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Author

Carrington, André

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Mad/Utopian/Prehistoric: Black Powers of Speculation

andré carrington*

Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction, Sami Schalk. Duke University Press, 2018.

Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement, Isiah Lavender III. The Ohio State University Press, 2019.

Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism, Alex Zamalin. Columbia University Press, 2019.

Critics return to the well of Black speculation because it illustrates how intellectuals at one or more margins of the fields of power that constitute our society participate in the construction of its discourses. It is harder to explain the motivations that bring Black writers back to speculative modes when no utopia proves inspiring enough to overturn structures of oppression and no performance of freedom lasts. Resurgent interest in learning from speculative tendencies in Black cultural politics has reshaped our understanding of the uses previous generations devised for their contributions to literature, political rhetoric, the arts, and scientific quandaries. Scholars like Sami Schalk, Alex Zamalin, and Isiah Lavender III represent a consensus that Black authors have consistently written about and written for possible futures that might appreciate what they have to say in ways not yet apparent in their present. Their research offers deep insight into how we might adapt our habits of interpretation to meet the persistent demands Blackness places on the way we think and act, particularly with respect to racial justice. Although utopia is not the concern of all the creative works in this discussion, ranging from scientific romance to jeremiad, Black speculation issues powerful correctives to what is called the American Dream and, more broadly, challenges the Anglo/US political imagination. Black writers have witnessed the limits of the modern and colonial episteme; they have attested to its failures and its potential for transformation; and they have stripped away its disciplinary power in order to face its implications directly.

Black and dis/abled writers participate in a tradition that Schalk names succinctly with her recent book, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018), when they “reimagine” what it means to

*andré carrington is a scholar of race, gender/sexuality, and genre in Black and American cultural production. He is associate professor of English at the University of California, Riverside and author of *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (U of Minnesota P, 2016).

be free and to sustain the freedom dreams of others. Critically, Schalk's intervention in both disability and literary studies begins by examining the social contingencies on which categories such as gender, race, and dis/ability depend. To this end, the concept of the "bodymind" becomes a powerful index of the subjection of Blackness in US culture when viewed through the lens of speculative fiction. In narrative form, authors can stage experiments that refuse to naturalize observed differences among persons categorized by racial difference and dis/ability. Black women's speculative fiction also offers revisionist images of bodyminds situated in real and imagined conditions that highlight the construction of racialized and intellectual disadvantage. Instead of claiming to remediate Black minds and/or bodies, however, envisioning liberation for Black subjects continually undermines the separation of mind and body in "the Cartesian dualism of Western philosophy" (5), according to the tradition of Black feminist thought that Schalk puts into perspective. As Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, and others brought to academic attention in the 1980s, this tradition emerges in vernacular intellectual forms: the reimagining named in Schalk's analysis takes place in activist movements, fiction writing, entertainment media, and fan spaces.

For instance, Schalk's reading of the horror film *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) defies a deficits-based notion of the learning needs of actually existing Black children. Here the central character is a child struck by a condition that has driven adults to attack other humans in order to consume their flesh. She and her similarly affected young peers do not communicate verbally, but they are "otherwise able to speak, learn, move, and behave like other humans" (13). Hunger defines these children, making them allegorical counterparts to real Black youth whose material deprivation primes them for criminalization in education and social service systems. The phrasing "otherwise able" belies the violent construction of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as privileged identities. Disciplinary practices rooted in white supremacy and heteronormativity compel conformity with racialized and gendered scripts, and they punish deviance by constraining or withholding possibilities that are "otherwise" available. The children in *The Girl with All the Gifts* are "otherwise able" to learn nonverbally and "otherwise able" to regulate their hunger (by eating raw meat from nonhuman animals), but, instead, a world unprepared for their survival produces their alienation. The story is a prism through which we can project our interests in knowledge and care in order to see them otherwise.

Allegory is only one way to reimagine race, gender, and dis/ability in speculative fiction, and exposing the operations of disciplinary power is only one of its aims. It is comparatively easy to

recognize that race, gender, and dis/ability have been treated in essentialist terms within the systems that uphold oppression, but Black women's speculative fiction also underscores the hazards of ostensibly sympathetic efforts that reify the body and the mind as parallel, quantifiable dimensions of personhood. Schalk's work provides a necessary rejoinder to disability rights rhetoric that centers white bodies, in part, by disaggregating the category of disability and contextualizing representations of disabled persons' experiences in a new schema structured by the significance of race. Schalk's analysis of disability makes its dimensions legible by displacing binary terms: physical versus psychological, intellectual, or mental; visible versus invisible. Adopting the bodymind portmanteau dispatches the first dichotomy. With respect to the second set of descriptive terms, Schalk designates different disabilities along a continuum that is intersubjective in nature; no disability is inherently visible or invisible, but they may be "nonapparent, intermittently apparent, and apparent."

This reclassification enables the reader to "move away from the ocular-centric nature of visibility and shift the onus for noticing or not noticing disability onto the perceiving person" (124). Citing the increased usage of this terminology among disabled scholars and advocates themselves, she enlists the reader in the collective work of knowledge production that *Bodyminds Reimagined* represents. Rearticulating the language of dis/ability is particularly effective when the text discusses writings by Nalo Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, and Shawntelle Madison because these works display the vital need to interrogate the role of race and gender in the way dis/ability attains familiar and unfamiliar modes of representation in the popular imagination. These authors depict persons with disabilities ranging from the familiar—low vision and blindness, conjoined twins—to the impossible, such as lycanthropy (becoming a werewolf) in both realist and nonrealist circumstances. What surprises in these fictions is the attenuation of spectacular and overdetermined scripts for realist disabilities; speculative fiction writers interested in subverting existing hierarchies contrive the "new rules of their fictional worlds" to represent radical challenges to prevailing social norms as well as scientific improbabilities like time travel (23).

In stories set amidst interstellar civilizations and the centuries-long lives of immortal beings, writers wield the flexibility of genre to propose ways of being free from social stigma and material disadvantage for bodyminds currently understood as disabled. Perhaps the tendency to blend the mundane and the spectacular at the level of identity appears facile in Black women's speculative fiction because of the versatility afforded by the understanding that, following Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "race is a metalanguage" (Schalk

129). As Schalk points out, minoritized writers—those of us conditioned by experience to think about power and subordination in systematic terms—learn to describe identity figuratively as well as literally in order to communicate across the differences that structure our social relationships. The capacity to think and act on premises that exceed the possibilities of the world as we know it is the engine of speculation in cultural production.

To be sure, putting theoretical possibilities of freedom into practice characterizes Black radical traditions, from mass movements to artistic innovations, to the drama of everyday life, yet it insults the intelligence of Black creatives to claim that their particular inventions are simply artifacts of some immanent, peculiar race genius. To the extent that Black intellectuals speculate on different subjects, toward different aims, from those of the majority, Black fantastical ideation diverges from dominant trends in more ways than representation alone. As Regina Bradley reminds us, the proverbial “mountaintop ain’t flat” (4): the ideological ground on which we stand is uneven. The material conditions of Black people’s lives predispose us to fantasize about distinct alternative possibilities.

To heed prophetic critics like Richard Iton, there is something characteristically Black about mobilizing the imagination in expressly political terms: “[T]he fantastic as a genre . . . destabilizes, at least momentarily, our understandings of the distinctions between the reasonable and the unreasonable, and reason itself” (289–90). Black thinkers may maintain skepticism toward normative judgments about the limits of rationalism in order to preserve their integrity against the erosive influence of Western hegemony, as Schalk writes. Concomitantly, the pejorative charge of “utopianism” hits differently: for writers concerned with Black liberation, the tension between progress and utopia is not always an explosive dialectic, as it seems destined to become in global accounts like those of Fredric Jameson. Rather than producing astonishment, social movements that make transformative demands—the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, decolonization—elicit dismissive responses when they venture beyond public consensus about what is politically possible. “Utopian” is one way to name those transgressions that marks them as indefinitely deferred, scarcely legible as politics, speculative. Jameson opposed progress to utopia in order to emphasize how the latter eludes representation except in spatially contained or ironized forms (155). Commitments to so-called progress that pursue concrete goods such as liberty and property are not immune to criticism either. In interpretations of US civil rights movements, for example, the valorization of partial, incremental achievements as progress often implies the tacit endorsement of liberalism, an

itinerary that is equally determined to fail Black Americans and peoples subject to colonialism.

In the second half of the nineteenth century and leading toward the turn of the twentieth century, Black American authors questioned whether collectivist cultural politics would help or harm Black freedom. For Martin Delany and Sutton Griggs, an autonomous Black polity could preserve the inherent integrity of Black genius. Delany's nationalist utopia, *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1862), represents the closely linked legacies of clandestine Black innovation, referred to in Afrofuturist scholarship as "Black secret technology," and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) by staging Black flight to a liberated Cuba. In *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019), Zamalin writes, "Everyday work on the plantation—planting rice, tobacco farming, cotton picking—was the way dominated black people recognized and exhibited their capacity for self-governance: 'the blacks themselves are the only skillful cultivators—the proprietor knowing little or nothing about the art'" (28). In Delany's as-yet incomplete vision, self-empowerment flows from the revolutionary reappropriation of the conditions of oppression, although it must find expression in exile: utopia is not (yet) here. By investing some other place with Black hopes for the future, *Blake* anticipates the "Atlanta Compromise" Booker T. Washington would later outline in his 1895 address to the Cotton States and International Exposition, wherein the Wizard of Tuskegee would chastise "those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land" (182).

Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) rejects the Compromise from another angle. Griggs contrives a network of race men with its headquarters in Texas surreptitiously planning to secure Black prosperity. Whereas Washington advised not to "underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor" (182), Griggs's Black leaders remove themselves from a public sphere under white control in order to set their own priorities. Fittingly, like *Blake*, *Imperium* ends without a resolution. The generation that followed Delany and Griggs witnessed none of the plans in their predecessors' texts coming to fruition, but history would not vindicate Washington's anti-utopianism, either. No compromise was great enough to placate the lynching regime, and the masses proved willing to risk unknown peril to escape Southern horrors.

Neither the millenarian migration to Kansas in 1879, documented in Nell Painter's *Exodusters* (1976), nor the postwar exodus to the North delivered Black America from subordination. No place on US soil could be safe so long as Blackness remained yoked to its meaning in the white supremacist imagination. The reprieve enjoyed

by expatriates in France and the Soviet Union—Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay—could not, by definition, extend to the broader populace. Both collective and individual endeavors to find utopia reinforce familiar limitations far more frequently than they evade them. Yet Zamalin reflects: “Experiments in political escape could never fully abandon ideas that reinforced inequality, but could articulate democratic emancipatory ideas that were never fully realized” (135). Zamalin’s effort to forge a connection between contemporary speculative fiction and the unfulfilled promise of Reconstruction makes belief in something akin to utopia legible as part of Black American heritage. *Black Utopia* offers glimpses of liberation in the work of ideologically and historically disparate writers—from Edward A. Johnson in the first years of the twentieth century to Octavia Butler in the 1990s—as evidence that their common aspiration toward better circumstances for Black life transcends their different visions of precisely how life should be lived. Even haters like George Schuyler refined the pursuit of social progress through critique in satirical fiction, like *Black Empire* (1938), which warned, in Zamalin’s words, that “liberalism’s founding wishes to minimize suffering led to maximal violence” (77). The value of freedom dreams is defined not only by the perfection they promise but also by the demands they make on the conscience.

Embracing speculation as a strategy in Black intellectual traditions requires asking that we consider what texts mean as well as what they do—how they instigate new modes of thought and action. In *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019), Lavender plumbs the past of Black literature for theoretical resonances with the ongoing endeavor to forge Black futures. Lavender’s investigation enlivens Afrofuturist scholarship by expanding the relevance of the concept. His analysis of slave narratives, ethnographies, Harlem Renaissance fiction, and postcolonial touchstones applies contemporary technological metaphors to texts from before the information age. This strategy for extending the range of what Afrofuturism means never suffers from anachronism because Lavender never claims that the early writers anticipated scientific advancements. Instead, the works he examines “locate science-fictional elements in non-science-fiction texts at the level of language, imagery, and metaphor” (17). This straightforward reframing of texts through a code that had yet to be invented when they were written confers performative efficacy to Afrofuturism: it projects the enduring significance of the authors’ legacies into a time and place they have ostensibly helped to create.

For instance, a shocking reorientation occurs when Lavender reads Olaudah Equiano’s description of the slave ship’s hold and Solomon Northup’s reconstruction of the kidnapping that leads to his enslavement as scenes of alien abduction. The analogy is

systematic, complete with a rehearsal of the “close encounters” sequence articulated by J. Allen Hynek and Jacques Vallee in the 1970s (86). While it is plausible to treat Atlantic slavery as the prototype for the late twentieth-century alien abduction scenario, Lavender’s interpretation emphasizes that the harrowing details and life-altering implications of Black captives’ recollections make them equally profound. Claiming precedent is not his objective; after all, orientalist harem fantasies and settler-colonial captivity tales in which modern hordes menace vulnerable white abductees are also parables for contact with extraterrestrial life. The passage from normality to abject terror and back to which Northrup testifies and the inescapable, irreversible transportation that Equiano recounts both portray abductions so violent and traumatic that they have virtually no parallels in earthly experience. Elsewhere, Lavender’s discussion of the folk belief that underground railroad conductors utilized quilts to provide surreptitious signals to fugitives constitutes a speculative contribution to legacies of Black code studies. Works on this topic by Jessica Marie Johnson, Shaka McGlotten, and Tara Conley argue substantively that Black vernacular discourse lends itself to innovative forms of coding. Lavender is not arguing that Black knowledge production is tantamount to prophecy. His Afrofuturist readings posit that speculation is uniquely valuable, and now, uniquely viable, for articulating the meanings of Blackness at any given time and space in the modern world.

If there is any truth commonly acknowledged by mad Black thinkers, Black innovators. . . . Black utopians, and anti-utopians alike, it’s that the future will resemble the past in its lack of guarantees.

If there is any truth commonly acknowledged by mad Black thinkers, Black innovators uniquely adept in the technologies of their day, Black utopians, and anti-utopians alike, it’s that the future will resemble the past in its lack of guarantees. Yet I still worry that students of contemporary Black culture may misunderstand the turn to futurity, utopia, and, in Tavia Nyong’o’s terms, fabulation, as a desire to distance Black futures from the Black past—and from Black nationalism in particular. A similar caution against throwing out the baby with the bathwater animates GerShun Avilez’s revisionist intervention on the aesthetics of the Black Arts era and its queer of color critical influences, reaching back to Marlon Riggs’s *Black Is. . . Black Ain’t* (1995) and Marlon Ross’s “Camping the Dirty Dozens: Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective” (2000). To be sure, well-informed skepticism toward any ostensibly unified program for Black cultural politics saves lives; it helps to avoid biological determinism, oppressive sexual politics, and reductionist historical metanarratives like the “Middle Passage epistemology” (Wright).

An emphasis on the heterogeneity and unpredictability of Blackness in diaspora militates against what Paul Gilroy called “unanimism,” in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000). Critiques of the nation form itself are

embedded in the freedom dreams that flourish under the banners of Black speculation and utopia. Many of these critiques reject American soil: those enumerated in Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals* (2020) choose the sea, while others, catalogued in Michelle Commander's *Afro-Atlantic Flight* (2017), take to the air. If history's shortcomings repeat, it may be hazardous for Black intellectual forays into the fantastic genres to continue deriving their resources from the repertoire of the "long civil rights era" in the US (Singh 6). The impact of Emory Douglas is indelible in the graphic sensibilities of the Black Speculative Arts Movement (Anderson, et al.); present campaigns for social transformation such as #8toAbolition echo the manifesto forms of the past, like the Black Panther Party's Ten Point Program (Dr Huey P. Newton Foundation).

At the same time, the artistic reclamation of Sun Ra unfortunately requires assessing why he was never popular. Nothing exempts Black fabulists from the problem of the avant garde, and Sun Ra valorized obscurantism and pageantry at the very moment when Black Power was mobilizing in the other direction: putting communalism into practice, demonstrating solidarity with an earth-bound Third World, communicating revolutionary politics in plain language, and confronting state violence directly. As Zamalin writes, "many critics derided what they perceived as [Sun] Ra's embarrassing personal eccentricities" (97). With Afrofuturism, contemporary Black future-making inherits a mixed legacy replete with the contradictions of its influences, along with those accumulated by the civil rights movement, the Popular Front, Surrealists, Pan-Africanists, and resistances to colonial modernity along the way.

Just as science fiction and fantasy stories allow us to learn from possibilities that may never be attainable, studies in speculation teach us that even foreclosed futures have a living legacy. Because they are not bound to the determination of causality or the fact of failure, Black speculations free us to believe that every movement matters: Marronage, migrations, desertions, defections, rootings, groundings, remittances, flights, separations, sutures, ruptures, and stillness. Could they all be the progenitors of a form of Black life that defies the sovereign power of white supremacy—a way of being Black, with or without posterity, that robs race of its authority to make live and let die? Speculation emerges in the gaps between our disparate agendas for advancement and at the barriers that stand in the way of liberation. It is form of knowledge equally empowered by the history we know and the future we don't.

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