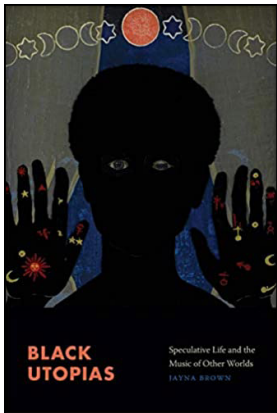


Jayna Brown. *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 224p. Paper, \$25.95 (ISBN 978-1-4780-1167-5).



Among texts that examine Black embodiment—that examine our existence beyond and transcendence from the horrific bounds of State-sanctioned supremacies—*Black Utopias* stands out. Beautifully layered, Jayna Brown connects the lived experiences and artistries of Black American preachers, speculative fiction authors, and jazz musicians, charting expansive understandings of what utopia means within dialects of Black radical thought. This is by no means an introductory text; it demands study. Neon highlights and copious scribbled-in-the-margins notes. Regardless, this book moves; unsettles while restructuring current understandings of Blackness at large.

In *Black Utopias*, Brown openly problematizes traditional conceptions of utopia. She's not concerned with worlds or systems wherein human needs are magically met and differences erased. Instead, she speculates a version that doesn't exist yet; one that culminates in "forms of subjectivity outside a recognizable ontological framework" (8). Does that sound overwhelming? It's meant to. In fact, Brown invites the reader to sit inside that unknown and to question preconceived notions of Black selfhood, embodiment, and existence. There is no unifying utopia here, and through the book's three, glorious parts—"Ecstasy," "Evolution," and "Sense and Matter"—Brown makes us privy to them all.

She begins with Black women mystics. Preachers Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Jemima Wilkinson, and Sojourner Truth wove spirituality with communal kinship, thereby harnessing collective power to reach other-worlds, leaving their flesh behind. Brown proves "all four women had experiences of being touched by the Creator" and, as such, carved out sites of "freedom and power much broader than those they were expected to occupy as black women, slave or free, in Antebellum America" (24). Religious touch, in this sense, was utopian, even when painful; Wilkinson, after awakening from a fever, was reborn as the genderless Universal Public Friend, who melted away from their physical form through astral projection. For Lee, religious touch meant devotion, walking thousands of miles to conduct rites called "melting times," where boundaries between "the I and the We" dissolved, leaving only divine light, communally felt (25). Jackson's touch came through seance and communion with "higher spirits" from alternate temporalities (55). Regardless of the *how*, Brown argues these worlds allowed for radical existences. The boundaries of touch provide fruitful sites for understanding Black, queer women radically (re)discovering themselves as part of greater, cosmic systems and unearthly spirit worlds.

From there, Brown moves into the concept of Black utopia as boundless, examining Alice Coltrane's rituals. Like the radical preachers before her, Coltrane believed herself touched by God, gifted with "supraterrestrial powers and heightened abilities" (59). Coltrane's utopia, like earlier versions, was reached by pain; ascetic deprivation and devotion to communal rituals similar to earlier melting times. For Coltrane, sound was the primary vehicle by which consciousness could be altered and one's flesh left behind. Through devotion to communal melody-making, one could be "loosed from the human body, and converted back into a material world of elements," allowing for infinite forms of existence and possibility outside of state-sanctioned traumas (73).

Still, “Sense and Matter” provides the most thought-provoking chapters. It’s here that Brown moves from metaphysical utopias into time-bound, explicitly Black, futurisms. Her close readings of Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series and Samuel Delany’s works, simply put, astound. Brown problematizes Butler’s version of utopia. Though it is religious and communal, she examines its biologically deterministic rootings and devotion to human superiority, conquest, and desire to colonize the stars. Meanwhile, she showcases how Delaney “plays with the lines between man, animal, and plant,” decentering human forms on a myriad of planets, including Earth, while suggesting that gender and biology are malleable (128). That utopia, even, is a thing of many-states, subject to forces beyond human control. As in earlier chapters, she contextualizes these examples using other science fictions of the time, making clear how white eugenicist thinking still defines what qualifies as human. These are the chapters where Brown breaks down what it means to be Black and human while showcasing the fluidity of Delany’s utopias, defining places *in-between* categorizations bound by white male dominance.

In the end, Brown brings her theorizing home with an examination of Sun Ra, another musician and poet who speculated on ideas of futurity. However, this is where notions of human, or in-between states, fall away altogether. Brown states that, where Black women preachers melded in and out of touch-states and Butler and Delaney speculated on forms of selfhood in-and-around biological bounds, Sun Ra moves beyond that entirely into the “impossible,” and “complete abandonment of the very limiting paradigms of life and self” (159). Sun Ra devoted himself to rebelling, urging Black folks in particular to “give up your death!” and “rebel against the terms of being alive that would call for a beginning, middle, or end” (167). This is where, with Brown’s weaving, we come to the idea of utopia as cosmic and unending, a maelstrom of the highest form, without touch, embodiment, language, or any sense of self to be found.

I am thrilled about what this book does and the questions Brown raises, though my review hardly scratches the surface of her examinations. Regardless of your field, this is a must-read about Black existence and alternate states of freedom. For LIS workers interested in history and media, *Black Utopias* mirrors conversations in Black archival disciplines; it’s worth reading to examine the research methods, alone. And for interdisciplinary Black scholars, this book proves pivotal to understanding ourselves across diasporic tapestries woven through time and space.—Jennifer Brown, University of California, Berkeley

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Research Libraries, 2020. 238p. Paperback, \$65.00 (ISBN 978-0-8389-4852-1).

Michael Stöpel and a team of editors have crafted a unique celebration of faculty-librarian collaborations that highlights the relevance of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* to all disciplines. This publication is a product of an AMICAL workshop developed to encourage faculty-librarian collaborations in the development of courses that integrated the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy*. AMICAL is a consortium of 29 higher education institutions located in 22 countries across Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Southern Asia. They are accredited by American Agen-

