's study *Eating on the Street: Teaching Literacy in a Multicultural Society* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993) details the cultural bias in this code of conduct. Schaafsma is told by one of his fellow teachers, and older African American woman, that she finds this behavior repulsive and stereotypical with the potential to "stigmatize poor blacks" (6). He recalls her telling them that African American children are held to different standards because they "have to work against so much prejudice, they have to work twice as hard to succeed, and part of this involved adhering to acceptable forms of behavior for society" (7). Just as this teacher sought to instruct her students to avoid what she viewed as a potentially embarrassing behavior, so too did the instructors at the college from which the Invisible Man just left.

the same way that Ntozake Shange has made it her quest to reclaim okra from the same audience as well.

### **Cooking as Creative Enterprise**

Both Smart-Grosvenor and Shange are interested in exploring the potential for creativity beyond the confines of the page or as a form of written expression. In describing the beginnings of *Vibration Cooking*, She writes,

When I wrote *Vibration Cooking* in 1970 I had no idea it would be published. I wrote it because I wanted to do something creative. My daughters were young and I couldn't afford to take a class in anything or pay a sitter. My creative activity would have to be done in the house. Writing seemed like the perfect thing. I wasn't a writer but people said they enjoyed my letters and besides, I was not writing to be published. I was writing to express myself. I loved to cook, had great food memories and experiences with friends and family in various places, so why not write about that. Put everything down and on special occasions give a copy of "writings" to the people I talked about. That's what I had in mind and that's what I did.<sup>42</sup>

Here, Smart-Grosvenor emphasizes her desire to express herself creatively through the fusion of food and literary production as opposed to writing for the purpose of publication. *Vibration Cooking* began as a personal, emotional, and creative project. While the author is referencing something akin to cosmic vibrations in her title, there is an undeniable synergy between sound and the wavelengths or vibrations they produce.

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<sup>42</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, xiv.

She differentiates between writing for publication and profit, on the one hand, and writing for personal reasons and pure creativity on the other. What is even more striking about her comments is the way she begins to refer to her memories and recollections of shared food as a form of writing albeit one she feels the need to set off with quotation marks, which undercuts the significance of the production of a formal text. Smart-Grosvenor is well aware of the historical legacy of plantation cook who were denied the ability to legally write and read recipes, which subsequently eliminates any potential for cookbook authorship.<sup>43</sup> Memories shift from psychologically contained entities to shared, printed matter. This printed work, once made and distributed, reaffirms the collective nature of the emotional resonance of this food-related experience. Smart-Grosvenor, as well as Shange in both *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and *If I Can Cook*, demonstrate creative expression is something to be valued as a form of high art; these authors demand “we perform and consume [their works]—that we cook and eat its recipes as an integral part of our experience of the work.”<sup>44</sup>

Smart-Grosvenor’s passage is about the desire to create and maintain an outlet for artistic expression. In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Shange situates the character Sassafrass in a home and romantic relationship driven by a similar desire to create. An appliquéd banner over the stove reads: “CREATION IS/ EVERYTHING YOU DO/

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<sup>43</sup> Doris Witt provides an extended analysis of the earliest formal African American cookbooks and their relationship to the standardized format of Fannie Farmer-style cookbooks, which propagated the style emphasizing a list of ingredients followed by a list of steps. While the role of cook was viewed as acceptable on the plantation, the role of cookbook author was legally denied (11).

<sup>44</sup> Witt, 11.

MAKE SOMETHING.’<sup>45</sup> This imperative appears in the text after a dream sequence addressing writer’s block and just before a series of recipes. Billie Holiday appears in the dream to tell Sassafrass:

*“It’s the blues, Sassafrass, that’s keepin’ you from your writing, and the spirits sent me because I know all about the blues...that’s who I am: Miss Brown’s Blues...” The Lady was holding a pearl-studded cigarette holder that dazzled Sassafrass, who could hardly believe what she was hearing. The Lady went on and on. “Who do you love among us, Sassafrass? Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, Big Mama Thornton, Freddie Washington, Josephine, Carmen Miranda? Don’t ya know we is all sad ladies because we got the blues, and joyful women because we got our songs? Make you a song, Sassafrass, and bring it out so high all us spirits can hold it and be in your tune. We need you, Sassafrass, we need you to sing best as you can; that’s our nourishment, that’s how we live.”<sup>46</sup>*

Music, according to The Lady, is a form of physical and psychological sustenance and nutrition. Though she looks to these musical figures for inspiration, the vision of Billie Holiday is telling Sassafrass that she is responsible for her own creative nourishment or food for the soul. Here, soul food operates as an abstract mediator between the spirits of deceased blues singers who, we learn, rely on the songs (or creative enterprises) of the living for their continued nourishment just as the living turn to the legacy of other creative personalities for inspiration. Mediation is a frequent formulaic here due to the mind-body connection with creativity and the need for tactility. Mediation suggests the desire to transpose the ontological into a physical manifestation of creativity.

After awakening from this dream, Sassafrass is moved by an overwhelming need to create something. She turns to the kitchen, views the banner over the stove, and nearly

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<sup>45</sup> Shange, *Sassafrass*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Shange, *Sassafrass*, 81.

empties her pantry cooking “Sassafrass’ Rice Casserole #36,” “Sassafrass’ Favorite Spinach for Mitch #10,” “Sassafrass: The Only Way to Broil Fish: Mackerel,” and “Red Sauce: Sassafrass’ Variation Du-Wop ’59.” The title of each recipe affirms Sassafrass’ role as author and creator. The casserole is her creation. The spinach is *for* Mitch, the abusive boyfriend, but it is *owned* and the favorite *of* Sassafrass. According to Sassafrass there is only one way to broil mackerel, and the accompanying red sauce is one of Sassafrass’ variations—no one else’s; furthermore, it has specific connotations to a sound (“Du-Wop” or a small group of singers harmonizing) and time (presumably 1959).

Just as Sassafrass uses cooking as an emotional and creative outlet, Shange as author and Coolio as musician use cooking as alternative domains for artistic expression. When she attempts to de-bone a chicken, Ntozake Shange uses creative license to describe the technique in *If I Can Cook* in her recipe for Chicken Vatápà. She writes/performs, “*Then we take the chicken out and cleanly, like a gangster in Detroit, take it all off the bones.*”<sup>47</sup> Referencing a Detroit gangster implies some sort of suave, deliberate action—most likely even criminal. Comparing the cooking to a gangster’s actions carries certain implications, which are picked up in hip-hop star-turned-chef Coolio’s 2009 cookbook. Best known for his Grammy winning single “Gangsta’s Paradise,” which critiqued the popularity of the “gangsta” lifestyle, Coolio opened his own catering business later in his career, starred in an online cooking show, and published the cookbook *Cooking with Coolio: 5-Star Meals at a 1-Star Price*. The cookbook’s cover is a photo of the author simultaneously cooking a pan of superimposed

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<sup>47</sup> Shange, *If I Can Cook*, 35.



bacon and eggs while scratching away at a turntable. The appeal of the book resides in the novelty of Coolio stepping outside his presumed musical comfort zone.<sup>48</sup>

Coolio, the self-described “The Ghetto Gourmet” according to the cover, uses the standardized format for recipes but alters some of the measurements through slang and filtered drug references. Tablespoons and teaspoons are used sparingly. Instead, Coolio calls for a “peench” or a “Dime Bag,” terms he defines in his introductory section:

*Peench [peench]: This is when you put a little bit of a spice between your fingers and throw it on your food. It's a lot like a pinch, except for the motherfucking fact that gangstas don't pinch. They peench.*

*Dime Bag [dahym bag]: This is a little bag that some people put some things into. I just use them to hold onto my spices. I fill every dime bag with 1 tablespoon of whatever spice is goin' in there. If I give you an exact measurement, it's because it's important to get it right, but most of the time, I just tell you to have a dime bag of salt and pepper handy to season to taste. In that case, just use a peench or two, until it tastes good on your tongue. Shaka!<sup>49</sup>*

Coolio, much like Ntozake Shange, compares his kitchen skill to a gangster/gangsta's ability to participate in illegal activity. Even in his measurements Coolio appeals to a specific type of heterosexual masculinity. Real men may cook, but gangstas do not under any circumstances pinch. They peench. Dime bags, in some cases used to measure illicit substances for sale and purchase, have now been recast as units of measurement for those using Coolio's recipes. Coolio has tapped into gang and drug culture to recast the kitchen

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<sup>48</sup> Coolio is an intriguing musical and culinary figure precisely because of his place in popular culture. His initial radio and record hits occurred during the era in which “g-funk” or “gangsta funk” hip-hop was immensely popular. As a member of the West Coast music scene, Coolio was one of many artists in the late 1990s sampling older funk rhythms and beats from the likes of James Brown, Parliament, and Sly and the Family Stone among others. Coolio's musical tastes are deeply rooted in funk and soul just as his culinary skills are rooted in soul food.

<sup>49</sup> Coolio (Artis Ivey, Jr.), *Cooking with Coolio: 5-Star Meals at a 1-Star Price* (New York: Atria, 2009), 5.

as a place to excel in an alternative creative format. Coolio uses street slang and terminology to use his kitchen as a canvas for artistic expression but does so in such a way to maintain his credibility with his initial audience of music listeners who remember “Gangsta’s Paradise” and might be more likely to “peench” than “pinch.” Coolio’s language represents the movement from the activist Bayard Rustin’s argument that “soul was the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement that called for, among other actions, singing, talking, and eating according to the African heritage of black people in America.”<sup>50</sup> When Coolio invokes slang or street language, he does so for comedy or a different type of credibility. His invocation of soul or African American street culture is not born of necessity but instead of popularity.

### **In the Mix: Vibrations, Memory, and Food in a Literary Landscape**

Gloria Naylor brings together memory, emotion, and creativity together in the context of food in her novel *Bailey’s Café* in ways that build on the culinary and social textures Coolio describes in his cookbook. This work takes the vibration and musical components of Ellison and Smart-Grosvenor and the psychic significance of James Brown’s canned stew to construct a landscape in which food because a source of emotional and nutritional sustenance. The novel builds on a musical framework that emphasizes the importance of seven characters narrating their tales of personal tragedy in a geographically indistinct locale containing a café, a boardinghouse catering specifically to women, and a pawnshop. People find this street when in crisis, and its function varies

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<sup>50</sup> Opie 125.

from visitor to visitor. The café, which operates by a distinct set of rules and expectations that I will address shortly, is the cornerstone of this mythical zone often referred to as a way station. Structurally, Naylor's novel is similar to a musical performance in the way in which the novel is structured by four distinct parts: "Maestro, If You Please...", "The Vamp," "The Jam," and "The Wrap." As owner of the café, which functions as the hub of activity on this street, Bailey serves as the "maestro" or bandleader to his orchestra of customers and way station denizens. In the first section, he informs the reader, "There's a whole set to be played here if you want to stick around and listen to the music. And since I'm standing at center stage, I'm sure you'd enjoy it if I first set the tempo with a few fascinating tidbits about myself."<sup>51</sup> Following these "tidbits" and introductory remarks, he segues into the second section, "The Vamp." Musically, a vamp "is a simple introductory phrase that can be repeated indefinitely until a soloist enters."<sup>52</sup> It is here that the orchestral technique is revealed to the reader: "Anything really worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens under the surface. You need to know that if you plan to stick around here and listen while we play it all out."<sup>53</sup> Clearly Bailey is articulating the need to read between the lines, or in the case of musical appreciation, listen between the notes. "The Jam" is next to take the stage and allows each of the seven central characters an opportunity to recount their personal stories over the course of this section. The final movement of the novel, "The Wrap," signifies the

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<sup>51</sup> Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Café* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 4.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Earley Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 156.

<sup>53</sup> Naylor, 35.

“music is over; the story has been told.”<sup>54</sup> The text embodies a complete musical performance.

These tragic tales occupying the space of “The Jam” mimic those in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in a number of ways ranging from overall structure to the presence of the café’s owner, known as Bailey, who operates as a parallel to Harry Bailly, the host at the Tabard Inn and leader of the pilgrimage in Chaucer’s work.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore,

Like Chaucer, Naylor presents each character’s story in discrete but interconnected narratives that have the headlink-tale-footlink structure. More specifically, Naylor begins each section with an introduction by Bailey—or, on one occasion, his wife, Nadine—which situates the main character of the section in the Bailey’s café setting; moves into either a first or third person narrative about the subject; then returns to the original narrator of the section...Naylor African-Americaniz[es] *The Canterbury Tales* through her structural and narrative responses to Chaucer’s work.<sup>56</sup>

According to Wood’s analysis, “The Jam” most closely resembles the format of *The Canterbury Tales* in that each woman is given the opportunity to relay her personal history of abuse, neglect, or trauma in a distinct structural pattern. The women’s tales in “The Jam” maintain a common rhythm and theme. Using Chaucer’s work as a counterpoint to the blues impulse, Naylor’s novel takes the guise of a song, utilizing the general verse-chorus-verse format, with multiple narrative perspectives. Naylor’s invocation of Chaucer in conjunction with musical structures is disruptive but

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<sup>54</sup> Whitt, 157.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Wood, “Two Warring Ideals in One Dark Body’: Universalism and Nationalism in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*” *African American Review* 30.3 (1996), 385. The café proprietor’s customers often mistakenly refer to him as “Bailey.” Though he is never correctly identified by name, for the sake of clarity and the purposes of this analysis, I will also refer to him as “Bailey” as well.

<sup>56</sup> Wood, 385-386.

productive—particularly in the way she uses the café and food to mitigate the various characters and scenarios of the novel.

The café exists not to serve food but to provide assistance to customers. The physical space of the restaurant functions as a site for community gathering. Bailey, the owner and operator, explains the rationale behind the seemingly illogical locale of the street as a way station:

[F]olks shouldn't get the wrong idea about this place. If we start serving 'em too readily, they'll begin thinking we're actually in the business of running a café. Forgetting how it happened they stumbled in here, they'll start looking for us when they're hungry. And then when they don't find us, they'll start asking questions... Life's too short to spend time trying to explain the obvious to the idiot. If they can't figure out that we're only here when they need us, they don't need to figure out.<sup>57</sup>

The café itself, rather than the food it serves, functions as a site of memory and recovery. When Shange's characters plan menus for parties or James Brown opens a can of beef stew, these figures want to create more than a source of gastronomic enjoyment. They seek the refuge found in the fictional café of Naylor's novel. The café offers a psychic respite as well as a physical one necessary to continue in an occasionally overwhelming world.

What the café offers is a site of familiarity and regulation. Menus are unavailable because only certain foods are offered on specific days. The café has limited options and as a result, is frequented by patrons seeking some form of order. An extremely limited menu forces customers to live in a regulated, orderly world—a world that was seemingly

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<sup>57</sup> Naylor, 28.

unavailable, which the mythical location of this street attempts to remedy. In “The Vamp,” Bailey describes the hazards of running a restaurant that is more invested in offering a sense of order as opposed to tasty vittles:

New customers are a pain in the butt until they get into the rhythm of things. Fried chicken Mondays. Hamburger Tuesdays. Hash Wednesdays. Pork chop Thursdays. Fish on Fridays. And a weekend open house: breakfast, lunch, dinner: your call.

Since they’re only getting one thing a day Monday through Friday, and anything they want Saturday and Sunday, why print up a menu? But you’d be surprised how long it takes that to sink into some people’s heads. It’s been a real lesson for me in human nature. During the weekdays some act offended that they’ve only got one choice and want to argue and get all loud, like somebody’s keeping ‘em from going to other cafes. Or they could come back on the weekend, when we’ll give ‘em anything they want. But the weekends bring in another type of character, who don’t believe it when you tell ‘em it’s really *anything* they want. They sit there confused and silly, craning their necks all around, asking over and over for a menu.<sup>58</sup>

The café’s social rhythm is contingent on customer’s following the set guidelines and rules of which foods are offered on certain days. Disruptions to the orderly nature of the café are not tolerated. When guests challenge restaurant policies and are in turn challenged by management, they learn a lesson. Bailey states that those who test the house policy typically fall in line: “Usually they eat it. And the next time they come back in, they act like people.”<sup>59</sup> Civilized behavior, according to Naylor’s text, hinges on the ability to follow standardized procedures. Those who find the café and seek a meal are also in search of order, which Bailey enforces with a baseball bat and unprinted menus.

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<sup>58</sup> Naylor, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Naylor, 32.

The meal is secondary to the experience of an orderly encounter in the context of the café. The narrator's account of those overwhelmed by options on the weekends supports the notion that the café is not in the business of offering food so much as it is offering a sense of structure in otherwise chaotic lives.

After the extended view of the inner workings of the café, Naylor transitions into "The Jam"—the meat of her novel—which concerns individual women's tales of abuse, heartache, and neglect. While many of the tales have some sort of relationship to a sense of personhood in relation to taste, Jesse Bell's story is particularly relevant to an examination of soul food and the psychic link between food and personhood. As a new wife, Jesse Bell discovers her new husband's conflicted feelings concerning canonical soul foods and seeks to solidify her marriage through the preparation and consumption of soul food. While her solution offers a quick fix, her relationship eventually implodes and she finds herself looking for the boardinghouse for troubled women on the same street at Bailey's Café, her favorite late-night hangout.

While explaining her relationship to her new husband, Jesse Bell arrives on the subject of food and the seemingly different expectations she and her husband have of what constitutes palatable cuisine:

My biggest problem was at the dinner table. A new bride, mind you, so I'm putting on the hog. Frying catfish. Washing and chopping collard greens. Baking biscuits. Smothering pork chops till they cried for mercy. Macaroni salad with *homemade* mayonnaise. And he'd just pick and pick at his food. He'd be smiling all the while, but I could see he was having a hard time swallowing. Now, if I knew anything, I knew how to cook. So I'm trying to figure out what it is until one night I set a platter of buttered cornbread and a steaming bowl of oxtail soup in front of him. He plays around in the soup with his spoon for a while, brings up the oxtail, and asks me timid-like, Wife, what kind of meat is this? I coulda fell off my

chair. A colored man, brought up in Harlem, who didn't know what oxtail soup was? Then it all comes out. Uncle Eli never let the Kings eat like that. He called it slave food—that old Tom. Well, Mother, I saw the sorry mess I had on my hands. So I began his education right quick.<sup>60</sup>

In order to establish Jesse Bell's credibility as a cook, Naylor emphasizes specific foods with short, choppy incomplete sentences that emphasize her understanding and appreciation of these foods. Catfish, collards, biscuits, and macaroni salad have culinary and cultural clout because they are canonical soul foods and therefore deserve their own syntactical spaces. For Naylor's character, the ability to masterfully execute these delicacies should increase her worth to her husband because they are the "right" culturally meaningful foods. The menu operates as a form of currency that her husband, she assumes, should appreciate since he grew up in Harlem. Upon learning the nefarious Uncle Eli would not allow Mr. King, Jesse Bell's husband, to eat these symbolic foods, she begins her mission to educate her husband on the highlights of a soul food menu. Fueled partly out of spite and disgust that her favorite foods were deemed unpalatable and too lowly for her husband to consume prior to their marriage, Jesse Bell attempts to make a statement concerning Uncle Eli's view of soul food as "slave food." For the new bride, Uncle Eli's ban of these items is paramount to racial treason. Uncle Eli, she reasons, views fried fish, macaroni salad, biscuits, and the like as antithetical to his agenda of "lifting the race." Jesse Bell fumes, "All that lift-the-race this and lift-the-race-that. To raise something, you gotta first see it as being low-down. And I didn't see a damn thing wrong with being colored. And where did Uncle Eli want us to be lifted up

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<sup>60</sup> Naylor, 123-124.



to? Why, white folks.”<sup>61</sup> Uncle Eli, she surmises, moves away from these foods in order to distance himself from his gastronomic and racial heritage.

Following the evening Mr. King expresses confusion over oxtail soup, Jesse Bell devises a plan to introduce him to sweet potato pie, another soul food staple, while capitalizing on her sex appeal.

The next night I baked three sweet-potato pies. I mean, the heavy kind with lard in the crust and Alaga syrup bubbling all through them. And while my pies are cooling and he’s in the bedroom reading his newspaper, I run me a warm bath and throw a whole bottle of vanilla extract in the water. So I’m soaking in the vanilla, the pies are cooling, and we’re all ready about the same time. I go into our bedroom, carrying one of my pies, dressed the same way I stepped out of that tub. I made sure it was sliced real nice—six even pieces. And he’s looking at me like I’ve gone out of my mind, but I still take it all real slow. I laid back on the pillows. Took out a slice, without disturbing a crumb, mind you. And wedged it right between my legs. It was time for the first lesson. Husband, I said, pointing, this is sweet-potato pie. Didn’t have a bit of trouble after that. Except it was all the man wanted for dinner for the next month.<sup>62</sup>

Again, Naylor emphasizes her character’s investment in proving herself as a cook. She immediately defends her ability to adequately cook a sweet potato pie by emphasizing two key ingredients: lard and Alaga syrup. Jesse Bell’s reputation hinges on her ability to reference these baking staples and name-check items that give her tale a level of culinary authenticity as a top-notch soul food chef and connoisseur. Having her character bake three pies is insufficient for Naylor’s commentary on race and class dynamics pertaining to soul food. Naylor “bakes” her character as well. While her pies are cooling, Jesse Bell soaks in a bath containing an entire bottle of vanilla extract until both she and the pies are

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<sup>61</sup> Naylor, 125.

<sup>62</sup> Naylor, 124.

ready for consumption. Her method of educating Mr. King is to bodily join herself and the sweet potato pies and share ingredients in an effort to educate her husband on the joys of soul food—and sexuality. Jesse Bell’s seduction of her husband using sweet potato pie is similar to the behavior Violet feared in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*. Violet, as I discussed in the Introduction, fears the sensuality associated with the consumption of foods due to the erotic nature of certain textures or tastes. The bodily connection with food is similar to the physical relationship between a reader and listener in terms of the vibrations and musical encounter the Invisible Man desired in Chapter 2. The unnamed narrator wants to feel the vibrations emitted by five phonographs to reinforce his psychic and tactile relationship to the music just as Jesse Bell and Violet understand the connection between food and emotional or sensual sustenance. In order to rectify any potential misunderstandings, Jesse Bell insists Mr. King consumes her as well as the foods she cherishes. This character becomes a physical manifestation of soul food as a specific cuisine but also in the sense of representing the “group soul” of her family and upbringing Pearl Bowser connected with the definition of soul food earlier in this chapter.

The consumption of sweet potato pie serves as an excellent point of conclusion for a study of the ontological associations and states produced by a funk aesthetic in African American literature. Rehashing a conversation with a friend, Amiri Baraka stated, “Sweet potato pies, a good friend of mine asked recently, ‘Do they taste anything like pumpkin?’ Negative. They taste more like memory, if you’re not uptown.”<sup>63</sup> Food, he suggests, is enough to carry one to an entirely different geographical location simply

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<sup>63</sup> Opie, 133.

through remembrance of taste and feeling. The consumption of these memories and dishes represent longing and comfort as well as desire and culinary chemistry. These foods, especially soul food in the context of this chapter, demonstrate a true ensemble of the senses in which sights, smells, textures, sounds, and tastes come together in the kitchen or workspace.

When Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor and Ntozake Shange compose and publish recipes alongside anecdotes, they ask readers to visualize an end result or final product. What will the combination of okra and tomatoes look and taste like? What is the texture of stewed rabbit smothered in gravy? The physical and typographic space occupied by a list of ingredients and steps demands interpretation along with the urge to synthesize into something tactile and hopefully tasty. The presumption typically accompanying each list and numbered step in a cookbook is that the reader or chef will follow each step precisely; that an orderly approach to the dish will be maintained at all costs for fear of ruining an otherwise inspired meal. Smart-Grosvenor, in her insistence of generalized measurements or cooking by vibration, adds an element of spontaneity to the mix.

Anyone who has ever been responsible for cooking a turkey on Thanksgiving knows the risks associated with cooking for a crowd. The spectacle of a large dinner is an opportunity to display great success or epic failure, and a slight misreading of an ingredient list or baking time has the potential for disastrous consequences. The successful completion of a dish or meal requires a synthesis of the sensorium. The preparation of a roux, the foundation of most Southern Louisiana Creole cooking, for example, requires a careful eye and steady hand. The requirements for creating a roux

are fairly straightforward: add flour to butter or oil and stir until it reaches the desired consistency. For some dishes, such as gumbo, a deeper, darker roux is required for adding a richer flavor to the soup. For stews, creoles, or étouffées, the color of the roux should bear a likeness to that of peanut butter. After heating the oil, adding the flour and stirring, it becomes a game of sensorial paranoia. Is the smell appropriate? How brown is brown enough? Is the consistency thick enough? These questions float around the base of the pot as the amateur chef's hand continues to stir for another five minutes. In the instant it takes to cross the kitchen to look at a jar of peanut butter to ensure the color matches, the roux can burn ever-so slightly and become un-useable. To complete the recipe, the chef must start again from the beginning or risk serving a substandard dish.

The procedures and artistry of cooking remind us of the interconnectedness of the senses and ontological aspects of funk more generally. The ability to feed those around us meets certain physiological needs regarding nourishment yet also demonstrates a level of care and concern rooted in the epistemological and ontological functions of this production. In each chapter, the senses were disrupted through sensory engagement with funk. The culmination of this disruption takes the form of culinary expression because it exemplifies the tension between the formal composition of a recipe with the more fast and loose approaches to cooking exemplified by Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor in *Vibration Cooking*, which is fueled by the same psychic and literal vibrations that appeal to the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's oft-quoted quip, "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" is part and parcel of this disruption. However, it is not merely what we taste, touch, smell, hear, or see so much as

it is how we synthesize these sensory engagements to get at the heart of this disruption and understand how it speaks to a distinctive cultural moment.

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## **Biography**

Casey Rachel Wasserman was born June 15, 1982 in Houston, Texas. After spending her childhood in New Orleans, Louisiana, she attended The George Washington University where she received her Bachelor of Arts in English in 2005. She has received several academic honors, including induction into Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society and served as a research intern at the Smithsonian Institution as an undergraduate. While at Duke, she received an Endowment Fellowship in English, an Aleane Webb Dissertation Award, and a William Preston Few Fellowship. A lifelong fan of James Brown, she documented her experiences at his 2006 funeral in *1<sup>st</sup> of the Month: A Newspaper of the Radical Imagination*.