
Book Review: *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*

Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*.
Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021. 224 pp.

Jayna Brown begins *Black Utopias* with a provocation: utopias, especially Black ones, are already here, but they might not revolve around (or even include) the human. She writes, “What if utopia had no humans at all, re-enchanted or otherwise? To loosen anthropocentric notions of human sanctity is to imagine the possibility of a profound paradigm shift, a perspectival sea change to a view of ourselves as made of the same (9).” Brown arrives at this point by suturing an understanding of Blackness as that which is excluded from modernity’s category of the human with an expansive conception of utopia that incorporates practices, epistemes, and materialities into spatiality. The result is a set of sensual explorations that rubs up against the violences that abut Blackness. Central to Brown’s theorizations of utopia are reformations of being itself so that the strictures of modernity—liberal individualism, monogamy, genital sexuality, and linear time—are undone by the artists and thinkers with whom she engages. This version of ontology, it turns out, produces a vibrational episteme, drawing upon the sonic as a key element of Black utopia: “Vibrations/sound waves mark the porousness between this world and otherworldly states of being (10).” The sonic is most evident in the chapters that center on musicians—Alice Coltrane and Sun Ra—but the vibrational undergirds each of the book’s three sections.

“Ecstasy” offers a pair of chapters that focus on Black female mystics. Upending what people think they might know about Black women during the time of enslavement, Brown grounds her analysis of the archives of Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black female preachers who journeyed through upstate New York. Brown offers sustained attention to their corporeal practices, so as to connect their religious beliefs with their own specific modes of attaining intimate connection, healing, and possibly joy. This also has the effect of highlighting the multi-sensory aspects of the vibration, especially since Brown is particularly alert to the ways that these sensualities subverted norms of gender and heteronormativity in their foci on community and connection to spiritual realms. The second chapter complicates readings of Alice Coltrane that would read her as anti-feminist or subordinate her to her husband, John, to delve into her profound engagement with Hindu cosmology, which emphasizes sound as the mechanism to “merge with a larger cosmic consciousness (10).” Coltrane/Turiyasangitananda, Brown argues, mobilizes music in order to loosen attachment to liberal individualism (“to melt”) and

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to foster devotion as a collective enterprise on her ashram and through her recordings. The ecstatic in Brown's reading entails a movement from contained normative structure to something else—a greater union with spirits or the cosmos.

The second part, "Evolution," leaves humans behind to focus on the vibrational dynamics summoned by evolution. While Brown reads Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, as another Black female mystic guiding us toward utopia, she explores the contradictions of theorizing evolution insofar as Butler demonstrates a difficulty letting go of the human. Instead of understanding evolution as providing conditions for survival, Brown asks how life might persist when humans are not prioritized as an organizational form. Speculations of life beyond the human also comprise Brown's exploration of mutability as its own ontological category, which she follows in the work of HG Wells and Aldous Huxley to work through the limits of individual plasticity in order to grapple with what change might mean as an orientation, especially as exemplified in the science fiction of Samuel Delaney. Ultimately, Brown argues "newness, the embrace of a continual becoming, begins with a different frequency, a new tune" (133).

Brown returns to Delaney in the third section, "Sense and Matter," to illustrate what such an orientation might feel like. This, she locates in the plural and multiple desires enacted in *Trouble in Triton*, which brims with orgies and "a supple sense of self, one not bound by hard edges but by a fluid lacing of desire (139)." Finally, Sun Ra's use of music for extraterrestrial travel deconstructs ontology even more molecularly into vibration. Sun Ra, she argues, is working for a right not to be, a project that actively denies the body: "To vibrate according to another frequency, to travel to other planets, meant adhering to very strict rules of self-denial and training" (156). For Brown, Sun Ra's explorations veer toward the impossible, especially in his substitution of spatiality for temporality, which she reads as a practice of refusal. Brown writes, "He thinks beyond the bounds of past, present, and future, death, and life, into an infinite universe of multidimensions," (159) illustrating a mode of Blackness that ultimately refuses death and that is, importantly, activated through music and performance.

Throughout *Black Utopias*, Brown commits to multiplicity and contradiction. We see this in her non-hagiographic approaches to preachers, musicians, writers, and literary figures. The tension between the possibility of liberation and being caught by modernity's seductions and violences is, after all, emblematic of her theorization of utopia. The key lies not in trying to locate a more perfect place, but to undo the epistemology that produces only one way forward. It is the work of mysticism and speculation to illuminate plurality, the orientations that lead away from stasis, and the multitude of entanglements seen and unseen. In this way, Brown's attachment to the sonic illustrates not only an ontological turn, but a set of ethics that work against hierarchization as well as offering methods for tuning to these other frequencies. And, it is in this politicization of the vibrational and sonic that we experience the depth of Blackness's radical potential.

Amber Jamilla Musser
The Graduate Center, CUNY
Email: amusser@gc.cuny.edu