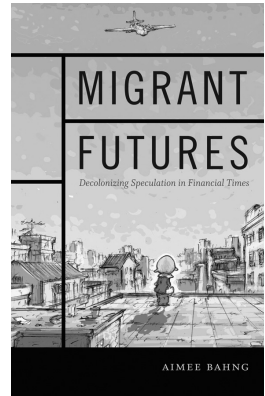
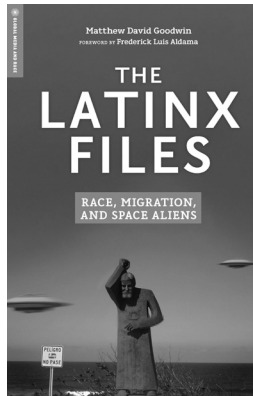


Review Essay
**Speculating the Future from Our
Apocalyptic Present**

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BLACK UTOPIAS: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds. By Jayna Brown. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2021.

THE LATINX FILES: Race, Migration and Space Aliens. By Matthew David Goodwin. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 2021.

MIGRANT FUTURES: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times. By Aimee Bahng. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2018.

The future is a contested space, a battleground with no shortage of fronts, all of which are oriented forward but remain firmly rooted in the present context in which they are written. This combination of known and unknown, of *is* and *not yet*, deeply fortified and open-sourced, makes the act of speculation a highly

political and consequential practice. While this may mean that there are openings for alternative and rebellious speculating, the other consequence is that our understandings of the range of potential futures, the spectrum of possibilities that we can envision, can shift as quickly as the current situation changes. For example, at the end of the acknowledgements section that opens *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (2021), Jayna Brown inserts a coda that both positions the text to come within our dystopic present and highlights some of the challenges involved in studying the future. She writes, "Since I began writing this book the world has become ever more apocalyptic as we face, among other conditions, a global pandemic; the climate crisis; a rampant, voracious, and brutal system of global capitalism; and authoritarianism and white supremacy" (ix). The quickness with which potential futures can be uprooted by a present that feels more and more like the worst possible scenario does not necessarily align with the time, rigor, and patience involved in writing and publishing an academic book, which tends to act as a snapshot within a historical context and scholarly lineage. Still, Brown acknowledges that these shifts do not make writing about the future a futile task, but instead underline the urgency of such a project. She continues, "I dedicate this book to our collective endeavor as we try to imagine other possibilities after the final days to come" (ix). Just as the push for utopia is framed as an ongoing process of radical longing and an exercise in testing boundaries and exceeding limits, the apocalyptic present also appears to be an ongoing procession of final days, like the ones previously survived, like the ones we know are waiting for us just out of sight.

All of the books reviewed here—Brown's *Black Utopias* along with Matthew David Goodwin's *Latinx Files: Race, Migration and Space Aliens* (2021) and Aimee Bahng's *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (2018)—are forced to contend with how the ever-moving present enhances or inhibits the study of the future. For example, in her introduction, Bahng notes that "As *Migrant Futures* headed into the final stages of production," the United States witnessed the election of Donald Trump and the corresponding effects on global financial markets, an example of how "electoral projections produced economic reality" (3). Staking a claim for the urgency of this kind of analysis of the fight over futurity, she explains that this example "yokes the abstract violence of finance capitalism to more overt manifestations of state violence as exacted through the police force disproportionately on black and brown, queer and trans bodies in the United States" (4). In this case, referencing our chaotic and violent present proves Bahng's thesis about the material dangers within state, corporate, and neoliberal speculation. On the other hand, Goodwin's *Latinx Files* ends with the assertion that none of the imagined futures and resistances previously discussed in his book will matter if we do not survive the current climate crisis: "Humanity is on direct course to make the planet uninhabitable through our use of fossil fuels rather than solar, wind, and waterpower. ... There will be no alien consciousness if we destroy our planet" (119). Caught within a conjunction of fields and subfields (Science Fiction Studies, Latinx Studies, Literary Studies, the Humanities, etc.)

that seem to constantly need to prove their worth and significance, Goodwin's admission is bold in that it both marks the limits of literary/cultural studies and makes clear that our work cannot be extricated from the horrors going on around us. While the primary thread that connects these three texts is their shared interest in visions of the future as told by writers, musicians, and artists from underrepresented groups, they are equally bound by a certain darkness that appears to inherently go along with discussions of where we go from here.

Brown's *Black Utopias* narrates a lineage of Black mythmaking and worldbuilding that responds to their respective creators' experiences in already dystopic earthly conditions. She argues that mainstream understandings of reality, along with humanity, have been historically denied to Black people; it only makes sense then that they would search for and construct alternative forms of being. Brown writes, "After all, black people's existence is mythological in the first place. We don't really exist, according to the logic of the human. And what does this current plane of reality, also known as a mutually agreed-upon fiction, mean to us anyway? And who mutually agreed upon it?" (4). Recognizing the arbitrary, artificial, but materially violent nature of social structures that exclude Black people, one can reconnect with the dreams, prophecies, fictions, and visions that contest unjust paradigms of reality and offer rebellious alternatives. By embracing a tradition of Black speculation, Brown asks, "What does it mean to be open to these worlds? To a madness all my own?" (5). In many of Brown's examples throughout the book, a reframing of how we read supposed madness appears to be a key piece to understanding the depths of utopic worldbuilding projects. In *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (2021), La Marr Jurelle Bruce writes, "On the one hand, madness is a floating signifier and dynamic social construction that evades stable definition. On the other hand, or maybe on the same hand, madness is a lived reality that demands sustained attention" (6). In the face of the various colonizing logics that value reason over madness/creativity/sentimentality, Bruce states that "most urgently, mad methodology primes us to extend *radical compassion* to the madpersons, queer personae, ghosts, freaks, weirdos, imaginary friends, disembodied voices, unvoiced bodies, and unReasonable others, who trespass, like stowaways or fugitives, in Reasonable modernity" (10). In *Black Utopias*, Black mythmakers reject the reasonable, recognizing it as a space that historically and by definition is violent and exclusionary. Brown not only offers this same kind of compassion to the preachers, artists, and fictional characters that others may write off as simply mad, but goes even further to ask a simple but radical question: What if they are right?

The chapters of *Black Utopias* follow Black visionaries that question oppressive conceptualizations of reality and humanity. In Chapter 1, "Along the Psychic Highway: Black Women Mystics and Utopias of the Ecstatic," the focus is on the stories of spiritual figures like Sojourner Truth and Rebecca Cox Jackson who show that not all utopian projects are truly liberatory. Brown writes, "The utopian urge within militant forms of resistance is ultimately... defined

by patriarchal nationalist belonging and political recognition. In contrast, the radical utopian practices of the preaching women included challenges to state and capitalist control, alternatives to heterosexual marriage and motherhood, feminisms, experimental health and religious practices, and the wild worlds of dreams and visions" (27). These stories also highlight the political potential of utopianism, offering a form of escapism that doubles as a "powerful form of refusal" (47). Chapter 2, "Lovely Sky Boat: Alice Coltrane and the Metaphysics of Sound," studies the radical worldbuilding of musician and mystic Alice Coltrane. Despite her marginalization by music critics and fans of her husband, John, Brown writes about Alice Coltrane's composition of an alternative Black consciousness that both incorporated the revolutionary politics of the 1960s and 1970s while rejecting the Western spiritual tourism of that same era. Maintaining that the reality-bending practice of writing a history of Black women mystics must also include fictional characters, Chapter 3, "Our Place Is Among the Stars: Octavia E. Butler and the Preservation of Space," concentrates not on the worlds created by science fiction author Octavia Butler, but those of Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). While Olamina's utopias strive to be hierarchy-free societies, Brown points out that they still maintain human-centric ideas of species supremacy. Still, Butler's novels offer especially relevant ideas about glimmers of hope within dystopic times: "But apocalypse holds awful promise; times of crisis open up possibility. A crisis could mean a total paradigmatic break, and imagining such a break is an opportunity for expansive speculation. ... What could happen if we were loosed from structurally and institutionally enforced forms of relation?" (87).

In Chapters 4 and 5, "Speculative Life: Utopia without the Human" and "In the Realm of Senses: Heterotopias of Subjectivity, Desire, and Discourse," Brown cites Sylvia Wynter and Samuel Delaney to discuss the possibility of nonhuman utopias, or utopias that break from speciesism. She writes, "When not served by the category human/man, we can detach from our investment in belonging to such categories and instead marvel at the potential modes of existing as biological entities such exclusion opens up. We can foster the ways of being alive some of us on the planet already tenaciously practice in the spaces of our exclusion" (112). The book culminates with Chapter 6, "The Freedom Not to Be: Sun Ra's Alternative Ontology," a look at Ra's push for alien and extra-human worlds. This project and philosophy includes rejecting seemingly neutral concepts that cannot be detached from the oppressive nature of deciding who is and is not granted humanity: "Peace, freedom, and equality—fundamental principles to a humanist politics—cannot be lifted out of these determinations. To speak of them, to picket for them, is to ask to be human. Ra's play with words here acknowledges *human* as an always exclusionary term" (172). More than anything, *Black Utopias* plants the idea that these sorts of utopic visions are even more viable as it becomes clearer that we are currently living in an age of extinction. At some point we must question which side has the better understanding of our present situation: those doubling down on oppressive structures, or those who

have long been searching for radical alternatives.

Similar to Sun Ra's exploration of extraterrestrial possibilities, Goodwin's *Latinx Files* explores the work of artists and writers that have reclaimed the alien, a label that has longed been used to defame Latinx people, Indigenous populations, and immigrants in the United States. Aliens represent threats of invasions and previously unknown cultures, evoking both fascination and horror. Goodwin explains, "The space alien is significant for expressing Latinx solidarity, a third space that allows for non-nationalist yet unifying dialogue. But equally important, the space alien is not a utopian figure beyond race and nation—it can just as easily express the tensions and conflicts among Latinx communities through its capacity to express our fears about extraterrestrials" (10). In the Introduction and Chapter 1, "On Space Aliens," Goodwin lays out the political potential of the space alien, defining it as "a Multitude, existing in a field of possibilities, with many constructions and functions, residing in the intersections of various discourses" (13). It is powerful because it is formless, and it shapeshifts in ways that allow different artists and writers to glean new possibilities from such an omnipresent cultural figure. Serving as a blank canvas, the alien is ultimately bound to the perspective and politics of the author deploying it. If the goal, explicitly or implicitly, is to uphold white supremacy, then the "going alien" narrative easily transforms oppressors into victims and "provides the means for Whites to fantasize that they are on the right side of history" (25). On the other hand, the Latinx science fiction writers and artists studied in this book have used the alien to tell complex stories about colonization, migration, invasion, tourism, and other journeys into new and unexpected places, along with the social difficulties that extraterrestrials experience once they arrive. Similar to how Joy James's (2013) conceptualization of the Black Cyborg shows the political potential of marginalized groups rejecting models of humanity that are created by and help maintain white supremacy, the Latinx alien no longer strives to be counted as human and embraces the possibility of being something much more powerful. Positioning (and problematizing) the field of Latinxfuturism within and among traditions of Afrofuturism, Chicanafuturism, and Latinofuturism, and despite Goodwin's claim that Latinx Science Fiction Studies remains in a recovery period, *Latinx Films* proves that there is already plenty of scholarship-worthy material to analyze.

Chapter 2, "Gloria Anzaldúa and the Making of an Alien Consciousness," offers a case study in the political, theoretical, and literary potential of the space alien through a reading of Anzaldúa's use of the figure. Starting with an unpublished poem that compares her experience with a life-threatening infection to the title monstrosity from the film *Alien* (1979), Goodwin writes, "The aliens demand recognition not as external invaders, but as a part of her. This aspect of the poem demonstrates a desire to embrace the alien, and shows the psychological difficulty, the guilt, and the horror involved with attempting to do so" (28). In this and other works, Anzaldúa emphasized the "radical strangeness" of the space alien and its condition as a migrant and border crosser. The most

notable contribution of this chapter to the rest of this book's analysis is the elaboration of Anzaldúa's "alien" consciousness, from the last chapter of her widely influential *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Goodwin writes, "Anzaldúa imagines that in the future a more evolved humanity will have a more evolved consciousness. ... Anzaldúa describes the alien consciousness as a way of being that is tolerant of ambiguity, contradiction, and perplexity, and that does not think dualistically but rather embraces multiplicity" (30). In Chapter 3, "Reclaiming the Space Alien," the multiplicity of the space alien is highlighted through the various uses of the figure by political cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz. From rejecting the fear-mongering invasion narrative, alluding to sympathetic aliens like Mr. Spock and E.T., or showing solidarity to extraterrestrial travelers, Alcaraz uses humor to dismantle the racist and xenophobic rhetoric that transforms "alien" into a racist, xenophobic, and dangerous slur. Similar projects are analyzed in Chapter 4, "Aliens in a Strange Land," which looks at fiction by Latinx authors Pedro Zagitt, Richie Narvaez, Brenda Peynado, and Carlos Hernández. Each author offers sympathetic versions of the alien that still maintain their individual agency: "They are not invading but have the potential to change the status quo and transform the nation" (74).

Chapters 5 and 6 work together to show two opposite sides of the political potential of the alien: the enlightened, utopia-driven aliens that strive for radical inclusivity, and the horrific, awkward, and inhuman versions that highlight humanity's inability to embrace an alien consciousness. Focusing on Isabella Rios's *Victim* (1976) and *Bordertown* (2003) and Ernest Hogan's *Cortez on Jupiter* (1990), Chapter 5, "The Unbearable Enlightenment of the Space Alien," features aliens that offer the possibility of hope that we may one day achieve the best version of humanity. Goodwin writes, "As an expression of the alien consciousness, the space alien becomes a means to imagine a better world than our actual world filled with systematic pervasive racism and oppression of the poor" (88). In the case of Hogan's novel especially, part of that hope for the future is based on a return to art, not just as an intellectual or emotional activity, but also as a means of survival within a violent, exclusionary space. In Chapter 6, "Space Aliens and the Discovery of Horror," while the terrifying aliens of Pablo Brescia's "Code 51" (2020), Junot Díaz's "Monstro" (2020), and Daína Chaviano's "The Annunciation" (2003) symbolize the most pessimistic outcomes of alien-human relations, there is also a possibility of liberation that emerges from such darkness. Finally, Chapter 7, "*La conciencia Chupacabras*," offers an alternative twist to Anzaldúa's alien consciousness: a Chupacabra consciousness, "which gives counterbalance to the utopian sensibility of the alien consciousness by focusing of the present-day threats to Latinx communities rather than future triumph" (108). Following the Chupacabra phenomenon that began in Puerto Rico and has long been intertwined with both exoticizing depictions of the island and U.S. colonial institutions, the mysterious creature comes to demonstrate the multitude of the space alien and its ability to both cross borders and reject unified definitions. In the end, Goodwin argues that it is the shrinking of our

universe, the conversion of what we refer to as “Space” into something we can collectively call “Home,” that will lead us closer to adopting a radically inclusive alien consciousness.

With a similar intellectual urge to make connections between big and small acts of resistance or violence, Aimee Bahng’s *Migrant Futures* connects speculative fiction to speculative finance, looking at who narrates the future and what effect that has on material conditions in the present. This premise is based on an understanding of finance as a form of capitalist mythmaking; while traditional forms of speculative fiction are based on possibility, finance focuses on probability, masking its similarly constructed narratives and worldbuilding with projections based on supposedly objective datapoints and statistics. If financial visions of the future trap marginalized people in a perpetual waiting room, while radical and queer speculative narratives offer the possibility of a distant but visible horizon, Bahng writes, “By enjamming these two formulations of the not yet—one that seeks to illuminate histories of empire and exclusion, and another that insists on a futurity as an opening up rather than a closing down—I want to consider the relationship between the waiting room and the horizon. ... *Migrant Futures* sets out to think speculation from below and highlights alternative engagements from the colonized, displaced, and disavowed” (7). It is important to note that Bahng most often uses *futurity* instead of *future* to emphasize not the endpoint or product of these speculations but instead the process by which the future is written and incorporated into daily life. This sets up certain science fiction authors and their work as engaging in an ideological battle with financial, corporate, and governmental institutions over whose vision of the future is going to survive. As Bahng suggests, “Projects of futurity abound, each preoccupied with fears of oncoming deterioration, disaster, or accident. Some invite us to buy into these futures markets, placing bets on which will return the best dividends; others imagine things differently” (9). Bahng’s clear delineation of the stakes involved in authoring alternative futures is reminiscent of Walidah Imarisha’s elaboration of “visionary fiction,” or speculative fiction that actively moves to create freer words. In a 2016 interview with *EAP: The Magazine*, Imarisha says, “So while all organizing is science fiction, and all organizers are sci fi creators, we absolutely need fantastical genres like science fiction, like fantasy, genres that not only allow us to step beyond the boundaries of what we are told is possible, but demand that we do, demand that we engage our imaginations.” What Bahng’s book makes even more apparent is that the other side, the colonizing or neoliberal side, is fighting just as hard to author the future and can rely on a number of built-in and unfair advantages.

Reflecting on the realities of neoliberal capitalism and transnational finance markets and the capacity for science fiction to minimize political borders and think on planetary (or intergalactic) levels, *Migrant Futures* covers a wide variety of geographic areas, including Southeast Asia, the United States–Mexico border, and the Brazilian Amazon. Chapter 1, “Imperial Rubber: The Speculative Arcs of Karen Tei Yamashita’s Rainforest Futures,” focuses on Yamashita’s *Through*

the Arc of the Rainforest (1990), which converts the ruins of Fordlândia, Henry Ford's failed rubber plant and civilizing mission in the Amazon rainforest, into an archeological site. While Ford speculated an imperial and extractive future through the planning and construction of a prefabricated industrial town in the heart of the jungle, both the project's ultimate flop and Yamashita's narration of it through the eyes of a much more technologically advanced alien population reverses popular narratives of colonization as an inevitable and civilizing event: "The cultural production of the jungle as feral and overgrown sets up the narrative occasion for staging a neocolonial intervention. Yamashita's alternative fabulation shifts the site of agency to an always willful rainforest, where the seemingly indefatigable capitalist appetite for more consumption of human and natural resources must be kept in check" (30). Chapter 2, "Homeland Futurity: Speculations at the Border," juxtaposes Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* (1997) with the 2008 film *Sleepdealer*, directed by Alex Rivera. Both works open up the possibility of transborder solidarities in opposition to militarized and corporatized border spaces. On the film's critical speculation, Bahng writes that "Refusing to relinquish technology as a site under the purview of the state, science fictions such as Rivera's *Sleepdealer* work to reclaim the ever important imaginative terrain of speculation, of futurity, so as to contest the ways in which capitalism has already bought, sold, and parceled the future into portions of risk to be managed, waves of fear to be stemmed, and threats of terror to be contained" (77). Left in the hands of the state and multinational corporations, speculation and technoscience become militarized, privatized, and deregulated, forming infrastructures of invisibility and violence, as exemplified as the mirrored projects of Area 51 and Guantanamo Bay.

Chapter 3, "Speculation and the Speculum: Surrogations of Futurity," looks at reproduction, surveillance, and securitization through analysis of Nalo Hopkinson's novel *Midnight Robber* (2000) and the film *Children of Men* (2006), directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Both works critique mainstream models of survival and the myth of the white savior. In particular, Hopkinson's novel suggests interspecies alliance, alternatives to colonizing conceptualizations of technological development, and the queering of traditional family structures as the keys to navigating dystopic conditions. Chapter 4, "The Cruel Optimism of the Asian Century," reframes the "Asian Century," the projected dominance of Asia during the twenty-first century based on technological, financial, and demographic explosions, within the contexts of economic bubbles and the exploitation of marginalized laborers. Sonny Liew's graphic novel *Malinky Robot* (2011) exposes this underside of Singapore's vision of cosmopolitan development: "The fashioning of a worldly Singaporean as the idealized inhabitant of this Asian future involves the figurative disavowal as well as the actual evacuation of undesirable populations in Singapore, both of which have occurred since the turn toward neoliberalism" (129). Following two nonhuman examples of these "undesirable" residents, *Malinky Robot* questions the shifting definition of humanity within the Capitalocene and proposes an interspecies

resistance. Finally, Chapter 5, "Salt Fish Futures: The Irradiated Transpacific and the Financialization of the Human Genome Project," analyzes Larissa Lai's novel *Salt Fish Girl* to look at the competing speculations over the future of the Pacific Ocean and transpacific futurity. Bringing together the history of nuclear testing and the rebranding of genetic mutation as regeneration, Bahng writes, "Thinking transpacific futurity from the extrapolation point of nuclear fallout demands a perspectival shift that disrupts the promissory optimism surrounding how genetically modified organisms, as well as other forms of biocapital exchange, will deliver the so-called Asian Century" (166). In the end, Bahng admits that radical, decolonizing speculation has long odds of defeating the militarized, neoliberal speculation, which makes the practice all the more necessary for keeping liberatory possibilities in view.

All three of these books convincingly argue that speculative fiction and the authoring of future worlds has material connections to and effects on the present. One scene described by Bahng in Chapter 2 of *Migrant Futures* articulates the darker side of this kind of speculation. In 2007 the U.S. government invited Sigma, a thinktank made up of science fiction writers, to a Department of Homeland Security conference to discuss the future of border security, cybercrime, and antiterrorist strategies. Bahng writes about this meeting, "Speculating on potential threats... these fictional world-smiths collaborated with policy makers in producing border futurities that, when operationalized, cohere not only in the rhetoric of regulation and securitization but also the military and economic structures that actualize fantasies of nation, homeland, and threat" (52). The military industrial complex is fueled by images of shadowy figures that can be defeated only through increasingly invasive surveillance and the terrorizing of marginalized groups arbitrarily deemed as dangerous or working against an imagined common national interest. When actual science fiction writers can be called on to create those threats and envision the violence needed to eliminate them, the stakes of alternative worldbuilding are laid bare. For Bahng, this highlights the fraught discursive space of futurity and the role of speculation in the maintenance of and challenge to oppressive economic and governmental narrative structures. For Goodwin, it could suggest that a reframing of otherness and radical inclusivity could transform these speculations into more complex understandings of borders and border crossers. For Brown, this sets up the political potential of both alternative worldbuilding and the rejecting of notions of reality and humanity that will never be inclusive. As inequality, climate change, global health crises, and threats of white-supremacist fascism make it harder every day to envision any kind of future, speculation becomes an even more important tool so that we never stop imagining better alternatives.

