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Reviewed by **Courtney Novosat**, Ph.D.

Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness, edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, is a collection of eleven essays exploring "the early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity" (p. 11). Placed broadly within the fields of Africana studies and science fiction studies, the volume addresses what Anderson and Jones view as a paucity in current criticism. Although the editors note the publication of several volumes dedicated to Afrofuturism, such as Alex Weheliye's *Phonographies* (2005), Marlene Barr's *Afrofuture Females* (2008), and Sandra Jackson's and Julie Moody-Freeman's *The Black Imagination* (2011), they argue that much contemporary scholarship falls outside the scope of Africana studies. With an eye toward forging this academic pathway and exploring the "explosion of interest in the technoculture sphere" of Afrofuturism, the volume focuses on the burgeoning idea of "Astro-Blackness," an Afrofuturist concept exploring the

"emergence of a black identity framework within emerging global technocultural assemblages" (p. 9). Divided into three sections, *Afrofuturism 2.0* begins with three essays that tread traditional cultural studies ground as they explore "Quantum Visions of Futuristic Blackness." In Chapter One, "Cyborg Grammar?: Reading Wangechi Mutu's 'Non je ne regrette rien' through *Kindred,"* Tiffany E. Barber rejects the tendency to read black aesthetic works as healing or liberating. Instead, Barber draws from Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg to argue that "black female cyborg[s]" in literature and art purposefully remain "unrestored to wholeness" to bear the marks of an unresolved, ever-present past (p. 35). While an intriguing thesis and solid argument, the work's import would be bolstered by a more comprehensive cataloguing of works whose black female protagonists or subjects remain "unrestored."

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Moving from art and literature to digital environments in Chapter Two, Nettrice R. Gaskins' "Afrofuturism on Web 3.0: Vernacular Cartography and Augmented Space" explores the way in which 3D environments become spaces wherein "artists can project and insert themselves in physical, virtual, or mixed realities" (p. 56). Drawing on her own experience as an artist in residency in *Second Life*, a position she was granted by IBM Exhibition Space, Gaskins argues that such virtual spaces enable artists to generate an "Afrofuturism aesthetic" (p. 61). However, she spends little time considering the white, middle-class aesthetic inherent to the game's design, a dimension of Second Life that Tom Boellstorff points to in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2015).

Shifting from one on-screen world to another, in Chapter Three, "The Real Ghosts in the Machine: Afrofuturism and the Haunting of Racial Space in *I, Robot* and *DETROPIA*," Ricardo Guthrie argues that the two recent films envision future cities as "white projection[s] of racial fears" (p. 65). Although it is problematic that films "unwittingly replicate existing hierarchies and subsume racial problematics," Guthrie does recognize

that such tendencies in film usefully make arguments of "posthistorical transcendence" nearly impossible (p. 67, 71).

The collection's second section, "Planetary Vibes, Digital Ciphers, and Hip Hop Sonic Remix," offers an exploration of technocultural soundscapes. In Chapter Four, "The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation," tobias c. van Veen explores how spectacles like Public Enemy's "Armageddon been in effect" produce dystopian soundscapes through remix and collage "that collapse the traumas of the past into the acoustic environment of the present" (pp. 88-89). He argues that such "chronopolitics" ultimately "intervene … in collective memory … to combat corporate, whitewashed, or technocapitalist futures" that alienate black experience (p. 100). One weakness of van Veen's otherwise well-mapped argument is its exclusive focus on male artists, a weakness highlighted by the essay's juxtaposition with Grace D. Gipson's homage to Janelle Monáe's work.

In Chapter Five, "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe: Psychedelic

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Soul Message Music Infused with a Sci-Fi Twist," Gipson argues that Monáe's "Afrofuturistic aesthetic…embodies the desires of black feminism" and "gives freedom to that 'other' (marginalized victims within the world) or segregated minority that is often discussed in Afrofuturism" (p. 111, 113). Given van Veen's too quick dismissal of hip hop's misogyny and sexism as a "narrative of consumer capitalism," Gipson's close reading of Monáe's conceptual albums offer a welcome counternarrative (p. 91). In Chapter Six, "Hip Hop Holograms: Tupac Shakur, Technological Immortality, and Time Travel," Ken McLeod explores the manifold ways in which "hip hop often refuses notions of 'real time'" and "engage[s] in notions of time travel" through "holographic performances" (p. 128, 133). In this more deeply theoretical chapter, McLeod turns to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* and offers a useful examination of Derrida's concept of "hauntology" to explain how holograms allow "artists to intertextually signify a collective notion of African American historical memory" (p. 133).

In *Afrofuturism 2.0*'s third and final section, "Forecasting Dark Bodies, Africology, and the Narrative Imagination," the essays move beyond typical fare of cultural studies to explore topics ranging from the Black Church and the futures market to medical ethics. In Chapter Seven, "Afrofuturism and Our Old Ship of Zion: The Black Church in Post-Modernity," A.M.E. pastor Andrew Rollins is critical of what he sees as outmoded narratives of the Black Church. He argues that "African Americans need a spiritual discipline" rooted in Afrofuturism and "Black Liberation Theology." His argument, however, might be made more compelling if he offered a closer examination of the practices and narratives advanced by the contemporary Black Church (p. 162). Waging another examination of cultural narratives, Lonny Avi Brooks turns to the futures market in Chapter Eight, "Playing a Minority Forecaster in Search of Afrofuturism: Where Am I in This Future, Stewart Brand?" As both "a witness and practitioner" in the futures market, Brooks sees a "language of colonial expansion, exclusion, conquest, and erasure" and "aim[s] to restore …race and Afrocentric points of view…by noting [their] absences" (p. 169).

Chapter Nine is similarly invested in revising troubling narratives of the

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present. In "Rewriting the Narrative: Communicology and the Speculative Discourse of Afrofuturism," Davis Deluiis and Jeff Lohr offer a metacritique of technoculture's tendency to erase the embodied experience of blackness. They advocate communicology as a "methodological framework" for "combat[ing] the dehumanizing trends" and resultant invisibility of black experience (p. 187). The volume's tenth chapter, Esther Jones's "Africana Women's Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine: Difference, Ethics, and Empathy," reminds readers that a dehumanizing discourse of black bodies has long permeated medical narratives. Highlighting the "continued mistreatment of black bodies" in narrative medicine, she resolves that "if biodiversity…is essential for species survival" as professionals claim, then all of us must "learn to relate more humanely across our perceived differences," an education she sees facilitated by the ideological and ethical concerns central to Africana Women's science fiction (p. 205, 224, 211).

Stepping away from the literary critical framework, in the volume's eleventh and closing chapter, "To be African is to

Merge Technology and Magic: An Interview with Nnedi Okorafor," Qiana Whitted interviews Afrofuturist writer Okorafor, who has authored "four novels, two children's books, and numerous short stories and essays" (p. 227). Okorafor discusses her writing process and the "subconscious" way in which Afrofuturist themes emerge from her life experience, again reinforcing the primacy of lived experience over the theoretical in the volume's closing section (p. 228).

A far-reaching volume, *Afrofuturism 2.0* certainly expands the critical canon exploring Astro-Blackness. Although the book is well-organized and scholarly in scope, readers would benefit from section introductions that articulate the rationale of each section and its relationship to the volume Introduction's overarching approach to Astro-Blackness. While the volume does not quite mitigate what it sees as Africana studies's failure "to make significant inroads in incorporating scientific and technological perspectives in the curriculum of black studies," it certainly treads new ground in that direction (p. 16). The third section's incisive discursive analyses make the volume well worth the read, particularly if we are to narrate a more racially-inclusive future.

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Andre M. Carrington
Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction
University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pb, 282 pp, $25
ISBN 9780816678969

Reviewed by **Paul Piatkowski**

With his focus on the unique intersections between race, science fiction, and fan-based cultural production, Andre M. Carrington in *Speculative Blackness* goes where no literary or cultural critic has gone before. Carrington notes that his foray into the relationship between race and science fiction follows on from Daphne Patai's and Marlene Barr's feminist approaches to science fiction, and these socially and culturally based models shape his thoughtful argument. Through an examination of the cultural production derived from fan engagement with popular manifestations of speculative fiction, Carrington argues for the reparative possibilities of engaging with Blackness as it is reflected in the popular imagination.

Carrington, an assistant professor of African American literature at Drexel University, quickly demonstrates the atypical quality of his work (expanded from a doctoral thesis). He explains that, despite some passing commentary on the two most prominent Black writers of science fiction, Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, his discussion engages with the type of speculative fiction often ignored in literary studies and even in SF studies. While regular genre fiction tends to be anathema to authors and critics in the ivory towers of highbrow literature, Carrington here goes directly into the lush lowlands of fanzines, mainstream television, comic books, and fanfic. His chapters survey a wide range of focus points, discussing fanzines of the 1950s, *Star Trek* (with one chapter on the original series and a later one on its spin-off *Deep Space Nine*), Marvel's *X-Men*, Milestone Comic's *Icon,* and even contemporary internet fanfic. This excavation yields observations that go beyond re-evaluating the relationship between race and science fiction to reveal the relevance of often-disregarded forms of fan-influenced and fan-produced work.

At once conversational and academic, Carrington's first chapter sets up a historical framework for the book's fan-centered angle. The chapter's subject, Carl Brandon, a self-described Black

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science fiction fan author revealed to be White Bay Area fan writer Terry Carr, influenced a complex and racially perplexed fanzine subculture of the 1950s. The case of Carl Brandon allows Carrington not only to discuss Blackness in a predominantly White science fiction context, but also to develop a substantive basis for the cultural production done by fans. The chapter showcases Carrington's impressive research of an obscure period of science fiction history, a time when fanzines were printed on mimeographs and thinly distributed. Carrington focuses less on writing technique than on production and distribution and the influence this work had in cultural production. Blackness, while initiating the chapter, takes a second seat here to Carrington's arguments about fan influence. Carrington's chapter on Nichelle Nichols, best known for her role as Lieutenant Uhura in the original *Star Trek*, returns him to the theme of Blackness as he explores the effects Nichols's role as a Black woman in the utopian future of *Star Trek* had on the place of Blackness in speculative futures more widely. He also examines the relationship of this role to Nichols's real-life influence on popular culture through her work with NASA. Uhura, Carrington notes, illustrates the cultural tendency to associate Black females with the exotic. This transitions well into

Carrington's succeeding chapter on *X-Men*'s Storm, whom he calls the most recognizable Black superhero in American popular culture. Carrington follows Storm's transformations over her forty years as part of Marvel's *X-Men*, particularly her shifting origin stories and physical appearance. In Carrington's eyes, the changes in these aspects of Storm's character reflect shifting perceptions of racial, gender, and national differences, with the speculative lens of "mutant" providing an especially effective method of observation. Carrington continually illuminates these reflections of Blackness within different versions of popular and often mainstream imagination. While Carrington concedes that Storm never transcends a politics of representation, he suggests that she does imply transformative questions about the importance of such representation.

Black-run and Black-focused Milestone Media, a 1990s comic book company connected to DC Comics, established crossovers between the superhero genre, speculative futures, and urban America. Carrington returns to the relationship between fandom and speculative fiction production by examining the unique approach Milestone Media took in its "letters to the editor" pages. Through advance distributions, letters to the editor

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appeared almost immediately in the pages of their speculative comics, offering immediate fan input on social topics like abortions and contraceptives, an unusual practice for the superhero comic medium. Carrington shows that, though Milestone Media only lasted from 1993 until 1997, speculative fiction in comic books offers productive and ongoing approaches to studying popular culture.

Returning to *Star Trek*, Carrington's chapter on *Deep Space Nine* establishes the series's position in relation to the larger *Star Trek* universe before convincingly arguing that novelizations are relevant to explorations of race in the genre. The discussion centers on Steven Starnes's adaptation of the past-future, time-jumping episode "Far Beyond the Stars." With a multi-tiered approach to Blackness in speculative fiction (the story centers on two merged time periods and heroes, as Black 1950s science fiction writer Benny Russell envisions his twenty-fourth-century counterpart and protagonist, Captain Sisko, who simultaneously has visions of Russell), Carrington's exploration of "Far Beyond the Stars" tactfully explores both the historical and fictionalized worlds of Blackness in speculative fiction.

Focusing on fanfic from the site *Remember Us*—an internet archive, edited by Carrington, for minority-based fanfic—the final chapter explores how the form of fanfic writing puts marginalized characters from titles like *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* into major roles in stories. Carrington summarizes his personal history in this chapter and selects stories from the site that highlight this phenomenon, arguing that this fan production constructs meaningful insights about Blackness as it performs within the genre.

Carrington's book presents an intriguing model for studying speculative fiction, one with the potential to improve an understanding of how Blackness performs and is performing in a largely White genre. This is particularly the case as Carrington's use of the fan-produced and fan-fueled elements of the genre reflect the cultural work being done by the mass of the population. His argument that this kind of analysis can be reparative has some potential, though he often delves into obscure material with which most of his readers will be unfamiliar and does not always show how this reparation can occur. Carrington's work has value in the growing field of Afrofuturism, and it also reflects the way that general SF studies continues to be evaluated both

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by itself and by the outside academic community. From the stars of mainstream SF to the lowlands of fan fiction, this book offers new insights on the value of speculative fiction in today's world.

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Edward K. Chan

The Racial Horizon of Utopia: Unthinking the Future of Race in Late Twentieth-Century American Utopian Novels

Peter Lang, 2015, pb, eb, 226 pp, $62.95

ISBN 9783034319164

Reviewed by **Tom Lubek**

The Racial Horizon of Utopia explores both the 'problem of race and the compulsion to imagine something beyond it,' and, in doing so, sets out to begin the necessary work of filling in what its author, Edward K. Chan, describes as an 'absence' of 'the problematics of the relationship between race and utopia' in critical assessments of utopian literature (pp. 3-4).

Following Fredric Jameson's well-known claim that SF repeatedly 'demonstrate[s] and dramatize[s] our incapacity to imagine the future' and is therefore 'a contemplation of our own absolute limits' (Jameson, p. 153), Chan argues that 'Utopia has a specifically racial horizon that simultaneously occludes and clarifies our attempts to imagine new forms of racial identity, as well as Utopia itself (p. 18). For Chan, it is 'precisely the imagination of how the race issue contours our ideas of Utopia that is at stake in the late twentieth-

century Utopian novel' (pp. 18-19). In *The Racial Horizon of Utopia*, Chan traces this horizon between the 1970s and 1990s as it appears in the work of Dorothy Bryant, Marge Piercy, Samuel Delaney, Octavia E. Butler and Kim Stanley Robinson, offering insightful analyses of how these writers demonstrate both the imaginative possibilities and limitations 'of our conception of race' (p. 20).

For Chan, the frequent response, at least in the United States, to the question 'where does race go when we try to imagine *our selves* (two words) in the future […] has been to say that in a fully achieved liberal democracy, racial difference will become irrelevant' (p. 38, original emphasis). Yet, at the same time, he argues that 'this view fails to take into account the role of corporeality in the formation of the racialized subject' (p. 38). Thus, his readings of these authors underscore 'the importance of acknowledging

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embodiment in our utopian imaginings of the future of race' to help us to 'unthink' the liberal democratic fantasy of a "colour-blind" future of race (p. 38). Returning to Jameson's point above, while none of the novels discussed in *The Racial Horizon of Utopia* successfully manages to imagine beyond this horizon, Chan's trenchant analysis of them—and the ways in which they fail—on the whole shows that 'in order to imagine new forms of democracy we must begin with the Subject rather than democracy as a totality' (p. 176).

Roughly speaking, the book is divided into two halves, with the first half laying the theoretical groundwork for the more detailed textual analysis that comes in the second half. Chapter One reads America as a 'racialized space' (p. 18), in which the 'ideal of the abstract citizen of liberal democracy' sits in tension with 'the full reality of life in racialized bodies' (p. 24), while Chapter Two builds on this by drawing on theories of corporeal feminism to posit '*embodiment*' as what is missing from 'the abstract Subject of liberal democracy' (p. 48). These theoretical explorations are anchored by close textual analysis throughout. In Chapter Three, Chan explores Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976). He assesses the

limitations of the ways in which these authors '[disrupt] the signification of race' (p. 86), and how this 'boundary or horizon' to our imagination gestures towards the necessity of constructing 'a new model of the subject that can accommodate particularity without repressing or erasing it' (p. 115).

Chapters Four and Five are then devoted to Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1980s) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1993-6) respectively. Chapter Four stands out as particularly interesting, not least because it is in *Lilith's Brood* that Chan locates a possible exception to the failure 'to imagine a "something else" beyond the abstract Subject of American Democracy' (p. 47). Chan reads *Lilith's Brood*, and indeed Butler's entire oeuvre, as a 'literature of embodiment' that both expresses 'what it means to embody difference' and 'what it means to confront the embodiment of difference' (p. 118). Building on Laura U. Marks's account of 'haptic cinema,' Chan describes *Lilith's Brood* in particular as a 'haptic utopia' that is 'based on tactility and embodiment' (p. 118) that must make us question not what utopia would '*look* like,' but what it would '*feel like*' (p. 122, original emphasis). In the same manner as his assessment of Bryant's, Piercy's, and Delany's novels, Chan probes the ways in which *Lilith's Brood* both attempts to look beyond and is

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circumscribed by Utopia's racial horizon. The result is a highly insightful analysis that builds upon the richly established seam of body-bound readings of Butler's work and explores the tensions in *Lilith's Brood* between the individual Subject vaunted by liberal democracy and the new collective forms of subjectivity brought about by the interbreeding of humans and Butler's imaginary Oankali aliens.

Chan writes in accessible and engaging prose, and the book should appeal to a wide range of readers. Chan provides brief but detailed synopses of all the major texts up for discussion, so that reader familiarity with them is not necessary. The quality of analysis also compensates for the relative brevity of his discussion of Bryant, Piercy and Delany as opposed to full chapters on Butler and Robinson, obviating any potential sense of imbalance. As Chan repeatedly states, *The Racial Horizon of Utopia* is not the final word on the relationship between race and Utopia, but is rather an inaugural call to other scholars to continue, or to take up, the necessary work of "unthinking" the popular future of race wherein 'the erasure of racial difference represents the positive form of the utopian horizon (p. 201). It is also an assertion of the centrality of utopian fiction, and SF more widely, to that critical goal.

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