From the ocean comes a notion that the real eyes lies in rhythm, and the rhythm of vision is a dancer. From the lookin’ come the seeing, one with real eyes realize the rhythm of vision is a dancer, and when he dance, it’s always on the one.

—Parliament, “Mr. Wiggles”

There is something inherently misleading about the word “revolution.” While the term suggests a change of astronomical proportions, those expectations are hardly ever met. That does not mean that revolutions have not happened, do not happen, or will not happen; rather, they come in unexpected shapes, forms, colors, and sizes. The revolution I will discuss in the following pages is tiny. Still, even this assessment of its size is not accurate. For, in this particular case, visual metaphors are inaccurate altogether. Neither a telescope nor a microscope can help observe it. This revolution cannot be seen at all.

Resorting to other sensory metaphors, for instance sonic ones, does not help much either. While we expect a revolution to arrive with a big bang, such loud sounds are hardly ever heard. As a matter of fact, the revolution I address in this essay is so silent it can hardly be heard. Ironically, this major breakthrough almost gets lost amongst the plethora of sounds and noises that surrounded it. Raising the volume does not help, since that only amplifies background noise. This strange revolution is neither a whisper nor a scream but occurs somewhere in-between sounds. It belongs to a realm that is neither visual nor acoustic.

The event I would like to nominate as a revolution is James Brown’s introduction of “the One” into popular music. While this term initially designated the first beat of
a measure, its meaning in funk music has become irreducible to its original use. This essay tries to unravel what James Brown and his successors—Sly Stone, George Clinton, Betty Davis, Bootsy Collins, Rick James, and Prince, to name but a few—mean when they speak of this enigmatic term. However, the One also exceeds its musical and even musicological relevance. Therefore, this essay removes the term from its original context and inserts it into another: political philosophy. Within this new context, I argue, the One could revitalize the concept of revolution.

The aim of this essay is to transform James Brown’s practice of rhythm into a philosophical concept of revolution. The artist’s shifts, suspensions, and interruptions demonstrate that change does not depend on the extremity or novelty of interventions, but on their critical timing. Before I can conclude that revolutions need to be rhythmic, though, I need to explain why I consider James Brown’s practice of rhythm to be revolutionary. This is a challenge, since the One has proven to be an impossible term to grasp. Many musicians, critics, and musicologists have tried to define this term, but its meaning constantly slips away. Even James Brown himself gives multiple, often conflicting, accounts of the One. This ambiguity, I argue, is an inherent quality of the One rather than a shortcoming of the definitions. In this essay, I do not offer yet another definition. Instead, I will explain how Brown’s revolutionary interventions are embedded in a practice of rhythm. Before I can analyze the One in practice and in detail, however, I (tentatively) need to lay out some of its interrelated characteristics.

The One repeatedly releases rhythm from its secondary and instrumental role in relation to melody and harmony. Through precisely timed and carefully performed interventions, James Brown manages to foreground the groove as soon as it threatens to disappear. Paradoxically, cuts, shifts, and suspensions disrupt the rhythm so that it becomes or remains present. This loss and gain of momentum cannot be explained by the (lack of) complexity of the percussive patterns alone. Rhythm is not only a quality of a song, an artist, or even a performance. It also depends on the interaction with other musicians and the listener.

Band and audience, however, cannot be directly controlled by the artist. In order to lure them into his sphere of influence, Brown’s rhythmic interventions cunningly double as tests. The artist’s heavy reliance on antiphony (call and response) clearly exemplifies this tactic. Simple phrases such as “Get on the good foot,” “Turn me loose,” “Hit me,” and “Give the drummer some” may appear to be lyrics, but are actually tests-in-disguise. Call and response, though, do not always come in the form of meaningful phrases. Nonsensical shouts, bodily movements or gestures, and percussive sounds often fulfill the exact same function. In fact, these percussive modes of antiphony are the model for verbal ones, not the other way around. Disruptions are tactically employed to probe the quality of a rhythm. They do not have to make sense in order to work. The mere fact of a response is the sole measure of quality. If the band and the listeners react appropriately—whatever that may mean—to Brown’s