

# Listening to the Sound of Culture

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Louis Chude-Sokei's *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* offers an intricately nested account of the historical relationship between race and technology, or, in his words, "a broader reading of the historical and cultural context that allowed those equivalences between blacks and machines to be sensible in the first place."<sup>1</sup> As that framing suggests, the work offers an entwined genealogy of black claims to humanity and human fears of robot uprisings, with profound implications for how we continue to imagine the boundaries of humanity. Works of science fiction and key historical vignettes serve as Chude-Sokei's primary exegetical texts, but he notably places black music—or more specifically, sound production—at the center of his account. What makes such an approach "structurally and philosophically possible," he argues, "is the awareness that black 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" (5).

Chude-Sokei is careful to stress, therefore, that "this is not a book about music"; rather, music serves as "a thread linking the various texts and contexts, secondary only to science fiction, which itself is subordinate to the mutually constitutive dyad of race and technology" (6). More to the point, this is not a book about music because the author is more concerned with sound, which is to say, with black music as media or as audible interaction with technology. Without dismissing other forms of black invention, Chude-Sokei contends that music represents an exceptional domain of black technological practice: both as "the primary zone

<sup>1</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 5; hereafter cited in the text.

where blacks have directly functioned as innovators in technology's usage" and as "a space where black inventiveness has rarely or successfully been questioned." Hence, to focus on music "as a space of sound and sound production is to reorient our listening . . . toward how blacks directly engage information and technology through sound" (5).

This focus on sound brings into relief a rich and complex history of interaction undercutting the persistent myth that blacks and technology are somehow opposed, or that blacks enjoy so little access to technology that such interactions can seem "either rare or adversarial, as in the well-known folktale of John Henry." Chude-Sokei cites the so-called digital divide as a recent reiteration of this spurious story of black technological lack, a story that withers quickly in the face of the musical record: "Funny thing about these notions of race or blacks as having been victims of a digital divide is that in the very period that term gained such currency as to have become cliché, blacks in the Caribbean, America, and Europe were busy generating the most sophisticated electronic music and technology-obsessed music subcultures in history" (6). As that jump from the Caribbean to the wider world would suggest to scholars of electronic music, this is an analysis that builds on the remarkable resonance and influence of the Jamaican sound system and all that follows. It is more than convenient that one vernacular name for a sound system is simply *a sound*, a term that, as Chude-Sokei is quick to emphasize, "foregrounds technology and specific cultural interactions with it," not unlike a great deal of Jamaican music itself, especially dub (7).

While it is true that the "mutually constitutive dyad of race and technology" persists as the core subject of Chude-Sokei's book, I would like to focus on the text's crucial musical threads in order to highlight how *The Sound of Culture* reorients specific histories of music, offers new openings for musicology and sound studies, and makes a case that the power of an audible, creole technopoetics can remake our very conception of the human. If, as Chude-Sokei posits, the black diaspora has generated the "most necessary theorizing and politicizing" of where we draw the lines between humans and machines "as a product of its extensive thinking about the African slave as an automaton," and if, as he elaborates, this profound philosophical work has been no more forcefully put forward than by dub reggae, then there is a great deal to listen for in this work and all it brings into the mix (8).

## Black Music in the Machine

Figuring sound production as a sign of technological mastery allows Chude-Sokei to connect such genres as minstrelsy, jazz, reggae, and techno without recourse to musical semiotics, Africanist pattern recognition, racial essentialism, or anything beyond the central frame of race and technology. More important than rhythms, formal structures, or lyrical themes for Chude-Sokei is the consequential cultural work that recordings of black voices accomplished in transforming listeners' ideas about race and technology. The production and reception of sound recordings by black performers thus offer a key vector through which "blacks assimilated

technology on behalf of the wider nation” (46). Chude-Sokei illustrates how black artists working at the dawn of the recording industry helped to mediate and mitigate a complex and often terrifying modernity “structured by the dual anxieties of slavery and industrialization [and] shaped by systems of human unfreedom” (80). While the technological underpinnings and obsessions of dub, hip-hop, and techno have inspired voluminous commentary, the discussion here also attends to the technological dimensions and implications of sound recordings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This has powerful genealogical and ontological implications for the study of “black music”—an often vexed category itself freighted with being raced, provincially nationalized, and inextricably bound up with machines (beginning with the plantation itself). To develop this narrative, Chude-Sokei examines surprising links between blackface minstrels and automata and the rise of such eventually domesticated machines as the phonograph.

The trope of the “talking machine,” argues Chude-Sokei, “marks a necessary early stage in a history of black technopoetics, where technology emerges as a primary mediator between the inhuman and the human and does so through race and sound” (71). Drawing on Evan Eisenberg’s *The Recording Angel*, the author affirms the contention that the “actual legacy of automata in the twentieth century was machines like the phonograph or gramophone.”<sup>2</sup> He builds on this reading by noting how, more generally, “ventriloquism and masquerade become increasingly properties of technology” between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, indeed, that “mimetically capacious machines”—whether actual phonographs or laboring robots—“were beginning to define the difference between centuries and, in the United States, the difference between cultural powers and relations between social groups” (68–69). The masquerading ventriloquists known as minstrels—leaping off nineteenth-century stages into the twentieth century, through the acousmatic media of cylinder and disc—serve so perfectly as mediators of this encroaching modernity, from uncanny spectacle to domesticated copresence, that it is a little stunning these links have not been drawn so clearly before.

Explicating a description of black blackface minstrel Bert Williams’s unusually demanding and meticulous recording sessions, Chude-Sokei emphasizes that by “studying his voice mask and perfecting it finally from a distance,” Williams was clearly “very aware of the importance of the new technology and committed himself to the phonograph as a new site of dialect performance” (75–76). Williams’s attention was well spent: he enjoyed the highest fees, top billing, and best sales in the business. But according to Chude-Sokei, the impact of Williams’s enormously successful recordings is more profound than these achievements: “The power of this machine to introduce many whites to the sound of black voices, to the intimacy of spoken word or songs across social and legal gulfs, cannot be underestimated” (76). Indeed, the implications go well beyond a traversal of the American color line. What is

2 Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records, and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 68.

key about this moment is how ideas about racial authenticity, developed so explosively in blackface performance—and given an additional twist in the black blackface of Bert Williams and George Walker, a.k.a. Two Real Coons—served to allay anxieties about alien technologies. Chude-Sokei notes that “the stress on realness is remarkable” in contemporary advertisements for Williams’s recordings “because this hyperbolic claim on the black voice is used to naturalize the talking machine.” “Remember,” he implores, “these machines were terrifying for the early consumer. Sound recording had yet to strip itself of associations with the occult and the sheer size and alienness of these technologies took years to domesticate. After all, if it speaks a black, vernacular voice, how alien can this machine be? If it speaks as a beloved darky minstrel, how cold and threatening could it be?” Once the talking machine was made familiar “within a stable racial and mimetic hierarchy,” listeners could once again be “guaranteed power over the machine” (76). This presents quite a different understanding of the “power” of black music than that which is usually implied.

### Creole Dub Song

Beyond transforming ideas about new machines at work and home, the trope of the “talking machine” also provides, for Chude-Sokei, “a crucial first step in answering Paul Gilroy’s call for ‘A comprehensive history of that special period in which phonographic technology first made black music into a planetary force’” (71).<sup>3</sup> *The Sound of Culture* contributes to this history by connecting the charged technological aura of the early phonographic history of black music to the remarkable, global, transgenre legacies of Caribbean music, especially dub reggae’s audible, appealing embodiment of a creole technopoetics. This linkage allows the author to examine how Caribbean creolization constitutes a “pre-posthumanism” that anticipates more recent philosophical considerations of cyborgs and the like and which arguably circulates outside of the Caribbean most powerfully via dub. It also supports incisive readings of cyberpunk and Afrofuturism, the orthodoxies of roots reggae and Rastafari, and the development of digital dancehall. To hear dub as deeply resonant creole technopoetics thus reorients our understanding of black music as a “planetary force” as it centers Caribbean creolization in ongoing discussions about the category of the human: “In advance even of dub, dancehall, hip-hop, or Afrofuturism there is a lineage of thinking in the Caribbean that engages epistemological border warfare and is therefore helpful as we attempt to make sense of how blacks have themselves made sense of their relationship to technology” (182).

While jazz, blues, and blackface minstrelsy appear in the book as foundational examples of technologized black sound, it is the more effusively electronic traditions of Jamaica that Chude-Sokei portrays as central to a longer history that extends into the future. The claim

3 Chude-Sokei quotes Paul Gilroy, “Analogues of Mourning, Mourning the Analog,” in Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonald, eds., *Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 261.

that dub reggae initiated modern musical production with its distinctive approach to multi-track remixing is not a new one, nor is it one to which Chude-Sokei devotes much space here. Instead, what adds weight to his dub-centric approach is the notion that dub demands primacy in the history of race and technology not because of its musical influence, *per se*, but because of its remarkably influential creolization of man and machine. Again, the author is concerned not with musical forms or features here but with the audible signs of technological prowess that abound in dub—and how these have been received by nonmusician and non-Jamaican listeners. Dub's profusely producerly qualities—sonic effects and artifacts bearing witness to the hands at the controls (and sometimes, the *dread* at the controls)—enabled this Afrocentric, bleeding-edge music “to be heard as a technological vision of a future far less definable in exclusively white terms than it had always been” (156). Meanwhile, dub artists' modes of self-representation abetted these associations as technology “was intentionally foregrounded in dub and roots reggae as a sign of hypermasculine agency, national pride, *and an African continuum*” (196; italics in original).

It is the paradoxical embodiment of the organic and technological, or dub's twin obsessions with “roots” and “tech”—what Chude-Sokei refers to as “technoprimitivism”—which appears to put a human mask on the machine, and race is another name for that mask. Race serves “a fiction that enables a hyperorganic humanizing of the white self once it loses its moorings, as was the case of jazz in the early twentieth century” (158). An uncanny ability to make the alien familiar explains why dub and Rastafarians have been so appealing to authors and filmmakers working to represent dystopian futures, alternate timelines, and other worlds. The predilection for projecting dub and Rastas into space is, then, a matter of “much more than either accident or mere exoticism”; more deeply revealing, Chude-Sokei contends, is that “the presence of Caribbean music and culture in cyberpunk was produced by an appreciation of the creole and technological properties of Jamaican sound” (130). This is true, the author asserts, even if the intellectual heritage around creolization may have been overlooked by the authors in question. Dub is part and parcel, product and export, of the more fundamental process of Caribbean creolization. As such, not only did dub become a muse for science fiction authors of the cyberpunk generation such as William Gibson, its resonant, creole technopoetics directly informed their influential conceptions of posthumanism.<sup>4</sup>

The Rastafarians who populate the Zion space settlement in Gibson's *Neuromancer* undeniably “participate in the presentation and construction of a distinct future” (159), but against this seemingly empowering representation Chude-Sokei reads Gibson's use of technoprimitivism as a sly critique of racial essentialism enabled by a perceptive reading of reggae and Rastafari: “Gibson gives us a tragic view of a movement that had become fragile due to its commitment to an authenticity impossible in the universe of *Neuromancer*, or in any other”

4 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984).

(161). There are other ironies here, which Chude-Sokei explores vis-à-vis the actual status and circumstances of roots reggae and Rastafari by the mid-1980s. While Rastafari was being co-opted by the Jamaican tourist industry, an insistence on the authenticity of analog sound and other rigid allegiances rendered roots passé as it “became orthodox and hostile to the more brazenly libidinal and openly digital excesses of a younger generation fueled less by a Garveyite notion of repatriation to Africa than by migration to New York, London, Japan, and other sites of information and disembarkation” (186–87). Notably, for all its departures from reggae orthodoxies, digital dancehall has enjoyed a remarkable reign in Jamaica and beyond, audibly holding the torch for dub’s creole technopoetics and restless futurism for more than three decades. Perhaps, the author suggests, this was all entailed by Gibson’s portrayal. “In his temporal intimacy with this Caribbean context and these shifts and with what seems an uncanny awareness of them,” Chude-Sokei notes wryly, “Gibson’s Rastas exist in a future that barely exceeds its present” (160).

This invigorating interpretation of *Neuromancer* is one of several passages that contributes to the book’s diasporic intervention into discussions that have been strongly shaped by African American musical, cultural, and literary movements. Where a US-based Afrofuturism often proceeds as a black corrective to a science fiction tradition that portrays the future as dubiously devoid of color, Chude-Sokei shows throughout *The Sound of Culture* that race has, in fact, functioned as a central feature of science fiction since its beginnings, considering that “machines were always-already racialized” and how many plots, even when centered on robots or extraterrestrials, invoke battles and debates over slavery and civil rights (154). “There is a reason why metaphors of difference, hybridity, and race *work* in talk about cyborgs, robots, and replicants,” Chude-Sokei charges. “It is part of the genre’s DNA” (154; italics in original). As such, it is no surprise that Gibson and his peers would be drawn to the creole concepts embedded in dub, which may explain why technoprimitive Jamaicans proved more appealing than, say, African American avatars of tech savvy—a choice that Chude-Sokei alleges “would seem far more potent as a critique than most black readers would like to admit” (161).

Chude-Sokei’s readings of cyberpunk and dub stand as correctives for the myth that one can speak of or for the diaspora as if it were a “cultural or political singularity,” a thing to be glibly deployed “as a mere extension of the trials and tribulations, goals and aspirations, of Western blacks or, to be fair, of specific vanguardist black cultural groups” (10). In the case of a US-based Afrofuturism, this has entailed what Chude-Sokei calls an “often cavalier proprietorship of the sounds, symbols, texts, and materials from the entire black world for deployment within a first-world racial logic and politics” (167). Against this tendency, Chude-Sokei seeks to recover dub and its creole conceptual frame from “the privileged black/white binary that defines and delimits black first-world thinking” (10). He proposes instead that “the fact that [the Caribbean] shares the context of blood, race, power, rape, and exploitation yet has still generated alternate modes of conceptually framing that history should be enough to

give creolization primacy in transnational conversations about race” (138). Afrofuturism may function differently in varied contexts of racial formation, and Chude-Sokei’s critique heightens the need to explore Caribbean contexts and trajectories for such ideas.

## More Sound Exegesis

Music supports and structures Chude-Sokei’s rich, provocative text, but in some ways it remains oddly silent. Whether or not a work like this holds stakes in the musicological, it remains conspicuous that a story in which music and sound figure so centrally refrains from close readings that engage sound as directly as the author approaches literature. “To focus on music rather than sound is to invite considerations this book isn’t primarily interested in, such as lyrical meaning, rhythmic analysis, specific musical history, or musicology,” Chude-Sokei states plainly enough at the outset (8). Let’s bracket the final term for a moment, though this strikes me as a valuable work of musicology, among the other things that it is, and I would recommend it to colleagues as such. Of course, I appreciate where the author is going with such protestations. The work seeks to point us not to the “performative, expressive, rhythmic, lyrical, or just musical” dimensions of music but to the *sound* of culture: not to signs of form or feature but to “signs of technological reproduction in which blacks function with some degree of primacy” (5, 8). Setting aside putatively musical matters to focus on sound serves to enable the music in the text to be “heard more broadly as technological engagement and as the nexus where race becomes a crucial element in that engagement” (8). The point is well taken and compellingly made, yet I am left with a tantalizing sense that there are dimensions of that sound that could be teased out to support Chude-Sokei’s points about this audible indexing of black technopopetics, not unlike his detailed exegeses of fictional works, advertisements, and circus exhibits.

Let me be clear before continuing down this mildly critical line that Chude-Sokei is doing a great deal in this book. It is an impressively interdisciplinary and wide-ranging analysis, a work of cultural and intellectual history fluent across cultural domains and time periods and interweaving a host of texts and contexts. There is no reason in a work of this scope that Chude-Sokei should feel compelled to recapitulate the extensive literature on reggae or dub, which he cites quite explicitly. But as that literature makes clear, especially such ethnographically informed and technically astute studies as Michael Veal’s *Dub*, which Chude-Sokei calls “irreplaceable,” or Ray Hitchins’s remarkable history of Jamaican sound engineering and aesthetic priorities, *Vibe Merchants*, there are various ways to call attention not only to how we can appreciate but *hear* the requisite technological engagement that produces this music.<sup>5</sup> If the audibility of those practices and processes is so central to the argument, readers may want a greater sense of how it is made to be heard and how they may hear it.

5 Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Ray Hitchins, *Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

While Chude-Sokei does provide ample discussion of dub's technopoetics in general terms, rarely does he offer a sustained analysis of a specific recording to explicate its sonic signification of technological acumen. He does, however, offer a suggestive litany of recommended, representative texts: notably, a partial but evocative list of dub recordings and artists (169–70) and a streamable playlist in the appendix (225–26). The idea of a playlist is a sensible, fun, and even salutary gesture, inviting not just a soundtracked reading of the book but a coproduction of the analysis. However, without elaborating how readers might hear the ways these recordings embody the larger argument, such lists can make confusing collections. The tracks on the playlist presented in the appendix, for instance, seem to fall into two clear camps: recordings that seem to audibly enact an engagement with technology and songs that are more *thematically* concerned with technology, the future, outer space, and so on. More attention to these recordings' sonic qualities in the text could have aided in their disambiguation or, better, in appreciating their underlying, audible technopoetics.

When the text on occasion takes a turn to something resembling music criticism, it offers a glimmer of how such explication could support the larger argument. The “sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitalized pop” that Gibson describes in *Neuromancer* “isn't actually a description of dub,” Chude-Sokei points out; rather, such a description seems “more akin to hip-hop or that dizzyingly intertextual sample-based electronic or industrial music that become popular in the 1980s with the advent of increasingly affordable digital samplers” (162–63). The author thus uses this telling imaginary leap on Gibson's part to affirm a larger point about the importance of Caribbean music in such figurations: “To describe it all as dub is for Gibson to give priority to the Caribbean origins of this context, the space that has come to stand in for creolization on a world scale” (162). Chude-Sokei's critique points vividly at the negative possibility for this kind of reading; one wonders what a positive example, scaffolded by a close reading of, say, an actual dub recording, would offer to the reader and to the overarching analysis.

That the attention to detail Chude-Sokei brings to novels and automata might also be brought to bear on the recordings he cites is a promising possibility that mostly remains unrealized, though it might have done some crucial work: helping readers hear *how* the sound of dub signifies the profound things that Chude-Sokei, Gibson, Afro-futurists, and dub producers themselves, among others, believe it does. Perhaps the author prefers to leave such queries to those working more explicitly in sound and music studies. These interdisciplinary fields would, in their own right, no doubt be better for more analyses of sound production in that vein. (Indeed, that sound studies has forced new and often tense conversations about the borders of “music” in music departments and music-related disciplines seems itself a revealing example of how technologies can pose categorical challenges to things we hold so dearly as constitutive of the human.) But so, I maintain, would this book.

Whether or not it is a work of musicology or a text *about* music, *The Sound of Culture* offers a fascinating and bracing perspective to those involved in sound and music studies,

as well as to cultural historians and others for whom the history of sound media—and the broad appeal of popular music, a category dependent on a variety of technological engagements—demands a place of prominence in our discussions of race, nation, diaspora, and (post)humanism. This may seem like the overstatement of a musicologist, but Chude-Sokei himself finds it remarkable that “it is through music that the Caribbean directly found its way into posthumanism” (155). If popular music and culture have indeed supplanted elite and bourgeois forms to become what Sylvia Wynter calls the “great unifying forms of our times,” regarding all these reverberations together would seem as crucial as ever (197).<sup>6</sup>

6 Chude-Sokei quotes Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poesis,” in Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, eds., *C. L. R. James’s Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 148.