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AZTLÁN ANTHOLOGY SERIES, VOLUME 4

# Altermundos

## Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture

Edited by

Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín

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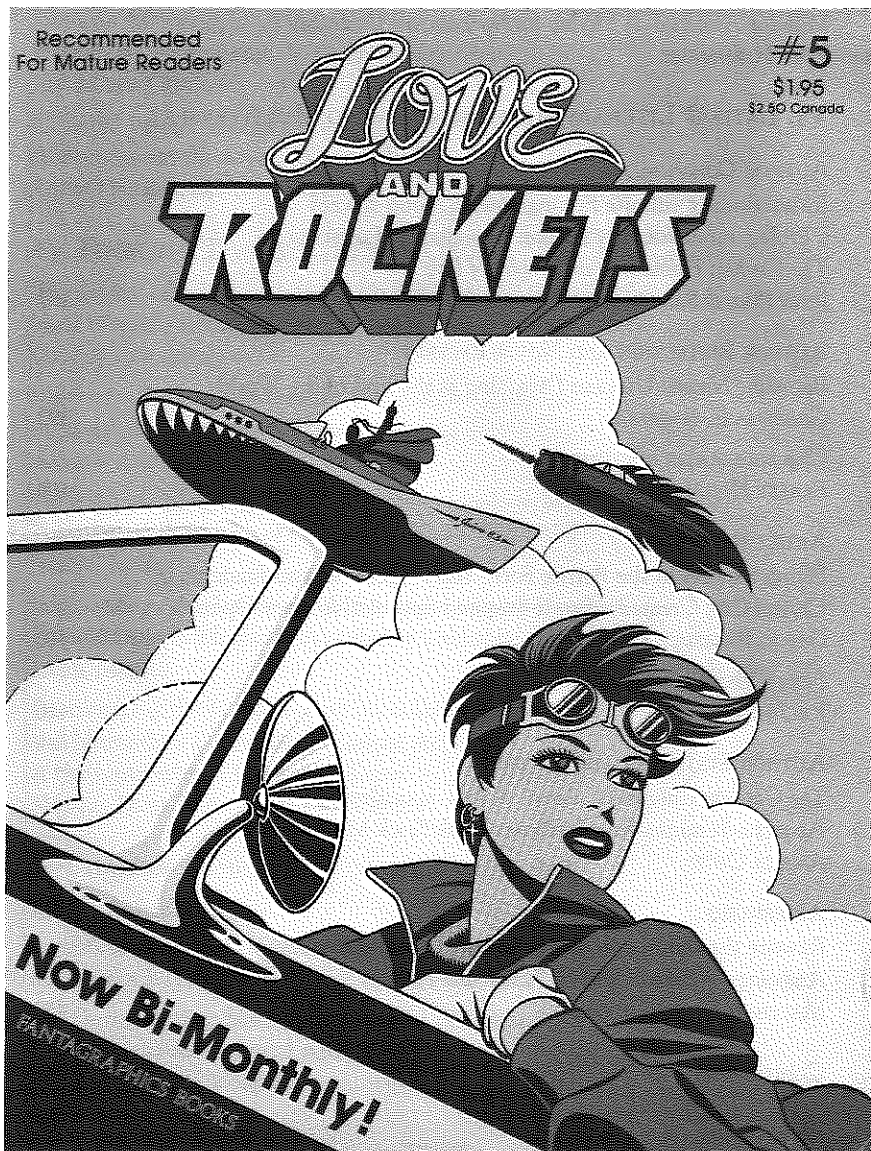
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Front cover of *Love and Rockets*, no. 5 (March 1984). Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.

## FOREWORD

### The Time Machine

#### From Afrofuturism to Chicanafuturism and Beyond

Catherine S. Ramírez

Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* brought me back to science fiction. I had been a science fiction fan when I was growing up, but had drifted from the genre with age. Perhaps my interest began to wane when I decided that, for all its emphasis on newness, the typical science fiction hero was a messianic white boy. Think Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars* and Ender Wiggin, the prodigy-protagonist of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* series. Or perhaps I decided I was done with sci-fi when I attended back-to-back screenings of *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* at the 1,300-seat UC Theater during my freshman year at the University of California, Berkeley, and saw that I was one of but a handful of women in the audience (to say nothing of the dearth of women on the screen). Or maybe the last straw was Jar Jar Binks, George Lucas's pitifully anachronistic sci-fi rendition of Stepin Fetchit.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the source of my alienation and discontent, I had pretty much written off science fiction by my mid-twenties. The genre was for immature white male nerds with dubious politics, I concluded; I was a feminist woman of color.

Then I encountered *Parable of the Sower*. It was the mid-1990s and I was supposed to be preparing for my PhD qualifying exam. I was looking for a distraction when I picked up the yellow and orange paperback. More than a mere diversion, Butler's novel proved to be a compass and inspiration. Its troubled and powerful heroine, Lauren Olamina, is a black teenage girl who experiences others' physical sensations as if they were her own and who manages to lead a motley group of survivors out of a postapocalyptic

Southern California to a northern haven. This extraordinary young woman cast new light on the theories of double consciousness, intersectionality, *malinchismo*, and cultural identity that I had been struggling to grasp in the classroom. I had no idea science fiction could be so smart, pleasurable, and politically down.

*Parable of the Sower* also introduced me to feminist science fiction and Afrofuturism. *Wikipedia* defines the latter as “a literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western cosmologies in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise, interrogate, and re-examine the historical events of the past.”<sup>2</sup> I present this definition not only because it is accurate and pithy, but also because the very existence of a *Wikipedia* entry for Afrofuturism speaks to the term’s significance and circulation since Mark Dery coined it in 1993. Like other terms that brilliantly name that which is before us but is seemingly invisible, natural, immutable, or permanent—for instance, capitalism and heteronormativity—Afrofuturism had surrounded me long before I knew the word for it. Take, as an example, the music of my childhood and adolescence. More than just the freak-a-zoid and atomic dog, Afrofuturism was the desire and audacity to imagine an alternate reality and alternative ways of being. It was Afrika Bambaataa’s *Planet Rock*, Marvin Gaye’s funky space reincarnation, and the need to travel through time by renarrating the past and striving for a brighter future.<sup>3</sup>

A Afrofuturism and the work of New Mexican artist Marion C. Martinez brought the concept of Chicanafuturism to me. I first saw Martinez’s mixed-media Catholic icons in 2001 at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe as part of *Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology*, a bold and innovative show that explored some of the ways in which four Latina artists—Martinez, Teresa Archuleta-Sagel, Elena Baca, and Alma López—used technology in their work. Like good science fiction, Martinez’s nine pieces in *Cyber Arte* were both familiar and new to me: they depicted the Virgin of Guadalupe and Christ with his crown of thorns, yet they were made of discarded computer parts, like wires, chips, and disks. These luminous works brought the high-tech and rasquache together and prompted me to define Chicanafuturism as “cultural production that attends to cultural transformations resulting from new and everyday technologies (including their detritus); that excavates, creates, and alters narratives of identity, technology, and the future; that interrogates the promises of

science and technology; and that redefines humanism and the human” (Ramírez 2004, 77–78).

With its clear ties to Afrofuturism, Chicanafuturism is itself a chimera concept, a suturing of Butler’s fiction, theories of Afrofuturism, Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of alien consciousness, and Martinez’s cyber arte. It is by no means pure, and as one of many alternative futurisms, to use Sherryl Vint, Rob Latham, and Nalo Hopkinson’s term, it is not original. Vint, Latham, and Hopkinson’s work highlights the ubiquity and capaciousness of alternative futurisms and the need for peoples across time and space to scrutinize the present, reexamine the past, and envision the future.<sup>4</sup>

Using the time machine, a staple of sci-fi, Aamer Rahman’s *Fear of a Brown Planet* offers an alternative narrative of the past to cast new light on the present.<sup>5</sup> In this sharp and sardonic stand-up routine, Rahman, an Australian comedian of Bangladeshi descent, responds to criticism from whites that his comedy is reverse racist and to the assertion made by some people of color that reverse racism does not exist. “I don’t agree with that,” he remarks. “I think there is such a thing as reverse racism. I could be a reverse racist if I wanted to. All I would need would be a time machine.” He then proceeds to retell the last five-hundred-plus years of world history. However, in his version of the story, African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Central and South American nations invade, colonize, and plunder Europe. Black and brown powers set up a “trans-Asian” slave trade in which whites are forced to “work on giant rice plantations in China.” Above all, they establish “systems that privilege black and brown people at every conceivable social, political, and economic opportunity [so] white people would never have any hope of real self-determination.” “If, after hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of that,” Rahman concludes, “I got on stage at a comedy show and said, ‘Hey, what’s the deal with white people? Why can’t they dance?’ that would be reverse racism.”<sup>6</sup>

Not just a simple revenge fantasy or reiteration of clichés, *Fear of a Brown Planet* exposes the absurdity of the very notion of reverse racism by bringing into relief profound historical injustices and social inequalities in our world. By invoking Public Enemy’s 1990 LP *Fear of a Black Planet*, and bearing more than a wee resemblance to George S. Schuyler’s speculative fiction novel *Black Empire* (1993), Rahman’s joke both draws from Afrofuturism and pushes it in new directions.<sup>7</sup> The contributors to this dossier do the same as they rethink Chicanafuturism. I defer to their expertise, commend their labor and creativity, and can’t wait to see where they’ll take us.

## Notes

1. Stepin Fetchit was the stage name of Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry (1902–85), an African American comedian and film actor who exploited and helped popularize racist stereotypes of the lazy, freewheeling, “Negro” simpleton over the course of the twentieth century.

2. “Afrofuturism,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrofuturism> (accessed December 30, 2014).

3. “Freak-a-Zoid” is from Midnight Star’s 1983 album *No Parking on the Dance Floor*, and “Atomic Dog” is from George Clinton’s *Computer Games* (1982). “Planet Rock” is a 1982 song by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, and “A Funky Space Reincarnation” is from Marvin Gaye’s *Here, My Dear* (1978).

4. For more information about Vint, Latham, and Hopkinson’s alternative futurisms project, see Miller (2014).

5. Rahman developed *Fear of a Brown Planet* with fellow comedian Nazeem Hussain and performed it at comedy festivals for several years beginning in 2004.

6. All quotes are from Rahman’s performance at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw\\_mRaHb-M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw_mRaHb-M).

7. *Black Empire*, about the creation of an independent and menacing nation on the African continent, was originally published under Schuyler’s pseudonym, Samuel I. Brooks, and ran as a serial in the *Pittsburgh Courier* from October 1937 to April 1938.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Altermundos

## Reassessing the Past, Present, and Future of the Chican@ and Latin@ Speculative Arts

Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B. V. Olguín

We began this anthology project by curating and editing two thematic dossiers on the Latin@ speculative arts published in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* in fall 2015 and spring 2016. In doing so, we sought to recover an element of vernacular culture that has always been a mainstay of the Chican@ and Latin@ literary, visual, and performing arts but that has not been fully appreciated or theorized, despite Catherine S. Ramírez’s (2004) prescient call two decades ago to recenter the speculative in theories of Chican@ poetics. We also simply like speculative fiction, particularly its boundlessness and its unabashed insistence on the utopian as a real possibility. What has emerged from the myriad dialogues, discoveries, recoveries, and theories of the Latin@ speculative arts is a profound, and profoundly productive, disorientation. Time travel—the old trope of the speculative arts—has merged with shape-shifting: virtually nothing of what we thought we knew about Latin@ literary, theatrical, cinematic, and visual arts genealogies and histories has remained intact. The possibilities for theorizing Latinidades are again boundless and endless.

Building on the two dossiers, this expanded anthology presents criticism of Latin@ speculative arts along with original creative production of speculative fiction and visual art. Screening approximately five dozen proposals and stewarding the development and revision of the pieces that are included in this anthology prompted a radical reassessment of what constitutes the speculative in terms of generic boundaries and