



# Towards More Speculative Critical Geographies

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## Abstract

As capitalocentric, fascist, genocidal and techno-managerial visions of future space proliferate and coalesce, what is the role of critical geography? How can critical geographers foster the creative imaginaries needed to organise for alternative futures? Contemplating the possible future directions of critical geography, here I consider the function of speculation – both in terms of the critical geographies of speculation and the possibilities of speculative critical geographies. In a brief reflection on recent work, I think about the ways that critical geography allows for intervention in and cultivation of speculative futures.

## Keywords

speculation, critical geography, future, prefiguration, fiction

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## Introduction

Speculation has long served as a cutting edge of colonial geographical expansion, uneven development and global capitalist investment strategy, grounded in a desire to profit from an uncertain present-future. As a means of value production and extraction, it involves the projection of hegemonic economic, social and geographical regimes into future space, and thus serves as a crucial site of intervention and invention. In the current context of economic, ecological and political instability – and the drive to capitalise on the ensuing and increasingly uneven precarity – scholars and activists are challenging attempts to colonise the future by critically interrogating the geographies of state and market-driven speculation. At the same time, some are also forging alternative forms of speculative inquiry, recognising the need for new futurist epistemologies. The framing of speculation as an opening for

imaginative alternatives has been explored in geography through considerations of *speculative geographies*, whereby speculation is understood as "an openness to what thought might become" (Williams and Keating 2022, 2), and a means of examining the "ranges of possibilities or lines of flight" (Attouh et al. 2024, 372) associated with contingency (Woodward 2016). Furthermore, speculation has often served a liberatory function for those who are not only marginalised in the present but also omitted from normative visions of the future (Noterman 2021). The cultivation of diverse conceptualisations of what could be – especially as a means of contesting or deviating from the violence and inequities of the status quo – can thus be a political act. It is also a creative act. Black geographies, for example, have long emphasised the importance of creativity to "freedom dreams" (Kelley 2002) and "speculating on hopeful futures" (Noxolo 2025, 135).

For this ACME forum on '*What is critical geography, and what can, and must, it be?*', I am interested in reflecting on the role of speculation in critical geography – both in terms of the critical geographies of speculation and the possibilities of *speculative critical geographies*. Specifically, I have been thinking about the ways that critical geography theories and practices offer a means of collectively speculating about creative, radical futures – an endeavor that is imperative in the context of capitalocentric, fascist, genocidal and techno-managerial practices which mobilise uncertainty and fear to limit and secure the possibilities of future space. In other words, how can critical geographers be proactive in cultivating the creative imaginaries needed to organise for alternative futures? Here, I briefly consider this inquiry through the lens of some of my recent work and offer up some related questions that might move us further towards more speculative critical geographies.

### **Critical geographies of speculation to speculative critical geographies**

Critiques of market and state-based speculation can create openings for alternative forms of speculative practice, including the adaptation of methods. In my work, I have critically examined the role of speculative cartographies in the devaluing and revaluing of urban property, especially so-called 'vacant' spaces (Noterman 2022). In particular, I have researched how city governments and prop tech companies use digital mapping tools and predictive analytics to create speculative valuations of urban real estate that project past-present "racial regimes of ownership" (Bhandar 2018) into city futures, whereby segregative and dispossessive logics are extended and revitalised. At the same time, activists and artists are mobilising speculative *counter*-cartographies to intervene in normative modes of urban property speculation by both revealing their contingencies and facilitating new speculative mappings of urban present-futures grounded in alternative spatial epistemologies and methodologies. For me, this raises the question of how critical geographies of speculation can open up space for what the Uncertain Commons collective (2013, 5) calls "affirmative" forms of speculation that remain "open to multiple futures" rather than more "firmative" types of speculation that seek to secure and "solidify[...] the possibilities of the future"? Or put another way, how can we move from critical geographies of speculation to more speculative critical geographies?

### **Inhabiting speculation**

In thinking about how affirmative forms of speculation are, and can be, mobilised within critical geography, I have also been exploring the relationship between speculation

and prefiguration: how does speculative praxis overlap with and differ from prefigurative practices? Here I have been considering the possibilities of *inhabiting speculation*, whereby speculation emerges from lived-in struggles that seek to change material conditions in the present and future, and can, in turn, be used to inform prefigurative practices that seek to actualise speculative visions in the here and now. A couple of years ago, in collaboration with a U.S. social movement – the Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign – I co-organised a series of workshops for housing activists related to ongoing research I have been undertaking on a policy that allows for the transfer of ‘surplus’ federal government properties for homeless services (Noterman forthcoming). While the workshop discussions initially focused on the significant limitations of the specific policy (and related housing and land use policies), they ultimately created space to imagine multiple possible alternative ways of approaching the challenges of houselessness. The conversations moved from critically analysing flawed housing policy frameworks toward more speculative lines of thought – towards redefining understandings of land and housing outside the norms of liberal property regimes and not limited by considerations of pragmatism. And yet, these speculations were grounded in everyday critique and ongoing material struggle and thus ended up informing the prefigurative practices of some workshop participants. These discussions led me to ask: *what forms of speculation undergird prefigurative practices?* And can inhabited forms of speculation – especially emerging from those who critically interrogate the normative regimes that fail them – offer visions of future space that stay with uncertainty and complexity rather than seek to manage or profit from it?

### Speculative fictions

Given that the theme of the 2025 Royal Geographical Society annual conference was creative geographies, I wanted to also briefly reflect on the (potential) role of speculative fiction, and especially science fiction, in critical geographies. As highlighted in Rob Kitchin and James Kneale’s edited collection, *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, science fiction serves as “a privileged site for critical thought” (Kneale and Kitchin 2002, 4). It not only offers a creative critical lens into contemporary geographies, providing a “useful cognitive space” (ibid, 9) to interrogate normative spatial and temporal assumptions, but it also develops realms to rethink the potential of speculative, ‘unimaginable’ geographical imaginations and “B-side” nonlinear temporalities (Goffe 2022). Recently, in my work on legal geographies, I have been thinking with ‘The Space Traders,’ a science fiction short story that legal scholar and critical race theorist Derrick Bell originally wrote in 1989 to use with his law students in discussions about the endurance of legalised racial violence and extractivism (Bell 1992). In the story, extraterrestrials visit the U.S. with a proposal to address the country’s pressing economic and environmental issues – offering vast wealth and technological advances in exchange for all Black citizens. The narrative follows the subsequent debate and ultimate acceptance of the proposal, bridging the extrapolative and the speculative tendencies of science fiction (Kneale and Kitchin 2002) to illuminate the structures that maintain racial capitalism and those that allow for its projection into future space, whereby the unimaginable quickly becomes imaginable. The (other)world-building involved in speculative and science fiction allows for critical reconsideration not only of the ‘reality’ undergirding fictionalised geographies but also of the very processes of world-building itself. Engaging with this story has allowed me to reflect on the types of speculative critical

geographies that emerge through the imaginative im/possibilities of fiction and creative expression more broadly. How do they inform, and can they further inform, our spatial praxis?

### Final thoughts

Given the current attempts of tech billionaires, politicians, and profit-driven investors to capture future space and imaginations, I think that an important realm for critical geographies now and in the future is to focus on what feminist theorist Caitlin Gunn (2019, 16) calls "radical speculation," which aims to free political engagement from "the mental hurdles of feasibility" in order to open up space to "imagine futures, reclaim histories, and create alternative realities." I am increasingly interested in how we can do this through our scholarship, organising and teaching – to resist getting too caught up in the normative assumptions and terms of reference that limit the possibilities of what critical geographical theory and practice is and can be. How can we create openings for more speculative critical geographies that turn towards radical, currently unimaginable futures?

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