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Joshua Bird

Western Washington University, joshua.bird@wwu.edu

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**CLIMBING
ABOARD
THE
MOTHERSHIP
AN
AFROFUTURISTIC
READING
OF
PARLIAMENT-
FUNKADELIC**

JOSHUA BIRD

“What’s happening CC? They still call it the White House, but that’s a temporary condition too. Can you dig it, CC”

In his 1994 essay *Black to the Future*, cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term “Afrofuturism” and defined it as such:

“Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery 180).

While critics argue that Afrofuturism actually first came into the public consciousness during the early part of the 20th century through the works of African American writers such as Pauline Hopkins and George Schuyler, Afrofuturist music was pioneered by Sun Ra during the late 1950s. Influenced by jazz music, African culture, and the impending Space Age, Sun Ra’s music contained Afrocentric elements that would have a profound influence on black musicians, as well as writers and artists, for years to come. One such influence was George Clinton, a fellow musician who once said of Sun Ra, “this boy was definitely out to lunch – same

place I eat” (Heron). Clinton was the mastermind behind the 1970s funk collective Parliament-Funkadelic, and his artistic vision included extensive elements of science fiction. Through the use of their heavily Afrofuturistic lyrics, album artwork, and extravagant stage show, George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic used their music to unify the black community. With this unity, they sought to elevate African Americans everywhere to a rightfully deserved equal status.

To fully understand Clinton’s vision, it is important to be aware of the group’s history. The roots of Parliament-Funkadelic can be traced back to The Parliaments, a doo-wop barbershop quintet based in Plainfield, New Jersey, that was conceived and constructed by George Clinton himself. Featuring bizarre and yet socially conscious lyrics, The Parliaments struggled during much of the 60s and were marred by obscurity and mediocre record sales for several years. The group finally found success in 1967 with the release of the single, (I Wanna) Testify, and with the

group’s newly acquired fortune, George Clinton assembled a five man backing band that was dubbed Funkadelic (a portmanteau of funk and psychedelic) to complement the five vocalists. Due to a dispute between Clinton and Revilot Records, he temporarily lost the rights to The Parliaments name, which led to the Funkadelic moniker being used for the entire ensemble until the 1970s.

In 1974, Clinton ushered in a new era with the revival of the Parliament name and from that point on, Parliament and Funkadelic both operated under the leadership of Clinton while using the same group of assorted musicians. While the two acts were essentially the same band, they could very easily be distinguished by their respective brands of music: Parliament featured more mainstream music driven by vocal harmonies, lyrics that dealt with compelling social issues and catchy horn arrangements, while Funkadelic was characterized by a more experimental, guitar based sound that placed emphasis on solos and skilled instrumentation (Clough). From then on, the two groups

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operated and toured concurrently, usually under the name Parliament-Funkadelic or simply P-Funk.

While Funkadelic's music certainly has science fiction elements to it, Parliament's work was completely engrossed in Afrofuturist themes. The seeds of George Clinton's scientific but artistic vision were sown on Parliament's March 1975 effort *Chocolate City* (Fig. 2), the first track of which opens up with Clinton's half-spoken, half-rapped first verse, "What's happening CC [Chocolate City]? They still call it the White House, but that's a temporary condition too. Can you dig it, CC" (Clinton)?

The album's theme was influenced by Washington, DC, a place where migration from the South made it a predominantly black community. During the early 1960s, Washington and D.C. were essentially two distinct places: the former was "the White House, monuments, slick museums and ornate embassies", while the latter was "neighborhoods, playgrounds, stores and churches" (Carroll). In the aftermath of the riots which followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the black community splintered into many different and often conflicting neighborhoods so that there were "multiple" DCs. With the release of *CC* however, "black Washington coalesced around an idea voiced by the glib tongue of a funk maestro, an idea that momentarily fused D.C.'s divisions with a vision" (Carroll). Clinton realized that

there was power in solidarity, and he used the idea in the title track (and the album as a whole) to suggest that black migration to the inner city was actually a positive thing and he even proposed that the United States itself could eventually become a chocolate city one day:

"Tell 'em to make sure they got their James Brown pass. And don't be surprised if Ali is in the White House. Reverend Ike, Secretary of the Treasury. Richard Pryor, Minister of Education. Stevie Wonder, Secretary of Fine Arts. And Miss Aretha Franklin, the First Lady. Are you out there, CC? A chocolate city is no dream. It's my piece of the rock and I dig you, CC" (Clinton).

This speculative utopia that Clinton envisions is important because this kind of speculative fiction has actually been extensively explored in other works of Afrofuturistic art, which firmly cements *Chocolate City* in the genre. The most notable example of this is Sutton Griggs' novel *Imperium in Imperio*. Published in 1899, the book imagines a separate African American state within the United States, much like Clinton's speculative *Chocolate City*. While Griggs' work isn't considered "true" Afrofuturism because of the time it was published as well as its content, Clinton's lyrics on *Chocolate City* represent the birth of his vision, and would anticipate the most socially conscious, Afrofuturistic piece of work that Parliament-Funkadelic would ever create.

December 1975 saw the release of Parliament's magnum opus, entitled *Mothership Connection*. This work embodied many of the aspects of Mark Dery's definition of Afrofuturism, as it not only addressed African American themes in the context of the twentieth century, but it "appropriated African American images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 180). This album was markedly different from *Chocolate City* and other Afrofuturistic art at the time because of the very direct way in which the theme was ingrained in the work. Consider the following lyric spoken by one of Clinton's alter-egos, The Lollipop Man (the first true character of the P-Funk mythology) from the first track on the album, "P. Funk (Wants to get Funked Up)":

"Good evening. Do not attempt to adjust your radio, there is nothing wrong. We have taken control as to bring you this special show... Welcome to station W-E-F-U-N-K, better known as We Funk. Or deeper still, the Mothership Connection, home of the extraterrestrial brothers... Coming to you directly from the Mothership. Top of the Chocolate Milky Way, 500,000 kilowatts of P. Funk Power" (Clinton).

In this passage, it is easy to see how the lyrics embody many of the aspects of Dery's definition of Afrofuturism. Not only have these aliens "taken control," but they refer to themselves as "extraterrestrial brothers... at the top of the chocolate Milky Way." This clearly represents the African American, as well as science fiction elements espoused by Dery.

While *Mothership Connection* contained many lyrics with science fiction themes, it also featured something equally significant: an album cover that presented George Clinton himself emerging from a flying saucer. This was one of the first times in mainstream culture that an African-American had been featured in space, and Clinton explained his decision to do so as such: "we [Parliament-Funkadelic] had put black people in situations nobody ever thought they would be in, like the White House. I figured another place you wouldn't think black people would be was in outer space. I was a big fan of *Star Trek*, so we did a thing with a pimp sitting in a spaceship shaped like a Cadillac" (Hicks). By "working with a shared set of mythological images and icons such as space iconography, the idea of extraterrestriality, and the idea of space exploration" (Corbett) as cultural critic John Corbett put it, Clinton defamiliarized the way in which African Americans were perceived by the public following the civil rights and Space Age era.

This defamiliarization is much more important in the context of Afrofuturism than simply featuring an African-American in outer space. In Kodwo Eshun's critical essay *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism*, he thoroughly explained the evolution of the perception of black people: "Afrofuturism uses extraterrestriality as a hyperbolic trope to explore the historical terms, the everyday implications of forcibly imposed dislocation, and the constitution of Black Atlantic subjectivities: from slave to negro to coloured to évolu  to black to African to African American" (Eshun 299). With the release of *Mothership Connection*, George Clinton took that subjectivity one step further, from African-American to equal citizen. On the second track of the album, entitled *Mothership Connection (Star Child)*, Clinton as Starchild (another alter ego and famous P-Funk character) proclaims that The Mothership "ain't nothing but a party." But more importantly the Mothership itself can be interpreted as a sort of salvation for African Americans. As Starchild also says later in the song, "you have overcome, for I am here" (Clinton), signifying that black people in America have reached Eshun's threshold of African Americanism, that is, the status of equal citizen.

There was one more way that P-Funk reaffirmed its Afrofuturistic message: through their elaborate, grand stage shows. During the height of their career



(1975-1979), Parliament-Funkadelic's live show was nothing short of a musical phenomenon. Live shows featured many musicians, all of whom would be dressed head to toe with the most ornate, outrageous costumes and props imaginable, all of which would contribute to the ever growing P-Funk mythology. Shows during this time in the band's history climaxed when a huge spaceship (dubbed "The Mothership") would land on stage amid smoke and dim lights, at which point George Clinton would exit the ship as his alter ego Starchild from Mothership Connection to rousing applause and cheering (Gutkovich 64). The audience's reaction to Clinton is a perfect representation of his quote "you have overcome, for I am here" because his personification of the Starchild character is representative of African Americans coming together and acting in concert for a common purpose. This clearly meets Eshun's threshold of African Americanism, that is, it further cements the status of African Americans as

equal citizens. These elaborate props and costumes would help the audience become completely consumed in the alternate universe of Afrofuturistic P-Funk mythology.

P-Funk's Afrofuturistic theme has profoundly influenced the contemporary African-American music scene. In fact, P-Funk was the primary influence of the rap movement gangsta-funk (G-funk), and remains to this day one of the most sampled acts in rap music, which itself has become an important cultural phenomenon. A good example of this is Dr. Dre's critically acclaimed 1992 album *The Chronic*, which prominently features Parliament-Funkadelic samples on nearly every song. Since rap music has entered the mainstream, P-Funk has been able to transcend its original predominantly African-American demographic and permeate to white pieces of cornbread like me. ●

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