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American Quarterly, Volume 71, Number 1, March 2019, pp. 205-217 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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# The Social Life of Speculation

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*Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic.* By Michelle D. Commander. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 296 pages. \$99.95 (cloth). \$25.95 (paper).

*Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction.* By Sami Schalk. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. 192 pages. \$89.95 (cloth). \$23.95 (paper).

*Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism.* By Shelley Streeby. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 168 pages. \$85.00 (cloth). \$18.95 (paper).

*Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times.* By Aimee Bahng. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 248 pages. \$94.95 (cloth). \$24.95 (paper).

In the past two decades, scholarly and popular interest in speculative fiction has surged. Groundbreaking anthologies like Sheree Renée Thomas's *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) and Grace Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012), as well as scholarship by Ramón Saldivar, Curtis Marez, Dillon, André M. Carrington, Donna Haraway, and others, deploy speculative fiction to address the interconnected histories and current realities of racism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. The four books under review here showcase speculative fiction studies (or perhaps, more accurately, "speculative studies") as an emerging, interdisciplinary field engaging many of the key analytics of American studies: racialization, settler colonialism, imperialism, climate change, diaspora, (dis)ability, and the transnational turn. Our current scholarly moment is marked by a turn not only to nonrealist literature but to speculation in all its multitudinous forms. As Michelle D. Commander, Sami Schalk, Shelley Streeby, and Aimee Bahng illustrate, speculation evokes an extrapolative practice that articulates the repercussions of urgent global

problems, a set of political tactics that shape new worlds through activism, and an imaginative strategy that etches unexpected ways to organize social life.

Of course, science fiction has an established presence in academe. The prominent journals *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Studies* were founded in 1959 and 1973, respectively, and the history of science fiction scholarship dates back even further. The editors of *Science Fiction Studies*, for example, maintain a chronological bibliography that lists Johannes Kepler's "Notes" from *Somnium: The Dream, or Posthumous Work on Lunar Astronomy* (1634) as an early work of science fiction criticism.<sup>1</sup> Since then, scholars have painstakingly historicized, contextualized, and debated the parameters and stakes of the genre. Some, like Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, Samuel Delany, and Joanna Russ, highlight science fiction's potential to unsettle hegemonic structures of power; others, such as John Rieder and Patricia Kerslake, analyze the colonial logics texturing the genre.

But speculative fiction studies, though it overlaps with scholarship on science fiction, is a different animal: broader, more capacious, less concerned with technical literary and generic questions. While some have tried to demarcate the bounds of speculative fiction—with Robert Heinlein and Margaret Atwood proposing the most famous definitions—others find the ambiguity of the term attractive.<sup>2</sup> In *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*, Bahng is "less interested in literary taxonomies than in the various modalities of writing and reading that can alter relations between writer and reader, shift ways of thinking, and produce different kinds of subjects"; she sees potential in speculative fiction's "promiscuity and disregard for the proper" (13, 16). Similarly, Streeby embraces the term *speculative fiction* in *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism* "because it is less defined by boundary-making around the word 'science,' stretching to encompass related modes such as fantasy and horror, forms of knowledge in excess of white Western science, and more work authored by women and people of color" (20). In Commander's *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*, Afro-Atlantic speculation exceeds science fiction, or even Afro-futurism, which Commander regards as only one "subgenre of Afro-speculation of the twentieth and twenty-first century that is concerned with the artistic reimagining of the function of science and technology in the construction of utopic black futures" (6). Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* is the only one of the four studies to offer an explicit (but roomy) definition of speculative fiction as "any creative writing in which the rules of reality do not fully apply" (17).

*Speculative fiction*, then, arguably does not specify a nonrealist literary genre so much as it characterizes a range of texts, both literary and otherwise, that enact a mode of thinking, acting, and being. The speculative mode, at least at its best, embraces wonder, uncertainty, contingency, imagination, invention, and collaboration.

Octavia E. Butler looms particularly large in speculative fiction studies today and makes an appearance in each of these monographs. Schalk, Streeby, and Commander draw on Butler's published and unpublished body of work directly; Bahng cites Butler's fiction as a source of inspiration, inculcating a "practice of unlearning hegemonic principles" (xi). The first black woman to gain widespread acclaim as a science fiction writer, Butler inspires not only Bahng but also a wide swath of creative writers. Her legacy and mentorship spurred an exciting wave of speculative fiction by people of color, rupturing a canon previously made up largely of white men. Moreover, upon her untimely death in 2006, Butler bequeathed her papers to the Huntington Library near her hometown of Pasadena, California, and the collection opened to researchers in 2013, launching a new era of Butler scholarship. Streeby uses Butler's papers to especially powerful effect because, in addition to using the archival materials to support an interpretation of Butler's published output, she also theorizes from the archive itself, highlighting Butler as an "early climate change intellectual" whose news clippings, notes, and journal reflections function as "memory work" (72, 71) that charts the destructive legacy of neoliberalism and extrapolates from it.

With its emphasis on characters who must assemble and live together in order to survive in hostile environments, Butler's oeuvre also galvanizes activists like adrienne maree brown (whose work Streeby takes up) and Walidah Imarisha (discussed by Schalk). Such activists apply insights from speculative fiction to reimagine society and actualize change in concrete ways. Speculation, then, hinges not only on thinking and imagining but also on material action. Bahng's illuminating phrase "speculation as praxis" (xi) conjures this notion, which emerges differently in each of the four books. Streeby probes how fiction and multimedia shape activist movements, and vice versa. Commander considers imagined flights to Africa in fiction texts alongside real-world projects that foreground and strengthen black sociality by "using Africa as a vessel for dreaming about other possibilities for life" (213). Meanwhile, Schalk's *Bodysminds Reimagined* opens with an epigraph from Gloria Anzaldúa: "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads." This claim drives Schalk's central argument about literature's material impact:

“Imagination, representations, and the real world influence each other cyclically” (110). Fittingly, all four authors strive to make their writing accessible to a broad audience. Avoiding abstraction for its own sake, they invite their readers into a kind of kinship with their own theorizing and with the texts, acts, and objects they engage.

Commander’s *Afro-Atlantic Flight* innovatively examines literature and film that thematize returns to Africa alongside nonliterary phenomena: heritage tours at Ghana’s slave castles, interviews Commander conducted with black diasporans, political activism, and African cultural performances staged in the US South and Bahia, Brazil. Through these wide-ranging analyses, Commander traces the contours of “Afro-Atlantic speculation”: a set of imaginative practices through which black people envision and enact returns to Africa. Intervening in conversations about the textures of diaspora and the stakes of escape, recovery, repair, and return, Commander posits Afro-Atlantic speculation as a “radical epistemological modality” with the potential to ground the “establishment of new, utopic realities outside of dominant society despite the lack of proof that black social life is conceivable” (6). Alongside Afro-speculation, flight is Commander’s other central concept. As evoked in the Flying African stories, which tell of enslaved people ascending into the air in order to return to their homeland, flight marks “an escape predicated on imagination and the incessant longing to be free” (7). Such escapes, Commander avers, must be collective. In their ideal form, Afro-Atlantic flights enable a “neoteric Pan-Africanism”—a pivot to “transnational black social relations outside of normative politics” (18).

Commander argues for moving from the analytic of “diaspora,” which she views as concerned with Africa as territory, to “Pan-Africanism,” which is not intrinsically linked to territory. Intervening in longstanding conversations about what diasporans and Africans owe each other, she responds to Kamari Maxine Clarke’s provocation that anyone who takes “African-” as an identity is also responsible for “acknowledging the more pressing issues in present-day Africa” (16). Commander analyzes the other side of the equation: what obligations might Africa have to diasporans, considering that African governments use the language of kinship to encourage homeland returns and the financial investments that come with them? In one of the book’s many resonant sentences, Commander argues that “slavery does not belong to diasporans solely; it, too, is bound up inextricably with the postcolonial condition” (18). Accordingly, Commander reads pilgrimage-to-Africa narratives empathetically, without attributing to diasporans a renewed scramble for Africa mentality, as some critics have. At the same time, she remains skeptical of an “individualist concentration

on homeland returns” (15), especially since physical return requires the financial means to travel across the world. Flight, then, must be employed in the service of “imagining an alternative life” (17) without requiring literal return.

There are many ways to return, and each method holds its own possibilities and pitfalls. Commander first examines flights achieved through literary and filmic narratives that employ the black fantastic (including ghosts, various forms of time travel, and dream sequences) to allow their diasporic protagonists to convene with the dead or revive the past. While such flights do not repair the ruptures created by slavery, they do allow characters to productively fragment progressive historical time as they “move literally and figuratively closer to Africa” (72). The following two chapters explore literal returns. Commander traces, on the one hand, the cathartic and triumphalist narratives that the Ghanaian cultural roots tourism industry uses to interpolate diasporic travelers into capitalist formations of fictive kinship and, on the other hand, the nascent neoteric Pan-Africanism present in accounts like Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008). While Hartman does physically travel to Africa, *Lose Your Mother’s* speculative ethos does not depend on an individual act of reparative travel. Hartman, precisely by abandoning the hope for repair that is at the core of the cultural roots tourism industry, enables relations between Afro-descended people outside the grasp of capitalism and the nation-state. Black American travelers enact another kind of flight when they settle in Bahia and partake in cultural performances that invoke African ancestral traditions. As Commander shows through accounts of her travels as a participant-observer on tours in Bahia and through interviews with black American expats, these diasporans seek the American Dream even as they yearn to become African-by-proxy. They often find themselves disappointed in their attempts to find rootedness because of the individual and inwardly focused quality of their returns. Their investment in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, while understandable, conflicts with their desire to reclaim their cultural ancestry and disconnects them from “the very people whose appearances legitimized Bahia as an Africa by proxy” (168).

In the last chapter, Commander pivots to returns that require no literal overseas travel. Across the US South, black Americans are crafting “symbolic Africas” (173) such as Soul City, the Republic of New Africa, and Oyatunji African Village. Such figurative returns, however imperfect, repossess Southern landscapes and insert black life and sociality into master narratives of American history. The recalling of African ancestors and traditions is effective because it enables not individual uplift but worldwide black collectivity and “ascensions

into thin air” (213) like those of the Flying Africans. Such ascensions are not just metaphorical, as Commander shows by homing in on the acts of Brittany “Bree” Newsome and Emmett Rufus Eddy, two black Americans who climbed flagpoles to remove Confederate flags from public buildings. Newsome, Eddy, and the residents of the South’s symbolic Africas materialize the black fantastic.

Commander’s conception of black sociality intersects with and productively challenges other recent work in Black studies. In some ways, Commander’s descriptions of Afro-Atlantic speculation resonate with Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2002), an extended meditation on the kind of flight that becomes possible when physical return is disallowed. Brand’s text might be called a work of speculative nonfiction, insisting on a kind of diasporic black collectivity that cannot be described as “belonging” precisely because it began at “the place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast.”<sup>3</sup> Commander’s reflections on collectivity and flight also recall Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s insights on the sociality of the hold: “To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one.”<sup>4</sup> Brand as well as Moten and Harney, in different ways, conceptualize blackness as an unregulated sociality that paradoxically generates new ways of organizing society. Commander also articulates the revolutionary potential of black social life: its refusal to be contained and its inherent generativity. But unlike these other thinkers, she does not entirely reject the possibility of seeking an origin. Indeed, *Afro-Atlantic Flight* refuses to let go of Africa even as it complicates straightforward notions of return. Commander’s nuanced account of how black people deploy imaginings of Africa reclaims the concept of a homeland return as politically fruitful while avoiding the pitfalls of earlier Pan-Africanist movements.

In *Bodyminds Reimagined*, Schalk also takes up black speculative fiction, homing in on the understudied intersection of black feminist theory and disability studies. Unlike Commander, she analyzes mostly literary texts, but her theoretical takeaways are no less wide-reaching. Black women’s speculative fiction, she contends, requires readers to change their modes of reading race, gender, and (dis)ability; this interpretive transformation facilitates tangible social change. Speculative fiction’s nonrealist elements expose “the relationships between social systems of privilege and oppression” and “highlight the socially constructed, and therefore mutable, nature of concepts like (dis)ability race, and gender” (5, 9), making this fiction ideally suited for intersectional analyses. Schalk convincingly renews intersectionality theory and defends it against its

detractors. Even as she acknowledges how this body of theory is sometimes applied in “limiting, static, and even regressive ways” (8), she also reimagines it in order to benefit from its strengths, including a women-of-color lineage and a unique ability to convey the imbrication of multiple power structures.

Schalk’s renewal of intersectionality complicates conventional interpretations of disability in widely studied literary texts. She argues that Butler’s *Kindred* uses a particular disability, Dana’s amputated arm, as both metaphor and materiality (whereas other scholars have generally understood it as either one or the other). In other words, Dana’s disability simultaneously highlights the injurious legacy of slavery as a social institution and emphasizes how enslaved people were literally subject to impairing physical violence. Similarly, in a later chapter, Schalk shows how a disability-grounded approach yields a new interpretation of Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, which feature a nonmimetic disability called “hyper-empathy syndrome.” Challenging one-dimensional interpretations of hyper-empathy syndrome, Schalk pursues its often contradictory representations across the novels, arguing that the series requires readers to understand disability as embedded in multiple contexts at once. These literary interpretations will be intriguing to Butler scholars, but also seek to broaden the set of literary texts to which researchers of literary disability studies turn, as Schalk argues elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond interpreting particular novels, Schalk’s larger project is to bring race and ethnic studies, gender studies, and disability studies together, allowing the insights of each field to transform the others. Numerous thinkers—black feminists perhaps most of all—have long illuminated the intricate and inseparable connection between race and gender. But few have attended to the imbrication of race and (dis)ability with the same care. Early in her book, Schalk describes the vexed position of race in disability studies. On the one hand, disability studies has traditionally been and largely remains a white-dominated field, not just demographically, but also in its theoretical foundations and the canon of texts from which its scholars draw. At the same time, Schalk dislodges the common assumption that the first text to consider race and disability was Christopher Bell’s essay “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” which appeared in 2006. She unearths a longer intellectual genealogy, highlighting Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), which analyzes literature by black women writers, as well as the body of scholarship on freak shows, which Schalk views as especially significant because freak shows declined in popularity in the 1940s just as science fiction rose to prominence.

Schalk's goal is to build on this existing foundation of scholarship in order to reenvision the connections among (dis)ability, race, and gender. The first half of the study is concerned with the "mutually constitutive relationship of disability and blackness" (42) through which ableism colludes with or even works in place of racism. While notions of physical (dis)ability play a key role in this relation, as Schalk elaborates in her chapter on *Kindred*, equally important is the construct of able-mindedness. Bringing together Phyllis Alesia Perry's speculative neo-slave narrative *Stigmata* (1999) with accounts of police violence, Schalk argues that black people are constructed as "on the boundary of able-mindedness and thus not to be believed" (80) about their experiences of oppression and even physical pain.

Whereas the first half of *Bodyminds Reimagined* takes up neo-slave narratives, the second half turns to futuristic and fantastic imaginaries. In chapter 3, Schalk explores how speculative fiction contextualizes (dis)ability in order to illuminate key disability rights issues, such as the value many disability activists place on adaptation and universal design. In this vein, Schalk draws on Butler's *Parable* novels to resist the "notion of a technologically created, disability-free future as an inherently positive goal" (108), emphasizing instead how what is commonly constructed as disability sometimes facilitates pleasure as well as pain. Fantasy fiction, the subject of the last chapter, highlights how (dis)ability as an analytic defamiliarizes other social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. The genre texts in this chapter are not nearly as widely studied as Butler's fiction, and Schalk turns to them partly for this reason, suggesting that they produce far-reaching "political interventions and representational shifts" (135) as fans disseminate them in popular spaces, especially online. Across all her chapters, Schalk troubles the traditional metaphors that concretize intersectionality (such as the matrix, road intersection, and Venn diagram). Schalk's version of intersectionality emphasizes multidimensional entanglements that resist visual charting and static notions of identity. This version of intersectionality serves as a launchpad for new social formations.

Intersectionality and its potential for speculatively renewing social life also animates Streeby's *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*. Taking up the dire problems of the Anthropocene, Streeby argues that speculation—in literary works as well as in activist movements like #NoDAPL and cultural productions including music and performance—spurs collective responses to climate change. Like Commander, Streeby gathers a vast multitude of speculative texts and acts. Intervening in emerging discussions about the genre of climate change fiction, or "cli-fi," Streeby examines how the future of climate change is imag-

ined in “movements, speculative fictions, and futurisms of Indigenous people and people of color—work that is all too often excluded from the category of cli-fi and that extends beyond cli-fi” (5). Like Schalk, Streeby emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, centering Indigenous people and people of color (she distinguishes between the two categories in order to foreground the specificity of settler colonialism) at the forefront of climate activism. By way of Samuel Delany and Fredric Jameson, she asserts that thinking about projected futures allows us to “take hold of the present” (18) and critically examine it.

But even more important, as the subtitle indicates, she accentuates the relationship between speculative fiction and social movements. For Streeby, speculative fiction describes not simply fiction with nonrealist elements but also the “visionary work [activists] are doing in imagining the future of climate change” (26). For example, her first chapter examines the #NoDAPL movement and other worldwide Indigenous struggles over resource extraction alongside the theorizing of Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon and literary works of Indigenous futurism. Streeby suggests that Indigenous environmental activism—like the direct action of the water protectors and the movement building of the participants in the Indigenous Environmental Network—constitutes a form of speculation, mobilizing Indigenous knowledge and traditions to generate a society outside the constraints of Euro-American neoliberal structures. Movements against resource extraction and wastelands not only resist environmental degradation but also reanimate a “politics of place” that links “people who are widely separated geographically but bound together in confronting common antagonists and sharing common goals” (44).

In this vein, Streeby sketches how activists of color around the world create coalitions across spatial distance and differing social positions. She supplies wide-ranging examples. The Black Lives Matter movement issued a statement in support of activists at Standing Rock and connected the materials used to build pipelines to the chemicals polluting water in largely black communities such as Flint, Michigan. Leslie Marmon Silko, presciently anticipating the #NoDAPL struggle, imagined a transnational coalition of activists who free the Americas from colonial occupation and its attendant environmental destruction. Butler archived news stories about Native American resistance to land and resource appropriation. Organizations like the Rising Tide Network and the International Climate Justice Network call for worldwide grassroots action that centers the impact of climate change on Indigenous people, poor people, and other marginalized communities.

Streeby’s final chapter coalesces around the creative and activist work of adrienne maree brown, who uses speculative fiction in the service of social

organizing and direct action. As elaborated in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds* (2017), brown uses principles drawn from Butler's novels—particularly the idea of “shaping change” in “relational, adaptive, fractal, interdependent, decentralized, transformative” (brown, quoted in Streeby 102) ways—to undergird community organizing around numerous issues. Streeby selects brown as a key figure in the chapter because brown intertwines her climate change activism with voter organizing, food justice, nonviolent direct action training, and harm reduction with drug users and sex workers. Brown treats climate change as a global problem while remaining attuned to the unequal and distinct ways that it affects various communities including black people, Indigenous people, and poor people. In the second half of the chapter, Streeby turns to two short stories from *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015), a collection edited by brown and her colleague Walidah Imarisha. In both Dani McClain's “Homing Instinct” and brown's own story “The River,” waterways enable the creation of communities beyond nation-state and corporate power.

If Streeby examines the racial capitalist production of environmental disaster, Bahng zooms out to examine the workings of global capitalism more broadly. She identifies speculative finance and speculative fiction as two kinds of intertwined future-producing practices. Speculative finance manages risk, contains uncertainty, and makes the future “available for possession” (4) by a privileged few. The futures imagined through speculative finance are inextricable from historical violence. Bahng excavates the histories of empire and racialization that underlie capitalist narratives of futurity. Speculative fiction offers counternarratives that lay bare these histories, and thus also create alternate visions of the future. Bahng's term *migrant futures* encapsulates speculative practices rooted in “inconclusive reflection,” “lingering conjecture,” and “experiment-reveling” (8). Refusing prediction and calculation, migrant futures embrace the “risky subjects” (17) whom capitalism attempts to exploit, creating new affiliations between these subjects and extending the “networks of care” (17) that threaten capitalist futurescapes.

Reading across Afro-diasporic, Asian, Asian American, and Chicana texts and archives, Bahng foregrounds speculative fiction as a genre enabling transnational modes of kinship that escape capitalist co-optation. Bahng assembles a “starter archive” (xi)—a fledgling, promiscuous collection of fiction, film, comics, and other narratives—that elaborates not simply a world after capitalism but the variety of alternatives to capitalism already existing in the present, alternatives lived by people whom capitalism brutalizes yet “who continue to

speculate beyond its logics” (xi). Among these persistent speculators are the residents of Fordlândia, a rubber plantation and factory town run by the Ford Motor Company in the Amazon rainforest from 1928 to 1934. In her first chapter, Bahng reads Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* against the imperialist legacy of Ford’s venture in Brazil. Yamashita’s novel excavates these “buried histories” and connects imperialism “with other kinds of scientific fictions that have worked on behalf of European and US empire building to render the resource-rich jungle available for imperial conquest and expansion” (27).

The second and third chapters home in on practices of predicting and safeguarding the future in two societal domains, homeland security and reproduction. Speculative narratives of danger, Bahng argues, allow for the violent securitization of the US–Mexico border. Against this kind of speculation, Yamashita’s novel *Tropic of Orange* and Alex Rivera’s film *Sleep Dealer* offer open-ended and relational structures of speculation that Bahng refers to as “the horizon” and “the network.” Bahng then turns to narratives of reproductive futurity. She weaves together analyses of Alfonso Cuarón’s film *Children of Men* and Nalo Hopkinson’s novel *Midnight Robber* with media narratives of transnational surrogacy, foregrounding how racial capitalism is reproduced through gendered bodies. While *Children of Men* attempts to critique this process of surrogacy, Bahng argues, counter to other critics, that the film reinscribes it. On the other hand, Hopkinson’s novel draws on non-Western science and storytelling to create webs of kinship that are transnational, queer, even “intergalactic and cross-species” (83).

The last two chapters of *Migrant Futures* are especially dazzling in their articulation of speculation fiction’s kin-making potential. Chapter 4 takes up Sonny Liew’s graphic novel *Malinky Robot* as a counternarrative of Asian futurity that “[captures] play and adventure in slow time” (133). Quietly resisting the neoliberal fantasies of aspiration and techno-orientalism mapped onto Singapore and other parts of Asia, *Malinky Robot* cultivates “extended practices of care and more inclusive notions of family and collective responsibility” (138). Reveling in the ephemeral, the uncertain, the mundane, and the dilapidated, *Malinky Robot* offers an affective counterpoint to the cruel optimism of neoliberal ascent; it generates what Bahng calls “queer exuberance,” or “the startling willingness to cultivate tender ties in precarious times” (145). Bahng’s final chapter pivots from Asia to the “irradiated transpacific” (147), where a “bio-ecological undercommons” (148) emerges from bodies of water polluted by nuclear waste as well as by the legacies of militarization and labor

exploitation. Larissa Lai's novel *Salt Fish Girl* serves as an occasion to reflect on the promises and limits of scientific research on DNA, and specifically on how such research is inextricable from racialized forms of neoliberal calculation. Lai's novel puts its faith not in those futures which scientific rationality can create or predict but in the "mutant assemblages" (Bahng 149) that coalesce within conditions of subjection.

Bahng's ambitious book contributes to the nascent but growing field of critical finance studies, as well as to the more established tradition of scholarship on racial capitalism. As she puts it in her epilogue, she is interested in speculation "not so much as a genre, but rather as a discursive practice" (169). Bahng reformulates financial speculation not just as a discourse that renders things and beings immaterial and disembodied, as Ian Baucom argues in *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005), but as one that, paradoxically, also renders them knowable, legible, and concrete enough to contain and possess. As Bahng charts how speculation enacts its structural and structuring violence, she also dwells on the counterpoint to such violence: the "irrational exuberance" (170) of an undercommons that refuses growth, incentives, ascent, and the desire for possession. Whereas financial speculation incites acquisitive striving, exuberant speculation insists on holding open the future without grasping hold of it.

All four studies are committed to this kind of exuberant speculation. And it is this commitment that unites them rather than a dedication to any narrowly defined genre of literature. Indeed, even as literary texts feature prominently in all four books, speculative fiction studies exceeds the realm of literature. The intellectual tools of literary studies—attention to the nuances of language, the construction of narratives, the conditions of knowledge production, and the stakes of representation—prove useful for articulating how speculation works, but these scholars ultimately concern themselves with how to produce new or renewed social worlds, not just interpret the world we have now.

#### Notes

1. "Chronological Bibliography of Science Fiction History, Theory, and Criticism," *Science Fiction Studies*, accessed September 13, 2017, [www.depauw.edu/sfs/biblio.htm](http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/biblio.htm).
2. Robert Heinlein, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction," in *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy: Twenty Dynamic Essays by the Field's Top Professionals* (New York: Davis Publications, 1991), 5–11; Margaret Atwood, *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent, 1982–2004* (Toronto: Anansi, 2004).
3. Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), 5.

4. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), 97.
5. Sami Schalk, "Experience, Research, and Writing: Octavia E. Butler as an Author of Disability Literature," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 6.1 (2017): 153–77.