

Diggin' You Like Those Ol' Soul Records: Meshell Ndegeocello and the Expanding Definition of Funk in Postsoul America

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Today's absolutist varieties of Black Nationalism have run into trouble when faced with the need to make sense of the increasingly distinct forms of black culture produced from various diaspora populations. . . . The unashamedly hybrid character of these black cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or antiessentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial nonidentity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal.

Paul Gilroy¹

Funk, from its beginnings as terminology used to describe a specific genre of black music, has been equated with the following things: blackness, masculinity, personal and collective freedom, and the groove. Even as the genre and terminology gave way to new forms of expression, the performance aesthetic developed by myriad bands throughout the 1960s and 1970s remained an important part of post-1970s black popular culture. In the early 1990s, rhythm and blues (R&B) splintered into a new substyle that reached back to the live instrumentation and infectious grooves of funk but also reflected a new racial and social consciousness that was rooted in the experiences of the postsoul generation. One of the pivotal albums advancing this style was Meshell Ndegeocello's *Plantation Lullabies* (1993). Ndegeocello's sound was an amalgamation of

several things. She was one part Bootsie Collins, inspiring listeners to dance to her infectious bass lines; one part Nina Simone, schooling one about life, love, hardship, and struggle in post-Civil Rights Movement America; and one part Sarah Vaughn, experimenting with the numerous timbral colors of her voice. One critic called her a “jazzy Odetta with gangster rapper inflections,” insinuating that her raw and organic sound and instrumental performances linked her with the singer/guitarist who inspired an evolution in the racial and cultural consciousness of blacks during the height of the freedom movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the explicit “in-your-face” aesthetic of gangsta rap.² Others referred to her as “the female Prince,” noting strong similarities between the two musicians.³ Indeed, both wrote, produced, and played the majority of the instruments heard on their debut albums. The level of genre-bending musical experimentation in which both have engaged at times has also placed them on the periphery of black music trends and black radio formatting. Their respective public images and stage personas reflect how both have challenged mainstream readings of sexuality and gender by creating ambiguity through androgynous dress and lyrics that convey at times the spectrum of love relationships. Regardless of these readings, it was clear that Ndegeocello’s entrance and presence on the mainstream stage of 1990s popular music challenged perceptions and definitions of performance (musical and otherwise), gender identity, and conceptions of blackness as America awaited the “newness” of the next century. But what helped propel Prince to new levels of popularity among “alternative” audiences seemingly stifled the career of Ndegeocello.

Plantation Lullabies advanced a style that consisted of live instrumentation coupled with street-smart lyrics reflective of the influence of 1960s poets Giovanni, Sanchez, and Scott-Heron and a vocal style that harkened back to 1970s soul singers like Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack. However, less than two years after its release, the confluence of style heard on the album was illustrative of the neosoul or “alternative” R&B style that some positioned as the representative of the postsoul generation’s return to the “old-school” performance aesthetics of the previous decades. Despite being initially linked with this style and its resulting milieu, by 1997 and 1998, when Erykah Badu’s album *Baduizm* and Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, respectively, dropped, Ndegeocello was noticeably absent from discussions about how the genre of neosoul was birthing a more conscious female voice and perspective in postfunk black popular music. She would only be heard on black radio when her music revisited the funk-jazz fusion sound of the popular “If That’s Your Boyfriend (He Wasn’t Last Night)” or “Dred Loc,” both from *Plantation Lullabies*. While some critics and intellectuals positioned Hill’s and Badu’s albums as being important hallmarks of the 1990s R&B scene and important articulators of postmodern black feminist thought, few considered Ndegeocello’s pronouncements against homophobia, self-hatred, and the recriminations of religion, as articulated on the 1996 album *Peace beyond Passion* or her examination of love relationships on the album *Bitter* (1999), as groundbreaking.

Despite these omissions, a number of scholars and cultural intellectuals have attempted to situate Ndegeocello within the larger scope of cultural/artistic statements made by a collective of writers as well as visual and performing artists during the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴ These works have done well to define Ndegeocello as representative of evolving conceptions of black feminist thought and/or queer culture in black popular music. Some have also interrogated how the construction and propagation of genre distinction in the marketing and formatting of black popular music on radio has created static definitions of what constitutes “authentic” representations of certain genres and also robbed musicians of the right to define or label their creative efforts. The latter has resulted in Ndegeocello’s music being noticeably absent from black radio and black network television, which profess as their mission the advancement of black culture. This work seeks to add to these scholarly discussions. Its central focus is an investigation of what Ndegeocello’s music reveals about the evolving definition of funk in the decades following what some have perceived as the “Golden Age” of the genre—the 1970s. Using the theoretical framework of the postsoul era, this article situates Ndegeocello’s music within the larger scope of the creative activity of the generation of musicians, filmmakers, writers, and visual artists born after the historic 1963 March on Washington and prior to the 1978 *Bakke* court case, which challenged the merits of affirmative action and framed the political discourse on the subject in subsequent years.⁵ It is in the cultural, intellectual, and artistic statements of this generation that one can gain understanding about the changing conception of blackness and funk in late twentieth-century America. It explores how Ndegeocello’s work as an instrumentalist, producer, and primary songwriter on her recording projects challenges the narrative of invisibility that has promoted the exclusion of black women instrumentalists in the historiography of funk and its derivatives. In these roles, Ndegeocello also subverts the power relationships that have defined the production of contemporary popular music. Finally, through musical analysis of selected works from the albums *Plantation Lullabies*, *Peace beyond Passion*, and *Bitter*, this work establishes Ndegeocello as a member of the collective of musicians that attempted to progress the funk aesthetic beyond the performance attributes popularized in the 1970s by bands such as the Ohio Players, Average White Band, and Parliament-Funkadelic and connect it with selected aspects of the “alternative” R&B or neosoul style of the late 1990s.

The Making of Meshell: Go-Go, Black Rock, and Black Bohemians

Music makes an image. What image? What environment (in that word’s most extending meaning i.e., total, external and internal, environment)? I mean there is a world powered by that image. . . . By image I mean that music (art for that matter . . . or anything else if analyzed) summons and describes

where its energies were gotten. The blinking lights and shiny heads, or gray concrete and endless dreams. But the description is of a total environment. The content speaks of this environment, as does the form.

Amiri Baraka⁶

Like many of her contemporaries who were defining the sound of R&B in the early 1990s, Ndegeocello's music was reflective of the diverse cultural, social, and musical interactions that framed the experiences of the postsoul generation. She was born Michelle Johnson in 1968 in Berlin, Germany, and spent her early years there before her family relocated to the Washington, D.C., area during the early 1970s.⁷ During this period, the District of Columbia and surrounding suburban communities were being reconfigured by the political, racial, and economic shifts precipitated by the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s. Her family settled in the suburb of Oxon Hill, Maryland, on the southeast side of the capital, which, like similar communities, had become a point of migration for black middle-class families, especially those connected with the military. This move afforded Ndegeocello access to diverse cultural and social spaces that would impact the development of her musical voice. Like many of her peers, Ndegeocello looked to previous artistic movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts movement, as a basis for creating new definitions of black music. But their relationship to the political struggles, intraracial debates, and class issues that preceded the years in which they came of age had the most direct impact on their musical expressions. As a result, this generation sought to revise the definitions of what constituted "authentic" black identity in an effort to respond to ongoing discussions about the rewards of integration.⁸ This group's engagement in the process of reassessment and revision, unlike previous generations, was done without apology and framed an expressed necessity to no longer deny or suppress any part of the "complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage" that their experiences in post-Civil Rights America had created.⁹ Trey Ellis asserts that this mind-set sparked the emergence of a "new black aesthetic," which was being defined in the early 1990s by a new generation of public intellectuals (e.g., musicians, writers, poets, visual artists, and filmmakers). This new black aesthetic was rooted in this generation's reengagement with art forms of the past and also in their exposure to other nonblack forms of culture. These individuals reflected a new representation of blackness—the "cultural mulatto." The "cultural mulatto," as defined by Ellis, was the African American raised in white middle-class suburbs. Both blacks and whites misunderstood them, so they created their own "spaces" where their art and identities could be developed. Ellis describes this as follows:

Alienated (junior) intellectuals, we are the more and more young blacks getting back into jazz and the blues; the only ones you see at punk concerts; the ones in the bookstore wear-

ing little, round glasses and short, neat dreads; some of the only blacks who admit to liking both Jim and Toni Morrison. Eddie Murphy, Prince, and the Marsalis brothers are just the initial shock troops because now, in New York's East Village, in Brooklyn's Fort Greene, in Los Angeles, and in Harlem, all of us under thirty only ones are coming together like so many twins separated at birth—thrilled, soothed, and strengthened in being finally reunited. . . . I now know that I'm not the only black person who sees the black aesthetic as much more than just Africa and jazz. Finally finding a large body of the like-minded armors me with the nearly undampenable enthusiasm of the born again. And my friends and I—a minority's minority mushrooming with the current black bourgeoisie boom—have inherited an open-ended New Black Aesthetic from a few seventies pioneers that shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines.¹⁰

Using Ellis's theoretical premise, one must surmise that integration had not only provided these individuals with access to specific institutions but also exposed them to different cultural forms that became an important element in their process of self-definition. Ndegeocello's relationship to this aesthetic is illustrated in the genre-bending, uncategorizable nature of her musical style and the androgynous nature of her stage persona. Both are subversions of mainstream readings of the black performance artist and black art, which will be discussed more thoroughly later in this work. But close investigation of the social and musical agents that contributed to the development of Ndegeocello's musical style reflect the diverse cultural and social experiences that were emblematic of the new black aesthetic. There are four that are paramount in Ndegeocello's development: 1) her matriculation at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, an accredited four-year public high school that combines academics and the arts; 2) her exposure to the regional jazz scene via her father, saxophonist Jacques Johnson; 3) her participation in the regional go-go scene of Washington, D.C.; and 4) her introduction to and subsequent participation in the Black Rock Coalition in New York during the late 1980s. All of these positioned Ndegeocello within male-centered performance "spaces" and framed how she was later able to navigate the marginal readings of race and gender perpetuated onto her by the American cultural industry (e.g., recordings, radio, and television).

Although much of her identity is rooted in the electric bass, this was not the first instrument Ndegeocello took interest in. Inspired by her father's participation in the local jazz scene, she initially developed an interest in jazz drumming. She aspired to master the instrument. "That was my big hope," she stated in a 2003 interview. "I had this album of Max Roach and Buddy Rich playing with a big band, and that as just amazing to listen to—I thought the drums were the *shit*. Plus, I think I had figured out that the drummer always gets to be the ass-

hole of the band, and I liked that.”¹¹ When one of her brother’s friends began storing his electric bass at the house, Ndegeocello, then fifteen, took interest in the instrument. She describes her early experiences playing the bass as follows: “It was a copy of a Precision—a really nice one, come to think of it. It seemed huge to me, because of that long-scale neck, but I fell in love with it. I started playing it right away, and I kept playing the bass line to a Herb Alpert tune, ‘Rise.’ It just felt so cool, and I knew I had to learn the instrument.”¹² Convinced that this was the means through which she could develop her musical voice, Ndegeocello acquired a Fender Mustang, a more manageable instrument for her small frame, and began taking formal lessons. But she found the lessons “very confining” and limiting. So she began learning various playing techniques through trial and error. “I mostly just taught myself by ear,” she asserted during a 2012 interview with the author: “Listening to records and learning the bass line. I like to think that I taught myself the bass. My brother played guitar, so he would teach me things in the sense of like ‘I have this gig, learn this song.’ . . . I think that was pretty much my education. Just getting out and playing. My Dad’s a musician. So there was no formal introduction to it. It was just something people did in my house. I feel like I just fell into it. It’s just genetics and natural ability.”¹³

By age sixteen, Ndegeocello began gigging around the Washington, D.C., area perfecting her ability to construct and maintain strong groove patterns. Central in this development was her experience playing the regional dance music style called go-go. Over the next few years, she played bass with a number of prominent go-go bands, including Little Benny and the Masters, Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers, and Rare Essence. Outside of the moments where she sat in with her father’s jazz band, Ndegeocello credits her experience playing go-go as being central to her development as a bass player and her understanding of the function and importance of the groove in black music. She describes this as follows:

I think it [go-go] helped me understand that certain musics have purpose. Go-go music is . . . sort of like the metropolitan area’s cultural dance music. It’s the dance music of this region. . . . I realized it was for people to move to and the foundation of it was the drums and percussion and that other instruments worked in a sort of [background] space; sometimes to tap into familiar songs that the listener could have a call and response to. . . . Everything is based around the drum and percussion so you can dance. And it helped me understand the aspect of the groove-oriented aspects of music. And also to know that it was alright not to play. I didn’t have to play every bar. It’s alright to have space. And also I watch[ed] people as I play[ed] to see what their body language [was] showing me in terms of where they [felt] the groove. I just

think it helped me tremendously [in terms of] where I fit bass lines and tempos and try to make things feel good.¹⁴

As a result of these experiences, Ndegeocello developed an approach to playing the bass that focused more on the purity of tone than virtuosity. But go-go also assisted in the development of her vocal style. The genre's call-and-response tradition inspired the sing/talk style that is a signature of her sound. She states, "I'm not a MC. I'm a talker. It's more so a trading of ideas like the go-go thing. More than I'm the mistress or master of ceremonies. It's just to interact with the crowd with some verbal presence. . . . I only sing because people didn't show up during demo work. I thought I would be just a songwriter then someone heard it [her voice] and liked it so I've been learning about my voice and trying to get better."¹⁵

As a product of a growing black middle-class aesthetic that emerged during the late 1980s, Ndegeocello struggled with negotiating the politics of gender that informed some of the social spaces she traversed. Although go-go is a male-dominated aesthetic, Ndegeocello's talent had provided her access to the stages where the music was performed. So her talent trumped the gendered expectations of these spaces. But her talent did not protect her from being stereotyped and discriminated against. Her first encounter with this came when she enrolled at Howard University. Unable to navigate the sexism of the music department, she soon left the university. But the experience left her disillusioned, so she relocated to New York City hoping that the diversity of its musical and social scene would further her musical development. Soon after she arrived, she became a member of the Black Rock Coalition, an artist collective headed by rock guitarist Vernon Reid. There she encountered other musicians who were attempting to redefine black cultural practice and definitions of blackness. The Coalition saw as one part of its mission the reclamation of rock and other forms of black music from the limited definitions imposed by the American cultural industry. What the Coalition offered Ndegeocello was not only opportunities to perform—she played showcases throughout the New York area, most notably in Greg Tate's Women in Love band—but also a social environment in which being "different" and outside of the "norm" in reference to how she defined herself, her compositional approaches, and playing the bass were welcomed. She developed a reputation for being a versatile player; finding comfort playing in a straight hard rock format as well as a jazz or R&B setting. During the early 1990s she began working on a demo tape, which eventually led to her being the first female artist signed to Madonna's Maverick label. Her debut album, *Plantation Lullabies*, dropped right at the time in which black intellectuals began espousing the emergence of a new black cultural movement or as Trey Ellis advanced—a new black aesthetic. Over the next decade, Ndegeocello's music would reveal how she sought to extend the definition of R&B, funk, hip hop, and jazz beyond the those sounds that dominated black radio programming. The resistance she experienced had much to do with level of experimentation that

she engaged in, but it was also rooted in an inability to understand how her resistance to operate in the roles advanced by many of her female contemporaries challenged expectations of how the female soul artist operates both onstage and in the recording studio.

Black Female Instrumentalists and the Issue of Invisibility in Black Popular Music

As in other generational/cultural periods, the years that constitute the post-soul aesthetic, as described by Nelson George and Mark Anthony Neal, is a period in which the concept of the black female instrumentalist was restricted primarily to genre-specific contexts (i.e., jazz and concert music) or presented as nonexistent. The invisibility of black female instrumentalists in contemporary popular culture, beyond the proverbial pianist or acoustic guitarist, has shaped the discourse on how black women instrumentalists engaged in public music making during the last twenty years of the twentieth century. Most important, it has reestablished instrumental performance, especially as it relates to funk and soul music as male activity.¹⁶

Several scholars have written about the contributions of female blues guitarists and a number of female jazz instrumentalists, but the scholarship on R&B, soul, and funk continues to situate instrumental performance as a male-dominated construct. One can point to the musicianship of pianists Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, Patrice Rushen, and Alicia Keyes or guitarists India Arie and Tracy Chapman as being representative of how the female instrumentalist/vocalists have been essential in defining the various stylistic trends that have defined R&B and folk music during the last forty years. But the acceptance and acknowledgment of their instrumental abilities has been largely veiled and analyzed through historical paradigms that have traditionally identified the piano and the acoustic guitar with the music making of women—regardless of race or social class. Performances on these instruments constitute, by virtue of their roles in the socialization of women in the home and their engagement in public music making, acceptable “spaces” through which the female musician can function within the context of mainstream popular music.¹⁷

However, there have been a few instances within the larger framework of popular music where women musicians have moved beyond these instruments and had significant influence on the evolution or popularity of a specific style. Overwhelmingly, women instrumentalists are excluded from the written histories of certain genres of popular music. These exclusionary practices have created what Sherrie Tucker calls the narrative of invisibility. Initially applied to observations regarding the development of jazz’s historiography, Tucker argues that the invisibility of women instrumentalists in jazz histories is based on the belief that women are incapable of meeting the musical expectations advanced by the performance spaces where jazz is created. In the few instances where there have been women who have measured up to these performance expecta-

tions, they have been relegated to another level of marginalization identified as the “exceptional woman.” Their musical talents are analyzed in relation to their male counterparts. This is reflected in statements like “she plays like a man.”¹⁸ On the surface, this reads as an acknowledgment of the female instrumentalist’s abilities, but closer reading reveals the gendered or conditional aspects of that acknowledgment. This analysis can easily be applied to our understanding of the role of women in the development of funk and its derivatives. Like jazz, the performance aesthetic of these genres was defined initially in the informal gatherings of male musicians. These meetings precipitated the development of certain techniques, skills that assisted in navigating the improvisatory nature of the bandstand and studio culture that birthed the culture. The fact that James Brown drew on the culture of the jam session during his early years in formulating his funk style may well account for the male-centered culture of funk. Rickey Vincent, in the book *Funk: The Music, the People and the Rhythm of One*, analyzes Brown’s early compositional approach as follows:

Brown was beginning to arrange his music in different, jazzier ways. He was bringing instruments in and out where they had never been before. Like the process of jazz, the *jam sessions* (onstage and in the studio) were the central places of his creativity. James squeezed the soul out of his band; then arranged the output as he saw fit. “You had to think quick to keep up. . . . A lot of solos, for instance, were just impromptu. He calls out you name, you just had to throat it, then hope it’s kinda relative to what is going on.” It was *improvisation*, under the influence of the Godfather, that drove the engine of James Brown music.¹⁹

While the jam session was the conduit through which musicianship was developed, it also provided a space where masculinity was performed. During the decades that followed World War II, the jam session became one of the central facets of the modern jazz culture. But only male musicians inhabited this space. Women existed on the periphery, either as lovers, as wives, or as fans of the music. A number of jazz musicians have discussed the “gendered” nature of the jam session and its importance in constructing the image and identity of the postwar jazz musician. Trumpeter Clora Bryant, who is one of the few women associated with the music scene that developed on Central Avenue in Los Angeles, states, “A woman would rarely venture into a club unaccompanied. . . . Women instrumentalists, no matter how well known, steered clear of the jam sessions. Women who did venture into the performing arena found the range of opportunities limited.”²⁰

But funk’s connection with jazz goes beyond replicating the milieu of the jam session, as many of the musicians that shaped the genre’s performance aesthetic were either jazz musicians or influenced by the modern jazz experimen-

tions of individuals like Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis. There is strong correlation between the jazz/rock and jazz/funk fusion styles, advanced by Weather Report and Herbie Hancock's The Headhunters, and some of the performances marketed as "funk" during the 1970s. Brown substantiates this when he says, "I've never been an R&B act, but I've been classed as one. . . . My music always came from gospel and jazz, which is called funk and soul. You see funk and soul is really jazz."²¹ With such strong adaptation of the performance practices and cultural milieu of the jam session, one can only surmise that this may have contributed to the absence of women instrumentalists in the funk bands of the 1970s (the only exception is Sly Stone's band, which was multiracial and coed). Even in the cases where women instrumentalists are included in the critical and historical discourse of funk, they are often framed as being "exceptional women." They are included in these narratives largely because they do not challenge or alter the discourse.²² But most important is that they are always vocalists.

The trope of the exceptional woman is evident in many of the genres that precede and derive from funk. Guitarist Peggy Jones was one of the few black female instrumentalists associated with the early rock-and-roll culture of the 1950s. Jones is said to have played with such musical prowess that she drew the attention of guitarist Bo Diddley, who in 1957 added her to his band and gave her the stage name of Lady Bo, acknowledging her musicianship as being equal to his. During her tenure with Diddley, Jones played on such hit records as "Hey Bo Diddley," "Who Do You Love," and "Mona."²³ Cynthia Robinson's soulful riffs, played on her iconic red trumpet, were characteristic of the early funk style advanced by Sly and the Family Stone during the 1960s.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the all-female band Klymaxx, which featured Bernadette Cooper on drums, vocalist Lorena Porter, guitarist Cheryl Colley, Lynn Malsby and Robbin Grider on keyboards, and Joyce "Fenderella" Irby on bass, achieved some success in R&B and pop circles with songs like "Meeting the Ladies Room," "The Men All Pause," or "I Miss You." But they never really realized any sustained success and were viewed by the industry largely as a novelty and/or anomaly. The record companies and agencies the group worked with struggled to sufficiently market the group, and the tensions this generated led to its eventual demise.²⁴ Despite their marginal success, within the larger history of R&B, the emergence of Klymaxx represented the first time an all-girl instrumental aggregation functioned, toured, and recorded under the genre distinction. A little over a decade later, Beyoncé revisited this format when in 2006 she organized a ten-piece all-female band, called the Suga Mamas, to tour in promotion of her album *B'Day* (The Beyoncé Experience Tour). The Suga Mamas would spark new discussions about the role of women instrumentalists in contemporary popular music as well as the "gendered" expectations that have been advanced by the cultural industry in recent years. Beyoncé has continued to feature in the band over the past six years, most recently during her halftime performance at Super Bowl XLVII (2013). She stated, in an

interview shortly after this performance, that she organized the band to inspire young girls to play music. "When I was younger I wish I had more females, who played instruments, to look up to. I played piano for like a second but then I stopped. I just wanted to do something which would inspire other young females to get involved in music so I put together an all-woman band."²⁵

While the presence of the Suga Mamas onstage has drawn more attention to women instrumentalists, to date no artist has replicated the all-girl band format. In the genres that have developed out of the funk aesthetic, the "exceptional woman" still tends to vocalists. This in no way implies that vocalists do not contribute anything valuable to the aesthetic but rather points out that the fundamental aspects of the performance—the groove—are still defined by male musicians. According to France Fladderus, this may be accounted for because of the relationship that developed between black nationalism and funk during the 1960s. This bond has meant that the patriarchal nature of black nationalism has been reinforced in machismo and posturing exhibited in funk performances so that the funk stage and studio became spaces where the performance of "power" and "collective freedom" are advanced and defined by the male performers.²⁶ The emergence of Meshell Ndegeocello as a bassist and, in 1993, bandleader was significant in confronting the narrative of invisibility that has framed black popular music performance and criticism. Most important to this discussion, however, is how in acting in the role of bassist, Ndegeocello situates herself as a creator and interpreter of the one element that differentiated funk and its derivatives from other genres—the "groove."

It Don't Mean a Thing If Ain't Got That Swing: The Groove in the Postsoul Aesthetic

The advent of Leo Fender's Precision electric bass in 1951 would prove to be one of the most important technological advances to change the performance of popular music. The instrument came to prominence when it was featured on the recordings of Elvis Presley and the Beach Boys during the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. The emergence of the instrument changed the function and role of the bass within the early R&B and rock-and-roll band aesthetic. Its resonant sound transitioned the role of the bass from supporting lead instruments, such as the electric guitar, piano, and horns, to being the foundation of the rhythmic groove. At times, the instrument became the articulator of the riff or melodic idea that all of the other instruments either responded to or worked with to achieve rhythmic symmetry. As various artists, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, began to experiment with different harmonic and rhythmic approaches, the Fender bass soon became one of the major elements that defined the rhythmic character of funk and soul. But from the beginning, the instrument was played largely by male musicians who had transitioned from either the acoustic bass or the guitar. Much like its counterpart the electric guitar, the electric bass came to represent masculinity, prowess, and rebellion. The emergence of vir-

tuosic players like James Jamerson (Motown/Funk Brothers), Duck Dunn (Stax Records/Booker T. and the MGs), Larry Graham (Sly and the Family Stone), and Bootsy Collins (James Brown/Parliament-Funkadelic)—during the years in which the soul and funk aesthetic was becoming more mainstream—would ultimately link the instrument to a certain set of performance practices. Each of these musicians would also experiment with timbral variations, which became central to their identification as important “sound identities” within the history of the instrument and popular music.²⁷

While many have looked at Ndegeocello’s presence on the stage as a bassist as an anomaly, she is actually part of a continuum of female electric bassists that extends back to the early history of the instrument. One of the first significant female performers of the instrument was Carol Kaye, who became one of the leading studio bass players in Los Angeles during the 1960s. Her playing can be heard on several hit records, including Simon and Garfunkel’s “Homeward Bound” the Beach Boys’ “Good Vibrations.” Her technique was unusual for the time, as most bassists plucked the strings with their thumb. Kaye played with a pick, which allowed her to get a certain sound from the instrument. As she explains, “My sound accidentally put the other adjunct bassists out of work unfortunately. It was more versatile; I could get a deep bass sound or add a bit of ‘click’ with the pick, enough to make it sound like a Dano [six-string bass] at times.”²⁸ Kaye would be followed by a number of other white female bass players (Tina Weymouth, Aimee Mann, and D’Arcy Wretzky) who would find a place in rock and pop music, but black women never made that transition in reference to the soul and funk aesthetic of the 1970s.

The electric bass became more prominent in the foundation of the “groove” in funk music in the 1970s. Notable performances, such as Larry Graham’s work on Sly Stone’s “Thanku Falettin Me Be Mice Elf Agin” and Bootsy Collins’s bass lines on James Brown’s “Super Bad” and “Sex Machine,” serve as examples of the instrument’s growing importance in the funk aesthetic. Where early funk practices had centered the groove on the drummer and rhythmic punctuations from horns, these songs transitioned the focus to the juxtaposition of these elements against the high audible bass line, which now articulated and supported the rhythmic dimensions of the performance. The 1970s also marked a shift in funk’s vocal style as the rhythmic/staccato-like style of James Brown gave way to a more lyrical/melodic approach that was advanced by Stevie Wonder, Maurice White, Philip Bailey (Earth, Wind, and Fire), and Lionel Richie (Commodores).

In the 1980s, new technological advances lead to new articulations of the groove. As Rickey Vincent has argued, the Yamaha DX7 keyboard replaced instruments like the Hammond B3 organ and the Fender Rhodes piano, which had helped to define the sound of funk music in the 1960s and 1970s. Drum machines tuned ears to more accessible beats, which led to many of funk’s most talented musicians simplifying their sound. But the most evident change in the concept of the groove came in the role and sound of the bass. The bass keyboard

track, which had less of the resonance of the bass guitar, became the standard in the contemporary R&B sound.²⁹ Although a number of bands utilizing live instrumentation remained active during the 1980s, they failed to achieve or maintain the widespread popularity that they had during the previous decades. The groove, as defined by funk and soul bassists of the 1960s and 1970s, existed only as a musical artifact or as the basis of some of the earliest hip-hop samples. Funk, for the next generation of black youth, became associated primarily with the sound of the New York and West Coast hip-hop aesthetic during this period.

With Ndegeocello's 1993 debut album, the organic and resonant sound of live instruments, improvisatory nature of performance, and the funk aesthetic of the groove were reinserted into the contemporary R&B continuum.³⁰ The album, which consisted of thirteen tracks, served as one of the decade's most important bridges between the old-school soul/funk aesthetic of the 1970s, the hip-hop sound of the late 1980s, and the "alternative" R&B sound that would be branded as "neosoul" less than four years later. *Plantation Lullabies* presented listeners with an eclectic array of sounds and ideas. It was one part R&B, one part jazz, and one part critical and social commentary associated with hip-hop. The confluence of these three genres was emblematic of a new black consciousness based in a revision of black identity outside of mainstream contexts and with little regard to the reaction of whites. Ndegeocello drew on past forms of artistic culture while progressing the music to reflect her real-time experiences. Homage to old-school funk can be heard on various tracks; most relevant to this discussion are "I'm Diggin' You (Like an Old Soul Record)" and "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)." Organized in the structural form of A-B-A, "I'm Diggin' You" opens with the presentation of the groove—defined by bass (playing primarily two chords, C#m7 and Dmaj7) and drum pattern (centered on the two and four) punctuated by the rock-oriented guitar licks. Ndegeocello enters not long after this pattern is established with the first phrase verse. Her contralto voice, which alternates at times between lyrical singing and a layered speech/talk style, serves as another layer of the polyrhythmic groove that dominates this performance. This singing/speech alternation is suspended in the "B" section, where the band moves away from the traditional bridge section used in popular song to engage in a type of musical dialogue with each other. The next section of the song begins with a breakdown that features first the bass improvising along with subdued drums before returning to the initial groove, varied this time by the addition of noticeable chordal punctuations played by the pianist. This morphs into a jazz-inflected piano solo, followed by a rock-oriented guitar solo that draws reminiscences of Herbie Hancock and Eddie Hazel, respectively. The groove returns, and Ndegeocello reenters with the "A" (identified through the text "Yes, I'm Diggin' You").

The sound is densely layered with rhythmic and harmonic statements that all coalesce into an infectious groove that points back to performances of Parliament-Funkadelic, Graham Central Station, and Sly Stone. Textural references to the eight-track, blue lights in the basement, the promise of freedom that

the Civil Rights and Black Power movements birthed, and a short excerpt from the Four Tops's 1973 hit "Ain't No Woman (Like the One I've Got)" further connected this track to the cultural milieu that birthed 1970s funk/soul traditions.

"If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)" featured lyrics that convert the type of braggadocio equated with the sex narratives of male hip-hop and soul performers into a tome about a woman who boldly tells another woman about her sexual conquests with the latter's man. The story unfolds over a groove consisting of a heavy but well-defined bass line, sampled horn riffs, chordal punctuations by the piano, and sequenced drum patterns. Again, the 1970s funk/soul aesthetic is referenced not only in the articulation of the groove but even in Ndegeocello's lyrics, which extend out of the narrative of the "other woman," which became the focus of a series of answer records inspired by Shirley Brown's 1974 hit "Woman to Woman." The remainder of the album moved between the genres of jazz/funk fusion ("Step into the Projects," "Soul on Ice"), the soul ballad style of the Quiet Storm format ("Dred Loc," "Outside Your Door"), and dance-oriented/New Jack R&B ("Call Me").

In each musical performance featured on *Plantation Lullabies*, Ndegeocello emphasized the importance of the "old-school" praxis of the groove and foreshadowed what would constitute the "neo"-R&B aesthetic of the late 1990s. In addition to Ndegeocello's instrumental performances, the album also featured a number of influential musicians. They include guitarist Wah Wah Watson (née Melvin Ragin), whose work with Motown's house band the Funk Brothers created the sound of the early northern soul aesthetic; jazz pianists Bobby Lyle and Geri Allen, who had been a member of the Black Rock Coalition and Jazz Loft Movement in 1980s New York; saxophonist Joshua Redman (one of the emerging voices of the jazz renaissance of the 1990s); and DJ Premier, who was known largely for his production work with the hip-hop group Gang Starr. The album peaked at number 166 on the *Billboard* 200 Album chart, number 7 on the *Billboard* Heatseekers Album chart, and number 35 on the *Billboard* Top R&B Album chart. Singles "Call Me," "Dred Loc," and "If That's Your Boyfriend" received the most attention from black radio, their respective videos being featured on BET.

Most revealing were the reviews, which acclaimed the album as being progressive and a welcome departure from the novelties that defined the performance aesthetic of other forms of contemporary popular music. Chuck Crisafulli of *Bass Player* wrote, "Yes, Meshell Ndegeocello is an A-list bass player—she's made that abundantly clear with the deep-pocket grooves and snakily soulful bottom-end commentary that power *Plantation Lullabies*. From the funk snap of 'Soul on Ice' to the weighty punch of 'If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)' and on through the supremely easy glide of 'Dred Loc,' the diminutive Ndegeocello walked onto the pop scene as a big player irrefutably in command of her four strings."³¹ Sal Cinquemani of *Slant Magazine* stated that

Plantation Lullabies is the quintessential hip-hop album, mixing the soul of Sly Stone and the funk of James Brown with the pop sensibilities of Prince and the grace of Lena Horne. If anyone had ever doubted that the Civil Rights Movement was still alive and necessary, *Plantation Lullabies* exists to prove them otherwise. "Soul on Ice" bitterly challenges the motivations of interracial coupling: "You no longer burn for the motherland brown skin/You want blonde-haired, blue-eyed soul." She scratches at the surface of a culture defined by a capitalistic (read: white) standard of beauty on the track "Shoot'n Up & Gett'n High." Her warning is filled with both remorse and hostility: "The white man shall forever sleep with one eye open." Drugs provide her clichéd escape and, ultimately, her salvation ("We both found God when he O.D.'d"). While much of the album is a work of young rage, it's the platform from which NdegeOcello has evolved and defied the bounds of hip-hop.³²

The tone of these and other critical reviews raises some significant questions. How does *Plantation Lullabies* fit into historical trajectory of postfunk black popular music? What does it reveal about the social consciousness of the postsoul generation? The album was one of the first non-hip-hop albums of the 1990s to openly address the social problems facing post-Reagan, crack-infested black America. It was also important in articulating how black love relationships developed and evolved as a result of these harsh economic, social, and political conditions (e.g., "Dred Loc," "Step into the Projects," "Diggin' You Like an Old Soul Record"). By the end of the decade, Erykah Badu's "Tyrone," Jill Scott's "Love Rains," and Lauryn Hill's "Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" and "X-Factor" would join this album in "voicing" the experiences of post-soul generation women as they navigated the complexities of black love relationships.

In the larger scope of postfunk styles, this album is one of a few by a female artist that promotes this type of social commentary. The other is Janet Jackson's 1989 *Rhythm Nation* album. Both focused their cultural commentary on the conditions of the present world. This is represented on Jackson's album in the tracks "Rhythm Nation," "The State of the World," and "Livin' in a World (They Did Not Make)." Ndegeocello addressed similar narratives in "Shoot 'n' Up and Gett' n High" and "Step into the Projects." Where Jackson's sound was more of the pop and dance-oriented genre that had advanced her crossover with white audiences during the late 1980s, Ndegeocello drew more from the jazz/funk aesthetic of the 1970s by opting for a cleaner, more organic sound than what was used on most pop songs of the time. She not only performed all of the vocals on *Plantation Lullabies* but also wrote all of the songs, played the majority of the instruments, and served as producer—a feat that has been done

by only a few males and has yet to be replicated by another female R&B artist. But while it is clear that Ndegeocello entered the postfunk aesthetic as a representation of the “exceptional woman,” she did not do so without disrupting the narrative.

Shifting the Sound of Blackness: Deconstructing the Groove in the Postfunk Aesthetic

You never want to do the same song over and over. Maybe one day I'll become the Backstreet Boys, but for now I'm just me. Me, who goes with whatever feeling I'm having, gets a picture in my head and writes just enough songs for an album. Then I move on to the next project.³³

Ndegeocello

In the years following the debut of *Plantation Lullabies*, Ndegeocello has worked unceasingly as a producer, instrumentalist, songwriter, and vocalist not only on her own projects but also in collaboration with a number of artists (John Mellencamp, Madonna, Herbie Hancock). She is also featured on a number of sound tracks and film scores throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yet she has remained on the periphery mainstream success, and only a select number of her recordings have been successively programmed on black radio. One key issue that has shaped the reception of Meshell Ndegeocello, since her debut, is her departure from existing paradigms that have situated the black female body in popular music as the focus of the masculine gaze. She has eschewed this practice in four distinct ways. The first is centered on the role she takes on in her live and recorded performances. As bassist and bandleader, Ndegeocello exerts a certain level of power over the structure of the performance. The positioning of the electric bass as important elements of her stage persona and “sound identity” is a stark contrast to the dominant image of the urban bohemian musician (D'Angelo, India Arie, Alicia Keys, Tony Rich), which a number of soul artists advanced during the late 1990s and early 2000s. These musicians have defined the instrumental aspects of their performance identity in what has traditionally been deemed feminine instruments (e.g., piano, acoustic guitar). This not only substantiates my earlier observations about the instrumental performances of women in funk and its derivatives but also reflected the emergence of a different male identity in popular music—the metrosexual, male soul crooner tradition.

The second relates to Ndegeocello's practice of gender and genre bending. Her shaven head, baggy clothes, and minimal or sometimes nonexistent makeup challenge the definition of femininity presented in popular culture. By forcing the audience to focus less on what she looked like and more on the music being made, Ndegeocello attempted to elevate readings of contemporary black popular culture. But such aspiration can be highly problematic, especially as it relates to marketing. Ndegeocello's issues with a perceived disconnect

with certain audiences mirrors the challenges other black musicians have faced when they have tried to mediate more cerebral and serious readings of their music. Paul Gilroy argues that common perceptions regarding the aesthetics of music that date back to the nineteenth century have conditioned us as consumers of culture to identify and accept intellectuality with white culture only. He explains this as follows: "The effect of racism's denials not only of black cultural integrity but of the capacity of blacks to bear and reproduce any culture worthy of the name are clearly salient. . . . The place prepared for black cultural expression in the hierarchy of creativity generated by the pernicious metaphysical dualism that identified blacks with the body and whites with the mind is a . . . significant factor that has roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of aesthetics."³⁴ This has directly translated into the means through which black music has been defined and marketed to the larger populace. The mass mediation of black music has been constrained by a set of perimeters that formed essentialist beliefs of "authenticity" that have framed the marketing strategies used to promote the music. As Gilroy has argued, "The fragmentation and subdivision of black music into an ever increasing proliferation of styles and genres has also contributed to a situation in which authenticity emerges as a highly charged and bitterly contested issue."³⁵ This has greatly impacted and framed what blacks and whites believe constitutes funk music. These beliefs, however, did not develop organically but may be linked with a series of directives launched several major record companies during the 1970s to "take over" the production and dissemination of black popular music. These companies, which had had little to do with defining and disseminating the substyles of black popular music that had become increasingly popular in the decades following World War II, launched this corporate "takeover" with the information compiled in a research study of the black music industry called the *Harvard Report* or *The Study of Soul Music Environment*. This project, commissioned by Columbia Records in 1972, compiled information regarding the programming of black music on radio, the companies that controlled the "soul" market, and the revenues generated by the growing popularity of black music with white audiences. As a result, CBS and a number of other major labels launched a series of initiatives. The first was the dismantling of the independent labels that had popularized funk and soul by acquiring the musicians, producers, and executives that had defined these entities. Boasting bigger budgets, the major labels decimated the talent pool that had helped propel Motown, Stax, and other soul labels.³⁶

The second initiative involved the reformatting of radio. Beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, the latitude that disc jockeys had exerted over the programming of music was circumvented when stations began subscribing to specific formats that centered on specific genres or listener demographics. The hybridized programming that had been key in promoting black music to non-black audiences in the decades following World War II was now replaced with music-oriented categories, such as adult contemporary, adult-oriented rock, or

quiet storm.³⁷ This shift impacted the popularity of funk in that it led to the eventual exclusion of album-oriented jazz/rock and jazz/fusion (hence funk) from primetime radio rotation. These albums, which were showcased heavily on radio during the first half of the decade, were relegated to special late night or weekend segments by the end of the 1970s. All of these greatly undermined the advancement of experimental forms of black music and the construction of black performative identities that lie outside of stereotypical readings of the black musician. They would continue to shape how radio station programmers, critics, record company executives, and consumers would interpret forms of black music over the next decade.

Like *Plantation Lullabies*, Ndegeocello's subsequent studio albums further challenged the limits of genre distinction and radio formats. Her sophomore album, *Peace beyond Passion*, not only amped up her commentary of society but also featured less of the funk-influenced grooves she had become identified with. The twelve-track album at times reflects more of an allegiance to alternative rock than funk. But in many ways, this aligns the album with similar offerings from artists like Parliament-Funkadelic and Miles Davis. The first single, "Leviticus: Faggot," addressed the intolerance and violence often directed toward black gays by the black church, the black community, and their families. Its use of the word "faggot" and the accompanying video's depiction of suicide raised questions of censorship as music channels like VH1 and BET as well as black radio debated the appropriateness of programming the song and video "as is." The former refused to show the video, and while the latter refused to acknowledge the single, it still managed to receive a great deal of attention from black and white audiences.³⁸ Although the album suffered from a lack of sufficient radio play, Ndegeocello remained relevant with black radio and black audiences with performances on several movie sound tracks (notably "Rush Over" from *Love Jones*, "Untitled" from *The Best Man*) and the 1997 collaboration with Chaka Khan, "Never Miss Your Water." The biggest single from *Peace beyond Passion* replicated the funk formula of "If He Was Your Boyfriend." It was a cover of the Bill Withers song "Who Is He (And What Is He to You)?" But by 1996, Ndegeocello seemed concerned not only with expanding the perimeters of the soul music genre but also with challenging the notions of "authenticity" as it related to black musical culture.

Where *Peace beyond Passion* had moments in which the groove as the foundational rhythmic phenomenon of the performance was disrupted, the 1999 album *Bitter* fully embraced the concept. Rather than cement each track in deep, dance-oriented grooves, *Bitter* was ethereal and atmospheric, moving contextually through the key themes of desire, love, and deception. The album's concept was centered on humankind's first relationship—Adam and Eve, who were represented in the album's two orchestral interludes. Simon Glickman, who reviewed the album for *Mash Magazine*, asserted that it "is unquestionably a masterpiece of naked feeling and timeless musicality."³⁹ Despite critical acclaim, the album received little attention from black radio. But

two of the album's most popular tracks were the melancholy "Fool of Me" and the rhythmically disjointed "Wasted Time." "Fool of Me" garnered attention because of its use in the 2000 film *Love and Basketball* and inclusion on the accompanying soundtrack. The track was sparse in texture, consisting of subdued strings, drums, and piano juxtaposed against Ndegeocello's stark vocals. "Wasted Time" in many ways harkened back to the sound that Prince experimented with on his early albums, with its layered vocals (different timbres and ranges) and various melodic riffs played by synthesizers and guitar.⁴⁰ The most evident aspect of this performance was the interplay that occurs between vocals and instruments and how the articulation of the rhythm is constantly varied. These variations ranged from programmed drum patterns layered over a real drummer to just a basic groove or rhythmic pulse being played by the drummer alone, all juxtaposed against Ndegeocello's vocals that are layered with those of Joe Henry, who suspends entrance of textural phrases, anticipates, or staggers behind the former at times. This rhythmic interplay furthers the ethereal nature of the piece. The sudden end of the track in the middle of a musical phrase also adds to Ndegeocello's vision to extend the track's play on the words "wasted time," as if the conversation is abruptly ended.

The bassist would later credit her experiences while traveling with the indie women's musical festival Lilith Fair sessions as being instrumental in defining the album's sound, citing specifically the Indigo Girls's impromptu backstage jam as inspiration. This is essential in understanding the evolution of Ndegeocello's music and her identity as a musician. Where the jam session had previously served as a "gendered" space that created the appropriate milieu for male musicians to develop their skills and also engage in the process of self-definition, in this case it is into the conduit through which women musicians engage in musical experimentation and are empowered. As one of the few African American women to tour under the Lilith Fair banner, Ndegeocello was exposed to a different network of women musicians than that offered by the soul music scene. The experience was transformative as Ndegeocello purchased her first acoustic guitar, wrote some new songs, and employed a new producer—Craig Street, who had previously worked with a number of genre-bending musicians, including k.d. lang and Cassandra Wilson.⁴¹ She described her approach to this recording "Wasted Time" as follows:

One of the interesting things [Ab Laboriel] did on that track is he made his own loop. He took some percussion instruments and just played for about three to four minutes. Just played and then him and I played drums to that. And I think that's what gives it, it's watery feeling—in the sense that there is something there keeping time. It is meter, but we could just float around it. I think it just allowed us [to]—what I call "time stretch." My thing is I feel time. . . . I call it I want to see through the matrix. I want to be able to put any note

where I hear it in that time configuration. And that's usually how I think of bass lines. I can play them right on the chord, right where it goes. But, there's incremental beats in between those, that I have a natural attraction to. So I try and find those as well. It just plays up the field. That's the thing I miss in modern recording. A lot of people play to computer clicks and every thing is pasted together. You miss that natural ebb and flow. The things that are a kind of "off" so to speak in some people's mind, that just allows our ear to adjust. And they feel good. That's one of the ways I try and approach recording in general. Its not to be on a grid but know that the grid can shift and be valuable.⁴²

Ndegeocello has continued over the years to push her music beyond general categorization, even though the 2002 album *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* revisited the approaches heard on *Plantation Lullabies*. Her 2003 album *Comfort Woman* draws on dub and reggae practices, and *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel* (2005) is her only straight-ahead jazz album to date. *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* (2007), *Devil's Halo* (2009), and *Weather* (2011) contain performances that are a confluence of soul, funk, folk, and alternative rock. Her most recent album, *Pour une ame souveraine (For a sovereign soul)* pays homage to the music of Nina Simone.

Ndegeocello's music has also challenged common definitions regarding artistry and genius in music. Outside of jazz, soul, and hip hop, both have been defined in largely white male contexts. Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Duke Ellington are viewed as manifestations of genius because of their ability to unapologetically push the boundaries of performance and composition. Ray Charles, Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye achieved the same status under the rubric of soul, while George Clinton, Larry Graham, James Brown, and Sly Stone are often cited in relation to funk. The historiography of popular music has yet to acknowledge the same in reference to the black female musician—despite the achievements of Mary Lou Williams, Geri Allen, Melba Liston, Patrice Rushen, Nina Simone, and many others. Our failure to equate artistry and genius in the realm of instrumental performance or composition with female musicians lies in the inability of scholars, historians, and public intellectuals to view the female musician beyond being only "interpreters" of musical praxis. The acknowledgment of Ndegeocello's work as a songwriter, instrumentalist, and producer by critics and peer musicians means that the theoretical language that has defined musical criticism since the early twentieth century is shifting.

Finally, where the historiography of popular music at times has championed a narrative of competition defined by virtuosic musical statements based on playing harder or faster than the next musician, Ndegeocello has sought to move beyond this, focusing her style on a cooperative aesthetic that framed

the context of performances on the continent of Africa, translated into various forms of black music, including funk. In this aesthetic, each musician's "voice" is valued equally. A high value is placed on hearing, receiving, interpreting, and reacting versus concentrating on virtuosic, self-centered performance. Ndegeocello describes how this has impacted her live performances as follows:

I did the improvise record. Then I had to play progressively and fresh every night. I had to challenge myself with that and I played with some amazing people. I did that for two years. Then I took another break and I think my writing changed and I started to listen to other kinds of music and opened myself up to other things. And I realized that the collective—the places you can get to harmonically if everyone is playing together and creating a tapestry—seemed much more interesting than having all of these “guns blazing” kind of musicians. It just made my ear different. I wanted to somehow affect people sonically. . . . I guess going back to the African Diaspora where the music is—everyone has a part. It's very African and James Brown. Everyone has their part and if we all do it, then the collective larger picture will be much better. Then you're not doing it for you. You're doing it for the listener. The greater cosmic thing if you want to believe in that too. It just made me change and create different relationships with the people I played with. It was much more of a happier experience. That's what's great about James Brown, Parliament and Funkadelic and a lot of bands like The Ohio Players—especially. It's like everyone has their part and their okay in it. And it sounds tremendous.⁴³

Ironically, this performance approach has come to define what most audiences see exhibited during the live performances of neosoul artists Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, D'Angelo, and Angie Stone and have made them favorites, along with Ndegeocello, of black audiences searching for alternatives to the hip-hop soul aesthetic. It is also one of the key things that connected their performance approaches to the funk practices of the 1970s.⁴⁴

Conclusion

By the early 1990s, the term “funk” had come to constitute the musical style and practices of musicians associated with 1960s and 1970s black popular music. The demise of funk (in its most organic form) and many of the bands that had defined it also signified the dismantling of the independent recording industry and the advancement of demographic and racially based radio formatting that reinserted the belief that “black music” was “race music” that spoke

to specific constituencies and not the populace. Such notions had existed since the cultural industry first recognized the commercial potential of black music culture. The dismantling of many public school music programs and the lack of access to traditional instruments would lead to new forms of musical production among younger generations. In the decades following the “Golden Age” of funk, newer forms of electronically generated R&B were advanced. All of them looked back to funk, especially in the form of the groove, as the foundation of their performance aesthetic.

But these years also marked a period of cultural awakening that represented for some a cultural renaissance fueled by a generation of artists who found inspiration in the social milieu initiated by perceived advancements achieved by the Civil Rights Movement. Although the term “funk” would not be revisited by the recording industry as denoting an evolving and current form of popular music or within music criticism, during the ensuing years its performance aesthetic and ethos remained relevant because of new substyles, such as neosoul.

A number of musicians, groups, and entities are credited with bridging the funk aesthetic of the 1970s with the neosoul phenomenon of the mid-1990s, but few have been as influential or controversial as bassist/vocalist Meshell Ndegeocello. Gifted with the ability to play multiple instruments in myriad styles, Ndegeocello’s recorded and live performances became indicative of a newly constructed funk aesthetic that can be defined in a reimagining of the voice beyond the typical antiphony of the lead and background vocalists to reflect an aesthetic based on the layering of lyrical singing with rhythmic speech/talk that was reminiscent of the recitation style of poets Gil Scott-Heron, Sonia Sanchez, Isaac Hayes, Millie Jackson, and Barry White. The instrumentation of the postfunk aesthetic departed from the large-band format of the 1970s to aggregations that featured lineups that included drums, electric bass, keyboards (acoustic and electric), one or two horns (occasionally), and computerized musical samples. While Ndegeocello represents only one facet of these practices, she has served as a reminder of how gender and racial coding have stunted the evolution of postfunk popular music. She has been significant in reinserting the black female instrumentalist into the context of black popular music, all the while challenging notions of what constitutes feminine and masculine performances. Although measurable widespread success has seemingly eluded Ndegeocello in the present, I believe that history will write her name among the list of artists who stretched our minds, eyes, and ear beyond the norm and redefined our understanding of what funk evolved into during the postsoul age.

Notes

1. Paul Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity and the Challenge of a ‘Changing’ Same,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (1991): 123.

2. Traci Morris, “Me’Shell’s ‘Plantation Lullabies’: Funky Freedom Songs,” *New York Amsterdam News* 84, issue 45 (November 13, 1993): 30.

3. The blogosphere has actively discussed Ndegeocello as the female equivalent of Prince. References to her being marketed as such can be found in “Meshell Ndegeocello,” http://www.dmagazine.com/Home/1999/11/01/Calendar_of_Events.aspx.

4. The body of literature surveying the contributions of Ndegeocello include Sara Scribner, "Me'Shell Ndegeocello," in *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O'Dair (New York: Random House, 1997), 511–15; Mélisse La France, "Textural Subversions: The Narrative Sabotage of Race, Gender and Desire in the Music of Me'Shell Ndegeocello," in *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music*, ed. Lori Burns and Mélisse La France (New York: Routledge, 2002), 133–47; Nghana Lewis, "'You Sell Your Soul Like You Sell a Piece of Ass': Rhythms of Black Female Sexuality and Subjectivity in Meshell Ndegeocello's *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*," *Black Music Research Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 111–30; Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Mark Anthony Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Andrea Clay, "Like an Old Soul Record: Black Feminism, Queer Sexuality and the Hip Hop Generation," *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008) 53–73; Kanda Crazy Horse, ed., *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Chris Jisi, ed., *Brave New Bass: Interviews and Lessons with the Innovators, Trendsetters and Visionaries* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003).

5. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of scholars and writers were advancing the notion of a new cultural/racial aesthetic being crafted by a generation of writers, filmmakers, and performance artists. For additional information, see Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo*, no. 38 (Winter 1989): 233–43, and Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001). Mark Anthony Neal, however, was the first to refer to this generation as the postsoul generation in the book *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

6. Amiri Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris and Amiri Baraka (New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 1991), 190.

7. Touré, "Me'shell Ndegeocello," *Rolling Stone*, issue 670 (November 25, 1993); Teresa Wiltz, "Meshell Ndegeocello Breaks Step with Pop," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2005.

8. A number of scholars have explored this more deeply; see Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Greg Tate, "Cult-Nat Meet Freaky Deke"; and a number of works of Mark Anthony Neal.

9. Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 235.

10. *Ibid.*, 234.

11. Meshell Ndegeocello as quoted in Jisi, *Brave New Bass*, 227.

12. Meshell as quoted in Jisi, *Brave New Bass*, 227.

13. Meshell Ndegeocello, interview with author, April 2012.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. In addition to Rickey Vincent's book on funk, other notable scholarly discussions include Tony Bolden, ed., *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), and various chapters in Richard J. Ripani, *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm and Blues, 1950–1999* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006).

17. For discussion on this, see Gillian G. Gaar, *She's A Rebel: The History of Women in Rock and Roll* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992), and Judith Tick, "Passed Away Is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870–1900," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 325–46.

18. Sherrie Tucker, "Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies," *Current Musicology*, Spring 2001–2002, 375–407.

19. Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People and the Rhythm of One* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 73.

20. "Clora Bryant," in *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West*, ed. Jacqueline Dje Dje and Eddie S. Meadows (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 285. There are many other musicians who discuss the importance of the jam session in the development of certain skill sets, but Dizzy Gillespie's account found in *To Be or Not—To Bop: Memoirs* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979) substantiates the gendered nature of these gatherings.

21. Vincent, *Funk*, 73.

22. Tucker, "Big Ears," 384.

23. For additional information on Peggy Jones, see Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 17–20.

24. It should be noted that by 1993, Klymaxx had dissolved because of personality and business conflicts. The band remerged in 2003 but without the original lineup.

25. "Meet Beyoncé's 10-Piece All Female Band The Suga Mamas," <http://www.thewimn.com/meet-beyonces-10-piece-all-female-band-the-sugas-mamas>.

26. France Fladderus, "Funk or It's a Man's Man's World: Genre Subversion in 'Flirtin' Is a Flo-Thing' by Jane Siberry," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 7 (2003): 54.

27. "Sound identities" is a reference to those specific musical attributes that distinguish the style of one musician from another.

28. Carole Kaye, as quoted in Jim Roberts, *How the Fender Bass Changed the World* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001).

29. For more extensive discussion on the musical changes that 1980s R&B undertook in order to compete in a increasingly marginalized market, see Vincent, *Funk*, 272–74.

30. It should be noted that a number of R&B bands also were continuing to advance the funk aesthetic. Most notable is the Bay Area group Tony, Toni, Toné, who are sometimes credited with bridging old school funk/soul with the new “alternative” R&B aesthetic of the 1990s.

31. Chris Crisafulli, “MeShell Ndegeocello: *Plantation Lullabies*,” *Bass Player*, November 15, 2008, 63.

32. Sal Cinquemani, “Review of Meshell Ndegeocello’s *Plantation Lullabies*,” *Slant Magazine*, July 3, 2001, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/music/review/meshell-ndegeocello-plantation-lullabies/139>.

33. Patrick Saunders, “Bitter a Serious Me’shell Review” *Billboard* vol. 02, no. 044 (August 5, 1999). www.Billboard.com accessed on April 2012.

34. Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic,” 123.

35. *Ibid.*, 122.

36. This “takeover” also came to include acquiring control over the lucrative catalogs of these labels. As many began experiencing financial difficulties, the major labels jumped at the opportunity to acquire the rights to these catalogs. One example of this is the demise of Stax Records in 1976.

37. Nelson George discusses this in more detail in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

38. “Meshell Ndegeocello’s Evocative Music Reveals Black Radio’s Lack of Tolerance,” *Billboard*, June 1, 1996, 24.

39. Simon Glickman, “Meshell Ndegeocello, Our Saving Grace,” <http://www.mashmag.com/99oct/octmusic.html>.

40. Ironically, former Prince bandmates Wendy Malvion and Lisa Coleman both appeared on this album.

41. Carrie Bell, “Maverick’s Ndegeocello Displays New Writing, Recording Methods on ‘Bitter,’” *Billboard* 111, issue 31 (July 31, 1999).

42. Interview with author, April 2012.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Ndegeocello’s legacy in advancing genre-bending representations of African American music can also be heard in the work of a new generation of groundbreaking jazz musicians that include bassist Esperanza Spaulding, trumpeter Roy Hargrove, and pianists Robert Glasper and Jason Moran.