

***Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures.* By L. H. Stallings. Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press. 2015. 296 pp. Cloth, \$95.00; paper, \$26.00; e-book, \$23.40.**

***The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics.* By Louis Chude-Sokei. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press. 2016. 280 pp. Paper, \$27.95; e-book, \$21.99.**

Early scholarship on black music took an orthodox approach, privileging the work of historians and musicologists. More recently, scholars in the field (most significantly, those engaged in black study) have implored that humanistic and social science discourses sharpen their critical reflexes; these scholars have taken the intellectual chance of aligning critical theory *and* black music. New studies on black music have fundamentally questioned the role of Western knowledge systems in producing theoretical approaches to the study of black music and its filial aesthetics and cultures. To conduct this research, many scholars have ventured to think more vastly about the aesthetic approaches related to black music and black sound cultures, to think about the significance of black music outside “black music studies.”

Both L. H. Stallings’s *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* and Louis Chude-Sokei’s *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* provide imaginative frameworks for theorizing the nexus of black aesthetic practices and black sound cultures. Their works expand the scholarly engagement with the aesthetics of black music and sound studies, and move toward an interdisciplinary field of inquiry revolving around sound, aurality, and sound technologies.

Funk the Erotic reframes funk outside its sonic capacity, to critique Western theories of the erotic and the human that maintain *truths* about sexuality and sexual cultures. Stallings’s theory of “funky erotixxx,” a heuristic that revises prevailing notions about the erotic (particularly black erotica), paired with her reformulation of Jean Baudrillard’s “transaesthetics” becomes an important analytic for theorizing funk as a “multisensory and multidimensional philosophy [that] has been used in conjunction with the erotic, eroticism, and black erotica” (xvi). The book provides a rigorous discussion of how black popular objects, across space and time, call into question Western conceptualizations of eros; Stallings also problematizes colonial approaches to theorizing black sexuality and sexual cultures. Using funk as an analytic to engage black sexual cultures, the book challenges objections by “Eurocentric theorists . . . black feminist and queer theorists” to thinking black sexuality, desire, and agency conterminously (4–5).

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Employing a sustained engagement with black popular art and aesthetics, which Stallings capaciously defines to include sex, pornography, theater, and strip culture(s), she makes a compelling case for the ways “narrative can be created using aesthetics and forms outside of literary traditions” (11). Thus, the strength of *Funk the Erotic* is its expansion of funk studies, from a field focused primarily on the black music genre “funk” to one including black literary studies. For example, Stallings’s archive contains objects of nineteenth-century literature (e.g., Paschal Beverly Randolph’s occult manuscripts), black sexual publics (e.g., *Freaknik*), black erotic literature (e.g., Zane’s black erotica), print media (e.g., *Players* magazine), and black trans narratives (e.g., *I Rise*, by Toni Newman) to dispute the importance of canonization in black literary traditions. Her archive centers these noncanonical objects of black literature and black aesthetics to argue that these black writers and artists were “sexual guerrillas who refused the sexual pacifism embedded within feminism or sexual terrorism and violence enacted by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (63). And while *Funk the Erotic* is “a book that is about funk, but not funk music,” the book masterfully weds funk (as philosophy) with theories of black sexuality and black sexual cultures (1–2).

While Stallings impressively rethinks black sexual cultures alongside funk, readers might wonder what the project could be if Stallings addressed the discursive capacity of funk visuality and sound in her conception of “transaesthetics” and “funky erotixxx” and their impact on black sexual cultures. A query about aesthetics emerges: why do aesthetics primarily appear as *Logos* (e.g., black literature) in the work? The book’s brief engagement with both the sound and visual cultures integral to funk, such as Stallings’s allusion to Betty Davis, Chaka Khan, and Erykah Badu at the beginning of chapter 2, reads as a missed opportunity to think more expansively about the implicit overdetermination of “literary traditions” and the stranglehold they have on black critical thought, especially work on black writing, black music, and black sound cultures.

Chude-Sokei’s *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* builds on his earlier work on minstrelsy and the African diaspora. The book argues that by looking at nineteenth-century to twenty-first-century American, Caribbean, and British literature addressing the topics of artificial intelligence, minstrelsy, cybertheory, and science fiction, one can better understand the relationship between race and technology. The book centers histories of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and industrialization in North America and Europe to examine this “dyad” and “argues that how we have come to know and understand technology has been long intertwined in how we have deployed and made sense of race, particularly in the case of blacks and Africans in a world made by slavery and colonialism” (1).

Like Stallings’s book, *The Sound of Culture* is not in and of itself about black music; rather, it uses black sound cultures and black music to trace the “signs of technological reproduction and the relationship of race or blacks to them”

(8). Importantly, Chude-Sokei argues that black music has been central to theorizing the relationship between race and technology, especially between “blacks and machines” (151). As a work of literary criticism, the book is made possible by “a perspective routed in and through the African diaspora. . . . [B]lack music—from jazz to reggae, hip-hop to electronic dance music—has always been the primary space of direct black interaction with technology and informatics. Music has been the primary zone where blacks have directly functioned as innovators in technology’s usage” (5).

Chude-Sokei also employs the work of Caribbean scholars like Édouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter to think through “the collusion between creolization and technopoetics” (189). He uses this intellectual tradition to conceptualize the entanglements of technology and what he terms as Caribbean “preposthumanism” (18). His sustained engagement with Wynter’s work and the concept of “creolization” is a curious one, considering Wynter’s own proclivities toward the term “indigenization” to think about how colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade produced technologies of dominance and power, alongside modalities of resistance and riotous rebellion.

There are many points at which Chude-Sokei could elaborate on the impact of black sound cultures on “black technopoetics.” For example, his discussion of dub is fragmented and brief, and he provides a far-too-succinct discussion of one of dub’s pioneers, Lee “Scratch” Perry. Perry’s investment in black sound cultures, particularly his studio, the Black Ark, where he innovated and created new sound technologies and black sound cultures, is foundational to the history and theory of Caribbean sound cultures. It would have been interesting for Chude-Sokei to engage black music alongside sound studies literature since he uses the language of “sound” and thinks more broadly about sound cultures (for example, sound system culture in the Caribbean). The work ends with a playlist “that thematically and historically follow [s] the arguments” of the book (225), but this explicit discussion of black sound would have been better placed earlier in the text.

Readers of *Funk the Erotic* and *The Sound of Culture* might be left with a yearning for elaborations on black sound and aurality, but the ambitious offerings of Stallings and Chude-Sokei demonstrate the dynamism of studies on black aesthetic practices and the impact black music studies has on a variety of disciplines and fields of research in the humanities, most notably, the field (s) of literary studies and criticism. Both works’ attention to the *literary* capacity of black aesthetics offers new insights to the study of black music and black sound cultures.

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