

REVIEW

Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture, by Britt Rusert (NYU Press, 2017)

John Murillo III
University of California, Irvine
murilloj@uci.edu

To help with the move to her new apartment, my aunt tasked me with collecting and boxing the books in my grandmother's home. Every tome I plucked from the shelves trembled in my hands because, although she prematurely departed this plane over a decade prior due to breast and lung cancers, disturbing the texts that at various turns of her life and treatment met and returned her regal gaze awoke the dormant process of mourning her. One with a faded, rust-colored cover and its binding worn loose called to be opened. It announced itself as a book of holistic medicine, comprised of anatomical diagrams, musings on the importance of spiritual and psychological health to physical well-being, and natural remedies with detailed descriptions of the utility and effectiveness of every ingredient.

Behind its final pages lurked a tattered envelope covered in my grandmother's writing in different colors of ink, and they matched the countless notes and marks she wrote throughout the text—in the margins, over important passages, at the tops and bottoms of dog-eared pages, and in-between the lines. The different colors at any given passage suggested repeated readings, new engagements made with new knowledge and

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following new experimentation, all tinged with the real *need* to arrive at a working healing praxis alongside, or maybe even counter to, the intensity and destructiveness of chemotherapy. My grandmother was a Black woman innovator performing alternative forms of research and experimenting with alternative forms of medicine in order to intervene in her own health where she felt normative or mainstream forms of science and medicine could not.

So we begin here and at a bit of length because this kind of narrative of experimentation and research done unseen, in the margins and between the lines, warrants revisiting after reading Britt Rusert's profoundly illuminating *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*. Rusert chronicles what she describes as a shadow archive—a history that lurks behind, undergirds, and complicates the dominant archive—of “African American science writing [and cultural production] in the antebellum period” (2017, p. 8), and she she calls this archive *fugitive science*. Fugitive science describes a heterogeneous, innovative, resistant, “dynamic and diverse archive of engagements with, critiques of, and responses to” (p. 4) the antiblack racial science that proliferated the antebellum episteme, and it expands the definition of science to include forms of praxis and experimentation typically, and often deliberately, unrecognized as science: conjuring, performance, astrology, mysticism, mesmerism, and imaginative speculation.

Citing Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Rusert characterizes fugitive science as a “counter-science,” (p. 6) one undergirded by a “subterranean politics and furtive insurgency” (p. 17) aimed at appropriating, confronting, mocking, or otherwise destabilizing the logics of the racial science of the antebellum period and its political and ideological echoes in eras beyond. It is a science of the “unthought” (Hartman & Wilderson, 2003) that innovates from the outside margins of history or in between the lines of the archive; it describes a set of “ongoing experiments in freedom, radical empiricisms” (p. 20) that refuse the normative constrictions and often deadly, antiblack consequences of what would typically be recognized as scientific inquiry. Irreducible to any one form of thought production (from writing to visual art

to performance), it treats science—and knowledge writ large—as an “assemblage of different fields and practices that could” and should “be dismantled, reassembled, and redirected” (p. 132) toward Black thought’s work of “imagining the unimaginable” (Sharpe, 2014, p. 59): liberation from, or the end of, the antiblack world. In that way, Rusert’s fugitive science is alchemical: from base elements marshaled from countless arenas of thought and experience, fugitive scientists such as Benjamin Banneker, Henry Box Brown, Martin R. Delaney, Sarah Mapps Douglass, and even Brenda Smith, my grandmother, Blacken and transmute an altogether radical unique, and “unthinkable” scientific practice.

Rusert categorizes three forms of fugitive science, but the lines between them blur and even disappear from case to case—it is, after all, a radically dynamic form of knowledge production; moving through the text, one might do well to also consider these forms to be like frequencies on which all fugitive science articulates. The oppositional frequency of fugitive science describes work done to intervene explicitly into scientific discourses, especially those that reinforced the ruling, antiblack episteme. Works operating on the practical frequency attempted to instrumentalize science and technology in ways that could help advance the project of emancipation. And finally, the speculative frequency of fugitive science wields the imaginative richness of scientific inquiry to explore the limits, conditions of possibility, and revolutionary potential of Black existence. Throughout her chronicling of the history and genealogy of fugitive science, Rusert reveals the fluidity of these forms, the ease with which an individual figure, work, or exchange may articulate on one or more of these frequencies at once.

As examples, Benjamin Banneker’s confrontations with Thomas Jefferson over Jefferson’s infamous *Notes on the State of Virginia* locate the oppositional origin point for Rusert’s history of fugitive science. Banneker’s extensive critiques of Jefferson and those that followed in their wake—like James McCune Smith’s essays—act as intentionally and predominantly oppositional works meant to intervene against racial science. On another frequency, Martin R. Delany’s novel, *Blake; or, The Huts of*

America, weaves a speculative history and future of revolutionary movement and organization that marshals both practical astronomical knowledge and metaphysical rumination. A work of more remarkably varied frequencies, Rusert reads Delany's novel as aiming to radically destabilize the boundaries between metaphysical mysticism and science, and to provide information that could all advance the cause of Black liberation in and beyond the antebellum period. And on still another frequency, the little-known teachings and lectures on physiology of Sarah Mapps Douglass, which she offered almost exclusively to Black women and young girls, indirectly offers a response to "the forms of experimental science that exploited [Joice] Heth, [Sarah] Baartman, and countless other women of African descent in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world" (p. 185), where Black women were (and are) subject to layer of violent erasure that render(ed) them the "mute experimental subjects of nineteenth century science" (p. 181). Further, Douglass's lectures operate on a lower frequency than the other subjects of Rusert's texts, a frequency of the lapses silences of the unavailable archive—muted, censored, displaced, or forgotten into unavailability—*necessitating* speculation in the form of inferences, like stitches, drawn from the limited records Rusert is able to collect. In this way, Douglass also responds to the *longue dureé* of the deliberate and casual erasure of Black women from the still unfolding history and genealogy of fugitive science. Each work, moment, and exchange of fugitive science encapsulates a dynamic expression announcing anew the defiant, creative, and uncontainable project of Black freedom on multiple frequencies.

Essential to fully tuning into the frequencies of these and the many fugitive scientists of Rusert's study—and of Rusert's study itself as well—is an attention to the grand questions about and implications for Black knowledge production and critical, creative thought that her chronicle compels us to (re)consider. As and after we read *Fugitive Science*, we must rethink the ways we define, recognize, and take seriously science, critique, resistance, and knowledge itself. After encountering the variable frequencies and forms fugitive science takes, how can we delimit what constitutes scientific inquiry? How might we better tune to the lower

frequencies of intellectual and creative endeavors that we otherwise miss, that are rendered inaudible, or that we would normally disallow from being truly engaged as knowledge?

Like I have been compelled to do, both at the outset of these remarks and in my own research, we might begin by radically reconsidering our encounters with the alternative, vexing, sometimes fraught fragments of experimentation, research, and speculation that comprise the vast, varied, and still-unfolding archive of Black thought. We might search the silences and lower frequencies for those articulations of Black innovation that fugitively traverse the static. We must, then, innovate an alternative form of reading and listening that will enable us to find what we, prior to reading this text, did not know we would do well to seek. Only then might the full expression of *Fugitive Science* and all its lessons from the antebellum period enable us to continue and advance the revolutionary struggle against racist science and its ripples in the contemporary moment.

References

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Bio

Dr. John Murillo III is Assistant Professor of African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine. His primary research interests are Black speculative fiction, critical theory, quantum mechanics, and popular media (especially comic books and graphic novels). He is finalizing his current project, *Impossible Stories: On the Time and Space of Black Creation* with The Ohio State University Press.