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STATE KILLING: QUEER AND WOMEN
OF COLOR MANIFESTAS AGAINST U.S.
VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION

Edited by Annie Hill



Credits

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Introduction

State Killing: Queer and Women of Color Manifestas against U.S. Violence and Oppression

Annie Hill

Introduction

In 1981, Audre Lorde delivered a searing keynote speech, titled “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” at the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conference. In the speech, Lorde instructed the audience to face the anger that racism and hatred cause in order to learn from it. She told white women to stop fearing anger expressed by women of color and start listening to it. She said that “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (1997, 280). Lorde’s insight, one of so many, was that the affective state of anger had power, energy, and information. Today, there is so much to rage against that we can become immobilized by the ineffective feelings of fear, guilt, and despair. Now is when we need the past to instruct the present. Lorde also explained to her immediate, and her imminent, audience:

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anguish at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a whole world out there that takes for granted our lack of humanness, that hates our very existence, outside of its service. And I say “symphony” rather than “cacophony” because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. (282)

This special issue releases an orchestra of furies that go by the name of *manifesta*. The shape-shifting genre of the *manifesta* develops from a symphony of anguish into an articulated anger “focused with precision” on what threatens, diminishes, derails, and ends our lives (280). It is a force whose form shifts to achieve its function: to kill the state we are in to ensure our survival. This killing rage moves from shock and awe at the gravity of our political situation to the agency of anger, and the critical insights it calls into being. In this frame of mind, the term “state killing” does not only signify state logics and projects that kill people but also points toward our collective struggles to eradicate a murderous state.

The Morning After: Waking Up and Calling for Manifestas

This special issue, titled “State Killing: Queer and Women of Color Manifestas against U.S. Violence and Oppression,” emerged from a panel that I co-organized with Karma Chávez for the NWSA conference in 2017. Our desire to organize a panel of Q/WOC manifestas arose the previous year. In 2016, NWSA met in Montréal and began the morning after Donald Trump’s election to the U.S. presidency.



November 9, 2016 was a surreal time to be an American outside of the United States, among thousands of feminists engaging in scholarship as the political ground at “home” shifted and a sense of urgency grew in hotel rooms and hallways. The resounding question: How should we mobilize against a man who aimed to dehumanize, criminalize, pathologize, detain, deport, and destroy people inside and outside of the country? Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” vowed to target women, people of color, religious minorities, queer people, trans people, poor people, and people without state-issued papers securing basic rights. Since people inhabit intersecting identities and locations, the scope of Trump’s agenda was at once vast and volatile.

The panel we convened at NWSA 2017 centered on Q/WOC responses to Trump’s presidency, its effects, and the conditions enabling him to occupy the country’s highest office. We called for manifestas because they are a feminist, and feral, form of public address (hence, our occlusion of the masculine “manifesto”). That panel and its enthusiastic audience inspired this issue, which I have undertaken to assemble more manifestas and to make them mobile, extending the concept from a conference panel to a digital collection.

As I hope the issue shows, like zines, manifestas generate a “third space” in which “readers witness acted-upon knowledge informed by critical and coalitional consciousness” (Licona 2012, 2). Zines are a DIY, subcultural form of print media. Focusing on Q/WOC zines, Adela C. Licona illustrated that white men were not the only people composing this form of communication, despite most attention being trained on men’s texts. Licona recast zines as “radical rhetorical performances” made by and for Q/WOC (2). Likewise, my aim with this issue is to disrupt the myopic attention on man-made manifestos and, beyond that, to demonstrate how Q/WOC construct manifestas that unsettle the intent(ions) and content(ions) of the genre.

A speaker at our NWSA panel said there was something about writing a manifesta that shifted her from a state of despair to a space of determination. Writing and witnessing manifestas can be energizing—especially in these enervating times—because manifestas not only move audiences, they move their creators too. I encourage readers to make their own manifestas by engaging in the three moves detailed below with pen, pixel, paint, photograph or whatever materials are at hand, and with the intent of shifting themselves and others out of the affective states we inhabit due to the political state we are in. Manifestas function as vehicles for feminist rhetorical invention because we need other words and images right now. The manifesta—as an unruly and exigent genre—speaks to that need.

The Manifesta: A Genre for Feral Feminists

As a genre, manifestas typically make three moves: they chronicle oppression, outline objectives, and confront oppressors to catalyze an audience toward action. They render violence visible by appealing to people experiencing oppression. Significantly, manifestas do not appeal to the state; rather, they address those who must navigate oppressive systems. They are therefore invitations to imagine pathways that do not cede to subjugation but refuse inclusion into oppressive systems, so often couched in the rhetoric of rights and recognition. In this issue, contributors insist other pathways are not only possible, they are already in play in the spaces where we come together.

Instead of pronouncing a version of sovereign speech (i.e., the manifesto that rules over others), manifestas gather and empower people to destroy the rule(s) producing domination. They thus constitute publics: people who see and hear themselves in a manifesta and grasp not only *who* but *what* it calls for. Sara Ahmed writes that “we bring into our statements of intent or purpose the experience of what we come up against. It is this experience that allows us to articulate a *for*, a *for* that carries with it an experience of what we come up against” (2017, 255). From this insight, we can see that manifestas inform by communicating experience and they transform by drawing on experience to create consciousness and collectivity with the express purpose of changing lived conditions. To challenge oppression and the manifold effects of enduring it, manifestas name what we come up against. By doing so, they forefront experiences that sustain and situate the knowledges we bring to this moment and which can move us toward the futures we desire.

In this way, manifestas inspire resistance as they “demand an end to oppression while mapping how wrongs may be righted in clear and frank terms” (Chávez 2013, 47). Contributors to this issue bring up what we come up against, including white fragility, excuses for men, anti-Blackness, compulsory able-bodiedness, political catastrophes, and assimilationist strategies that enable and enact oppression. They respond by screaming, speculating, rescripting, witnessing, and envisioning survival within and beyond these threats to life.



Figure 1: Photograph by Adela C. Licona of Relational Machinations sculpture



Contributions to the Special Issue

The manifestas assembled here are passionate guides that unpack and attack systems producing human devaluation, disposability, and death. The eight contributions are diverse manifestations of the manifesta genre and include analytical essays, cultural commentaries, scripted dialogues, poetry, and photo-essays.

In the opening piece, “three reminders from the birth and blood chorus,” **Alexis Pauline Gumbs** provides a “poetic meditation” to “contemporary survivors of U.S. State Violence” that calls on ancestors to help us live through this time. Drawing wisdom from the past brings forth the power of our presence: reminders that we are here now, descended from those who came before us and who stand before us with essential stories to tell. Gumbs runs with reminders that (re)turn us to the past as resource and pathway of resistance. She reminds us to “retake the stakes unshake the breaks make out the fake open the ache taste back our touch we must.”

In “Black Feminist Futurity: From Survival Rhetoric to Radical Speculation,” **Caitlin Gunn** mines resources that empower and extend beyond survival. Gunn sees speculative fiction by black feminist authors, including Gumbs, as a “politically powerful form of play.” Arguing for radical speculation as a political framework, Gunn urges readers to encounter these authors as prophets and guides to the futures we want and can already envision. Through textual analysis, Gunn evidences how black feminist speculative fiction gives us the tools and terms to “subvert the stories white supremacy tells about and to us.”

Accompanying the strategies of Gumbs’ “ancestral assignment” and Gunn’s “speculative play,” **Lamiyah Bahrainwala** screams in the face of the daily violence that puts her children in danger. In “Responding to ‘White Fragility’: A Manifesta of Screams,” Bahrainwala enacts screaming as a strategy to shake white people from their racist somnambulism and protect her children from this life-threatening indifference. Bahrainwala gives three examples of how white fragility sanctions injury to black and brown bodies. She details how children of color are threatened when they are in public and when they are at play. Her commentary, resonating with the pieces that precede it, suggests that play is both a mode of survival and a serious threat to white supremacy.

While Bahrainwala recounts spontaneous confrontations and screaming as response, **Lzz Johnk** and **Sasha A. Khan** craft a scripted dialogue between Doctor and patient in “Crippling the Fuck Out: A Queer Crip Mad Manifesta Against the Medical Industrial Complex.” They contend that “compulsory able-bodymindedness” interlocks with other systems of oppression, and pathologization operates to dispossess “non-normative bodyminds.” This contribution stages how the Medical Industrial Complex uses the pathologizing rhetoric of taking care of the Other to signify care-taking (i.e., to keep safe and well), when medicalization actually works to get rid of difference (i.e., to take care of a problem).

In “Puerto Rico Weathers the Storm: *Autogestión* as a Coalitional Counter-Praxis of Survival,” **Karriann Soto Vega** analyzes the comingling of political and natural disasters and focuses on responses by grassroots artistic collectives, such as *Vueltabajo Teatro*. Specifically, Soto Vega examines how *Vueltabajo* organized aid and communication outlets for Puerto Ricans after hurricane María. These life-sustaining efforts enact *Vueltabajo*’s disidentification from the state in order to counter oppression and carve out routes of



resistance via *autogestión*, or collective self-management. Soto Vega offers a study of survival within the vortex of coloniality, disaster capitalism, and climate catastrophe.

Following Soto Vega's appraisal of state failures to assist Puerto Ricans, **Bo (Luengsurawat) Rittapa** and **Jacob Lau** parse U.S. attempts to manage populations, and diversity, via migration control and the national census. In "Now You See Me, But You Don't: Neoliberal Visibility and the Politics of Counting," Rittapa and Lau explore the co-occurrence of the 2010 U.S. census and Arizona SB 1070 to illustrate how efforts to increase marginalized subjects' visibility laid the groundwork for Trump's targeting of vulnerable populations. They reveal that liberal grassroots campaigns to grant state recognition and resources to trans people worked with, not against, the exclusion of migrants from legal protection and personhood.

Jess Burgoyne-King then offers two poems foregrounding the entanglements of state and sexual violence. The first poem, "Mumpsimus Enforced in the Vivarium," takes us to a past-but-present place of "cotton-candy trees" and "concealing histories" to track extractions of labor, land, and sex to feed the demand for sugar, cotton, and souls. The second poem, "Excuses for Men," traces the growth of a girl from infancy to womanhood, hounded by threats and acts of sexual violence. As her life course (and force) is pursued and penned in by men, she bears the burden of self-preservation announced in the claim that what girls experience is "not that bad."

The final contribution is a photo-essay called "INtersectional OUTrage" by **sarita gonzales** and **adela c. licona**. They made images in Tucson, Arizona—a place where border technologies turn the desert deadly—to respond to the Right's revival and the ongoing violence that peoples and lands experience due to white supremacist colonial capitalism. Akin to Gumbs' "three reminders from the birth and blood chorus," gonzales and licona's composition speaks the past and present. They envision a vibrant coalitional force in and from the desert as they are "a/roused by women-of-color feminisms, incited by grassroots organizers, and ignited by fierce and furious mujerx across generations."



Figure 2: Photograph by
Adela C. Licona of Relational
Machinations sculpture



Radical Rhetorical Performances: Tools and Blueprints to Survive the State We Are In

The call for contributions to this special issue asked for strategies to kill the state, but what came pivoted from state killing to kindred survival. From these refusals to surrender to U.S. violence and oppression, the collective claim is that one way to kill the state we are in, is to survive it. The manifestas deliver challenges to oppression, responses to lethal threats, reflections on surviving, and studies of collective survival. They also reimagine what counts as and what shape the “manifesto” can take by both crafting a Q/WOC manifesta genealogy and recasting the genre in bold and capacious terms. These manifestas arrive at a crucial time and provide turning points because this genre “is designed to rupture or intervene in history, in the present, with the aim of a better future” (Chávez 2013, 48). As feminist rhetoric and resistance, manifestas intend to persuade their audiences to speak out and act against violence and oppression.

The shared purpose of this issue became how to kill *and* survive this state by subverting its claims, refusing its orders, and rejecting its phobic fear of others. Trump’s administration builds on a long history of U.S. dominance, entrenching division and devaluing the people who made “America” and who precede its founding. Surviving this state requires visionary plans for its demise: blueprints that do not rely on, or reproduce, the death-worlds that the state creates. Living in a killing state necessarily entails generating radical spaces and subjectivities that can provide plans to persist within, and ultimately beyond, the state’s moribund borders. Regarding the emergence of radical subjectivity, Joy James and Edmund T. Gordon contend,

The *guerrero del amor* becomes a warrior lover who understands struggle and battle as expressions of commitment, loyalty, sharing of self—a selflessness that is not sacrifice but fulfillment through collectivity. The unfolding of self within the collective, just as the self develops in its individuality, is likely to be the foundation for radical subjectivity. (2008, 368)

To engender radical subjectivities, we must cultivate a third space made with our tools and our blueprints that shelters us, bringing us together again and again so we can continue to dismantle the master’s house while building a world we want (Licona 2012; Lorde 1997). Manifestas offer tools, blueprints, and spaces for us to try out and dwell in. Gumbs notes in relation to her book *Spill*, “This space, which is a temporary space, which we must leave, for the sake of future travelers and our own necks, is a sacred dedicated space” (2016, xxi). I hope this issue is a generative space for us to enter and exit so we can fight (for) another day.



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