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Kesha Morant Williams

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Language in Action: Funk Music as the Critical Voice of a Post–Civil Rights Movement Counterculture

Kesha M. Morant[1]

Abstract

From work songs and spirituals during slavery to the gospel, soul, and funk of the civil rights movement, Black music offers a new historicist interpretation of the African American experience. Through Black popular music, the struggles, faith, and joys of a people are expressed. More than mere entertainers, Black musicians are the village griots, the revisionist historians, and the voice of a people. African American music solidifies messages of societal concerns, offering snapshots of social conditions and defining moments within a society. This research posits that funk music was the social protest discourse of poor and working-class Black youth after the euphoria of the civil rights movement faded in "the decade of the detached." Music accompanied many prominent protest movements, including the civil rights and Black power movements. But with an apparent lull in protest activities in the 1970s and 1980s, research focused on the previous decade, leaving an absence of immediate post–civil rights scholarship. While large mainstream social protest movements were less apparent, a counter protest movement emerged through the rhetorical means of funk music. This form of creative communication used everyday experiences to challenge the dominant power structure and ideology of the time period. Consciously or unconsciously, the work of funk musicians recognized language as a form

[1]Eastern University, St. Davids, PA

Corresponding Author:
Kesha M. Morant, Eastern University, 1300 Eagle Road, St. Davids, PA 19087-3696
Email: kmorant@eastern.edu

of social control, thus ending their blind consent to manipulation through language by developing a counterdiscourse that challenged accepted social norms. The functional approach to rhetorical social movements is applied to further support this claim.

Keywords

discourse and power, social protest, funk music, civil rights movement

Since its earliest form, Black music has operated as a tool to send coded messages throughout the in group. Dating back to slavery, oral culture survived in America and was reinforced through speech patterns and musical expressions of the African people. Even with restrictions that required the enslaved people to adapt their musical expression (Floyd, 1995; Jones, 1963), Africans managed to maintain their musicality as a significant cultural expression still visible in all forms of popular Black music. From the work songs and spirituals during slavery to the gospel, soul, and funk of the civil rights movement, Black music offers a new historicist interpretation of the African American experience.

It is through Black popular music that the struggles, faith, and joys of a people are expressed. More than mere entertainers, Black musicians serve as the village griots, the revisionist historians, and the voice of a people. African American music solidifies the message of the societal concerns of a period by offering snapshots of social conditions and historically defining moments within a society. Without its music, Black culture would not have "achieved a luminous, all-encompassing apotheosis whose influence reverberates to this day" (Seymour, 2004, p. 29).

This research posits that funk music was the social protest discourse of the young Black poor and working-class community after the euphoria of the civil rights movement faded, a period defined as "the decade of the detached" (Chang, 2005). Research shows that music accompanied many prominent protest movements, including the civil rights and Black power movements (Denisoff, 1983; Murphy, 2003; Stewart, 1997; Vincent, 1996). However, because of an apparent lull in protest activities in the mid- to late 1970s and the 1980s, research continued to focus on movements of the previous decade, leaving an absence of immediate post–civil rights scholarship (Horner et al., 2001). While large mainstream social protest movements were less apparent, a counter protest movement emerged through the rhetorical means of funk music. This form of creative communication used experiences of everyday life to challenge the dominant power structure and ideology of the time

period. Fairclough (2001) posited that power behind discourse means that the entire social order of language is developed and maintained by those in power. Furthermore, the process is hidden or buried in the ideology of the order of discourse. Consciously or unconsciously, the work of funk musicians recognized language as a form of social control and therefore ended their blind consent to being manipulated through language by developing a counterdiscourse that challenged the accepted social norms of society. To further support funk music as a discourse of social protest, the functional approach to rhetorical social movements is applied (Stewart, 1980/2006).

Early funk musicians were diverse not only in their messages but also in their musical styles. Unfortunately, by the mid-1970s, disco had taken over much of the industry, and as did artists in other genres, funk artists added a disco vibe to their music. This means that similar sounds and party themes were found in much of the music produced during this period.

As the ’70s began to acquire the reputation of a decade devoid of social upheaval, race moved out of the spotlight. Scholars debated the “declining significance of race,” while a new type of “neoconservative” emerged, one who actively socialized with racial minorities yet harbored economic or social beliefs more consistent with the established status quo. Whites could now socialize with Blacks and Latinos in the new discos that had sprung up in every city as a replacement for live concert fare. The “color-blind” music gave the impression of a color-blind society, but that impression was far from the reality (Vincent, 1996, p. 205).

George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic is an example of funk musicians who, through their party motif, managed to maintain a critical voice that challenged the dominant ideology of the time period. While on the surface, much of their music fell in line with the popular music of the period, the band managed to maintain its individuality and stood out among the crowd of commodified bands through its apocalyptic, mythical approach to protest and its critique of economic and social issues such as urban blight, the nuclear threat, and governmental neglect (Brown, 1994; Maultsby, 2006; Vincent, 1996).

Through references to the Mothership, all-Black towns, and a unified collection of all people, post–civil rights funksters used psychedelic imagery that created a discourse counterculture as a means of protest.

Funk Roots in Popular Music

While scholars posit that the musical roots of funk go far deeper than James Brown, it is fair to assert that the roots of popular funk music are most often

accredited to Brown. Funk music emerged out of a desire for a more confrontational approach to protest music. Brown's most noted work, "Say It Loud," was more than a cry of protest; it was also a call to action. The immediacy and intensity of the song resonated with the Black community unlike any popular music that had come before: "'Say It Loud' was a turning point in black music. Never before had black popular music explicitly reflected the bitterness of blacks toward the white man—and here it is done with ferocious funk" (Vincent, 1996, p. 78). The music "was a scorching expression of the black man's soul, just when the entire world was listening in anticipation" (p. 74). The musical content encompassed self-empowerment, celebration, and self-love. It paved the way for improved self-esteem and community esteem, challenged societal social norms, and, most important, created an avenue for self-definition.

The explicit, unapologetic nature of funk music led to its rejection by the record industry. While soul and disco were embraced as palatable genres for White listeners, the industry "consciously ghettoized funk" (Brown, 1994, p. 492), banishing it to Black radio and local neighborhoods. This dismissive tactic of record executives further positioned funk as a power discourse. Record executives are considered the group in power; therefore, in an unchallenged situation, they standardize the definition and the beliefs associated with funk discourse. Power, however, is a relational dynamic, meaning that if the funk musicians and their audience did not respond to the record executives as expected, the power to define was removed from the executives and placed in the hands of the funk community (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 1999).

Post–Civil Rights

By the mid-1970s, the apparent need for communality and unity that had dominated the Black community just a few years prior seemed to dissipate. Many Blacks who obtained government jobs believed that they had "arrived" and no longer saw the need for united protest. And while the civil rights movement and later the Black power movement were successful in many ways, both failed to develop a plan of continuity. This failure left the Black community disheveled and scattered. The complacency and individually focused direction of African Americans following the civil rights and Black power movements left a horrific impact on the Black community (Chang, 2005).

"Advantaged" Blacks settled into their new jobs and entrepreneurial ventures and adopted the unchallenged dominant ideology—work hard and obtain what you desire—while the poor and working-class community grew agitated and began to lash out. As the separation between the working class

and middle class continued to grow, gang violence, Black-on-Black crime, police brutality, and hate crimes increased to unprecedented levels. The White inner-city population rapidly decreased as slums and mysterious apartment building fires increased (Chang, 2005). Just a few years after the movement, there was little connection between the movement and reality:

> By 1976, the year of the bicentennial, voices of dissent could barely be heard. "Black Is Beautiful" was no longer a militant gesture; it was simply cool to be black. "Power to the people" was the greeting in 1972. By 1976 it was "Have a nice day." (Vincent, 1996, p. 166)

The success of the civil rights movement raised the expectations of racial equality and economic and political empowerment within the Black community. Even with considerable growth of the Black middle class, the overall conditions of the African American population were worse than before the movement. The unemployment rate grew as the United States shifted from an industrial to a technological and service-oriented society. And as the government shifted to a Republican, individualist position, "federal funded job training, education, and social programs designed to improve the conditions of African Americans whose lives had been affected by decades of 'Jim Crow' laws" (Maultsby, 2006, p. 299) were eliminated (Chang, 2005; Neal, 1999).

Funk stands out among other forms of music during this period because it paralleled the transition of American society from the era of sanctioned racial segregation known as Jim Crow (1890s to 1960s) to the 1970s, the decade of "integration" and "equal opportunity." For many African Americans, the 1970s represented a paradox of social unrest and ubiquitous optimism (Maultsby, 2006, p. 293). Therefore, as a discourse of social protest, more than any other genre of music, funk expressed the immediate after-the-movement frustrations of the people.

It is difficult to box this form of cultural expression into a standard definition: extreme talk, style, dress, behavior, and, most relevant to this article, extreme musical expression. Funk is the extreme of everything. It is "deliberate confusion, of uninhibited, soulful behavior" (Vincent, 1996, p. 4). "It is a deliberate reaction to—and rejection of—the traditional Western world's predilection for formality, pretense, and self-repression" (p. 8). It is an ego trip, an escape from daily life—and, most important, a form of social protest. Prior to its musical form, funk was associated only with the negative components of the word. Even with its musical popularity, it was never fully embraced by African American or American culture, because it was

representative of the unkempt, unintegrated, "field Negroes or ghettoized" aspects of Black culture many wanted to forget (Vincent, 1996).

Those who embraced funk culture soon realized that the spiritual music was an expression of feeling, attitude, philosophy, and behavior (Maultsby, 2006). Parliament-Funkadelic offered its audience an opportunity to climb aboard the Mothership, or join Uncle Jam's Army and *escape*. Enjoying themselves at all costs, followers of Parliament-Funkadelic's protest discourse were permitted, at least for a moment, to be free from all of life's problems and concerns.

Yet while there are strengths to funk as a form of social protest, there are also weaknesses. Funk went against the grain and created music that spoke to a counterculture within an already marginalized group. It focused on speaking to the needs and desires of a small, insular community in the vernacular language most familiar to this network. It is undisputable that funk music and culture have infiltrated the music industry in such a way that it continues to resonate in the global world, particularly through hip-hop music. And while the music of Parliament-Funkadelic appropriately speaks to a multiplicity of issues relevant to the artists and their listeners, this splintered approach dilutes the chances of measurable influence.

Functional Approach

Funk discourse is defined as a means of rhetorical expression because it is an available means of persuasion. Furthermore, it is composed of a collective group of "ordinary" people who participate in discourse about ways to escape or handle oppressive conditions. The schemes of Stewart's (1980/2006) functional approach to social protest rhetoric are applied to further support funk music as the critical voice of a post–civil rights movement counterculture. This scheme includes transforming perceptions of history and society, prescribing a course of action, mobilizing for action, and sustaining the movement.

Transforming Perceptions of History

To transform an audience's perception of history, the audience must know that a problem exists. It is not uncommon for persons to be unaware that they are oppressed, and in many cases through language and action they consent to this oppression. The post–civil rights Black middle class had achieved some success, and while they understood that oppression and discrimination were paramount in African American history, it was not relevant to their present existence. The unspoken ideology posited that society is "supposed" to be

a certain way, and everyone has a role in securing the continuation of the particular order of discourse, as the only the way to maintain a particular social order is through reproduction, in this case the reproduction of the adopted language (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). When persons use the discourse of a group, they reinforce not only the language but also the beliefs and behaviors attached to the discourse (e.g., terms such as *minority* and *subculture* create an image of "less than"). The only way to change this pattern is to create a counterdiscourse (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 1999); hence the evolution of funk.

On the surface, the culture spoke of racial harmony and a color-blind society. Successful Blacks did not see the need to address social and economic issues, because it was not clear how these directly affected them. As with White flight, many middle-class African Americans also moved out of the inner cities and therefore were not personally affected by urban blight. While the nuclear threat existed, as with many issues, few people were concerned, because it was "just a threat." Poor and working-class Blacks were most likely to feel governmental neglect; therefore, the masses adopted a "blame the victim" approach and were unresponsive.

Funk discourse addressed these issues by appealing to the audience everyone else ignored: "poor folks." "Social movements must alter the way audiences perceive the past, the present, and the future to convince them that an intolerable situation exists and that it warrants urgent action" (Stewart, 1980/2006, p. 155). Funk was successful at this stage, but because the audience was a marginalized group within a marginalized group, the effect was minimal. Just as Black Power rhetoric was for Blacks who had not "arrived," the "uneducated" and the "ghetto dwellers," funk rhetoric spoke to an even smaller group within the poor and working-class Black community.

Transforming Perceptions of Society

Arguably, transforming the audience's perceptions of society is the strongest stage of post–civil rights funk protest discourse. During this stage, language alters the listeners' perceptions of the oppressor as well as the oppressed. In many instances, the protesters believed that mainstream (White) ideology was "right" and therefore that Black ideology was "wrong." This leads many to assume that White America maintained all of the power. Stewart (1997) posited that White ideology is so interwoven in the Black psyche that its influence goes unnoticed. The rhetorical task is to dismantle the perspective that mainstream society dictates the legitimacy of Black America.

During the Black power movement, devil appeals were used to discredit mainstream oppressors. These appeals painted the oppressor as evil or demonic, almost nonhuman, (Gregg, 1971/2006). Post–civil rights funk discourse takes a different approach; the oppressor and the victimized-oppressed are, for the most part, absent from the language of this music. By eliminating the opposition and the victimized audience from the discourse, Parliament-Funkadelic transformed their audience's perception of society. "Chocolate City" focuses on Black domination of inner cities as a positive message, in contrast to concern over White flight. In the song, Black people are in positions of power, and the only reference to White people, "vanilla suburbs," does not elevate Whites to a level of power. In this stage, funk has effectively created a counterdiscourse. Within this particular language community, the dominant social formation is rejected, and a new formation relevant to the needs and desires of this speech community is developed (Gee, 1999).

"One Nation Under a Groove" discusses an imaginary Black community that is unified and celebrating just because it can. While James Brown, the father of funk, created aggressive lyrics that insinuate the existence of an oppressor, Parliament-Funkadelic created an equally effective message, but instead of focusing on the oppressor or the difficult aspects of life, the band consciously chose to develop messages that uplifted its target audience without identifying the existence of an oppressor. The band made its audience aware that they are worthy of equality and in some cases are placed above—*called by a higher power*—than the masses.

Post–civil rights funk discourse took this same position as Brown and other civil rights artists but shifted the critical lens through which the message was developed and disseminated. Parliament-Funkadelic's acknowledgment of government neglect toward the Black community was not a new phenomenon in Black music; however, the band's solution to embrace Black domination of the inner city as a positive instead of focusing on the oppressive nature of the situation was a virgin area of musical exploration. Through this redefinition of inner-city life and presentation of large Black populations as desirable, Black people became aware of the power and beauty of self-definition as well as Black culture and life (Burgess, 1968; Maultsby, 2006; Stewart, 1997).

Prescribing a Course of Action

Many of the objectives addressed in post–civil rights funk discourse are the same as those of the Black power movement. Stewart (1997) wrote that the Black power movement had four core components to its course of action.

Black power activist Stokely Carmichael argued that the liberation of Black people and a better society would occur only if Blacks controlled language and defined themselves, moved back to the community, took control of the community, and kept their resources internal. It is apparent that the musical discourse addressed these core components: (a) Language was controlled by redefining funk and its surrounding culture, (b) the community was defined as a counterculture within an already marginalized group, (c) "Chocolate City" encouraged its audience to embrace their neighborhoods as Whites ran toward the suburbs, and (d) both "Chocolate City" and "One Nation Under a Groove" made references to the essentiality of controlling community. However, the mere existence of a course of action did not mean that it was an obtainable one. Just as the grandiose and idealistic objectives of the Black power movement led to limited results, the same is applicable for funk discourse.

Mobilizing for Action

To mobilize participants into action, they must believe that victory is obtainable. Often, those most closely tied to protest movements have exhausted all other means of available persuasion. Aggressive protest occurs because success was not achieved after attempting to address concerns through the prescribed societal method. Therefore, by the action stage, protesters are willing to make significant sacrifices to obtain their goal (Stewart, 1980/2006). Post–civil rights funk protest discourse emerged after years of frustration. The old civil rights movement had left youth disconnected and frustrated with a lack of tangible results. And the Black power movement offered them new hope but disbanded as quickly as it had formed. Funk as a discourse of social protest was arguably the first form of popular Black music to splinter from a formalized movement yet continue to affect the African American community.

The measurable following suggests that Parliament-Funkadelic was capable of mobilizing its audience toward action. "Mothership Connection" is an example of mobilization language delivered by the group. As with most of the work of Parliament-Funkadelic, "Mothership Connection" is a song about a big party. However, this is not *just* a party; it is also a path to salvation. Parliament-Funkadelic connects the Mothership to the Negro spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The Mothership of the 1970s operates in same role as the chariot during enslavement: as a vehicle sent to take Black people to freedom.

Clarity of mobilization purpose is the weakest aspect of this form of protest discourse. Previous research (Brown, 1994; Maultsby; 2006; Vincent, 1996) posits that on a macroscopic level, funk music drew attention to social injustices during a time that many considered a period of social rest (Chang, 2005). The music presented the discourse in such a way that while it informed its audience that ignorance is not bliss, it also told them that wallowing in an oppressed or victimized state is not the answer. "Uncle Jam Wants You" is a cry to rally the troops. Yet the question remains after the troops are rallied: Where are they going?

Sustaining the Movement

Stewart (1980/2006) wrote that people become frustrated if they do not see progress or if a movement experiences multiple setbacks. To maintain support, a movement must reinvent itself and find ways to continue to make an impact and remain visible. Funk protest was able to sustain itself in a number of ways, the most dominant being its presence in rap music. While funk music of this period focused on mythical or psychedelic protest lyrics, the next phase of this genre of music reinvented itself and reemerged as a component of rap music (Vincent, 1996). Heavily influenced by funk music, early hip-hop became the independent voice of a new generation of youth.

Conclusion

A major function of protest music is to create solidarity among its audience. This is accomplished by prompting outside support or sympathy toward the movement issues; reinforcing the ideology of movement supporters; creating cohesion, solidarity, and morale in the movement; recruiting new supporters; and invoking or addressing potential solutions (Denisoff, 1983). However, a weakness of this form of discourse protest is that just as many rhetorical forms, it poses a question or expresses disagreement about societal issues but does not offer explicit solutions.

Although much evidence suggests that funk music as a discourse of social protest was able to sustain itself, the question of what exactly it is sustaining arises. After applying the schemes of the functional approach to funk music, it is also plausible that many components of a rhetorical social movement exist. And while mobilizing for action presented significant weaknesses, and clarity is desired surrounding what exactly is being sustained, this analysis supports that funk music is the critical voice of a post–civil rights movement counterculture.

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Bio

Kesha M. Morant is an assistant professor of communication studies at Eastern University. Her primary research agenda connects with popular communication, health communication, and cultural studies. Her work explores the manner in which language and discourse influence communities of people—be it interpersonally, small groups, or within organizations. This area of interest was explored at length in her dissertation at textual analysis on "African American communication dynamics: The continuity and extension through commercial Black talk radio."