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The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics by
Louis Chude-Sokei (review)

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Faulkner and the black Americas from so many different angles, and this book gathers the very best of them into a collection that challenges and changes the way we think about Faulkner's work in conversation with the work of writers from the black Americas.

Louis Chude-Sokei. *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics.* Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2016. 268 pp. \$27.95.

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Say you've been sent to planet Earth, emissary of a wise and beneficent post-human people. Your mission: to solve the old race problem that causes earthlings so much misery. Your base of operations: the heart of the Imperium, twenty-first-century America. Your weapon: black technopoetics, a disruptor set to "stun." You'd be following the secret agenda Louis Chude-Sokei advances in *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*. I say secret because this agenda doesn't appear with complete clarity until near the book's end. But Chude-Sokei wants to change the way race works both to differentiate black people from the norm of the (white) Human and justify their subjection to it. He pursues this mission, unexpectedly and with flashes of brilliance, by using the science fiction to challenge cultural stereotypes by way of the future they presume. "To combine race," he writes, "with a futurism is to subject blackness to the vagaries of temporal transformation" (207). Chude-Sokei wants a blackness open to continuing transformation: "necessarily mutable, contingent, and therefore subject to going beyond itself" (198). A fantasy?

Only fantasy can tell. Science fiction (generically allied to fantasy, as the shelves of brick-and-mortar bookstores attest) builds futures out of the detritus of contemporary dreams. Chude-Sokei shows how deeply such dreams come stained by histories of racial subjection and colonialism in the West. It's a gorgeous, sobering insight: science fiction, the escapist pabulum of white geeks, has been *about* race all along. Chude-Sokei can make it because he approaches science fiction in broadly cultural rather than textual terms as a displaced allegory of social relations that provides an armature for dreaming the future. For him the fundamental feature of the genre, the one that places race front and center, is its obsession with technology, or more colloquially, machines. This emphasis allies science fiction with Italian futurism, a contemporaneous modernism whose celebration of machine aesthetics served an obvious ethnic chauvinism. Here's the "tell" Chude-Sokei observes and interprets: machines in science fiction mediate social relations between whites and blacks.

To sustain this claim, he works back about a century to document an abiding cultural association between blacks and machines. It isn't simply that as enslaved labor, transported Africans resembled the machines that would eventually replace them. Chude-Sokei establishes that, culturally speaking, blacks could pass for machines—and vice versa. Minstrelsy opens up this possibility by staging blackface performance as the liminal and empty other to the Human in a way that mimes the otherness of machines. A black automaton would clinch the point. Chude-Sokei finds one in the strange history of Joice Heth, the allegedly 161-year-old "mammy" of George Washington whom P. T. Barnum purchased in 1835 for public display, launching his spectacular career. Heth's extreme age, her rigidity and blindness, made it hard to distinguish her from an automaton—source of her initial public renown. Barnum later heightened Heth's uncanny appeal by billing her as an

automaton passing for human: a black machine. It would be hard to invent a more powerful instance of the assimilation of machines and blacks, a cultural fantasy that finds fulfillment in 1930 with the Westinghouse Electric Corporation's design and manufacture of Mr. Rastus Robot, the Mechanical Negro.

These material instances of mechanical blackness give heft to the claim that the conflation of blacks and machines becomes a pervasive motif in science fiction. Chude-Sokei shows how the nineteenth-century writing he calls "Victorian proto-science fiction" advances this association to the point of inevitability. He treats familiar authors in unfamiliar ways to reveal their displaced preoccupation with race and slavery. Herman Melville's story "The Bell Tower" (1856) assimilates a critique of slavery to an account of a machine slaying its human master. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), in Chude-Sokei's words, "features the discovery of a superior and technologically advanced subterranean lost race in England who pose a threat to an 'inferior' Britain" (103). The racial implications—and fears—are obvious and helped drive the vogue for "lost race" narratives that becomes a staple of pulp fantasy. Put *The Coming Race* together with Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1871), that extended meditation on the life and destiny of technology, and the cultural interchangeability of blacks and machines becomes obvious: "simply substitute 'blacks' or 'the Negro' or even 'the colonized' for machines [in Butler] and a dimension of meaning opens up that simply cannot be accidental, given his commitment to Darwinian views of race, culture, and historical transformation" (118). This Victorian legacy of machines figuring for blacks lives on in subterranean fashion in the bona-fide science fiction that emerges in the early twentieth century, a point Chude-Sokei makes by examining Karel Čapek's famous play *R.U.R.* (1922). Čapek not only popularized the word "robot" (from "robota," Czech for "forced labor," "slave"), but wrote his play with an eye trained on American race relations. Chude-Sokei's lesson: when you see "machine" in science fiction, read "black."

It won't make you happy. The cultural diagnosis is clear: blacks, like machines, remain both soulless and menacing, and the notion of race reinforces their difference from the (white) norm of the Human. Something must be done, but in a way that disrupts that difference. That's where Chude-Sokei's weapon comes in, black technopoetics. He doesn't describe it in much detail beyond a user-friendly gesture: self-consciously black "engagements with technology" in "literary, philosophical, [or] musical" realms (11). You'd be forgiven for thinking the gesture associates his work with Afro-futurism. But no. Chude-Sokei rebukes the whole motley movement for remaining too invested in a first world—and essentialist—notion of blackness. He prefers pluralities, and he liberates them with his disruptor of choice: creolization, which creates new mixes out of old cultures. Late chapters provide a useful history of this practice: its inception with Aimé Césaire and the surrealists, its adaptation by Édouard Glissant of Martinique and Wilson Harris of Guyana. Most illuminating, however, is the extended discussion of Sylvia Wynter's work and the solution it offers to the problem of permanently subjugated blacks. On Wynter's disruptive reading they inhabit "demonic ground," cultural space of new becoming where alone new genres of the Human can emerge. As Chude-Sokei puts it, "yesterday's monsters are today's subjects; today's machines are tomorrow's human beings" (222).

So there's hope. Only not for "us," taking "us" to mean blacks today (and not me). I can't second his claim that cyberpunk advances a vision of the future *creolized*. The sun has set on cyberpunk dystopias and risen elsewhere: the bio-fictions of Octavia Butler and the creolized sci-fi/fantasy of Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, or N. K. Jemisin—all black women writers, a crew Chude-Sokei shows no interest in taking seriously. If, as he repeatedly argues, creolization (however "universal" a practice) emerges as a Caribbean response to the oppressive force of colonialism, I suspect its greatest creations turn out to be cultural and collective, not personal and aesthetic—Rastafari, for instance. But Chude-Sokei

proves himself no friend of Rastas either, preferring the “inauthenticity” of dancehall and dub to the benighted “authenticity” of reggae, roots, and reparations. If there’s a bigotry of the postmodern, it shows itself in the blithe dismissal of lived spirituality—“livity”—as delusion, or more familiarly, “essentialism.” Space won’t allow me to address Chude-Sokei’s interest in *sound*, especially its digital avatars, as a panacea for black purity. It’s a side of *The Sound of Culture* that, while interesting, deserves a more detailed treatment than it receives, especially given the extent of recent developments in sound studies. The book is most convincing in its historical assessment of blacks as machines, least so in its dated claims about the pertinence of cyberpunk to black futures. It ends in good postmodern fashion, however (reminiscent of *The Crying of Lot 49*), “listening for a growing minority, servile and oppressed, waiting for the moment when we realize that it is we who now echo them” (224). In the era of Black Lives Matter and a mounting black body count, that’s enough to give even a white guy the hesitation blues.
