

Transcendence, Testifying, & Funk: The Resistive Strategies and Spiritual Communities in David Dorfman's *Prophets of Funk*

Kate Speer

University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract

David Dorfman's most current work, Prophets of Funk (2010) follows the rise, demise, and redemption of Funk composer and musician Sly Stewart using a collage of hits from his band, Sly & the Family Stone. Invested in this loose biographical narrative are the culture of the black Pentecostal Church, the tradition of transcendence and testifying, and the creation of Sly Stewart as a charismatic prophet. Prophets of Funk uses charisma both spiritually and politically to enhance the audience-performer connection, successfully creating active audience citizens. By using the rhythms of Funk, Dorfman and the cast can draw upon Pentecostal practices of testifying and transcendence, which are modes of receiving God on a personal level and also act as resistive performativity. As a result, Prophets of Funk both comments on the construction of racism and re-writes the discursive texts by proposing a universal funkativity. Thus the construction of Sly Stewart as a charismatic prophet is a tool to transfer charisma to the audience and an aid to reach Higher Ground.

Since its formation in 1985, David Dorfman Dance has become one of the leading American modern dance companies known for politically relevant and community based works. Dorfman's most current work, *Prophets of Funk* (2010) follows the rise, demise, and redemption of Funk composer and musician Sly Stewart using a collage of hits from his band, Sly & the Family Stone. Invested in this loose biographical narrative are the culture of the black Pentecostal Church, the tradition of transcendence and testifying, and the creation of Sly Stewart as a charismatic prophet, all of which are connected to the historical and theoretical framework of Funk music. In addition to expanding upon the presence of these narratives within the work, this research also argues how this particular staging and narratives enhance the audience-performer connection, with the overarching agenda being the creation of active audience citizens.

Prophets of Funk is the third installment of what Dorfman refers to as a trilogy of works that focuses on suspect heroes in order to reveal the grey area surrounding larger societal questions such as political action, war, and racism. Similar to *underground* (2006) and *Disavowal* (2008), which look at the domestic terrorist group Weather Underground and the radical abolitionist John Brown respectively, *Prophets of Funk* neither presents Sly Stewart as a savior nor a sinner, but rather as a multi-faceted individual upon whom our desires, hopes, and fears are projected.

Framing *Prophets of Funk* begins with a historical and theoretical analysis of Funk music. Funk's lineage is steeped in black musical traditions such as gospel, rhythm & blues, rock, and especially jazz. Dave Thompson writes that Funk is the "ruthless discipline of rhythm and the awesome expansion of improvisation; it is the righteousness of social comment and the rebelliousness of political action" (Thompson vii). Funk is marked by improvisation, a divergence from the tyranny of the verse-chorus-verse song

structure, and large bands that interacted in live jam sessions to create “thick bass lines and guitar licks locked into tight drum patterns accented by horns, congas, and keyboards” (Vincent, *Funk* 3; Thompson 59; Brown 86). For many, Funk is spiritual, rooted in African aesthetics of spiritual and mental health through free expression and reaching oneness with the cosmos through rhythm (Vincent, *Funk* 4). According to George Clinton, Funk philosophy considers freedom a state of mind and advocates transcending one’s problems through release (Wright 39).

Consequently, Funk’s aesthetic “of uninhibited soulful behavior that remains viable because of a faith in instinct, a joy of self and a joy of life, particularly unassimilated black American life” was inherently political (Vincent, *Funk* 4). The very essence of Funk represented egalitarianism, because no one voice or instrument was primary (Vincent, *Funk* 16). By affirming and validating the African American experience both through lyrics and stages shows, Funk became a forum in the popular mainstream music scene for making explicit the continuing presence of racism in America (Vincent, *Funk* 5). Thus Funk mixed pleasure, performance, and intellectuality (Bolden 26).

As an example, even the make-up of Sly & the Family Stone’s band was intentional, featuring both white and black musicians as well as male and female (Neal 4). With a white drummer and saxophone player and women who could both sing and play instruments rather than just be back-up eye candy, the band represented what it preached: an integrated society. Similarly, the current make-up of David Dorfman’s company reflects a desire to tackle racial issues and integration with a mixed cast of white, black, male, and female dancers. Many of the power dynamics, identity politics, and manipulation of stereotypes staged in *Prophets of Funk* would not be possible without the perception of gender, race, and other identity markers that the dancers represent. For clarity in this written analysis, I perceive company members Raja Kelly and Kyle Abraham as black menfolk, Karl Rogers and Luke Gutgsell as white menfolk, Meghan Bowden and Renuka Hines as black womenfolk, and Whitney Tucker and Kendra Portier as white womenfolk¹.

Additionally, the etymology of Funk reflects a black oral tradition of emptying a signifier and refilling it with another meaning. The origin of “funky” comes from the Ki-Kong word “lufuki” of the Bakongo people of Central Africa and means strong body odor, which culturally signified hard working integrity (Vincent, *Funk* 33). However, as a slang word for smell, a euphemism for sex, and an auditory proximity to fuck, funky in white American speech is closely associated with black stereotypes of promiscuity and looseness (Thompson vii; Vincent, *Funk* 24; Bolden 15). Thus, the naming of a primarily black music genre Funk connects both to the etymology of the word indicating a high level of commitment and integrity, fusing leisure and labor, and to a resistive strategy against the white male dominated music industry (Bolden 15). According to Frank Kofsky, “to call a composition, a passage, or a player ‘funky’ was not only to offer praise in general, but a means of lauding the object of praise for its specifically black qualities”

¹ During rehearsal, the dancers used the terms “menfolk” and “womenfolk” when referring to themselves in the context of this piece. At the beginning of “Somebody Is Watching You,” the cast takes turns bowing along these gender and racial lines. While in a line holding the rhythm with a step-touch, the dancers subtly reveal their identities when the men bow, then the women, then blacks, and then whites (Dorfman).

(Vincent, *Funk* 43). The decision to use Funk subverts the language of the dominant culture by revising the English language, highlighting the dramatic contradiction between hegemonic discourse and the reality of the black experience (Bolden 15, 24).

Dorfman utilizes this resistive strategy from black oral tradition in the movement sequence nicknamed “Trio A” that pays homage to Yvonne Rainer’s work of the same title. Since movement can harbor elusive or multiple meanings, there is the possibility to repeat movement and shift the meaning by adjusting the texture, intent, tempo, and other qualities of the movement. Just how funk is emptied of one meaning and refilled with a new connotation, the movement sequence of “Trio A” carries one meaning at the beginning of *Prophets of Funk* and then completely shifts when repeated again at the end during the portrayal of Sly’s decline.

During “Stand!” the movement represents a celebration. The music itself is infectious and joyful: not only a black pride anthem, but also referencing the ritual act of standing and testifying. At the point when “Trio A” starts, the music shifts into a tighter groove. Horns pierce on the one and three, hand clapping catches the double beat, and voices accent the rhythm with Na Na Na. Likewise the dancers’ quality of movement shifts to fast, sharp movement that hits and accents the complex rhythmical landscape (Dorfman). The shift is meant to be hot, a crowd pleaser showcasing the dancers’ efficacy with rhythmical expression and funk.

When “Trio A” appears again towards the end of *Prophets of Funk*, the sequence is preceded by a disturbing improvisation between Karl Rogers and Raja Kelly, which sets a somber mood. The duet is performed to an audio recording of a Dick Cabot interview in which Dick Cabot is struggling to hold a conversation with Sly who is clearly under the influence. Although the audience is laughing, the unsaid situation reflects the social construction of unfair disadvantages for blacks. Rogers stands over Kelly holding two drum sticks moving only when Dick Cabot speaks while Kelly moves along the floor only during Sly’s lines (Dorfman). The power dynamic is clear between Rogers and Kelly as it is with Dick Cabot and Sly. The pervasiveness of white supremacy drips from both Rogers’ stiff stance and the audience’s laughter at Sly.

Following this segment enter Kyle Abraham, Meghan Bowden, and Renuka Hines, standing in military fashion, their legs planted wide, holding their wrists in front of their torsos. Like drill sergeants Bowden and Hines repeat “Trio A” while Kyle moves through fierce gestural movement that either looks like speechifying or attacks the air. The presence of the black bodies references the militarism of the Black Power movement. Absent of smiles and the bounce quality that rode the rhythm in “Stand!,” the movement is harsher, direct, and aggressive with the emphasis on the anger behind racism and the decline of Sly as a prophet for tolerance and equality (Dorfman). However, the movement is still the same although the quality has shifted, which suggests that both the joy/celebration and militarism/anger may exist simultaneously not only as a black experience, but as a human experience as well.

Across the literature, Sly Stewart is referred to as the “most popular Pentecostal mystic” in the country or “part shaman, part preacher, part trickster, [and] part soul brother” (Neal 3; Kaliss xiv). His “vivacious banter and infectious positivity complimented by a strikingly deep voice that could soar and scorch your soul in an instant” speaks to a charisma or an “it” quality that captivated both white and black audiences across America (Vincent, *Funk* 94). According to Barbara Campbell, Sly

would work both himself and the audience into a frenzy that resembled a revival meeting (Neal 6). People's recollection of the band's set at Woodstock resembles black preachers who would invite their immobile community to transcend their reality (Neal 7).

- *Sly was like a preacher. He had half-a-million people in the palm of his hand* – Cynthia Robinson (Neal 7).
- *Half a million clenched fists and peace signs rising into the air in a massive human tidal wave of approval* – Steve Lake (Vincent, Funk 94).
- *Man, every hair on my body was standing on edge...it was like electricity was just running all through our bodies. Then that had us so pumped up when we went back out for the encore, that was when we shifted into a gear that none of us had ever shifted into...* – Sly & the Family Stone bass player Larry Graham (Vincent, Funk 94).

This gear into which Graham and the band shift could be interpreted as a trance or spirit possession, an act associated with Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism grew out of a protest against the black Protestant congregations that took on white religious attitudes such as removing shouting and dance-possible rhythms during worship (Hurston 103). As a result, the Sanctified Church or Pentecostalism became “a rebirth of song-making” and is frequently marked by spirit possession, lively music, and religious fervor (Hurston 104; Booker 29). Similar to much of the literature regarding the spiritual transcendence of Funk music in response to the rhythm, Zora Neale Hurston writes that spirit possession is “an emotional explosion responsive to rhythm” in which for a moment the spirit “chooses to drive out the individual consciousness temporarily and use the body for its expression” (91). Spirit possession, according to Hurston, is a community thing that thrives in concert in which the first shout is the most difficult for the preacher to arouse and then it spreads like wildfire (91). Likewise, Funk stage shows, such as Sly & the Family Stone at Woodstock, would lead the audience into a trance where the common language of the rhythm encourages a community of one (Wright 45).

The acts typically associated with spirit possession such as calling on the spirit, shouting, testifying, and speaking in tongues bespeak an active participation in one's relationship with God as well as resistive performativity in opposition to hegemonic structures (Anderson 120). Specifically in opposition to white supremacy, the performance of spirit possession disrupts the totality of racism's hold, because the presence of God is called forth by the individual rather than an institution, endowing the possessed individual with discursive power in that moment as they re-write texts using non-hegemonic speech (Anderson 124). For instance the very presence of bands like Sly & the Family Stone performing on stage validated and affirmed the black experience and the infectious, upbeat music created an atmosphere of tolerance, which revealed the presence of racism within pop culture as well as American culture as a whole (Vincent, Funk 90).

Additionally, there is a presence of sexuality both in Pentecostal worship and Funk music. Anderson considers a sermon's heightened emotion parallels sexual intercourse, climaxing with sustained shouting usually occurring at the height or conclusion of a sermon. Both an attraction to the pastor and a personal, sensual relationship with Jesus reflects a connection between the spiritual and the corporeal

experience (Anderson 121). In his article that attempts to define the “quality possessed by abnormally interesting people,” Joseph Roach suggests that that “it” quality of charisma is marked by a “strange magnetism which attracts both sexes” (555, 558). In *Prophets of Funk*, Raja Kelly, who portrays the youthful Sly, exudes this strange magnetism when he disappears completely into the character of Sly Stewart. With the same gesture, Kelly is able to possess contradictory qualities such as being tall and lanky with immense coordination and rhythmical acuity, “linking male ‘sexual domination’ with ‘vulnerability’ in the same hot breath” (Roach 560).

Kelly solidifies his connection with the audience and hooks their attraction in the number “If You Want Me to Stay” a hit from the 1973 album *Fresh*. The song is the epitome of Funk featuring Sly’s sultry vocals that drag the lyrics to deep, low chords; his intimate, high-pitched screams; and the bass guitar’s percussive subtle beat that is simultaneously cool in tempo and hot in rhythm. The video projection of Kelly in shades lip-synching and bouncing his head to the beat is addictive. Not only are his large lips seductive, but also the additional dance of his Afro completes his cool image. There is an intensity in his performance while he remains emotionally detached. Kelly reinforces the bounce and groove of the music as he struts across the stage, his long legs taking an easy stride as the hips coolly sway. His height is exaggerated by his psychedelic platform shoes, so that the contrast of his height and his deep get down as he weaves the knees in and out in a deep pli   is heightened and his pelvis becomes a focal point between his snaking torso and lanky legs (Dorfman).

According to bell hooks, “within neo-colonial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the black male body continues to be perceived as the embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion” (131). Consistently configured to be more body than mind, the black male body is a site of both danger and pleasure in which he is objectified and eroticized as “Other” (hooks 129). Kelly’s stage presence plays right into this black trope of eroticization and assertion of hypermasculinity; however he is neither passively objectified nor a commodity for a white capitalist agenda. Instead, the construction of his sexuality and blackness is a political tool to manipulate the audience towards his, Sly’s, and Dorfman’s radical agenda of Funk philosophy: a possible interpretation that by freeing one’s mind through spiritual release, we can escape the limiting discourse of our racist world to find true equality and tolerance.

Due to my emotional arousal towards Raja Kelly, I am in a state of what Richard Bord calls “uncritical information receptivity” in which I am susceptible to Kelly’s influence and directions because I have attributed my emotional state to his unusual characteristics or charisma (488). The ability for Kelly to direct the audience’s actions is most prominent towards the end of *Prophets of Funk* when Kelly uses verbatim Sly Stewart’s speech from the band’s set at Woodstock:

Sly Stewart: *What we would like to do is sing a song together. Now you see what usually happens is you get a group of people that might sing, and for some reasons that are not unknown anymore they won’t do it. Most of us need approval, most of us need to get approval from our neighbors before we can actually let it all hang down, you see. But what is happening here is we are going to try to do a sing-along. Now a lot of people don’t like to do it, because they feel that it might be old-fashioned.*

But you must dig that it is not a fashion in the first place, it is a feeling and if it was good in the past, it is still good. We would like to sing a song called Higher and if we could get everybody to join in we'd appreciate it.

Call: *I want to take you higher.* Audience Response: *Higher!*

What I want you to do is say higher and throw the peace sign up, it will do you no harm...

Call: *I want to take you higher.* Audience Response: *Higher!*

Call: *I want to take you higher.* Audience Response: *Higher!*

(Woodstock).

Similarly, in *Prophets of Funk*, Kelly approaches the edge of the stage to look out into the audience, asking everyone to raise their peace signs high over their head as they repeat after him, "I want to take you higher." He even points to some non-participating individuals to get them to raise their arms higher in order to get complete audience participation (Dorfman). Both the original Woodstock and the staged version follow the message characteristics and delivery factors outlined by Bord as necessary in the construction of alternative perspectives or simply put the narrowing of the audience's perspective so that it is in line with the speaker.

For one, the speech is simple in its theme, the speaker simply wishes for the audience to sing a song together, because it will create a collective feeling of good will (Bord 490). Two, the speaker uses high action verbs, such as sing along or throw the peace sign. This suggests a specific behavioral reaction, increasing the audience's commitment to the speaker's message, and heightening their emotional state. Third, the speaker focuses on a shared identity in order to ignite collective action. In this instance, there is the "we" group who will participate in the sing-along and the "they" group who need approval and think it is old-fashioned (Bord 491). Fourth, the rapid delivery of the message with short pauses between statements inhibits the audience from forming an alternative opinion and gives the speaker an appearance of self-confidence. Finally, repetition and elicitation of the audience response creates a "pseudo-intimate bond between the speaker and the audience" (Bord 492). The call and response communication process emphasizes community and generates a unified movement (Smitherman 108). As a result, the audience feels a personal attachment to the message.

While manipulated by Raja Kelly's charisma to participate in this call and response, the audience still has agency. According to Max Weber, charisma, which is sometimes referred to as the gifts of the Spirit or the characteristic of unusually interesting people, is determined by the audience (Bord 486). It is the audience who attributes greatness to the speaker based on their emotional arousal and the speaker's message qualities. Thus, if we endow Kelly with charisma and choose to follow his prophetic path to salvation we are agents in our own meaning-making journey. This active participation, like in Pentecostal worship, allows for the audience to be fully present and engaged with the performance on a more intimate level.

Another charismatic prophet of the Funk era, visible in Kyle Abraham's character, is James Brown. By including allusions to James Brown in this piece, Dorfman draws on the multiple facets that Brown represented which were not only the harsh realities of black working class success, but also a public celebration of blackness (Vincent, *James Brown* 53). In the words of Al Sharpton, "there were other entertainers

who became the first blacks to go mainstream. He was the first to make the mainstream go black” (Vincent, *James Brown* 71). Politically, his public image pushed “an assertive, black masculine aesthetic” that was co-opted by the Black Power movement in the late 1960s (Vincent, *James Brown* 52). His song “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” (1968) popularized the term black: empowering and liberating the term as well as ushering out Negro as an identifier (Vincent, *James Brown* 60). In addition to his political contributions to the black image, Brown pioneered the foundations of Funk through his new sense of rhythm: using all instruments to create percussion and emphasizing the downbeat, the “one” to create a new choppy, percolating rhythm (Vincent, *James Brown* 55).

James Brown-isms can be seen throughout *Prophets of Funk*, especially in the section when Abraham is completely taken by the spirit, stripping off his 70s garb to reveal flashy, shiny, silken draws with gold fringe. As he takes up the stage with his shouts and frenetic dancing, the cast follows him like devoted, crazed fans. At which point, Abraham mimics a common Brown act of feigning a tortured soul as the fans cloak him in a cape, only to be surprised as he rises again with renewed energy (Dorfman). According to Anderson, “the heightened emotion, the charismatic tongue, the jubilant laughter, the moan or the shout...all point to a charismatic calling of the spirit” (127). Additionally, during Kyle’s monologue about the realities of racism and preservation of spirit, Abraham slips between frank, somber testifying to a release of high energy with twisting hips, hot feet, and high pitch vocals (Dorfman).

As a spokesman and soul for black America after the death of Malcom X, James Brown drew on the power of testifying to unite crowds as well as to speak the truth regarding the black experience (Vincent, *Funk* 7). Testifying, which is a feature of the Sanctified Church, is a ritualized form of communication in which a speaker is spontaneously moved to give verbal witness to the truth of some shared black experience (Smitherman 58). Often the testimony is told through a story, creating a spiritual reality for the listeners, which has the power to reaffirm one’s humanity and to diminish their sense of isolation (Smitherman 150). When used in *Prophets of Funk* to enhance the audience-performer connection, the shared reality created by Abraham closes the gap between the stage and the audience because of the shared experience.

I feel this
I live in this
Ain’t got no house
No walls
But I still got my funk
 – from Kyle Abraham’s monologue (Dorfman).

Consequently, we bare witness to the dichotomy housed inside Abraham’s body. He demarcates the prison of his body, emphasizing in words the societal constructions that have forced his exile. However, the bound movement of his body is interrupted and thwarted whenever he refers to his funk or unquenchable spirit. At which point the lines of his body dissolve in his twisting isolations and heightened energy that suggest spirit possession and the loss of self-consciousness (Dorfman). Handled with humor, the staging makes the explicit comments on racism tolerable for the general audience. As

witnesses, we become responsible for the truth within his message. Whether or not we realize it, we have been made party to an unsigned contract to absorb his experience after having seen the presence of God within his own flesh.

However, it is not just the charisma of Sly and James Brown as portrayed by Raja Kelly and Kyle Abraham respectively. Aptly titled *Prophets of Funk* and like many of Dorfman's works, plurality and multiplicities are favored over a single message. Thus, one could assume that Dorfman suggests multiple prophets exist both in the past, as in Sly Stewart and James Brown, and in the present, as conveyed by the current dancing personalities onstage, including David Dorfman. Additionally and more importantly, there is the suggestion that prophets and prophecies exist within ourselves. And if charisma can be caught, like catching the spirit in Pentecostal worship, then there is the possibility for the audience to leave the theatre with their own charisma. The implications of that occurring are huge, because it transfers the charismatic power of the performer to the audience. No longer is it a strict hierarchal relationship between performer and viewer. The stage is democratized as the audience member is empowered and receives the gifts of the spirit. Following this activation, the audience then interacts with other social worlds, consequently spreading the charisma beyond the theatre either by testifying, telling others about the performance, or through transcendence, embodying the dance-possible rhythms that then infect the energy of others.

In conclusion, *Prophets of Funk* uses charisma both spiritually and politically to enhance the audience-performer connection, successfully creating active audience citizens. Funk music becomes the vehicle that transfers the charisma of the stage to the audience. Funk's artistic values of improvisation and rhythms parallel the politics of Funk philosophy. Not only does the joyful aspects of Funk play into a strategic resistive practice against white hegemony by celebrating blackness, but Funk also tries to generate realities that fall outside hegemonic texts. By using the rhythms of Funk, Dorfman and the cast can draw upon Pentecostal practices of testifying and transcendence, which are modes of receiving God on a personal level and also act as resistive performativity. As a result, *Prophets of Funk* both comments on the construction of racism and re-writes the discursive texts by proposing a universal funkativity. Thus the construction of Sly Stewart as a charismatic prophet is a tool to transfer charisma to the audience and an aid to reach Higher Ground.

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