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State Killing: Queer and Women of Color Manifestas against U.S. Violence and Oppression
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Black Feminist Futurity: From Survival Rhetoric to Radical Speculation

Caitlin Gunn

This manifesta challenges a reliance on black feminist survival rhetoric that can limit the impact and reach of black feminist visionary work. It argues for a framework of radical speculation that recognizes black feminist theory-making as a politically powerful form of play and illuminates visionary work of black feminist activism from the Combahee River Collective to prison abolition. Culminating in a call to view black feminist speculative fiction authors as guides in speculative play, the manifesta demands we move beyond surviving today's apocalyptic anti-black conditions toward cultivating futures that we desire and in which we can do more than survive.

Survival Rhetoric Kills Our Futures

I woke up on November 9, 2016, the morning after the U.S. presidential election, and called my mother. I expressed my sense of dread and hopelessness about black women's survival in the face of fascism, state violence, and emboldened racists. My mother told me black women are good at surviving conditions we were never meant to survive and that our strength is our ability to endure the unendurable. Her advice is what black women often hear and what they say to themselves: survive today, make it until tomorrow, our presence, here, now, is enough. This advice grows less comforting to me as I exist in the midst of rising terror about livable futures for black people. And yet, when facing violence that threatens black lives, black women remain occupied with rhetoric that privileges immediate survival.

When black women are focused on basic survival, black feminism is reduced in reach and vision. The key term of "survival" functions within ostensibly empowering rhetoric that stops black women in the present moment or suspends us in history.[1] Under the rhetoric of survival, we struggle to manifest a fundamental component of black feminist praxis: imagining ourselves and our lives beyond white supremacist oppression. If we reject rhetoric delineating what we can or should have, we can begin to conceptualize the radical futures we desire.

Desire as a concept leaves room for strategizing survival while preserving options for full thriving black lives filled with joy, abundance, and playfulness. Survival is necessary and desirable, but alone it cannot actualize black feminism's radical aim of dismantling white supremacy.[2] With our desires focused on a framework of radical speculation, black feminists can create more pleasure and more resistance. We can act as the main character, Lauren, in Octavia Butler's (1993) *Parable of the Sower*, and learn to shape God, shape the universe, and shape change—all with an eye to future worlds.

How can we live in the current U.S. dystopia without reducing black women's lives to survival? To start, we must interrogate the rhetoric of survival and cultivate the power of radical speculation and speculative play.

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A Framework of Radical Speculation

Radical speculation enables us to imagine futures, reclaim histories, and create alternate realities. Speculation is *radical* when we imagine futures unbound by ideologies and structures designed to delimit black lives. Radical speculation is therefore a framework fit for dismantling white supremacy. Working within a framework of radical speculation prepares us to confront the "alternative facts" that white supremacists spread. Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the 45th president, used the phrase "alternative facts" in a *Meet the Press* interview (2017) to defend Trump's inflated claims about attendance at his inauguration. As this phrase gained traction, I witnessed its rich and speculative nature prop up white supremacy, falsehoods, and state violence.

Alternative facts distort reality, but white supremacists are not the only ones capable of imagining alternatives. We must never forget that we know how to breathe our lives into the cut-out spaces made for black deaths. Activist Charlene Carruthers (2018) points to the crucial revival of the black imagination in *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*. The state, she argues, kills the black imagination and stifles black expression (26 – 27). The goal of killing black imagination is to prevent us from dreaming about liberation, imagining an end to oppression, and engaging in life-affirming self-expression. When radical speculation by black people flourishes, it becomes both a protection and resource against anti-blackness and violence (38 – 39).

Imagining black futures is an urgent obligation, not a luxury, due to the impacts of state violence, including capitalism and police brutality. Audre Lorde (2007) proclaimed that poetry is not a luxury. She wrote, "[Poetry] is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (36). Speculative exercises in art, fiction, and theory strive toward dreams as explicitly as poetry, providing spaces to play in our futures and pasts, and catalyzing action to move in and beyond the present. The obligation of imagination is visible in ongoing black political projects such as prison abolition, which demands speculation applied against threats to black lives. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Y. Davis laments the failure of imagination that underscores critiques of the prison abolition movement:

> Prison abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impractical, and, at worst, mystifying and foolish. This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so 'natural' that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it. (2003, 10)

As prison abolition is difficult to imagine, so too is the dismantling of other white supremacist institutions. Radical speculation is an opportunity to critique and adjust our orientation toward the conditions assumed to be intrinsic to society. Working within a framework of radical speculation enables us to bypass mental hurdles of feasibility, freeing us to accept the challenge of imagining and building the futures we desire. Lorde (2007, 36) wrote, "If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is a luxury…[then] we have given up the future of our worlds." Radical speculation and

speculative play refuse to give up black future worlds, and speculation can empower black women to resist the rhetoric of survival.

Building Black Feminist Futures through Speculative Play

Black feminism has a long, rich tradition of radical speculation. Black feminist writers envision black liberation as freedom for all oppressed people. The Combahee River Collective's statement asserts that black women's liberation is necessary in and of itself, not as a supplement to feminist and black liberation struggles (1979, 273). The Combahee River Collective employs radical speculation beyond survival by asserting, "If black women are free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (276). To imagine a world where black women are free is a critical futurist praxis that forms the foundation of black feminist activism. Today, the movement for black lives participates in radical speculation through the rallying cry: "Black Lives Matter." This declaration has always been true for black people, although it is a claim that the U.S. state violently, fatally, rejects and denies. If we imagine through radical speculation what it looks like for black lives to matter and for black women to be free, then we take the first step toward building a world in that image.

We can also enact a framework of radical speculation through speculative play. We can approach speculative play through fiction, visual art, music, research, and theory as methods of training ourselves to make alternative futures. One guide to this training comes from adrienne maree brown's (2017) *Emergent Strategy*, which defines speculative fiction as a "way to practice the future together" and as a laboratory (19). Speculative play enhances our ability to flex muscles of futurity and to develop skills and shared languages for imagining a different tomorrow (brown 2017). Black feminist speculative work is a place we can go to find "the medicine of possibility applied to the trauma of human behavior" (37). This trauma is so often the result of state violence, but it also manifests through the rhetoric of survival that burdens black people and expects black women to live through pain.

Another guide to this training comes from Alexis Pauline Gumbs' (2018) *M Archive: After the End of the World*, which bends time to render the present reality of state violence and environmental destruction as history. An exercise in speculative play that Gumbs calls "speculative documentary" (xi), the book arrives from a future in which black people, and black feminism, have done more than survive apocalyptic conditions. People have built and sustained a culture without capitalism and anti-blackness, which acknowledges black women's contributions and power. Written "after and with" (xi) black feminist theorists and poets like M. Jacqui Alexander, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton, and "after and with" the Combahee River Collective and the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, Gumbs gives a glimpse into a future that has always been the domain of black feminist metaphysical speculation. She describes the work as written "from and with the perspective of a researcher, a post-scientist sorting artifacts after the end of the world. This is you beyond you" (xi). If we heed the futurist call found in works of radical speculation, then we can channel the "us beyond us" to move from the present to futures unrestrained by what is today deemed impossible. Gumbs performs speculative play and reminds us that yesterday's impossible futures may one day be viewed as prophecy.

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From this archive, we learn that black feminism *is* futurist work. Naming and embracing it as such appreciates how black feminist knowledge production performs radical speculation. Patricia Hill Collins points to the role of black feminist work in shaping present and future generations:

> Although fostering dialogues among black women in the here and now is important, of greater significance is reconceptualizing Black women's intellectual work as engaging in dialogues across time. The significance of writing books, making movies, recording music, and producing other forms of cultural production lies in their power to foster dialogues among a diverse array of current and future readers, viewers, and listeners. (1998, 75)

Through speculative play in visual art, music, fiction, theory and other cultural productions, we practice, test, and hone our skills and will to thrive. As our play *is* political action, we must honor it as vital praxis for constructing liberation from oppression and violence. Speculative play helps us discover how to move beyond the paralysis of survival. Focusing on visionary futurist goals ruptures the survival rhetoric that can trap and kill the black imagination. Black feminist science fiction writers are leaders, guides, and prophets in speculative play.

Prophetic Visions: Black Feminist Fiction

Walidah Imarisha introduces *Octavia's Brood*, a speculative fiction and social justice anthology, with these claims: "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction" (2015, 3). Familiar with speculative play, black authors of speculative fiction write futures where black people reject this world and futures that erase us, whether these erasures come from mainstream science fiction texts in which white people build the future and black people function as tools and machines, or the mainstreaming of the prison industrial complex in which white people build penal colonies to contain black bodies.

With startling accuracy, black feminist science fiction predicted current conditions. Octavia Butler's (1993) novel, *Parable of the Sower*, and her (1998) sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, are gaining renewed attention as her dystopian vision of the 2020s and our burgeoning fascist reality collide. In *Parable of the Talents,* Butler's depiction of the politician, Jarret, and his response to public displays of violence and hate foreshadow Trump's rhetoric and action:

> Jarret condemns the burnings, but does so in such mild language that his people are free to hear what they want to hear. As for the beatings, the tarring and feathering, and the destruction of "heathen houses of devil-worship," he has a simple answer: "Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind, and become one of us. Help us to make America great again." (1998, 19)

This depiction is accurate down to the detail of a political leader promising to "make America great again" as the country descends into chaos due to class stratification, corporatization, and destruction of natural resources. Radical speculation entails creating and turning to speculative work that imagines present conditions as well as methods to kill the state we are in.

There are endless lessons and strategies to learn in the endeavor to implement radical speculation and speculative play. To begin this endeavor, we must view works by black feminist authors of speculative fiction as sites of knowledge production and black speculative fiction as a mandatory component of the black feminist canon. This angle of vision means incorporating the concepts of black feminist fiction authors into our lives through activism, education, work, and play; as we celebrate, mourn, plan, and dream; when this world is not enough because it was not made for us.

We can learn to think through a framework of radical speculation and interrogate rhetoric that halts liberation in the name of pragmatism. Black feminist authors of speculative fiction respond to queer black science fiction writer Samuel Delany's entreaty to write our own stories to find out what happens in them (2009, 40) – and so we must, to subvert the stories white supremacy tells about and to us. When we engage in radical speculation and speculative play, we move beyond survival to assemble the alternative futures we desire, made in our own image and manifested on our own terms.

Notes

1. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Muñoz asks us to move out of what he calls the "prisonhouse of here and now" (2009, 1).

2. Desire also leaves space for instances where survival is neither prioritized nor wanted. One of the most poignant moments in adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* is her assertion that "Africans leaping off of slaver ships were afrofuturists [...] Slaves who ran to freedom, and slaves who ran to their deaths, were afrofuturists" (2017, 162). The paths of futurism and desire do not always lead to survival.

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CAITLIN GUNN is a Feminist Studies Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her work engages black cyberfeminist theory, feminist cyborg theory, and black speculative fiction to theorize a black feminist cyborg ontology. In her work as an equity consultant, she brings feminist theory to education and nonprofit settings to assist with curriculum, workplace culture and training, and conflict resolution.

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