POPPING THE LOCK: THE POCKET, FUNK & THE AMBIVALENT SOCIAL
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The nation’s capitol and all of its capital versus the District of Columbia and its local lack of capital. The District, Dee Cee, and its empty pockets. I think you see me trying to refill and re-noise those pockets in many of the poems that refuse to follow any sort of strict, formal stanza sort of design. That is—it doesn’t have to be 1, 2, 3, 4, silence, space, 1, 2, 3, 4, silence, space, which is fine. I flirt with consistency, those patterns, and then I rip it away—

On the one, say what is the pocket. One: the pocket is the deepest hole in the groove. So low you can’t get under it. You can only get in it. Reel back “Be Real Black For Me: Aesthetics and Perhaps, Syntax”: the groove is made plain on the breakdown, like a rabbit’s black circle on a flat land. Entrance to the groove entrances dancers to enter. Or:

harmonies obscure the beat, the breakdown eschews tune for what Eshun calls “percussapella” makes the beat plain allowing dancers to get in the groove (versus out of it).

The pocket’s whole holeness, like the contradiction of Black(s) Aesthetics, is the holiest of holeys and Marvin Gaye’s “Wholly Holy”—transcendence done bodily, a boot on the kick kicks the booty off the spine (a pendulum, a hypnotist’s pocket watch) and so deep into time it’s out of time. A forever in a moment, all we can reckon of Heaven.

On the two, say what is the pocket. One: the pocket is the deepest hole in the groove. Two: the pocket is the sound of rhythm synching down into that hole. The pocket is not a tailored suit though a suit can have a pocket. The pocket isn’t the rhythm like the pocket isn’t the pants. But like a pants pocket, the band’s pocket or the dance pocket is the free space in which the jam can be jammed, because the pocket is about a tight emptiness. A limiting freedom—improvisation—it holds time to hide time like pocket change. The more jammed into the pocket, the tighter it gets.

Tight is two-faced, a janus. When a band is tight, they are in the pocket. The Fabulous Flames stayed tight from James Brown’s tight fist on the reins. Gimme one and so one. Gimme three and so so so. But tight is also intoxicated, a loosening up. A tight band is too loose. Part of the Godfather’s tightness was that when band members were too tight and acting out of pocket the tight-fisted Brown would take it out of their pockets. And...sooooo, their pockets empty, out of the synch but in the hole, the band went head up with the Godfather. Who fired the Flames and flew in the the crew who would become the JBz. Many of whom would become Funkadelic. Parliament. Bootsy’s Rubber Band—a rubber band’s elasticity is about a tightness, both at the same time, a spandex pocket.

On the three, say what is the pocket. One: the deepest hole. Two: synching into that hole. Three: the range of acceptable behavior. To be out of pocket is to forget your role, your position. To wander out of place. Like—Brown would’ve said—the Fabulous Flames. By getting out of synch with the Godfather (their bandleader thus keeper of time), they acted out of pocket. As Phonte says in “On Time”: “Stick to the script, nigga, / fuck your improv.” On time is near synonymous for in the pocket: to say, “That shit was on time” is to say that something was where it was needed precisely when it needed to be


2 Eshun, Kodwo. “Transmaterializing the Breakbeat” More Brilliant than the Sun, 23

3 BUT, what is suggested by “on time” is that the presence of the shit in question was not anticipated—but an unforeseen condition necessitated the presence and it presented itself. That money was on-time.
there. Thus, on time and in the pocket approbe the appropriate moment and position. Nas: Never on schedule but always on time. Mos Def: Where you at? Right here.

Yet both on-time and in the pocket arrange a range—limited—of rightness. A range is a field of play, a space, a pocket where things can happen. The pocket is the time/place and anything in it can’t be out of place/time—a dollar in the pocket is the same as a dollar in the wallet in the pocket but different than a dollar in a sock, a hat or a dollar in a wallet in a locker. Ask the pickpocket.

On the four, say what is the pocket. One: the hole. Two: synching in. Three: the acceptable range. Four: the site in which the hole and the whole sights and cites itself. If the law say sampling is lifting and the break beat is elevated as the deepest pocket, thus the richest; then samplers pick pockets and pickpocket them. If sampling a break is stealing the song, then the break seems synecdoche. Yet, the break seems a pocket without pants. What’s that? An envelope? A metonym of the song? To pants, like to break down, is to lay bare. The break down is where the listener (the sampler, the dancer, the dj) “sees” the hole of the whole.

The pocket is where the band “sees” the whole of the hole. The pocket is the song at its deepest, the hole reason why you dig it, what the band is digging for. The pocket, the whole hole, recognizes and plays itself, repeats itself almost exactly. It’s fleeting, even a band jammed in the pocket for a whole jam stops jamming after a while (say, Fela). The in-concert act ends before the act ends the concert. The moment a pocket becomes a quantized loop it is no longer the pocket. A loop. A beat. But it’s boxer shorts. Silk pajamas. Male kangaroo. No pocket. The exactitude is alchemical. As is the potential to last beyond the drummer’s last pulse, the bassist’s last line, the brass’s last breath. The pocket is played not re-played.

But what so what? What follows is a survey of territory.

ONE! Two! THREE! FOUR! Make it funky!

What holds me in the pocket is the contradiction of flexibility in tension with precision. How this flexibility begets textability, reading the composition’s black and white spaces, commenting on them. The comment reveals the space while moving in the space. The comment becomes comet, a flash of light or UFO.

Funk makes serious game of exploring space—from the slyly stoned “Spaced Cowboy” to the galactic anthem “Mothership Connection”—by stretching the pocket (ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!). Thus rubber-banded, funk strides soul and what’s next, ass-etically and pole-ically reading the black and white spaces, a glittery boot on each and a crotchspan between.

With funk, we return to mess in the message. But that return signifies: Soul has smoothed the rasp of church and bedroom. The grit don’t hit the fans with the raw Sam cooked for Ray and Aretha. Funk, especially post-Riot, post-Grunt, deep Parliament showed the seams that seemed seamless in seamy soul. The Family Stone crammed enough Avant rhythm that when Riot wheezed from the drum machine, the pocket got a hole in it and change spilled out on Miles and Herbie. The JB’s screamed at James and didn’t get fired, leaving mud between the cracks clogging the funky drummer’s stutter with maggot brains. All the while a little doo wop called the Parliaments was about to trade shark-skin for space suits. Sure it was drugs. But that’s the joint. Soul was about a signal, a mas-con masked as mass consumer music. Soul insisted on re-connection to a kind of spirituality. Funk

4 The M-O-S says more. When tracking hip hop’s internal contradictions in the track “Hip Hop”, he notes it’s “On time and inappropriate.”

5 Folks like Dilla, Madlib and DOOM eschew quantizing like the Bomb Squad, did.
escapes into spaceships, into virtuosity, into cocaine. Space is why LaBelle can sing of going upstairs to gitcha yaya while in Astrogear.; it insists that it’s your thang and stretches, if not severs, the link to the prima materia, the soul is in your telechy. The funk makes a rhythm king of your heart and a gigantic synth of your throat.

Yet for all the future, the roots rupture, call it ruture? Splicing gospel with nursery rhyme and yodel, or leaping over the cotton fields to the yam patch of Africanesque call in “Knee Deep” or the response of “Thanks For Talking To Me, Africa.” Susan Willis says “funk is really nothing more than an intrusion of the past into the present” and connects it to “girlhood sensuality”—thus the playground taunt of black girl voices provides the funk correlative/corrective to grown man platitudinosity in Sly’s “Stand” and Stevie’s “Ordinary Pain.” And when Badu fungs her rock quoting “Ordinary Pain” for “Penitentiary Philosophy” she means escape from the coffeeshop of Baduism into the murk. How in 99, D’angelo traded the chem high, arrrh’n’bee sheen of Brown Sugar for the dirtier-textured, haint-baiting Voodoo. How does it feel, the mud, the blur and slur that had ?uestlove crying in his kit about being behind the beat?

Funk’s ambiguous ambivalence for the pocket is musical.

Funk’s ambiguous ambivalence for the pocket is semantic, too. Like other tags to other black music—jazz, rock and roll—“funk” is obscene. It acts out of pocket against eelish mores. What’s slippery is that it fungs up contemporaneous white and black space contemporaneously. The writer Kodwo Eshun suggests Parliament’s Sir Noze D’Voidofunk is a surrogate for “Cool” (read Black Cool). And Cool was the nemesis. Cool, by the mid-70s, was the currency of Soul. Where there was Smokey, there was no fire; Motown had become a quiet storm. Before that Motown’s The Temptation’s heaviest shit was “Psychedelic” soul (ahem, er-uh, funk without the trouble of the negro word). The Temps deconstructed their trademark harmonies, becoming human arpeggios, dissing the chords to get at ghetto discord, let the band play for 3:52 before getting the stone rolling, dropped the suits, and rocked the psychedelic signifiers white youth dug openly and black youth downloaded on the downlow. Parliament’s stage show, with men in wedding gowns, wigs, diapers, glittery makeup, afronaut costumes was not on schedule. It was ahead of time.

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6 For scale, the total length of “My Girl” is 2:39.