2015 CCCC Chair’s Address

Ain’t No Walls behind the Sky, Baby! Funk, Flight, Freedom

Editor's note: This is a written version of the address that Adam Banks gave at the CCCC Convention in Tampa, Florida, on Thursday, March 19, 2015.

Funk is dead is what they said, while sitting around cheating at pool. Their bags were bagging and they weren't bragging; to tell the truth they were looking real cool.

Now they were choked up tight in their white on white, their cocoa brown fronts were down. They wore candy striped ties that hung down to their flies, and they sported gold dust crowns.

It was the 15th frame of a nine-ball game and they all stood digging the play. With an idle shrug they suddenly dug a strange cat moving their way. He was a medium built cat with a funny time hat, he looked about 5 years old. He wore a messed up vine and he needed a shine, and he shivered as if he was cold.

To all the other guys, they surmised this dude was some ordinary flunky, but to the well trained eyes of how the Mothership flies, you could tell the mutha . . . was funky!
That verse, from George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic’s 1993 song “Martial Law,” links up at least three different generations of Black oral tradition, as it is a version of the folktale titled either “Hip Bud” or “Billy Bud,” but it also provides a poet in one of my favorite movies (Love Jones) with the opening lines of his poem as he tries to court photographer Nina Mosely. But as another character in the movie says over their own game of pool, “Let me break it down so it can forever and consistently be broke.” Can I do that? Can we dispense with the pretense of the scholarly paper for a minute so I can do that?

I ask you for permission to do that because my message this morning is not a scholarly one, even though it is about our scholarship. It’s not even particularly deep, though it is about deep things. And I don’t want to use this moment to pretend to speak for the organization in any way, this organization where I learn far more from the gifts and commitments you bring than I can pretend to offer. All I have is my vision of what we do. And that vision, everything I think about who we are, the best of what we do, and who we can be, comes down to three words: Funk. Flight. Freedom. Actually, George Clinton’s protégé Bootsy Collins says it even better than George did.

The sky is not the limit! Ain’t “no walls behind the sky,” baby, so we just gonna fly on and reach for the stars, if you know what I’m talkin about. That line is from an interview with Bootsy Collins, who has one of the greatest slow jams I know, Bootsy’s “I’d Rather Be with You.” Many of you already know that funk and soul music are primary spaces through which I enter this thinking, teaching, and serving work that we do. But beyond the thousands of songs that rotate through my various digital devices and the hundreds of vinyl albums I listen to at least sometimes and the untold numbers of songs I experience because of my friends’ Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and Spotify posts, it is this one song from that space bass player from Cincinnati that has stayed with me. Through all our conference events and conference calls, through all the officers’ email exchanges and in-person exchanges, through all of my walking time, coffee shop time, and library time, even through all of my own internal flights about ways I might escape this moment, I keep coming back to Bootsy, to “I’d rather be with you.”

Part of that is truly because I would rather be with you—because there is no other academic discipline I would rather be part of than composition. But more than that, I think that this song is the one that wouldn’t let me go in all of my thinking about this moment because of its reminder—no, its insistence—that
there are no limits, that we need to fly on and reach for the stars, that renews me in a moment when I so need renewal. Bootsy’s song brings together the three themes I believe can guide us as we respond to the call to risk and reward that our program chair has chosen for us: Funk, Flight, and Freedom.

In fact, Bootsy Collins and his Parliament/Funkadelic family made flight and space travel central themes and images in their music. From the mother ship as the central metaphor for PFunk’s role in the musical universe and the twentieth-century chariot that they invoked to swing down and let us riidie, to Bootsy’s instruction to his audience that we gonna fly on, past any limits that our day-to-day lives might impose on us, past any constraints that might wear on us, joined in a long line, to a long tradition of tales of flying Africans in which flight—across oceans home to Africa, and across galaxies to as yet unexplored stars and planets—has been an ongoing motif for claiming freedom right here and now.

These ideas—funk, flight, and freedom—speak to the role I believe composition and communication can play in the academy—to who we be; to how we go about the work we do; and to what work we see ourselves having come here to do. Our Program Chair, who has done a wonderful job organizing this year’s conference, has talked about CCCC being the “mother ship.” I’ll extend that metaphor past the starship Enterprise for right now, though. In many ways, I think of composition as the Deep Space Nine (Berman and Piller) of the academy. Because we have the opportunity to be part of the academic journey of almost every student who pursues higher education, hub metaphors for our work are not at all new. I use the Deep Space Nine metaphor in this sense as well, but with other reasons in mind. I also believe that because of our training—our grounding in rhetoric, composing, and communicating—we have a chance to be a hub for intellectual life on campus for our colleagues in other departments and for administrators as well. Because we are a discipline and at the same time cannot be contained by ideas of disciplinarity, we can be a model and connecting point for the hard work of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity we often hear talked about across campus, but rarely lived out. In fact, I often imagine composition programs and departments operating more like interdisciplinary centers than as programs and departments. And I’ve always believed we ought to be a hub for connections between the academy and local communities. It is precisely because we do discourse, in all its messiness, that we have the chance to be this kind of hub for intellectual work and for justice work, on campus and off.
I have Funk on my mind this morning not just because it is a genre of music that I love, but because of the ways Funk artists imagined the world and our place in it. One of the things that I love most about composition—one of the reasons I'd rather be with you—is because of ways in which our field has arrived at a disciplinary maturity and yet remains undisciplined, unable to be disciplined. Funk is on my mind because for me it represents us dropping pretense and embracing boldness, wildness, and irreverence. Poet and scholar Tony Bolden cites writers like Jayne Cortez, Sterling Plumpp and Talib Kweli as “funky.” Check his description:

Effusive and amorphous, the funk impulse is a central component of all Black music—from antebellum ring shouts and gospels to blues, jazz, funk and hip-hop. Hence, George Clinton’s hyperbole: “In the beginning was the funk.” Characterized by an aesthetic that foregrounds speed, self-reflexivity, asymmetry, dissonance, and repetition, funkativity bespeaks a kinetic epistemology comprised of dynamic principles stored in a virtual archive of cultural memory, replete with (pre)configuring riffs and rhymes, twists and turns, shakes and breaks that are perpetually (re)sampled and (re)mixed in a manner comparable to electricity. (15)

Bolden also links Funk to Latina/o culture by referencing Federico Garcia Lorca’s theorizing of the concept of duende. He quotes Lorca this way: “the duende climbs up inside you, from the soles of your feet” (16). I yearn for my own writing to one day reflect THAT kind of electric, kinetic epistemology. Funk is worthy of sustained scholarly attention because it the sweat and the stank of Funk, the sweet and nasty smell of exertion as we break it on down and shake it on down, that signifies not only honest expression, exertion, and integrity, but acumen, celebration, commitment to one’s work, and, yes, intellect. This intellectual, creative, and physical work has helped Blackfolk and audiences across race and culture intervene into the nation’s racialized ideologies for Bolden, because those steeped in the Funk are free enough to toss those ideologies aside and refuse to play by the rules of the game. Intervention comes from those who are irreverent, from those who are contrary, from those who are wild.

I’m talking about Funk as a guiding idea for who we are in our thinking, teaching, making, and doing because for just a minute, I want us to drop our serious, scholarly personae and just talk together. I want us move forward knowing that just like activists in Ferguson and Cleveland and New York and the Bay Area teach us, respectability will not save us in the streets or in relationships or in politics, or even in a brilliant presidency; it will not save us in the academy either. So just like Viola Davis took off her wig on How To Get Away
with Murder to let the nation know she would not be defined by someone else’s oppressive standards, I want us to take off our own respectability politics for a minute and realize that no matter how much we push our students to dismiss their home languages for some assimilated standardized version, respectability will not save them, or us. I want us to realize that the funkiness of C’s the Day and our Sparkle Ponies is one of the best things about us, and that even if we did not have them, the Chronicle still wouldn’t understand us, and much less save us. I’m beyond grateful that Sparkle Ponies roam our halls and listen in on our sessions and inspire the connections across people and ideas that open up space for new, imaginative teaching and scholarship and make people feel welcome and at home in the process. I want us to realize the respectability of having fellows like other academic organizations will not save us. I want us to realize that all our citations of high theory will not save us, and neither will trying to show that we are as rigorous and as serious as our literary colleagues save us. And I want us to realize that even the respectability of bigger budgets will not save us. As real as our struggles are, we act like being broke is new. We always been underfunded. We always been figuring it out as we go. We always been dismissed, disregarded, disrespected. But we served anyhow. We transformed one discipline and created our own anyhow. And it was women who did that work. It was people of color who did that work. It was queer folk who did that work. It was first-generation students in New York City and across the country demanding open admissions who did that work. It was people of all backgrounds teaching four and five courses a semester, contingent and full-time and sometimes even more time, who did that work for us, building and running programs while they taught and theorized.

But sometimes it seems to me that the Funk of who we have been throughout our history is dead. Our conferences are sometimes too clean—not so fresh and so clean clean, but serene clean. To paraphrase a poet friend of mine, Thomas Sayers Ellis, all their stanzas and all our conferences and all our conference attendance look alike despite our brochures and our resolutions and our best intentions. As real as the intradepartmental and institutional condescension we face can be, our best work happened in periods of struggle. Our best work happened when we dedicated ourselves to the students the rest of the academy didn’t want. Our best work happened when our courses looked more like handcrafted zines and broadsides created on mimeographs than huge productions done and supported by huge corporate publishers. Our universities spend all this time and effort at branding, talking about excellence
and distinction and matrices and best practices. But I want us, our courses, our programs and departments to be more than that—I want us to create and work in spaces that look after the students and the teachers and the communities the rest of the academy’s pursuit of "distinction" looks at and sneers, ain’t nobody got time for that. I want colleagues who will show and tell and teach our students like Elaine Richardson and Rhea Lathan taught us last year, The Shame Tree truly is dead.

I want Funk to be our guide not just because the rest of the academy feels too clean and too serene to me, but because intellectual life is funky. It is messy. Trying to build a society worthy of our aims is messy. It is ratchet. I want Funk to be our guide because that is the only way we can close the huge gaps that exist between our professed ideals and our practice, the only way we can own our privilege within oppressive spaces. Funk means we are willing to sweat. Funk means we are willing to deal with messiness and complexity. Funk means we will look unflinchingly at all that pains us, all that is wrong around us, and STILL dance and shout and shake and twirl our way out of our constrictions.

My hope for us is that as we worry a little less about being neat and clean, a little less about respectability inside our departments, programs, and universities, that as we embrace boldness, complexity, and even a little irreverence and messiness that we will be able to take flight into intellectual, pedagogical, and programmatic places that we might partially see, but cannot yet fully know. Just like Mos Def and Talib Kweli said, “this aint no time when the usual is suitable/tonight alive, let's describe the inscrutable.” This is a time for exploration, for experimentation. This is a time when we can create and risk, when we can write graffiti on the walls and color outside the lines. This is a time when we don’t have to have it all figured out just yet. Many of you know that flight has been a fairly consistent theme from our former chairs speaking on this occasion. I’m also asking us to take flight across both space and time because for me, flight means embracing and investing in innovation. It means creating spaces for innovation not tied to byzantine processes of administrators’ or faculty senates’ approval. Being willing to really fly on and reach for the stars means that we drop at least some of our worries about what’s happening right now and fix our gaze on big challenges and problems and then work backward.

Because the Beloved one and author of Beloved, Toni Morrison, tells us, if you “wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (Song of Solomon, 177), let me say this right now. By the power vested in me for the thirty minutes of this chair’s address, I hereby promote the essay to dominant genre
emeritus. I thank you for your loooonng and committed service over more than a century. We still love you. We want you to keep an office on campus and in our thinking, teaching, and writing lives. We will continue to throw wonderful parties and give meaningful awards in your name. And yet, we also acknowledge the rise and promotion of many other activities around which writing and communication can be organized. And we realize that if we are going to fly and find new intellectual spaces and futuristic challenges to meet with our students and each other, we have to leave the comfortable ground we have found with you.

For those of you who might be wondering if I’ve lost my mind at this point, let me state my case this way: the essay is a valuable, even powerful technology that has particular affordances in helping us promote communicative ability, dialogue, and critical thinking. But we have gotten too comfortable relying on those affordances as our writing and communication universe goes through not only intense change, but an ever-increasing tempo of change. I admit that change gets dizzying, and I often find myself relying on the opening words of my favorite artist of the entire Funk and Soul era, Donny Hathaway, in the painfully, plaintively, beautiful song, “Someday We’ll All Be Free”: “Hang on to the world as it spins around/Just don’t let the spin get you down/. . . Never mind your fears.” We have been talking about technological changes in communication for more than thirty years thanks to venues like *Computers and Composition* and many of our technical and professional writing scholars. Jacqueline Jones Royster challenged us years ago to expand our vision of academic discourses in her classic “Academic Discourses or Small Boats on a Big Sea.” And we’ve been talking about multimodal, multimedia forms of composing for a long time as well.

This is the time for us to take those calls to yet another level. Think with me, about the literacies, about the understandings that the essay has helped us build with students: ethical source use and connection to scholarly community; the ability to value other voices, including those with whom we disagree; the ability to develop compelling support for an idea; experimentation with different rhythms and organizing strategies in our prose. This is obviously only the beginning, but you get the idea. Keep those abilities in mind and consider what the authors of *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Jen-kins) argue are the literacies we have to develop with our students for right now and for the future:
But there is more than literacy—more than changing literacies—at stake. As composing becomes more and more enmeshed in digital environments, tools, practices, and networks, we need to see this as a crossroads moment for our scholarship too. That crossroads for me is one where we see that we have to embrace technology issues not as part of what we do, but as central to what we do. Technology is what we do, or what we need to do, not just because literacy is always technologized, not just because of computers AND composition, but because of the big picture technological issues that are always brought to bear on all facets of our lives and work. Questions about privacy and surveillance, about policy and legal frameworks, about how technologies are marketed, about design, about networks, artificial intelligence, and natural language processing, just to begin the list. So we need to ask different questions about writing with technologies, but also about writing in relationship to big picture technology issues.

What happens to composing when laptop and desktop computers go the way of the typewriter? How will wearable and implantable technologies change our access to information and our ability to share with each other? How will the constant sharing that sometimes makes us uncomfortable on social media go into warp drive when audio and video recording of everything everywhere becomes as commonplace as clicking and sharing a link are now? How will we respond when the dramatic changes in the pace of change exacerbate racial and gender divides that are already staggering?
What I am trying to suggest is that we need to take the next step in our investigations of technology issues far beyond the boxes and wires—that because writing, communication, composing, are always technologized, big picture technology studies need to become a crucial, a central part of what we do. It is time for some new journals and book series to take as big a leap forward now as *Kairos* and *Technoculture* and *Computers and Composition* did in their beginnings, journals and book series that are dedicated to exploring the messy big picture concerns that structure technologies and our relationships to them. In a cultural moment when we are fascinated by the visual because of Instagram and Vine—perhaps blinded by the image, to riff on a classic article by Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola, we need more work in sound studies and oral composing and audio archives. We need a more critical edge when it comes to technology studies so that we don’t become hoodwinked every time governments and corporations unite to try to sell us utopian visions about the next new technological hotness that will heal everything that ails us.

And to do all of this, like Malcolm X famously said, we need some new friends. It’s time for us to travel across campus, across programs, and into more strategic relationship building by doing more with affiliate faculty and cross-disciplinary courses and certificates. We need deeper connections with the disciplines that get lumped into area studies—long-term and systematic relationships with departments and programs in gender and women’s studies, Indigenous studies, Latina/Latino studies, Asian and Asian American studies, and Africana studies. We need to build deep and long-term relationships with university libraries and iSchools that go beyond the first-year comp trip to the library to learn about source use. And we need to keep working hard on that fourth C in our title: we have to do long-term work building on our relationships with communication programs, schools, and departments. Many of our members attend RSA (Rhetoric Society of America) and NCA (National Communication Association), but how can we take those individual relationships that exist and use them to deepen our programmatic and organizational connections? What can we do—throughout CCCC and our home departments and programs—to build long-term relationships with Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs)? We need greater connection and collaboration across programs and organizations because even the most brilliant faculty, even the largest writing and rhetoric programs, even the best organizations like CCCC, cannot do this futuristic work alone.
However, to invoke flight—even imagined flight—at a time like this might seem fraudulent, given that none of us on the ground is free. We are not free to fly when one of our own, my sister Dr. Ersula Ore, was assaulted and thrown to the street because a police officer didn’t like the way she responded to him. And on our own campuses we are not free to take flight when the exploitation of highly skilled teachers and scholars labeled as contingent, labeled as adjunct, minimized with a part-time tag, is allowed to flourish. It may be that we will never see this society become brave enough to move beyond sexism, homophobia, racism, and economic exploitation. Ta-Nehesi Coates might have had it right when he stated on Twitter: “Maybe we shall not overcome. But I am still here to ask us to think about freedom as crucial to our work. MeShell Ndegeocello put it best in a song called Satisfy: I’m asking us to think about how we find ‘freedom amid this mockery.’”

I’m asking us to think about freedom in this unfree world because the only freedom we will see, the only freedom we will get, is the freedom we take. And the only way we get free is to walk with and learn from those who are out here working to get free. One thing this means is we have to focus less on the rhetorical “exemplars,” focus less on “successful” movements. Freedom work is funky rather than refined. It is becoming rather than overcome. It is in process rather than proclaimed. When I was in Syracuse I used to put together community ciphers on different topics; some would have as few as ten or twelve people, some as many as fifty or sixty. And one of the many beautiful things about these groups is that they maintained a focus on what we CAN do, no matter how bad things seemed. And while there were many reasons for that focus, a huge amount of it was due to one woman, someone I sometimes called “mother sister” after the Ruby Dee character in Spike Lee’s movies. Any time our conversations seemed to get too world weary or too mired in the obstacles we might see, she would stand up and say, “Dammit, just ACT like you free!” Ms. Beulah’s exclamation was so powerful to us that it became a refrain for almost everyone in the groups because of her insistence that we claim our own agency no matter what the external circumstances.

One major obstacle we have to free ourselves from is the set of handcuffs the same old theory and the same old theorists and the same old scholarship place on us. Movie producer Harvey Weinstein talked to Vulture Magazine recently about the lack of diversity in the Oscars (Fox), and I think to myself that even the Oscars are less white than our published scholarship and the awards we give for scholarly publications. As my man Sayers (Ellis) said, “All
their stanzas look alike”—and too much of our theorizing and scholarship does too. As important as people such as De Certeau and Jameson and many others can be to our work, there is just as much theoretical richness to be gleaned from Anna Julia Cooper, from Minnie Bruce Pratt, from Vine Deloria, from the Young Lords in New York and Dreamers and Dream Defenders and the Crunk Feminist Collective and from local people and organizations whose names we don’t yet know. The moment when we will be free or represent freedom as an organization, as a group of scholars, will be not just when the demographics of our conferences and our faculties look like the demographics of our society, but when our citation practices and works cited lists do too.

I came by this morning with my mind stayed on intellectual freedom and racial and social and sexual and economic justice because the only way to gain the freedom we so desperately need as a society and as a discipline is through the very problems that threaten and seem so intractable. Womanist theologian Katie Cannon said it better than I ever could. In a sermon published in the late James Haskin’s collection *Keeping the Faith* titled “Living the Life of Jubilee,” Cannon transforms the very ideas of Jubilee, of liberation. I imagine her words in this sermon as a guide for the work I hope to do and the kind of person I hope to become. She says:

And in these modern times, what do we do, what do we say, when the powers and principalities, when the spiritual wickedness in high places, say to us go get your sons, go get your daughters, go get your nieces, go get your nephews, go get your grandchildren, go get your great grandchildren, go get your sisters and brothers, and hand them over to us.

Yes, church, what are we saying, what are we doing, when the bureaucrats and the drug dealers, what are we saying, what are we doing, when the global capitalists and the gang bangers, what are we saying when the cold-hearted, mean spirited power brokers and the misogynistic, bible thumping homophobes demand the souls of the people in our families, the people in our churches, the people in our communities? When the people who don’t mean any good to us demand the souls of our sisters and brothers anywhere in the world?

But it is what she does next in the sermon that is simply transformative. Rather than proclaim Jubilee as some moment when those who are enslaved are free or people are relieved of their debts, she challenges her people by flipping the script: instead of a powerful moment of celebration of freedom gained, she challenges them to live the life of Jubilee Justice. Rather than some mystical, majestical moment, Jubilee becomes a lifelong commitment to the work of liberation. Being able to reach higher ground, or to fly on and reach for
the stars, demands service in the valleys where we live and struggle. And when we see it this way, our service mission, to our students, to our campuses, and to our communities becomes the very thing that gives us the freedom to fly. As real as the obstacles are that we face, on campus, in the community, in public, at home, as real as the walls and impediments to movement are here on the ground, let us make this space that we create here together for these few days be one where we proclaim, “Ain’t no walls behind the sky, baby.” As we come here to be renewed and to renew each other, let us embrace the funk that keeps us from being completely sanitized by academic silos and conventions. And let us fly on, reaching for stars we cannot yet map, see, or scan. Let us be committed to creating free spaces for ourselves, and to standing with and learning from those who are engaged in freedom struggle, not in the past, but right here right now. Let us use that freedom we take for those who do not have our protections or our privileges, inside and outside the academy. Let us use it to become a hub for intellectual life and critical dialogue both on campus and off. And let us use it to serve our students, to serve the local communities in which we live, love, work, and play, and to serve our broader society, which needs our attention to discourse and our ability to enter messy public conversations maybe more now than at any point in our recent memory. Thank you.

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