Adrian Piper
Notes on Funk, I-II//1985/83

Adrian Piper's Funk Lessons (1982–84), were a series of participatory social events in which the artist taught white participants about black funk music and how to dance to it. Her four essays entitled 'Notes on Funk' present a thoughtful analysis of her intentions, experiences and of feedback from her collaborators.

Notes on Funk I
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 idioms, 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, re-rehearsing, 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 idioms, 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 pseudo-academic lecture/demonstration, and social union replaced the audience-performer separation. What I purport 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
PARTY

GET

DOWN

AND

One's ability to listen to this genre of music without pain and personal feelings. These negative associations linger into adulthood and inhibit one's ability to listen to and understand this art form. Without participation, the result was often cathartic, therapeutic, and intellectually stimulating...

The intimate scale of the dialogue permitted a more expansive exploration of individual reactions to funk music and dance, which are often highly intense and complex. For example, funk music often evokes feelings of anxiety, anger, or contempt among middle-class culture. White listeners may find the music threatening and culturally insensitive, while black listeners may feel avenues of expression and identity.

In the context of the European-descended tradition of classical folk and popular music, it sounds mindless and monotonous. This music, in turn, evokes a sense of cultural appropriation and the portrayal of black culture as pathological, reinforcing stereotypes...

The presence of funk in the discourse of language and identity raises questions about the role of music in shaping social norms and expectations. For some, funk represents a form of resistance and empowerment, while for others, it may be associated with negative connotations...

Overall, funk music and dance provide a rich context for exploring issues of identity, cultural appropriation, and the power dynamics within artistic expression.

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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

[... ] 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.

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 Colour (I think that's the going phrase these days; as my parents often complain, 'What's the matter with 'coloured'? Or 'coloured 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 pseudo-academic 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!