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## Black Utopias: speculative life and the music of other worlds

by Jayna Brown, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2021, ix-212pp., \$25.95(paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4780-1167-5

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immigration law and policy. U.S. history is divided into five periods. Laissez faire extended from 1780 until 1875, followed first by what Prieto calls the era of qualitative restrictions running from 1875 until 1921, where Asian migrants were the main target for restrictive legislation. This was soon followed by a shift to quantitative restriction, exemplified in the 1924 National Origins Act, which shaped immigration policy for the next four decades. It was replaced by the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965, legislation that liberalized immigration policy while creating unintended consequences such as the growth in the undocumented migrant population due to quotas on immigrants from the Western hemisphere, something that was not a feature of the 1924 law. Prieto's overview of this period and its subsequent replacement by a new era of restriction that began during the 1990s, the peak decade of post-1965 immigration was succinct but effective. The following chapter is devoted to debunking myths, looking at three recurring arguments made by restrictionists: that immigrants take jobs from the native-born, that their presence creates undue fiscal consequences for the country, and that immigrants are responsible for a rising tide of crime. Here, of course, Prieto has abundant evidence from the research community at his disposal to rebut these myths.

In a seven-page chapter titled "Harvest of Empire," Prieto reviews some of the main accounts of movement across international borders, including those from neoclassical economics, the new economics of migration, and world systems theory. This theoretical overview transitions to an examination of the role of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on rising levels of Mexican migration to the U.S. This is followed by an equally brief chapter that reviews and highlights the flaws and inequities in the current visa system. This leads to a concluding chapter in which a call is made for reform predicated on an ethical commitment to, citing the philosopher Seyla Benhabib, the moral principle of "associative obligations."

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**Black Utopias: speculative life and the music of other worlds**, by Jayna Brown, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2021, ix-212pp., \$25.95(paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4780-1167-5

There are books that captivate you fully, that illuminate you, challenge you, that pierce through you with such clarity and imaginative force, opening mind and soul beyond the definable, the settled, not with the aim to re-define or re-stabilize but with the aim of being and doing in the untethered state itself. Jayna Brown's

Black Utopias is such a book. Drawing on black studies, philosophy, feminist, and queer theory as well as on music scholarship and criticism, Brown develops an interdisciplinary account of radical utopias, which she describes as “an archive of black alternative worldmaking” (7), envisioned and embodied by black visionaries, thinkers, mystics, and musicians. Guided by the life and practices of such black prophets, historical as well as fictional, “who all claimed they had been chosen [...] not only to form alternative social structures but to lead us into alternative dimensions of existence” (11), Brown opens up a different ontology of being; one that suspends and exceeds Western notions of liberal humanism and freedom, of individual selfhood and progress. As she puts it, “black people have been excluded from the category *human*, we have a particular epistemic and ontological mobility. [...] The untethered state does allow for the possibility of real change on a vast inhuman scale” (7).

Utopias, for Brown, are therefore not hopeful articulations of a better future, which rest on the differential logics of established models of recognition and inclusion. In fact, Brown does away with the concepts of hope and future altogether. Instead, she centres utopia in the here and now, “in situ, in medias res, in layers, in dimensional frequencies” (1), taking the concept “into a no-place, into an elsewhere” (6), and thus bursts open new understandings of time, relationality, and (im)possibilities of existence. She thereby also finds fault with the masculine undercurrents of Afrofuturism and its study, especially with its investments in classist and heteronormative notions of futurity. Rather than a call for belonging to the category of human, Brown’s black utopia is a radical dissent against the very (Western) idea of the human and its entanglements with individual subjectivity, evolutionary thinking, and species hierarchies. While Brown’s text is therefore full of theoretical interventions into a philosophy of utopia, she limits her conceptual line of argument to the book’s introduction and conclusion. The rest of the chapters, which are organized in three parts of two chapters respectively, guide the reader through an eclectic collection of utopian imaginations and speculative practices which Brown traces through the history of black thought, spirituality, and culture.

Part 1 is entitled *Ecstasy* and its first chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the book’s engagement with practices of black alternative world-making. It specifically engages with traditions of radical black utopianism of the nineteenth century through the visions and worship of the female spiritualists Rebecca Cox Jackson, Zilpha Elaw, Jarena Lee, and Sojourner Truth, whose respective spiritual practices, so Brown, dissolved linear understandings of time and the boundaries between the self and the collective, the transcendent and the material. Building on these mystical traditions, Chapter 2 is concerned with the life of Alice Coltrane, who later changed her name to Turiyasangitananda after turning towards Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions. Brown delves into Coltrane/Turiyasangitananda’s path to reaching otherworldly transcendence in both her devotional and musical practice, not in search “to retreat from the world but to redefine (or undefine) it, to be released into absolute consciousness” (12).

Part 2 *Evolution* starts with Chapter 3 in which Brown focuses on the expansive religious beliefs of Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of Butler’s sci-fi *Parable*

novels, who Brown describes as “a literary evocation of the itinerant black women preachers” (83) discussed in the first chapter. Brown not only follows the ways in which Olamina’s spirituality bears radical openings for change in the face of apocalypse and extinction but also dissects how Butler works through ideas of evolution in her literary practice. Brown detects a “humanist impasse” (88) in Butler’s thought as she is still attached to essentialist notions of human nature which ultimately limits the possibilities of evolution beyond the hierarchical assertions of speciesism. This contentious relationship between humanism and radical change is taken further in Chapter 4, in which Brown pushes towards fundamentally reimagining the genre of the human, asking how “the infinite changeability of biological matter potentially shifts ontological ground” (112). Based on a thorough peer-critique, Brown argues against the inscription of human exceptionalism in utopian imaginaries, warning that “[w]hen imaginings of biological lability retain notions of human superiority, and racial, gendered, and ablest hierarchies, when they harbor transhumanist dream of species perfectibility, they breed eugenical fantasies” (13).

The third part of the book, *Sense and Matter*, begins with Chapter 5. Through a close reading of Delany’s *Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* and the *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Fourier*, Brown explores the role of bodily senses and desire as departures for utopian thinking. To harness desire’s potentiality as “visceral, composed of a decentralized relationality” (153), she calls for freeing it from its entanglements with “hierarchies of sentience” (114) which would place inter-human interactions above other forms of relationships. The book’s final chapter engages with the music and extra-terrestrial philosophy of Sun Ra whose utopian practice “reached toward a sense of beingness beyond a politics of earthbound inclusion” (156), thus refusing any integration into ideas of the human as such.

The concluding chapter powerfully restages the urgency of Brown’s utopian investigation for life itself, both earthbound and otherworldly, at a time of ecological annihilation. Brown ends by asking us to “surrender to the unknown – the unknowable – and be open to vast change” and contemplates “speculative aesthetic practices away from anthropocentric fears and fantasies of technological triumph toward envisioning new modes of being as organic entities embedded within larger ecologies” (178). This truly exceptional book is a must-read for scholars of black studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and music. But above all, it is an homage to all “mad souls” (5) who radically re-imagine what it can mean to be and to not be.

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