

**L.H. Stallings: *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual
Cultures*. University of Illinois Press, 2015**

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1 When describing his approach toward funk music, one of its most famed contributors, Rick James reflected in a 1981 “Creem” interview, that funk allows him to traverse taboo societal topics that make powerful statements on vice, criminality, and law enforcement (DiMartino). For L.H. Stallings in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Culture*, revolutionary funk is multi-faceted and structurally disruptive. Its revolutionary power radically transforms politics, sexuality, erotica, energy, technology, and artistic expression. Funk’s multi-sensory and multi-dimensionality complements black political consciousness and subsequent activism. Throughout this colorful, unconventional, and lively text, Gender Studies researcher, L.H. Stallings explores how “funk” operates to inform black social movements, culture, and music. Funk is effusive, an effervescent Foucauldian biopolitical energy transfer, a force without *being* forced. Stallings deconstructs how funk is a manifestation of “African diasporic philosophy about transition, movement, and embodiment that relates to art, work, sex, gender, and national boundaries” (Stallings 6). Funk has a multi-purpose agenda, complicating rigid social constructs, hierarchies, and limitations.

2 *Funk the Erotic* asks how music can inform one’s body and subjectivity. Through this, Stallings highlights the transaesthetic components of black cultural art forms. While French theorist Jean Baudrillard defines *transaestheticism* through a “rejection of modernity,” where Western civilization is viewed as largely inconsequential, Stallings expands his definition (Stallings 11). Stallings describes transaesthetics as sexuality, art, expression, economics, and politics without boundaries, specificity, or characterizing distinctiveness (Stallings 11). She focuses on how transaesthetics disrupt biologically determinist ideas of subjectivity, and “produces causality and agency,” impacting representation and resistance (Stallings 6). Ultimately, “transaesthetics” provide a paradigm with which marginality is centered and better understood. Further, Stallings uses *transing*, or a disciplinary tool that serves to challenge “hierarchies of

gender...sexuality, functions and form,” to explore “anti-work” ideology, discussed below (Stallings 11).

3 Transing functions as a conduit of resistance to challenging normative ideas of sexuality, gender, and cultural expression. Cultural expression helps frame Stallings’ focus on the sensory experience of black people and significance of bodies to black movements and artistic representation (Stallings 11, 205). “Sensorium” thus informs the way subjects coordinate “all of the body’s perceptual and proprioceptive signals, as well as the changing sensory envelope of the self” (Stallings 11, 238). Additionally, sensorium affords black movements’ multi-sensory functions essential to its flourishing.

4 This multi-sensory function of the body and black movement complement Fanonian configurations of the effects of colonization on the black body. Similarly, Michelle Stephens conceives of marked bodies in *Skins Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*, as a crucial framework for understanding the stigma that racism operates in. Stephens asserts that for marked bodies, colonization is dehumanizing and separates bodies from their subjectivity. Stallings wants to expand the potentiality of black subjectivity, challenging *epidermalization*. In “epidermalization,” racialization reduces the skin to “merely a covering of a body already trapped in the symbolic order,” while transaesthetics and funk add a newly transformative ‘marking’ on the black body, one of metamorphosing experience and expression (Stephens 12). While Fanon helps frame the limitations placed on black bodies, L.H. Stallings advances the scope of the discourse, arguing for a transformative subject formation that recognizes black peoples’ internal monologue and the complexities of black subjectivity.

5 *Funk the Erotic* analyzes the politics of work-sex work, work society, leisure, anti-work politics, and a post-work imagination. The nuances of black work narratives inform the “body in motion” that frame Stallings arguments (Stallings 17). This “body in motion” brings us to funk’s impact on what is produced in the interior. The multilayered marking on black bodies are reproduced through kinetic energy and sensation. Marking functions like smell, and radically transforms bodies subjected to hierarchical and oppressive institutions. Dominant institutions that police sexuality, reinforce “master narratives” on work related to sex, depoliticize work, and pathologize sexual morality, embody the regulatory organizing of sexual labor Stallings seeks to disrupt. A moralizing

approach to sex work, and relegation to an informal economy is compounded by static capitalist divisions of sexual labor. This works to stymie agency, fluidity, and autonomy for the black worker.

6 In “Freaks, Sacred Subjectivity, and Public Spheres,” Stallings begins by reconfiguring Eurocentric conceptualizations of the “freak.” The “freak” in colonial narratives of black bodies is Otherized and sexually deviant. Stallings argues the de-pleasuring of sex aligns with settler-colonizing agendas of nation-building and exploitative, capitalist labor objectives. Funk defies the colonial, labor-intensive agenda that serves Eurocentric configurations of sexuality and societal formation. Stallings addresses how anti-work ideology and black women’s skepticism of property relations, lay a foundation for a powerful black emancipatory struggle. Ultimately, funk music and anti-work ideology decide black bodies are the site of energy, power, and creativity, not purely exploitation, limitation, and abuse.

7 Moreover, Black women’s sexuality is historically contextualized in the text. Stallings draws upon the black feminist literary canon to help construct an agentive, autonomous black female sexuality. *Funk the Erotic* pushes back against earlier endorsements of ‘respectable’ sexual politics, reducing black women’s sexuality to asexual victimhood or plainly, celibacy. This is what Stallings refers to as “sexual pacifism” (Stallings 34, 61). Respectability rests upon a premise that unapologetic black female sexuality reinforces colonial tropes about black women’s ‘promiscuity’ or ‘licentiousness.’ Yet Stallings advocates a nuanced model of sexual reclamation, whereby black women can affirm their sexual agency without being vulnerable to antiquated articulations of what sexuality *should* mean to them. Puritanical notions of sex endorse sexual binaries for black women. Funk disrupts this stultifying approach to construct a transformative black female sexuality.

8 Funk has roots in internationalist spiritual discourses originating from West Africa as well, and forms cultural influences in the United States. Funk challenges Eurocentric, individualistic, and anthropocentric aspects of humanity, including exploitative labor practices, and rigid sexuality.

9 In “Superfreaks and Sites of Memory,” Stallings finishes with an idealized vision of sexuality as an important site of memory for the metaphysical, as it can be for the

material world. Memory serves to “advance sexuality,” seeing it as an “object of imagination” (Stallings 151). Moreover, funk’s embrace of pleasurable sex subverts sexually repressive enterprises and reimagines intimacy, aesthetics, Otherness, and power in *transing* black subjectivity. Furthermore, work is analyzed, framing anti-work as crucial for resisting an oppressive, labor intensive, and gender essentialist hegemonic capitalist order on black bodies.

10 Methodologically, Stallings studies black performance artists and exotic dancers to construct questions around black performance, the power of visibility, and importance of black sexual agency. Theatrical works of Lynn Nottage, the illuminating erotica of Wanda Coleman and others, challenge the stigma associated with unapologetic black female sexuality, the politics of eroticism, and performance.

Conclusion

11 L.H. Stallings’ *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* is an innovative and creative exploration into the impact of funk music, work, art, transaesthetics, and the politics of black erotics on matters of resistance, social movements, and subjectivity. Funk complicates Eurocentric constructions of bodily movement, gender dynamics, and sexuality. While reading, I was curious how African-American female entertainers like Josephine Baker fit into the narrative of black female bodily autonomy, performance, and visibility that Stallings unpacks here.

12 If the themes explored in this text are of continual interest to the reader, Jennifer Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Duke University Press, 2014), offers complementary analysis on the necessity of affirming black female spaces where black sexuality is free from derision or regulation. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* is an important addition to Gender and Sexuality Studies, Black Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, queer theory, and queer of color critique. This creative text crafts a limitless subjectivity, ‘transes’ the status quo, and expresses the nuances of black female sexuality.

Works Cited

- DiMartino, Dave. "Rick James Claims He Invented Punk Funk," *Creem: America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine*, Dec 1980.
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