Badass Feminist Politics

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Exploring Radical Edges of Feminist Theory, Communication, and Activism

EDITED BY SARAH JANE BLITHE AND JANELL C. BAUER

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Afrofuturist Lessons
in Persistence

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JENNA N. HANCHEY

Introduction: Feminist Exhaustion and Persistence

We are tired. We, feminist scholars of communication—women of color and white women, transwomen and ciswomen, differently and normatively abled women, women of all sexualities, women of multiple nationalities—are tired. Some of us are more tired than others. Our exhaustion is both bodily and psychological. We labor under patriarchal, heteronormative, and transphobic conditions at home, in the workplace, on social media, in public, and in private. These affect us differentially, and some of us are particularly weighted down by the burden of navigating the flows of power constantly pressing against us. To different extents, feminists feel continually pressed because to live as a feminist is to oppose the pressure of hegemonic cisheterosexism. Sara Ahmed thus defines oppression in terms of this feeling of pressure, of being pressed: "Oppression: how we feel pressed into things, by things, because of who we are recognized as being."[1] We are tired—*exhausted*—because to live as feminists means to constantly persist against the pressing forces of normativity.

In this essay, I ask, How should feminists persist in the face of the constant pressure of conditions ever more hostile to our being and becoming? This question is worth attending to because there is no answer immediately forthcoming in popular cultural narratives. No matter how much we labor, liberation from our contemporary circumstances seems hopeless. The news is bleak; society's

visions of the future more so. The only question that popular media seem to have left open is this: Which dystopia will we find ourselves in? We are implicitly told we will eventually land in either *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Children of Men*, *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*. We have only to prepare for the worst, whichever worst it is, for there is no saving ourselves now.

But just at Chela Sandoval recognized in the white, Western postmodern frenzy over subject fragmentation, the bleakness of contemporary circumstances is not new for many feminists and feminist scholars.[2] Marginalized folks of color and those from the Global South have been persisting under conditions where domination tries to persuade that they have no future for centuries.[3] Similarly, feminist and queer communication scholars of color and those from the Global South have written extensively about how to prevail against circumstances that marginalize,[4] erase,[5] degrade, and enrage[6]—persisting against the bleakness of disciplinary futures.

White feminist communication scholars like myself would do well to learn from those women and queer folks of color who have labored for so long to imagine new worlds if we are to persist under such conditions of hostility to feminist being and becoming. And if we are to be ethical in our persistence, we must acknowledge their contributions as more than simply influences; they are constitutive copresences that make possible our knowledge production.[7] In particular, white and Western feminist communication scholars must theorize through what María Lugones terms an interactive acknowledgment of difference, letting the wisdom of feminists and queer scholars of color pervade throughout our engagement with persistence and fundamentally affect how we envision our futures.[8] As Bernadette Marie Calafell argues, "Looking at our contemporary political and cultural landscapes and how they directly inform our academic livelihoods, now more than ever we need to reevaluate our feminist commitments or create new ones."[9] Feminist communication scholars should center feminist and queer of color and Global South theorizing in order to survive and thrive in our contemporary context, where we have already been worn down by (hetero) sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, capitalism, hate, and greed.

In this essay, I draw lessons in persistence from one of the most fruitful perspectives for imagining and enacting liberatory futures: Afrofuturism.[10] Afrofuturism is a field of creative production and study that centers African and African diasporic experience. By focusing imagined futures on and around Blackness, Afrofuturism provides hope that the world can and will be different. Hope may sometimes be seen as a defense mechanism against loss of control, or a way of reconciling oneself to unchangeable circumstances and the futility of struggle. Here, I use hope in a different sense, drawing from the thought of Sara Ahmed: "Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder

to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible."[11] Hope in this sense is what allows us to continue to struggle now and provides the catalyst for remembering that it is our *right* to write ourselves into the future,[12] even when we are told that the future will not be for us. Afrofuturism imagines the future in ways that provide hope, thus sustaining our persistence in the present.

I engage with Afrofuturism as a white woman because the futures that are being created by women and queer people of color, such as in Afrofuturisms, Latinxfuturisms, and Africanfuturisms, are the images of the future that we *all* need. At the same time, I recognize that these are not my dreams to either imagine or necessarily proclaim. What I highlight here, then, is what these imaginings do and why all feminist scholars of communication need Afrofuturism. White cisgender and heteronormative women in particular need to listen to the radical futures that are being imagined and labor to support the actualization of these new worlds.

Imagination is not often considered the realm of the communication discipline, as communication scholars typically focus on the temporal realms of past and present. If they do engage with the future, it is often under the umbrella of the predictive rather than the fictive. However, Afrofuturist scholar Ytasha L. Womack argues that the work of imagination is fundamental to persistence: "The resilience of the human spirit lies in our ability to imagine. Imagination is a tool of resistance."[13] Afrofuturism provides lessons in imagination that are necessary for feminist scholars of communication to persist, resist, and constitute more just futures. In the remainder of this essay, I first define Afrofuturism and explain its importance to feminist studies of communication. I then describe three particular lessons Afrofuturism holds for feminist persistence: change is inevitable, but it can be shaped; roots are vital to our futures; and liberation must be for all.[14] Finally, I conclude with a call to engage Afrofuturism in both our research work and everyday lives.

The Afrofuturist Imperative for Feminist Communication Studies

Afrofuturism serves to "excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future and offer critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture."[15] Afrofuturism thus disputes the teleological assumptions of white, Western mainstream technoculture while providing alternative visions of the future that are necessarily based in radical liberation simply by being built around African and African diasporic subjects. By imagining through ontologies and epistemologies of Blackness, Afrofuturism fundamentally refigures our futures by averring that those not considered human by Western modernity are fully realized and liberated subjects,[16] and connecting the past to the future by interweaving spirituality and nature in and through technological ideologies.

As Afrofuturism connects the past to the future and the natural to the technological, "Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken."[17] That is, by imagining alternative futures that draw as much from traditional Africana spirituality as from technological innovation, Afrofuturism also intervenes in the present. Many Afrofuturist creators and scholars thus see Afrofuturism as activist by its very nature,[18] believing that "just as the actions in the present dictate the future, imagining the future can change the present."[19] Since "Afrofuturism unchains the mind,"[20] the practice of imagining radically just futures opens new avenues for strategy, action, and collectivity in the present.

To imagine futures that center Africana ontology and epistemology, Afrofuturism fundamentally refigures ideologies of "the human." Drawing from Frantz Fanon and decolonial theorists, Sylvia Wynter makes the powerful argument that the white, Western, patriarchal conceptualization of the human—what she terms as Man—has long been overrepresenting himself (gendering intended) as *the human as such*.[21] Man, rather than incorporating all versions of what humanity can and does mean, instead presumes his version of humanity to be universal. This presumption is deeply violent; by configuring a subsection of humanity as the human itself, "black subjects, along with indigenous populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as the universal human."[22] Afrofuturism works off the basis of this theoretical understanding to create worlds where all people are understood as human.

The Afrofuturist project is thus necessarily feminist.[23] Within the system of Man, it is impossible to extricate the violence done to Black bodies from that done to feminine bodies, as well as to the colonized, the poor, or the otherwise aberrant.[24] As such, Black liberation can never be fully realized without concomitant projects of liberation from patriarchy, colonialism, heternormativity, cisnormativity, and capitalism. Afrofuturist philosophy thus is rooted in Black feminist thought and draws from it to imagine fully realized feminist futures. Womack goes so far as to argue that "Afrofuturism as a movement itself may be the first in which black women creators are credited for the power of their imaginations and are equally represented as the face of the future and the shapers of the future."[25]

Lisa A. Flores avers that racial rhetorical criticism must be an imperative in rhetorical study;[26] similarly, I argue that Afrofuturism should be an imperative in feminist studies of communication. Afrofuturism can aid feminist communication scholars in persisting under our contemporary circumstances by disputing the normative science fiction futures being written by white, patriarchal technocapitalists. Kodwo Eshun argues that this not only constrains our ideas

of what the future can be but also acts to *actualize* certain visions of the future: those based on whiteness, patriarchy, and class oppression.[27]

Science fiction and market capitalism are often two sides of the same coin.[28] When our field of vision and imaginations are filled with dystopian extrapolations that sexism, racism, colonialism, and capitalism will continue to rule the world, transforming it into a hellscape for everyone on the underside of modernity,[29] the work being done is more than predictive. According to Eshun, "a subtle oscillation between prediction and control is being engineered in which successful or powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards them, to command us to make them flesh."[30] That is, the visions being produced and communicated about the future "preprogram the present" in such a way as to make those visions *more tenable*.[31] If this is the case, then feminist communication scholars have an imperative to communicate futures in such a way as to advocate for justice and liberation for all. We *must* engage with Afrofuturism. Indeed, as Flores writes about the imperative for racial rhetorical criticism, "I cannot imagine why we would not."[32]

Three Afrofuturist Lessons for Feminist Communication Scholars

In this section, I detail three important lessons that Afrofuturism holds for feminist communication scholars, lessons that can help us persist under contemporary political and cultural conditions that seem hopeless. Drawing primarily from the work and legacy of Octavia Butler, Africanfuturist novels of Nnedi Okorafor, concept albums and accompanying films of Janelle Monae, and the poetic "speculative documentary" *M Archive: After the End of the World* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs,[33] I explore how Afrofuturist fantasies and science fictions upend Western ideologies of progress, linearity, dualism, and freedom. By advocating for understanding both the inevitability and flexibility of change, how rootedness is fundamental to futurity, and for a vision of liberation accessible to all, Afrofuturism asks us to rethink what futures are possible and provide hope that such futures may be actualized.

Change Is Inevitable, but It Can Be Shaped

God is Power—
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent.
And yet, God is Pliable,
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.

God exists to be shaped.
God is Change.[34]

The history of Black lives has been a history of unavoidable change structured by racial-colonial dynamics of power. As Mark Dery wrote in the essay that first termed Africana speculative work as "Afrofuturism," the story of Black lives *is* the story of alien abduction: "African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)."[35] Afrofuturism teaches marginalized populations how to not only adapt to the powerful forces of change but also bend and shape such forces to a will for justice. In a time when feminist scholars feel brow-beaten every day by the racist-capitalist patriarchy and feel that their futures are inexorably shaped by power's domination, pointing toward nothing but bleak dystopias, Afrofuturism can help us to see how we may navigate within power in such a way as to shape futures and move them onto liberatory paths.

But before we can begin to shape change, we must realize its inevitability. The novels of Octavia E. Butler are foundational to this philosophy of thought, narrating the experience of Black lives through brilliantly imagined relations between generations past, present, and future. Her work explores the fact that "Afrofuturism is born out of cruelty, and that cruelty of the white imagination was a necessary condition out of which the African diaspora had to reimagine its future."[36] Over and over, her strong Black female characters cannot escape those in control and their structures of power. Lauren lives in a dystopian world, eerily similar to our own, where only gated communities hold a tenuous safety from marauding groups of raiders. Once her community collapses, she must work to create a new one from nothing under the continual threat of violence and death.[37] Lilith wakes to find herself hundreds of years in the future in the hands of aliens from whom she cannot flee. She only desires to go back to her world, but the earth itself is already fundamentally changed, and she will be too by the time she can return to it.[38] Anyanwu has both powers and immortality, but even so, she cannot resist when she is forced to leave her village, travel across the ocean, and bear children who are both familiar and strange.[39] Dana is called back in time against her consent and unable to will herself back. She must survive in the time of slavery and face the conditions of her own becoming.[40] In all of Butler's works, the illusion of autonomy and control is harshly dispelled, and the protagonists must learn how to forge "the cruelty of bondage and murder" into "portholes of redemption."[41]

The structural imposition of cruelty requires one to learn how to shape change in order to survive, all the while understanding that the being of ourselves and those we love is premised on violence. The question Butler's work forces us to

face is, "What to do if the precondition for your being is the abduction, murder and rape of your ancestors?"[42] Butler asks us to shape change, while yet recognizing that we cannot fully escape cruelty[43] nor should we necessarily want to do so.[44]

And yet, Butler's characters persist where all hope seems lost and live to struggle another day. In her work, shaping change *is* feminist activism. As such, her legacy does not end with her fiction but continues into the realm of social justice strategy. Recognizing the utility of shaping change as a means of contemporary action to create better futures, the works *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* and *Emergent Strategy* take the philosophy underlying Butler's novels and ask what we can do with it.[45]

Octavia's Brood recognizes the value of speculative fiction to social change activism. The edited collection brings together established science fiction authors with social justice activists who have never written fiction before to curate a volume of future visions that can inspire movements for justice in the present. Walidah Imarisha sees a direct correspondence between organizing for social justice in the present and writing about more just futures: "Because all organizing is science fiction, we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world."[46] Activism is always already fictive, in a sense. *Octavia's Brood* provides a resource for tuning the resonances between fiction and activism in order to make our visions reality.[47]

adrienne maree brown takes this resonance a step further to develop a map for shaping change in our everyday lives. As a community activist, brown has developed and written about activist strategies inspired by the novels of Butler and how she uses them to build better worlds *now*.[48] She calls her philosophy emergent strategy, defining it as "strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions."[49] Although brown is inspired by Butler, her work is much hopeful, believing that enacting justice is primarily "a matter of longing, having the will to imagine and implement something else."[50] She recognizes that there are limits on our actions but asks us to think of ourselves as change shapers who are "adaptive—riding change like dolphins ride the ocean. Adaptive but also intentional, like migrating birds who know how to get where they're going even when a storm pushes them a hundred miles off course."[51] The constraints of power are transformed under brown's vision into conditions of possibility—which is not so far off from Butler after all. Brown brings us back full circle: Though the conditions that give rise to our being may be harsh and violent, these are yet the very conditions that allow us to persist and flourish, to bend and shape change to a will for justice.

Roots Are Vital to Our Futures

Every technological leap during this period started in a small village or on a farm. Kibra worked with a group of craftspeople, masons, and beekeepers to develop the first computer.[52]

In normative white mainstream technoculture, Blackness is often considered antithetical to futurism.[53] Alondra Nelson explains: "In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color. [These] narratives suggest that it is primitiveness or out-modedness, the obsolescence of something or someone else, that confirms the novel status of the virtual self, the cutting-edge product, or the high-tech society."[54]

In other words, Blackness is equated with both primitivism and naturalism and used as the foil against which white futurism imagines technological progress. Afrofuturism challenges this understanding of both technology and futures by demonstrating that rootedness is essential to futurity. By contesting the opposition of the past and future on the one hand, and nature and technology on the other hand, Afrofuturism "does not simply look to what is seemingly new about the self in the 'virtual age' but looks backward *and* forward in seeking to provide insights about identity, one that asks what was *and* what if."[55]

First, Afrofuturism understands that you must be rooted in the past to understand the future.[56] The temporal fusion of past and future in Afrofuturist thought disturbs Western assumptions of linearity and progress.[57] In Afrofuturism, "many speak as if the past, present, and future are one."[58] Challenging linear progress models of time is not only imaginative but also political. In doing so, "these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory,"[59] constructing an alternative means of temporal relation that figures Black subjects as central to the present and future. In addition, attention to the simultaneity of past-present-future requires a different ethic of writing, as writing is thus something we do in relation with those who came before[60] as well as those who will come after. Alexis Pauline Gumbs melds her writing into relations of both past and future, considering her work to be "ancestrally cowritten" as well as "written in collaboration with the survivors, the far-into-the-future witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible in the present apocalypse."[61] The past, present, and future are mutually co-implicative in Afrofuturist thought, asking us to think in a different ethicopolitical landscape than that of white technofuturism.

One way Afrofuturism is connected to the past is through attention to ancestry and tradition. Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist work powerfully illustrates the importance of tradition in space-age futures in her novella *Binti*.[62] Binti, the titular character, is the first member of the Himba tribe to be accepted to Oomza University, the premier school in the known universe. In order to attend, she also becomes the first Himba to travel to another world. The Himba maintain their rootedness by covering themselves in a thick substance made from red clay native to their land. Binti maintains a fidelity to her traditions, even while she changes beyond her wildest expectations. In the end, it is her maintenance of connections between past and future, tradition and change that allows her to make peace between violent factions and avert a galactic war. *Binti* demonstrates how

Afrofuturist visions are "rooted in the past, but not weighed down by it, contiguous yet continually transformed."[63]

However, our connections to the past are not always positive. Afrofuturism also recognizes that the interconnection between past, present, and future also signifies the reverberation of injustice throughout time. One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon is neosoul artist Janelle Monae's short film *Many Moons*. In the six-minute music video, Monae acts as her alter ego, the android Cindi Mayweather. Cindi is hosting an android auction, where the wealthy and famous have gathered to bid on the newest android models—all also played by Monae. We see the androids being manhandled and forced to walk a runway—standing in here for the auction block—for the bidding process, while Mayweather sings about "freedom."[64] By the end of the video, Mayweather performs so frenetically for the audience—her repetitive motions gaining speed, faster and faster until she loses control—that she first raises into the air and then collapses in a heap on the ground. The final shot is the light in her eyes extinguishing, fading to a statement on the screen: "'I imagined many moons in the sky lighting the way to freedom'—Cindi Mayweather." Monae paints a vision of the future where the analogies to slavery are clear, using the past to infuse the future with a warning for the present.

Second, Afrofuturism challenges the opposition of technology to nature by examining how a rootedness in nature is essential to survival and innovation. In doing so, Afrofuturist thinkers challenge both the racial-colonial stereotype of Africans and the African diaspora as primitive barbarians as well as the assumption that the technological is inherently antithetical to the natural. Under white futurism, a connection to the technological is assumed, but this connection is automatically questioned when the futuristic identities are Black. Thus, "Afrofuturists have attempted to forge a new identity that puts black cultural origins in categories of the artificial as much as in those of the natural,"[65] while simultaneously demonstrating that "a well-crafted relationship with nature is intrinsic to a balanced future too."[66]

The poetic work of Gumbs deftly explores the relationship between rootedness in nature, technology, and survival. In her "speculative documentary," *M Archive: After the End of the World*, she narrates the findings of a group of Black scientists looking back on a past apocalypse that shifted them from what we would understand as human and that remains to come from our current vantage point.[67] Gumbs explores how, on one the hand, rootedness enabled survival for those in the throes of disaster: "we took off our leaden clothes and we skipped out of our concrete shoes and we went barefoot enough to bear the rubble we had created just before. we let the sun touch us and felt what we had done to the ozone in our daze. we noticed that skin was just as thin as it should have been and all that we had been calling skin before were layers of accumulated scars."[68] The survivors of the apocalypse require a reconnection with the natural in order to persist. Yet, after the end of the world, such a reconnection also involves a

coming to terms with the environmental degradation humanity has wrought—the sun is necessary, though no longer kind; the ground centering, though no longer smooth.

On the other hand, then, Gumbs explores how, in part, the disaster itself was caused by the people in power ignoring their own roots, as well as ignoring the wisdom of those who stayed connected to the ground: "anything they wanted to know about the earth and what would happen if they ignored it, they could have learned by watching the old, curved brown women everywhere. but mostly they ignored those women. just like they ignored the world shaking around them. to their doom."[69] Gumbs calls us to rethink the path we are on in the Western world before it is too late and to listen to the wisdom of the Black and Brown women around us—those who remain rooted in the past while imagining better futures.

Liberation Must Be for All

"We can't save everyone."
"Doesn't mean we can't try," she countered.[70]

As described in a previous section, Afrofuturism radically refigures what it means to be a subject and what it means to be human,[71] as "the moment in which black people enter into humanity, this very idea [of the 'human' as a universal formation] loses its ontological thrust because its limitations are rendered abundantly clear."[72] Afrofuturism thus refigures "the human" outside of the strictures of white hetero capitalist patriarchy, centering Black feminist visions of the future while rendering humanity accessible to all. Gumbs explains how centering the Black feminine ultimately necessitates liberation for all. In her estimation and from the vantage of the universe, Black feminism *is all*: "there is no separation from the black simultaneity of the universe also known as everything also known as the black feminist pragmatic intergenerational sphere. everything is everything. . . . you can have breathing and the reality of the radical black porousness of love (aka black feminist metaphysics aka us all of us, *us*) or you cannot. . . . this was their downfall. they hated the black women who were themselves."[73] To deny Blackness is to deny ourselves, and to embrace Blackness is to embrace everything. When the limit case of humanity is centered as its primary subject, the result is a radically inclusive liberation. Therefore, centering Blackness is imperative because it is by thinking in and through Blackness, the anti-Man,[74] that we may fundamentally restructure our ideas of what it means to be human and open them to all. As such, Gumbs see her work not as seeking "to prove Black people are human" but instead calling "preexisting definitions of the human into question"[75] in a way that opens space for radical liberatory inclusivity.

Afrofuturism knows that liberation is not liberation if it is not for *all*. One place we see this demonstrated is in Monae's "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer*. Monae's dystopian future begins with images of humans, frozen as if on

display—or images digitized on a screen—with her voice-over explaining, "They started calling us computers. People began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty . . . it was only a matter of time."[76] Although Monae's music and imagery clearly center Black women, Black queer sexuality, and Black feminism, she uses the centrality of Blackness to make the argument throughout the emotion picture that all "dirty computers" should be liberated from their oppression.

Okorafor takes the idea that liberation is for all and extends it to the nonhuman world, while maintaining a focus on Blackness, and particularly African Blackness. Her novel *Lagoon* is a story of first contact, where aliens come to Earth. Specifically, they come to the ocean edging Lagos, Nigeria and promptly abduct one Ghanaian and two Nigerian ambassadors particularly chosen to carry their message to humankind, dragging them into the waters. The aliens come to the water because water is life, and bring with them change. Any being that comes into contact with them changes based on its deepest desires—a swordfish becomes a powerful monster, a bat learns to see, the water is cleansed of its pollution, the heroine Adaora becomes part-fish. In Okorafor's imagining, it is not just humanity that deserves liberation from oppression but the entire lifeworld.

Making sure that we maintain a focus on all peoples as we work toward liberation is imperative to persistence. Persistence can sometimes come at the expense of others rather than in coalition with them. As brown writes when discussing the importance of collectivity to social justice organizing, "We are brilliant at survival, but brutal at it. We tend to slip out of togetherness the way we slip out of the womb, bloody and messy and surprised to be alone."[77] Centering feminist persistence on Afrofuturist visions can help us to avoid looking up and finding we have persisted alone. Afrofuturism reorients us around collectivities that include those not considered human and figures futures where all life may be liberated, together.

Beyond Hope: The Communicative Power of Fiction

In the previous section, I illustrated three important lessons that Afrofuturist work holds for feminist communication scholars: the imperatives to shape the inevitable force of change, maintain rooted relations, and work toward liberation for all. For some feminist communication scholars, the focus on fiction throughout this essay may rest uncomfortably with their understanding of disciplinary norms and values. However, under such anti-Black and anti-feminine circumstances as we currently face—circumstances that try to force us to believe that our only possible futures are horrific and dystopic—we need the fictive to persist. As speculative fiction author Nalo Hopkinson argues, fantasy is valuable:

"Call it escapism, because at some level it is, but I think that goes back to human beings being tool-users. We imagine what we want from the world; then we try to find a way to make it happen. Escapism can be the first step to creating a new reality, whether it's a personal change in one's existence or a larger change in the world."[78] We need to escape the systems and structures that seem to determine our lives in order to imagine and enact the type of futures that we desire.

Afrofuturism is thus necessary to our understandings of public communication and the process of communicating technological futures. We need to pay attention to fiction because the fictive provides the potential to "make the impossible possible," to adapt Hopkinson's claim.[79] But beyond imagining, Eshun argues that Afrofuturist fantasy is in fact a constitutive part of *enacting* alternative futures. He claims that our visions for the future help to produce those very futures by calling their potentiality into being and acting to pull us and our actions in the present toward them.[80] It is for this reason that the importance of Afrofuturism goes beyond hope.[81] By learning, envisioning, proclaiming, and developing liberatory future worlds, we provide not only dreams to place our hopes in but also the material first steps on the path that makes those dreams reality. As Womack argues, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."[82] Afrofuturism may be science fiction and fantasy, but it is nonetheless activism.[83]

Taking a cue from activist adrienne maree brown, we might create an "emergent strategy" specific to feminist communication scholars. Emergent strategy calls on us to follow the Afrofuturist lesson of intentionally shaping change by laboring to "grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."[84] As feminist communication scholars, we have the ability to draw on the day-to-day activism of emergent strategy in our scholarship, teaching, praxis, and lives.

I offer the following four strategies to guide each of us in persisting under the ethic of Afrofuturism:

1 Learn alternate futures.
2 Envision them.
3 Proclaim them.
4 Labor to actualize them.

First, learning alternate futures requires seeking them out. We must search for the speculative work of women of color and Global South women, knowing that it will often be hidden, suppressed, and elided by hegemonic forces. Studying this knowledge will bring forth reframed perceptions based on alternative ethics. Second, we must take part in the act of creation ourselves. Each of us holds unimagined possibilities that she may bring to the table. Third, we must publicly announce the alternative futures that we have learned and created. Proclaiming liberatory futures in public not only provides support and encouragement to

marginalized peoples but also acts to continually solidify the potential of those futures to take hold. As such, proclaiming futures blends with the fourth step: laboring to make these futures possible, probable, and material. By acting as if these futures are reality, they are brought into being, made tangible, more and more each day.

Feminist communication scholars hold a key position in the fight for liberatory futures: we stand where expertise in dismantling the discourses of power meets skill in communicating alternative futures. The fight for the future is a communicative one. As such, feminist communication scholars have valuable skills to bring to bear. The question at hand is then, How do we infuse our lives and work with the century of labor done by Afrofuturist writers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers,[85] advocating for their vision in our scholarship, activism, and practice, while maintaining the primacy of Africana voices and experience? There is much for feminist communication scholars to contribute to Afrofuturist work, but ultimately those of us who are white and Western must remember that we are followers, not leaders, in the struggle over futures. Let us ground our feet and look to the sky, learning from the spectacular Black feminist visionaries who have both gone before us and will go after us, joining in the struggle to secure futures of liberation and justice for all.

Discussion Questions

1 How might Afrofuturism help us rethink the trajectories of feminist communication studies?
2 What might it look like to center an ethic of shaping change in your own thought, your department, your university, or your field of study?
3 How might you start to seek out and support alternative futures in your own life?

Try This!

In fall 2021, Amber Johnson, Benny LeMaster, Reynaldo Anderson, and Natasha A. Kelly published a special forum in the journal *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* on "Speculative Fiction, Criticality, and Futurity," where they asked contributors to write speculative fiction "imagining the future where liberation and freedom from systemic oppression are possible." Read the short stories, flash fiction, and graphic novels included in this special forum. Then write a short story that imagines a future free from domination in your own words, one that creates a world where a form of domination that you have seen or noticed in your life has been overturned or transformed. What futures can you imagine? Write 1,000–3,000 words describing your own alternative future.

Notes

1 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 50.

2 Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

3 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 97.

4 For instance, Joëlle Cruz, James McDonald, Kirsten Broadfoot, Andy Kai-chun Chuang, and Shiv Ganesh, "'Aliens' in the United States: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Foreign-Born Faculty," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (2020): 272–285; Lisa A. Flores, "Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism," *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 4–24; Bernadette Marie Calafell, "The Future of Feminist Scholarship: Beyond the Politics of Inclusion," *Women's Studies in Communication* 37, no. 3 (2014): 266–270.

5 For instance, Joëlle M. Cruz, "Brown Body of Knowledge: A Tale of Erasure," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 5 (2018): 363–365; Kathleen M. de Onís, "Lost in Translation: Challenging (White, Monolingual Feminism's) <Choice> with *Justicia Reproductiva*," *Women's Studies in Communication* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1–19.

6 For instance, Rachel Alicia Griffin, "I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance," *Women's Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): 138–157; Gloria Nziba Pindi, "Hybridity and Identity Performance in Diasporic Context: An Autoethnographic Journey of the Self Across Cultures," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 27–28.

7 Joëlle M. Cruz, Oghenetoja Okoh, Amoaba Gooden, Kamesha Spates, Chinasa A. Elue, and Nicole Rousseau, "The Ekwe Collective: Black Feminist Praxis," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 5, no. 3 (2016): 89–94; Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), ix–xii; María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 77–100.

8 Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 68.

9 Calafell, "The Future of Feminist Scholarship," 267.

10 For an exception, see Lonny J. Avi Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 101–107.

11 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2.

12 Walidah Imarisha and adrienne marie brown, quoted in Sheree Renee Thomas, "Foreword: Birth of a Revolution," in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 1.

13 Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 24.

14 I use liberation rather than emancipation as emancipation is still premised on coloniality. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 453–458.

15 Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 9.

16 Alexander G. Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 21–47; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Vicus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopoltics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

17 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 301.

18 For the clearest instance of this, see adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

19 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 44.

20 Ibid., 15.

21 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument." *CR: New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

22 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 24.

23 Alondra Nelson, quoted in Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 108.

24 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

25 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 101.

26 Flores, "Between Abundance and Marginalization."

27 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," 289–292.

28 Ibid.

29 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

30 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," 290–291.

31 Ibid., 290.

32 Flores, "Between Abundance and Marginalization," 18.

33 Alexis Pauline Gumbs's work is difficult to succinctly explain. At once academic, poet, and fiction author, she names her work "speculative documentary" in order to highlight how her writing draws together these three fields that are often considered disparate.

34 Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993), 25.

35 Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (1993): 736.

36 Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," 101.

37 Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

38 Octavia E. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1989).

39 Octavia E. Butler, *Seed to Harvest* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007).

40 Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

41 Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," 102.

42 Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 51.

43 Walidah Imarisha, introduction to *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 3.

44 Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," 102.

45 adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha, eds., *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015); brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

46 Imarisha, "Introduction," 4.

47 Ibid., 5.

48 brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

49 Ibid., 2.

50 Ibid., 21.

51 Ibid.
52 Gabriel Teodros, "Lalibela," in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 128.
53 Nelson, "Introduction," 1.
54 Ibid., 6.
55 Ibid., 4.
56 Ibid., 8; Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 81.
57 Nelson, "Introduction," 8.
58 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 153.
59 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," 297.
60 Cruz et al., "The Ekwe Collective," 90.
61 Gumbs, *M Archive*, xi.
62 Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2015).
63 Nelson, "Introduction," 8.
64 Janelle Monae, *Many Moons*, Youtube video, 6:29, April 4, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZyyORSHbaE.
65 Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters," *Social Text* 20, vol. 2 (2002): 59.
66 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 104.
67 Gumbs, *M Archive*, xi.
68 Ibid., 83.
69 Ibid., 35.
70 Bao Phi, "Revolution Shuffle," in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 13–14.
71 Weheliye, "'Feenin,'" 21–47.
72 Ibid., 27.
73 Gumbs, *M Archive*, 7.
74 Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."
75 Gumbs, *M Archive*, xi.
76 Janelle Monae, *Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]*, YouTube video, 48:37, April 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE.
77 brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 6.
78 Nalo Hopkinson, quoted in Alondra Nelson, "'Making the Impossible Possible': An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 98.
79 Nelson, "'Making the Impossible Possible,'" 97.
80 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism."
81 Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," 103.
82 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 42.
83 Imarisha, "Introduction."
84 Ibid., 3.
85 Here, I trace the origins of contemporary Afrofuturism back to W.E.B. Du Bois's 1920 publication of "The Comet."