

25. Notes on Funk I–IV

These pieces were performed in 1982–1984 and were written up in 1983–1985. The chapter is previously unpublished.

Notes on Funk I

1985

From 1982 to 1984, I staged collaborative performances with large or small groups of people, entitled *Funk Lessons*. The first word in the title refers to a certain branch of black popular music and dance known as “funk” (in contrast, for example, to “punk,” “rap,” or “rock”). Its recent ancestor is called “rhythm and blues” or “soul,” and it has been developing as a distinctive cultural idiom within black culture since the early 1970s. Funk constitutes a language of interpersonal communication and collective self-expression that has its origins in African tribal music and dance and is the result of the increasing interest of contemporary black musicians and the populace in those sources elicited by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (African tribal drumming by slaves was banned in the United States during the nineteenth century, so it makes sense to describe this increasing interest as a “rediscovery”).

This medium of expression has been largely inaccessible to white culture, in part because of the different roles of social dance in white as opposed to black culture. For example, whereas social dance in white culture is often viewed in terms of achievement, social grace or competence, or spectator-oriented entertainment, it is a collective and participatory means of self-transcendence and social union in black culture along many dimensions, and so is often much more fully integrated into daily life. Thus it is based on a system of symbols, cultural meanings, attitudes, and patterns of movement that one must directly experience in order to understand fully. This is particularly true in funk, where the concern is not how spectacular anyone looks but rather how completely everyone participates in a collectively shared, enjoyable experience.

My immediate aim in staging the large-scale performance (preferably with sixty people or more) was to enable everyone present to

GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER.

This helps explain the second word in the title, that is, “Lessons.” I began by introducing some of the basic dance movements to the audience, and discussing their cultural and historical background, meanings, and the roles they play in black culture. This first part of the performance included demonstrating some basic moves and then, with the audience, rehearsing, internalizing, rerehearsing, and improvising on them. The aim was to transmit and share a physical language that everyone was then empowered to use. By breaking down the basic movements into their essentials, these apparently difficult or complex patterns became easily accessible to

everyone. Needless to say, no prior training in or acquaintance with dance was necessary. Because both repetition and individual self-expression are both important aspects of this kind of dance, it was only a matter of a relatively short time before these patterns became second nature. However, sometimes this worked more successfully than others, depending on the environment and the number and composition of the audience-participants (See my videotape, *Funk Lessons with Adrian Piper*, produced by Sam Samore and distributed by The Kitchen, for a record of one of the more successful performances.) Also, the large-scale performance compressed a series of lessons that might normally extend over a period of weeks or months.

As we explored the experience of the dance more fully, I would gradually introduce and discuss the music (which had, up to this point, functioned primarily as a rhythmic background) and the relation between the dance and the music: Because of the participatory and collective aspects of this medium, it is often much easier to discern the rhythmic and melodic complexities of the music if one is physically equipped to respond to it by dancing. Thus the first part of the performance prepared the audience for the second. Here I concentrated on the structural features that define funk music, and on some of its major themes and subject matter, using representative examples. I would discuss the relation of funk to disco, rap, rock, punk, and new wave, and illustrate my points with different selections of each. During this segment, except for brief pauses for questions, dialogue, and my (short) commentaries, everyone was refining their individual techniques, that is, they were LISTENING by DANCING. We were all engaged in the pleasurable process of self-transcendence and creative expression within a highly structured and controlled cultural idiom, in a way that attempted to overcome cultural and racial barriers. I hoped that it also overcame some of our culturally and racially influenced biases about what "High Culture" is or ought to be. Again, this didn't always work out (see "Notes on Funk III").

The "Lessons" format during this process became ever more clearly a kind of didactic foil for collaboration: Dialogue quickly replaced pseudoacademic lecture/demonstration, and social union replaced the audience-performer separation. What I purported to "teach" my audience was revealed to be a kind of fundamental sensory "knowledge" that everyone has and can use.

The small-scale, usually unannounced and unidentified spontaneous performances consisted in one intensive dialogue or a series of intensive dialogues with anywhere from one to seven other people (more than eight people tend to constitute a party, the interpersonal dynamics of which are very different). I would have people over to dinner, or for a drink, and, as is standard middle-class behavior, ini-



49.
Funk Lessons: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Performance (1982).
 Photo by Daniel Lander. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

tially select my background music from the Usual Gang of Idiots (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, etc.). I would then interpose some funk and watch people become puzzled, agitated, or annoyed, and then I would attempt to initiate systematic discussion of the source of their dismay (in fact these reactions to my unreflective introduction of the music into this social context were what initially alerted me to the need to confront the issues systematically and collaboratively in the performance context). This usually included listening to samples of funk music and analyzing their structures, content, and personal connotations for each listener, in a sympathetic and supportive atmosphere. Occasionally, it also included dance lessons of the kind described previously, though this usually worked better with party-size or larger groups.

The intimate scale of the dialogue permitted a more extensive exploration of individual reactions to funk music and dance, which are usually fairly intense and complex. For example, it sometimes elicited anxiety, anger, or contempt from middle-class, college-educated whites: anxiety, because its association with black, working-class culture engenders unresolved racist feelings that are then repressed or denied rather than examined; anger, because it is both sexually threatening and culturally intrusive to individuals schooled exclusively in the idiom of the European-descended tradition of classical, folk, and/or popular music; contempt, because it

sounds "mindless" or "monotonous" to individuals who, through lack of exposure or musicological training, are unable to discern its rhythmic, melodic, and topical complexity.

Alternately, funk sometimes elicited condescension or embarrassment from middle-class, college-educated blacks: condescension, because it is perceived as black *popular* culture, that is, relatively unsophisticated or undeveloped by comparison with jazz as black high culture; embarrassment, because funk's explicit and aggressive sexuality and use of Gospel-derived vocal techniques sometimes seem excessive by comparison with the more restrained, subdued, white- or European-influenced middle-class lifestyle. Often this music is also associated with adolescent popularity traumas concerning dancing, dating, or sexual competence. These negative associations linger into adulthood and inhibit one's ability even to listen to this genre of music without painful personal feelings.

These and other intense responses were sympathetically confronted, articulated, and sometimes exorcised in the course of discussing and listening to the music. The result was often cathartic, therapeutic, and intellectually stimulating: To engage consciously with these and related issues can liberate one to listen to and understand this art form of black, working-class culture without fear or shame, and so to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and political dimensions of one's social identity.

What follows are notes I took after having staged the performance at different times. They are the fruit of my dialogues with participants and of my observations of their responses to the performance.

Notes on Funk II

October 1983

The long-term goal both of the small- and the large-scale performances is to restructure people's social identities, by making accessible to them a common medium of communication—funk music and dance—that has been largely inaccessible to white culture and has consequently exacerbated the xenophobic fear, hostility, and incomprehension that generally characterize the reaction of whites to black popular culture in this society. All aspects of that culture, including its speech patterns, conventions of social interaction, its music, and its dance, have become the target of the last outpost of explicit and socially legitimated racism, I believe, because these are the last artifacts of black culture that are identifiably black, that is, have not been either appropriated or assimilated into white

culture (usually through the back door: witness Elvis's appropriation of Chuck Berry, the Rolling Stones' appropriation of Don Kovay, Bo Derek's appropriation of cornrows, Al Jolson's and Fred Astaire's appropriations of minstrelsy, Peggy Lee's appropriation of Ella Fitzgerald, etc.; the list is endless). I describe this reaction as racist, but in fact it is more generally xenophobic, because it is as much a response of anxiety and fear to perceived cultural differences that can be alleviated only by denying or appropriating them as it is a response of hostility or contempt to perceived racist stereotypes.

To see this, consider the progress of the black civil rights movement in this country. Blacks have attained whatever *political* parity we've attained by proving that we can conform to the requirements of white political participation just as well as anyone else (for example, by voting, being self-determining, socially and legally responsible, etc., in the ways prescribed by [y]our forefathers). Similarly, whatever *economic* parity blacks have achieved (as illustrated, for example, by whites' hiring token blacks, admitting token blacks into higher education and the professions, occasionally resisting the impulse to a general exodus when a black family moves into the neighborhood, etc.) depends on our ability to "fit in," that is, conform our public behavior to white social conventions (for example, speak standard English, play tennis and discuss the stock market with the boss, enthusiastically attend concerts of classical music, function at cocktail parties, etc.)

I have no objection to the acquisition and exercise of these skills: They are *skills*, that is, personal resources, and the more of those that people have, the more flexible and comfortable in a large variety of contexts they are likely to be. What is disturbing is the response on the part of the white majority to the appearance of any other, different skills and modes of self-presentation that fail to conform to those predominant conventions: Even some of the most well-intentioned and politically concerned whites tend to get so nervous and angry when confronted by the relatively alien social and cultural conventions of black, working-class culture that they may actually attempt jive talk, a "black" accent, and a diddybop strut when around working-class blacks in order to resolve the perceived dissonance, and of course the severe discomfort and sense of bad faith involved in this effort naturally dispose them to shun those individuals as much as possible.

Thus *social* parity and acceptance require conformity to white culture as well. What remains to be attained is a comparably minuscule degree of *cultural* parity; that is, the respect and recognition of identifiably black cultural conventions as a rich and aesthetically legitimate art form—not just due jazz in all its topical abstraction and formal complexity, and easier to accept for precisely that reason, but due black popular culture as well, because it is so explicitly and intimately tied to the African

roots of black creative expression. But if the xenophobic reaction to perceived cultural difference is as strong and widespread as I fear it is, the requirement of cultural conformity will be just as strongly imposed, funk music and dance will be more or less permanently consigned to a *genuinely* avant garde underground, and the Talking Heads and Steve Reich will be the closest that white society will allow itself to approach.

Of course, there are other possible explanations for the reactions of most whites to funk music and dance (even well-meaning and politically correct friends and acquaintances have described it to me as "animalistic," "crass," "vulgar," "exhibitionistic," "escapist," "decadent," and so on). Some argue, for example, that it's just a clash of cultures that is exacerbated by the fact that dance and music have an integral social function in black culture that is absent in white culture until you reach adolescence, at which point you're automatically supposed to perform like Fred and Ginger on the dance floor at dancing and necking parties, upon pain of permanent social ostracism; thus the anxiety and paranoia of many whites at having to "perform" on the dance floor. There's no question in my mind but that this *is* a part of the hostility that usually greets these aesthetic idioms; it's unfair to be required to be instantly competent at a social skill at which one has had virtually no prior social training, and those negative reactions don't easily disappear just because one has grown past adolescence. But this fact doesn't prevent people from trying vainly to dance complicated Israeli horas or Greek circle dances, even though they've had no prior social training in those skills, either.

Another explanation of the kinds of racism this idiom elicits is that there's a general tendency among the educated to dismiss any aspect of popular culture as unworthy of serious attention, and that this tendency increases in direct proportion to one's socioeconomic ascendancy into the higher reaches of the middle class. Again, while this seems to me to be generally true, it ignores the fact that we can be unctuously reverent of the popular culture of other societies: The phenomenon of King Sonny Adé reminds me of the early 1970s, when Steve Reich discovered the Ramayana Monkey Chant, and that was practically all we ever heard on progressive New York radio stations. So it seems to me that some popular cultures do make it past the intellectual and psychological barriers—as long as they keep a respectful distance.

Of course, it's also easy to understand how whites might feel threatened by being thrown into the middle of the black cultural milieu without having already learned the rules; blacks feel the same way about being thrown into the white one similarly unprepared. There are few experiences more unpleasant than the realization that not only can one do absolutely nothing "right" as defined by the prevailing so-

cial and cultural conventions but also that one calls attention to oneself—often hostile or derisive attention—by doing everything wrong. But this doesn't account for the dismissive, contemptuous, often paranoid response at having funk music and dance introduced into apparently all-white social contexts.

Finally, it has been suggested to me that the antipathetic reaction to funk music and dance is the inevitable consequence of its explicit sexuality, when thrown in the face of a predominant culture shaped so largely by repression and sublimation. I don't think this explains that response to lyrics that have nothing to do with sexuality but rather with self-transcendence, social unity, betrayal, self-respect, and the many other themes that are prominent in funk music; nor does it explain why whites are perfectly comfortable with sexually explicit language in Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Monteverdi. But I also recognize that for a culture obsessed with sex and the stereotype of blacks as more sexually potent than anyone else, it is easy to read sexual interpretations into these lyrics even when it is not appropriate to do so. This phenomenon just confirms my suspicion, reached largely by a process of elimination of alternative explanations, that the white response to this idiom is overwhelmingly racist and xenophobic, and that we won't make any real progress in race relations at the deepest level until we are able to confront and transcend this response.

My motivation in doing the *Funk Lessons* performances also has a very large self-interested component (of course). The ignorance and xenophobia that surround the aesthetic idiom of black working-class culture have affected the audience's comprehension of my performance work since 1972, when I did the *Aretha Franklin Catalysis* piece on the streets of New York, up to an audience-oriented performance in 1980, *It's Just Art*. After a performance of *It's Just Art*, for example, one member of the audience asked me why I was up there "shaking my booty"; further questioning elicited her opinion that the music of black working-class culture was inappropriate for inclusion in an examination of serious political topics, and that Phillip Glass or Mozart would have been more suitable. Another response I often encountered to this piece, as well as to an earlier audience-oriented performance, *Some Reflective Surfaces*, was that I was "using boring, monotonous disco music to comment on the decadence of Western culture."

These responses made me realize that I was not, in fact, as fully assimilated into white society as I had always thought. Having gone through the process of aesthetic acculturation into "high art" in art school, I had always supposed that I shared the same set of assumptions as the audience to the "high art" I produced: about formal inventiveness and exploration, and the value of using my experience of various aspects of social life and popular culture as resources for my work, and

so on. But these responses forced me to recognize that this supposition was false, and that in fact this audience would (or perhaps could) accept only a certain circumscribed range of inventiveness, exploration, and sociocultural art resources as aesthetically legitimate; a range circumscribed, in the final analysis, by ignorance and xenophobia.

To realize this forced me to make a choice: either to abandon a cultural idiom of communication that had always been part of my life and personal identity as a black woman, or else to share this idiom with my audience so I could use it successfully in my work as a recognized and comprehended medium of communication, or shared language. It also gave me a very different perspective on my status as an artist and relatively privileged member of society. I had always assumed that any meaningful political work I did had to involve utilizing the advantages of my middle-class education and aesthetic acculturation as resources "for the benefit of" the disadvantaged community from which I came; as though those resources

50.
*Funk Lessons:
Berkeley Performance*
(1983). Photographer
unknown. Courtesy
John Weber Gallery.



were unequivocally invaluable gifts, unparalleled by anything that that community might have to offer, and were to be distributed as widely as possible. This view now seems to me to be laden with patronizing, elitist assumptions about who has what of value to offer to whom. The funk idiom of black working-class culture is an unbelievably rich and enriching art form that I disseminate in the performances not only to facilitate comprehension of my other work but also for the cultural benefit of my largely white, upper-middle-class audience. That is, it is black working-class culture that has invaluable gifts to offer that audience, and not just the other way around.

The responses to the performances so far have been polarized—perhaps predictably: On one side are those who respond with interest, enthusiasm, the desire to test their biases, or use the performance situation therapeutically, as a way of trying to come to terms with deeply internalized racist stereotypes by which we are all victimized in one way or another. On the other side are those who begin by expressing objections to the overt didacticism of the piece: They argue that art should be subtle, suggestive, and ambiguous in its messages, and that anything communicated too explicitly is apt to seem heavy-handed. But pressing these objections further usually uncovers the underlying attitude fairly quickly, which is, Who are *you* to tell *me* what I need to know?—as though merely supplying new information were an affront to the recipient's intelligence. I think this attitude expresses a kind of provincial anti-intellectualism and arrogance that runs through much so-called avant garde sensibility, of which one assumption seems to be that an aesthetic free spirit on the contemporary art scene by definition knows and experiences all that is worth knowing and experiencing, and that it is, in fact, a kind of insult to suggest that there is any deficiency in information there to be remedied. I feel quite helpless in the face of this response, as it seems to me to be the kind of attitude that lacks the concept of gaining knowledge through dialogue and communication, and that is ultimately all that any new art has to offer. Certainly that kind of knowledge and insight is what my audience to this work offers me; if it didn't, I would have the very strong sense of thrashing and flailing around in a sensory deprivation tank with only my ego to keep me company.

Another explicit assumption of this attitude is, of course, the idea that an artist has no right to communicate *any* message or information from a stance of certainty of its value or authority, but I have suggested elsewhere ("Power Relations within Existing Art Institutions," in volume II) that this is a natural consequence of our general view of artists as essentially powerless and irresponsible. Thus, I sometimes have the sense that in doing these performances I am biting off much more than I can chew at one meal, but the only acceptable response I can find is to just keep on munching.

I suppose that what finally vindicates the performances in my own eyes (as well as the effort to continue engaging with very different kinds of people in doing them) is the undeniable *experience* people seem to get, almost invariably, from participating in them, including me: It just seems to be true that most of my white friends feel less alienated from this aesthetic idiom after having participated in it directly, and discussed their feelings about it in a receptive context, regardless of their reservations about whether what I'm doing is "art" or not, whether funk deserves the legitimation of "high culture" or not, and so on. For me what it means is that the experiences of sharing, commonality, and self-transcendence turn out to be more intense and significant, in some ways, than the postmodernist categories most of us art-types bring to aesthetic experience. This is important to me because I don't believe those categories should be the sole arbiters of aesthetic evaluation (see "Power Relations within Existing Art Institutions," in volume II).

But perhaps the real point of it for me has to do with the ways in which it enables me to overcome my own sense of alienation, both from white and black culture. As a Woman of Color (I think that's the going phrase these days; as my parents often complain, "What's the matter with 'colored'? Or 'colored woman'? That was a good, serviceable, accurate description forty years ago!") who is often put in the moral dilemma of being identified as white and hence subject to the accusation of "passing," it gives me the chance to affirm and explore the cultural dimensions of my identity as a black in ways that illuminate my personal and political connection to other (more identifiably) black people, and celebrate our common cultural heritage. At the same time, the piece enables me to affirm and utilize the conventions and idioms of communications I've learned in the process of my acculturation into white culture: the analytical mode, the formal and structural analysis, the process of considered and constructive rational dialogue, the pseudoacademic lecture/demonstration/group participation style, and so on. These modes of fluency reinforce my sense of identification with my audience and ultimately empower all of us to move with greater ease and fluidity from one such mode to another. It also reinforces my sense of optimism that eventually the twain *shall* meet!

Notes on Funk III

February 1984

"We're all cool here," he said ____ly.

He was a member of the audience. The performance was going smoothly, but I was unsatisfied: The space was too large for the number of warm bodies in it; the

amplifier had blanked out a number of times, was growing increasingly hot to the touch, and threatened to start smoking, or melt down, within minutes. In fact it did, but that was later, about halfway through. I was at that point in the performance, early on, where I was sensing and trying to articulate the audience's unease: at being spoken to directly, at being urged to talk back, at being asked to listen and move strangely to this music, at being encouraged to publicly express their feelings: of annoyance, self-consciousness, embarrassment, resentment, contempt, shame, or whatever else was keeping them stiff, silent, and unresponsive.

This doesn't happen with every audience. Some audiences view themselves as genuine collaborators (which is what they are in any case) and allow their gut responses to come out rapidly and cleanly. Whether these are positive or negative, they invariably heighten the energy and intensity of our contact, lower inhibitions, loosen muscles, and enable the magic of this music to work.

(Positive: for example,

1. The analytical part gives me a lot to think about
2. That was fun
3. Now I understand rationally why I don't like to party
4. It's about time someone gave this stuff the respect it deserves
5. Whatta workout)

(Negative: for example,

1. The music is mindless. Shut up and dance
2. You can't transmit Soul through academic analysis
3. Much ado about nothing
4. This stuff is sexist and racist
5. Don't assume I'm ignorant when there's nothing to know)

Other audiences seem to view themselves more as victims: They feel manipulated, patronized, suspicious of my accessibility and my vulnerability. In these cases, it usually helps for me to address these feelings directly—not only because it clears the air by communicating the fact that it's all right to have them but also because it reduces the audience—performer separation by communicating the fact that I understand these feelings too. This is one of those situations in which it's actually to

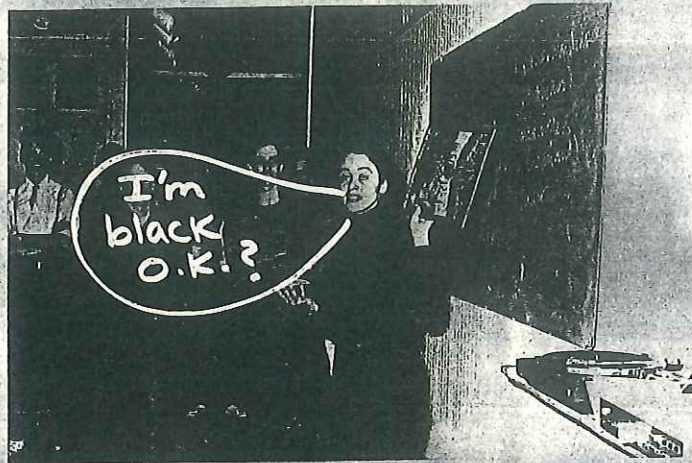
my advantage that I'm light and speak like a Richard Pryor imitation of a white man. I can communicate these feelings because I know what it's like to have them. However, it doesn't always help, because I don't always succeed in reducing the distance between me as a representative and advocate of an "alien" art form, and my audience who feels judged, criticized, and found wanting relative to it. This particular manifestation of a cultural inferiority complex is just one of the insidious ways racism spreads its cancer:

1. Afro-American working-class culture is *in fact* part of my white audience's culture, and not alien to it. As the choreographer Halifu Osumare has pointed out, it is *Afro-American* culture, and we all would have continued to waltz, polka, and minuet, like our European ancestors, without it.
2. But typically, white Americans cut off their legs and mistake them for their umbilical cords: Instead of recognizing their fundamental independence from their European forebears—an independence partly determined from the beginnings by the cross-pollination of Africa and Europe in the Americas—most white Americans aspire to symbiotic identification with Europe, while suppressing the most distinctively American facet of their identities, that is, their intrinsic hybridization—yes, genetically as well as culturally (see Joel Williamson, *A New People* [New York: Free Press, 1980]).
3. Why? I say it's the racism inherited from Europe's own cultural inferiority complex, originating in the ancient awareness of its enormous genetic and cultural inheritance from and indebtedness to Africa—an inheritance disseminated via North Africa's connection to Egypt, Greece, and Italy (where *do* all those pug noses and "swarthy" complexions and that curly hair come from, anyway?), assimilated into Indo-European culture, and severed at its African roots, but that's another story. In any case, Americans feel culturally inferior to Europeans and aspire to be like them, and this requires the denial and rejection of their own varying degrees of blackness. The suppression of an intimate aspect of oneself in order to identify with an alien other is, of course, a familiar mechanism in neuroses of all kinds, as is the anxiety and fear that suppressed aspect then elicits.
4. This suppressed blackness is then reconstructed as the alien and threatening Other—hence the xenophobic response of anxiety and fear to black culture (that we don't have this response to a *genuinely* alien Other is evidenced by our reactions to dolphins: Maybe they really are smarter, stronger, subtler, and more grown-up than we are, in addition to having a better sense of humor, but that's acceptable, as long as we all know who's boss [get it? heh heh]).

51.
*Defaced Funk
 Lessons Poster*
 (1983). Collection of
 the artist.

ADRIAN PIPER

The black chick



ADRIAN PIPER: Performance artist and art critic Adrian Piper is both lecturer and moderator from MCAD's Centennial Symposium *The Power of Art: The Language of Images*. Piper will also be a visiting artist at MCAD from October 24-28 at which time she will teach special seminars for MCAD students and give a public performance entitled: **FUNK LESSONS, A Collaborative Experiment in Cross-Cultural Transfusion.**

On Friday, October 28th at 7pm Piper will present a performance involving music appreciation and social dancing called *Funk Lessons*.

"Funk refers to black popular music and dance and has been developing as a distinctive cultural idiom within black culture since the early 1970's. It is based on a system of symbols, cultural meanings, attitudes, gestures and patterns of movement that one must experience directly in order to understand."

In this performance Piper will introduce the basic dance movements to the audience, working with them in rehearsal and improvisation. Piper will then discuss the music in relation to Disco, Rap, Rock, Funk, and New Wave and illustrate these points with brief selections of each. The idea is **LISTENING by DANCING.**

So please, you are all invited to **GET DOWN AND PARTY TOGETHER.**

**3rd
 floor**

ITEM: Defaced poster from a recent performance of
Funk Lessons

5. But here's the double bind: The anxiety and fear response to what is perceived as alien and threatening carries with it the implicit belief that the Other is *superior*: in strength, cunning, endurance, and understanding—hence the myth of blacks as bigger, stronger, cooler, sexier, wiser, hipper, meaner, and so on. White Americans then get to feel inferior, not only to what they are not (European) because of what they are (African-influenced) but also to what they are (African-influenced) because of what they are not (Afro-American). Blacks become an object of fear, loathing, admiration, and awe.
6. It then becomes presumptuous, an act of bad faith, to aspire to experience black culture sympathetically or through participation. It is seen as an attempt to pretend to be what one is not, to be hipper and sexier than one feels. To feel hip and sexy at all then becomes self-deception, a violation of one's authenticity. So to do anything that might make one feel hip and sexy, or look hip and sexy, or look as though one felt hip and sexy, or is supposed to make one feel and/or look hip and sexy, is, of course, psychologically, morally, and politically unacceptable on every level, and the only thing left to do is make a joke of one's self-hatred and withdraw.

"We're all cool here,"

he said hotly.

One stance that often works as an antidote to the syndrome of the Other is

Fuck it. Let's boogie.

But it's not always easy to assume this stance. People victimized by the syndrome of the Other can experience their own liberation only as shameless and wanton self-abandon, as the abdication of all dignity and self-respect; and the temptation is strong to view others' liberation in the same light. Not that I have anything against shameless and wanton self-abandon, in moderation, or against the occasional abdication of all dignity and self-respect. My point is simply that someone who tries to maintain personal authenticity by adhering to *any* circumscribed social or ethnic role will tend to view liberation from that role—anyone's liberation—as a personal threat. Perhaps a more sedate way of achieving liberation from the syndrome of the Other is to keep in mind that

1. black Americans are not typically victimized by this syndrome in the first place, so it's a misperception to view their cultural idioms as a personal threat;

2. white Americans might evade victimization by this syndrome by fully recognizing and celebrating all the dimensions of their cultural identity as Americans; because in fact,

We ARE all cool here.

We are ALL cool here.

Notes on Funk IV

October 1984

So is this music sexist? Does it exploit women, as some performance participants have charged? Consider, for example, lyrics like "Push, push, in the bush"; "That fox is fine, fine, fine with me"; "Best in the west" (which, as sung by Chaka Khan, would presumably exploit men, according to this reasoning); and so on. Let's begin by making some elementary distinctions. You met someone new. You both clicked. Last night you slept together, and today you feel better than you've felt in years. You tell your best friend (or roommate or favorite co-worker), "Lord! He/she was fantastic in the sack." Are you exploiting your new lover by saying this to someone else?

Consider another case. You're at your consciousness-raising group (remember those?). You've gotten yourself into a lather about all your failed relationships with members of the opposite sex. You rage, "Men (women) are all pigs (bitches)." Can you be accused of sexist exploitation for having said this in a group? Would it be appropriate for members of this group to level this accusation at you under these circumstances? Consider a third case. You rave about your lover's sexual talents to your consciousness-raising group, which has twenty-five members. You want to share your exaltation, joy, and deep satisfaction and sense of peace with them, but without being too heavy or solemn about it. So you joke, "Mmmm-mm! The peccs (tits) on this man (woman) are a thing of beauty to behold!"

And so on.

Perhaps a general point begins to emerge here. The point is that language does not exist in a vacuum. It depends for its meaning and connotations on the specific context in which it is used. What may well be exploitative and sexist in the context of an editorial explaining why men and women should not have equal employment opportunities, or in the context of a parent instructing a child on the dangers and liabilities of the opposite sex, may not be at all in the context of the intimate exchange of confidences and feelings between or among friends.

What makes this last context different from the first two? One thing that makes it different is all the participants share a common understanding of how these utterances are to be interpreted. That is, they know what your deeper political views are (or at least assume they know); they know that you are using these words playfully, or ironically, or expressively; they know that you know that they know these things, and that you choose your words and phrases with an eye to their effects on them in particular. That is, they know that you know them as well as they know you—and so bracket the (relative to this context) extrinsic connotations of your utterances accordingly. Simply put, you and your audience understand each other.

Now consider what happens when an innocent bystander overhears your conversation, a bystander who is not a part of your group and has no understanding of the conventions of meaning and expression that govern it. Moreover, this interloper lacks understanding both of your intimate relation to the designated members of your audience—a relationship conditioned by shared knowledge, conventions, and experiences—and also of your relation to the person you're describing as dynamite in the sack, as having great pecs and buns, and so on.

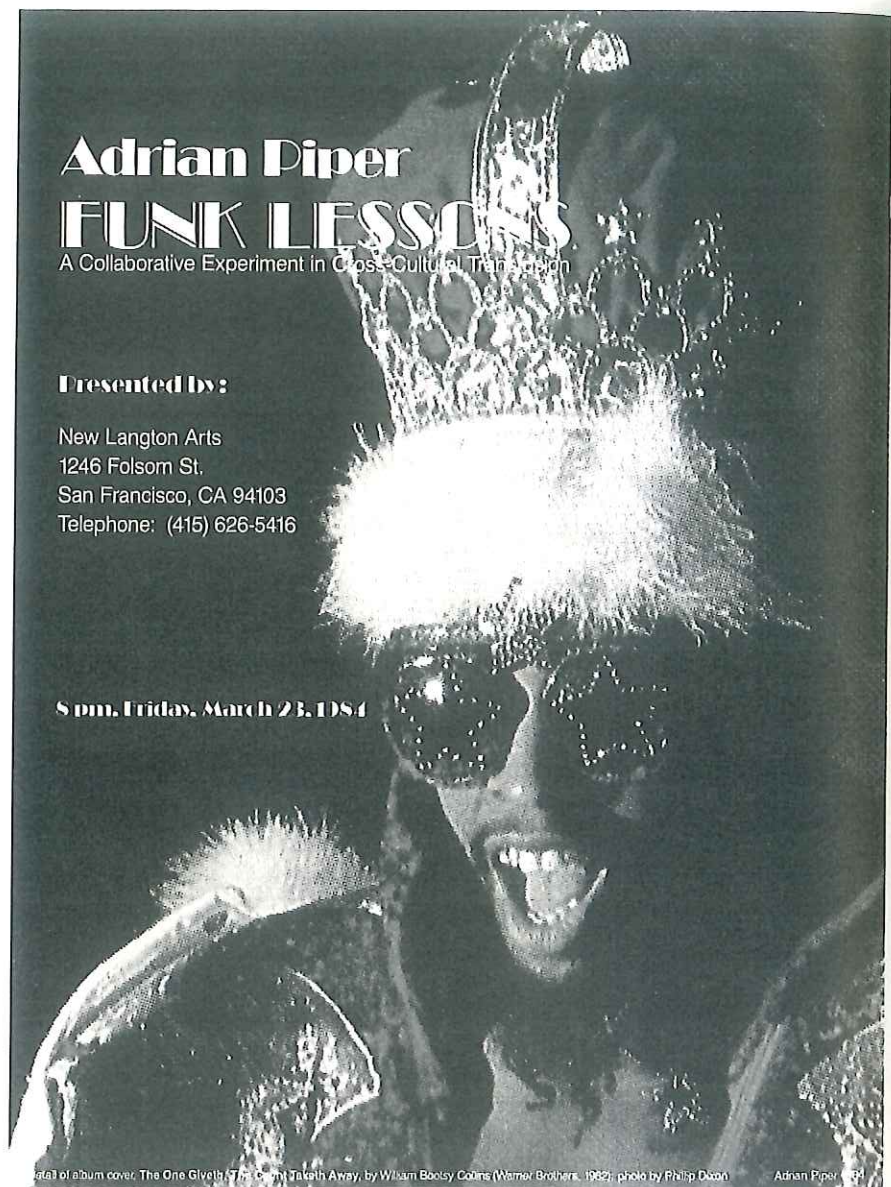
What sort of response might we expect from this interloper to your utterances? Well, if our interloper is politically correct, we might expect moral outrage as an initial reaction. But our interloper will have other psychological characteristics as well. If he or she believes that the world is his or her oyster, and so that there is no conceivable social context that may be at least initially inaccessible to his or her understanding, and that may therefore require him or her to reflect again on the accuracy or appropriateness of that initial response, then that initial response of moral outrage will tend to harden into an unconditional judgment that, *regardless* of whatever the characteristics that define this social context, its participants are sexist and exploitative in promoting and condoning the use of such language. This view is an especially convenient one for those individuals who are apt to become nervous when confronted by evidence of their own ignorance or lack of sophistication. For it enables them to deny that there is, in fact, anything further in the context worth knowing.

There are some other possible characteristics our interloper might have instead. One might be a strong sense of the limitations of his or her sensibility, and a recognition that more information about this context, its participants, their relationships and practices, and so on, needs to be gained before it can be decided whether that initial response of moral outrage is justified or not. Of course, this is not to claim that more information will prove to our interloper that his or her initial response was wrong, and this brings us to another possible characteristic he or she might have.

After achieving the familiarity necessary with this context, our interloper might still find such language morally repugnant, regardless of the extralinguistic assumptions that are here brought to its use. This would be, presumably, because our interloper has the interesting psychological feature of never, ever using racy language, ever, to describe any experience or feeling he or she has, ever, with anyone, regardless of context or degree of intimacy with his or her audience. This feature, presumably, would be the psychological basis of our interloper's conviction that the relations of familiarity and intimacy that characterize this context do not legitimate the use of this language.

This last would be an interesting psychological feature indeed. It might even lead us to wonder whether our interloper understood what familiarity and intimacy were.

At this point, I doubt that it is necessary to point out the conditions under which the idiom of Funk music developed, nor the highly circumscribed context in which it receives an audience. Afficionados know all too well the hours spent, upon first arrival in a new town, turning the radio dial for hours, trying to find the one—if that many—R&B station that plays Funk music, and how hard it is to recognize once you've found it because it has to run three commercials for every cut in order to stay afloat. Those who have succeeded in finding this station, and have called to request a record or ask for an identifying artist and title, may also be familiar with the surprise of the DJ or station manager at speaking to someone on the phone who lacks a recognizably (that is, stereotypically) working-class black accent. Such a DJ or station manager would be even more surprised at the misplaced moral outrage of our ignorant interloper. Because it is still a source of surprise, for many black Funk musicians and composers, that there are any white people listening at all.



52.
Funk Lessons Poster
 of *Bootsie* (1983).
 Courtesy John Weber
 Gallery, collection of
 the artist.

Funk Lessons (Performance Hand-Out Summary)

Characteristics of Black Dance (adapted from Dolores Kirton Cayou; courtesy of Halifu Osumare):

1. Relaxed back.
2. Bent knees.
3. Whole foot on floor.
4. Isolation of body parts: feet, knees, hips, shoulders, head, and so on.
5. Polyrhythmic: different rhythms carried by different body parts.
6. Unification of music with dance: Each kind of music has its own appropriate dance style.
7. Personalistic: variation and play on fixed dance conventions for individual self-expression.
8. Self-transcendent: use of dance to "become one" with the music; to be "possessed" by it. Your physical movements are determined by the music, *not* by your mind.
9. Participatory and nonexhibitionistic: dance as an involving communal event, *not* entertainment for a spectator audience.
10. Socially functional: dance integrated into ongoing daily life, *not* special and specialized feat of accomplishment.
11. Modular: extended choreographic patterns constructed from sequences of simple units of physical movement.
12. Repetitive: patterns repeated multiply, or until they become second nature.
13. Improvisational: simple units of physical movement lead into different movements, gradually or instantaneously transforming extended pattern.

Characteristics of Funk Music:

Structure

1. Frequent detours from major harmonic scale: use of dissonant, atonal, minor, major or minor 7th chords and melodic sequences; frequent modulations (key changes).
2. Multiple and multilayered melodies, each carried by a different instrument, voice, or chorus.

3. Multiple or multilayered polyrhythmic syncopations, each carried by a different instrument, voice, or chorus.
4. Self-composing: Rhythmic and melodic density enables listener to pick out unique, individual rhythmic and melodic sequences from among layers of rhythm and sound. The more layers one can discriminate, the more complex and sophisticated one's "compositions."
5. Creation of intimate or social space through spoken monologue or dialogue, respectively.

Content

1. Desire for self-transcendence: to "become one" with the music, one's lover, other people, the universe.
2. Sexual love: as source of pride, pleasure, self-respect, humor or play; as means of self-transcendence, achievement of unity.
3. Political themes: affirmation of self-respect; desire for unity or liberation; fear of self-obliteration, social or interpersonal betrayal, disunity; expression of dignity.

Funk Lessons Discography and Bibliography

Funk

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