Speculative Method-Making for Feminist Futures: Insights from Black Feminist Science and Afrofuturist Work

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Speculative Method-Making for Feminist Futures: Insights from Black Feminist Science and Afrofuturist Work

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ABSTRACT

How can black feminist science and Afrofuturism inform the crafting of methods for future research? Can their strategies for visioning alternative worlds help shape a methodological scaffold to guide the doing of empirical speculative research? The article engages with these questions while drawing on the author's experience on a youth futures project. The article identifies the challenges of empirical, speculative projects – the difficulties for participants in breaking away from the dead weight of the present and the difficulties for researchers in engendering research that allows newness – surprising and radical imaginaries of the future – to emerge. By exploring relevant ideas from the worlds of creative Afrofuturism and black feminist science, the article proposes a set of methodological prompts that may help understand and address these challenges. These prompts are also an attempt to construct a distinctive intellectual and ethical compass to guide everyday research practice, and are offered in a spirit of experimentation, to be used, amended, or selectively ignored by fellow speculative researchers. The intention is to support a form of speculative research that does not foreclose on the radical and liberatory possibilities of futurity advanced by black feminist creativity and scholarship.

The terrain of future studies is characterised by complexity and contestation. It comprises a range of related sub-fields – speculative research, futures literacies, futures methods etc., and is necessarily multi- or even transdisciplinary in character. How futurity is approached and studied can look/feel vastly different depending on the traditions one draws from. For instance, writers from the fields of organisational and business studies may be more closely linked to the commercial world, and to forecasting models (Beckert 2021; Gümüsay and Reinecke 2022) compared to those who draw from decolonising critiques of 'speculation' in ways that disassociate it from Western thought, and from capitalist-financial modes of calculation (Bisht 2020; Facer and Sriprakash 2021; Sardar 1993). This heterogeneity can promote lively debate amongst those of us that traffic in the intersections of these perspectives and varied understandings of attendant terminologies/language. This article does not seek to map the diversity of this vast terrain, but it is interested in the particular notion of

'speculative method-making' at a time when different constituencies may be using similar-sounding terminology in fundamentally different ways.

Speculative method-making is tied to wider debates in future studies but it is specifically concerned with 'method' as it emerges in research relations, in the close encounters of 'fieldwork' in empirical studies. In the broad field of speculative research, a central goal has been that of attending to the development of methods or, alternative practices of 'attention, invention and experimentation' in relation to creating new futures (Wilkie, Savransky, and Rosengarten 2017). One of the aims is to move away from modes of visioning the future that are rooted in the actual, in the order of the present (Bergson 2002) and towards speculation, towards desiring more, desiring better and above all, *desiring otherwise* (Abensour 1999, emphasis mine). The heterogeneity of the field means that what is 'more', 'better' or 'otherwise', and how it may be desired is differently understood and approached. For example, organisations and think-tanks[1] that specialise in supporting businesses or defence/security concerns of governments, are also interested in 'speculation', in moving away from a reliance on older models of probabilistic forecasting to entertaining the notion of using the imagination to create 'better' futures, by offering more sophisticated tools/ training workshops, which may still be rooted in hegemonic, capitalism-reliant futures frameworks. Ideological movements such as 'long termism' or right-wing 'accelerationism' have pushed arguments that minimise/normalise the suffering or atrocities of the past/present, to focus on the 'greater good' of fulfilling human potential in the long term, while protecting elite financial interests (Torres 2021). Tech entrepreneurs and corporations seeking foresight into futures speak the language of scenario building, qualitative research, multi-disciplinarity, co-operation, and growth but have fundamentally different ideas for the future (cf. Keeling's 2019 critical analysis on Shell's corporate initiatives on future-making). Speculative research therefore faces a challenge in preserving its capacity for a radical and critical practice that seeks to generate fair and just futures for all. The article is located in this moment and continues in the tradition of critical thinkers who have sought to enhance research modes and practices that are resistant to neo-liberal co-option or assimilation and engender a clear sense of futures that are just for all.

The article also arises from a desire to sharpen my own thinking around research practice following a project with youth that attempted to provoke/imagine/articulate visions for better futures. While the field of speculative research abounds with innovative, interactive methods that can be usefully adapted for such goals, on this project, my chosen methods and interactions felt somewhat inadequate in the face of the 'wicked' challenges that prevailed in the individual and group discussions. This dissatisfaction with my experience of deploying speculative methods persisted over time, pressing me to read more broadly, think deeper and more critically about the possibility of theoretical-ethical-methodological frameworks that may support everyday research planning, action and experimentation. The article is thus also an attempt to bridge the more aspirational speculative goals for creating better futures and the doing of everyday research which may be mired in pragmatic details. It is not a conventional article that presents findings from the project but one that explores my lingering sense of dissatisfaction, to reflect critically on whether I could have been better equipped. The project provoked questions that the works from Afrofuturist and black[2] feminist science spoke to, and I have structured the article to reflect this chronological order – discussing the project

and the issues that arose before moving to the literature and the critical reflections they prompted. I have turned to Afrofuturism and black feminist science as two fields that are heavily invested in making alternative futures. Together they seemed to offer the requisite theoretical-methodological-ethical frame for sharpening research practices to remain distinctive and to engender radical future-making.

Positionalities and Perspectives

In this first section, I briefly set out the project that was conducted with young people in their final years of schooling, over 2016 (Priyadharshini 2019; 2021) that gave rise to this article. The material I draw on, is a small section of the larger project and emerged over a school term and involved me visiting the school on four different occasions for about half a day each time. The participants were a group of 16/17-year-old, white, female students in Norwich, U.K. They were working towards their 'A' levels in science and/or in mathematics and were interested in seeking a university place for future studies. They came from a range of backgrounds and were located in different areas of the city, from more privileged neighbourhoods, to those self-described as 'rough'. The fieldwork had been designed around activities that would stimulate/encourage them to express their hopes and fears about the imminent futures, and to generate imaginaries of alternative, desirable, futures for them and the wider world. A range of speculative tools/methods were incorporated into interviews and workshop discussions: designing postcards from a distant future; photo-elicitation from a series of futuristic images; prompts from popular music/TV shows that involved time travel/the future, etc.

For the purposes of this article, I draw mainly on a set of interactions with three participants – Faith, Max and Lana (pseudonyms). They shared the experience of being on the threshold of leaving compulsory education, and an interest in pursuing maths and/or science into their future – hoping to be a teacher, pharmacy assistant or researcher. They expressed different types of concerns or anxieties about the fact that they were on the cusp of change – there was a mix of excitement and sadness at the prospect of leaving school, its attendant routines and mix of established friendships. As mentioned before, this article's primary interest is not in the empirical findings as such, and I use these youth, and their responses/reactions, as 'theoretical consoles' (Carrington 2018), as devices to improve my thinking around the practice of speculative research projects.

The fieldwork encounters were fruitful in drawing out a range of anxieties and concerns about their near futures and broader societal futures – climate breakdown, pandemics, the resurgence of right-wing politics, poverty, political upheaval. However, the more imaginative leaps to move beyond plausible/predictable futures to alternative futures beyond sanctioned discourses of career and employment, proved much harder to materialise. In retrospect, this would require a longer, slower, more stepped process to facilitate the leap into the 'novum' – the new or the novel – that speculative methods desire. I return to these specific moments of what feels like unfinished work, to consider them critically, and, to draw inspiration for speculative method-making from black feminist science and Afrofuturisms.

As these youth presented as white female, I am prompted to examine how/why these perspectives help me in making sense of their responses and the project as a whole. As an educational future researcher raised in the Indian post-colonial context and now working

in the U.K. HE sector, I have an interest in theories, frameworks and resources that depart from the hegemonic or canonical, those that seek to prompt change and focus on justice and fairness. This is not just a personal preference, but something necessitated by having to make sense of radically different kinds of childhood/youth, across different locations and time periods – my own, and those that participants in U.K. schools have presented to me over two long decades, and yet others that I know, read and learn about in the wider world. There is a quality of radical difference, not only caused by differences in age, class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality or ability, between myself and participants, but by the intersection of these, exaggerated by my own migratory journeys in time and space.

As such, frameworks or perspectives that are explicitly focused on future-making that challenge us to think beyond immediately apparent identities and those that recognise (and problematise) commonalities and solidarities across radical differences feel appropriate. It must also be said that the fruits of labour by black feminists, creatives, and futurists are explicitly, never only meant for understanding or benefitting black lives. Such an essentialist restriction would ghettoise intellectual resources that are generously offered to make better worlds for all life/matter on the planet. Non-white scholars have repeatedly claimed that they are more than just local informants who speak to issues arising for/from their communities, but are also thinkers, theorists and activists, with an interest in re-shaping the world for all (Edmond 2020), with a cosmic, 'world galaxy' perspective (Keeling 2019). The danger of (mis)appropriation when minoritized scholars are not credited accurately or respectfully, or when their words get traduced into something other than what was intended always remains. However, this is a persistent danger for *all* theories and concepts when they are 'set to work' in contexts far beyond their origins. In this article, the relevance of these ideas and works lies in what they offer to improving speculative method-making.

Researching Youth Futures

I present a series of key moments/issues that arose during the project, focusing largely on those that presented an opportunity for critical questions relating to enhancing the quality of speculative research. Each of these moments are followed by the critical questions that they posed, which are followed up in the later sections of this article.

Indeterminate, Unreachable Futures

One of the areas of enquiry for the project was to gain a map of the fears and hopes for the future, and to get a sense of how futures could be imagined in new ways. Among the participants, Faith, who had a keen interest in pharmacy offered an insightful proposition about the future: that while there would be advances in medicine, these could be equally 'good or bad'. There was scepticism that what appears to be an 'advancement' would turn out to be an undeniable good. There was an understanding that knowledge and understanding can shift with time and context. She also expressed the view that the future was, by its nature, unpredictable, and would, 'lack control and direction'. The indeterminacy of futures was well understood but equally, there was a sense that this quality was not something that could be exploited as the levers to manipulate it were not readily visible. This

combined with the sentiment that what appears to be an advance could well turn out not to be so in the future suggested that there was no sense of intimacy with a desired future, a future that can be imagined and shaped, however imperfectly.

As a group of youth tantalisingly under 18 years of age, and thus excluded from voting, they brought up the matter of the Brexit[3] referendum as affecting their futures:

> We talked about Brexit amongst ourselves a lot. We thought we should have been allowed to vote. The majority of people we spoke to, who couldn't vote, would have voted to 'Remain'. Whereas the older generations voted 'Leave'. If we'd been able to vote, it would have looked very different … .

There was an open critique of a system of decision making that had excluded them and was not accountable to their concerns for the future. Their perception of being marginalised as non-participants in shaping futures created a sharply critical mood.

We could interpret the challenge of speculative research as one of encouraging a leap beyond the immediacy of the present, to function as a springboard to the 'novum' – to imagine, desire and create other futures. This proved to be a much more difficult to encourage or engineer within the constraints of the project. On reflection, creating opportunities to imagine a different, optimistic, even less discriminatory future under these circumstances would require the deliberate cultivation of specific spaces/environments. These spaces would also need resources/activities/ideas that encourage experimentation with and articulation of other desires.

> Q: What kinds of spaces and resources would provide the impetus (act as a springboard) for instigating new desires that are able to critically accommodate the flawed present and yet allow participants to imagine hopeful alternatives?

Divided, Isolated Futures

One of the clearest articulations about the future was the fear that it would not be better or different, but simply repeat many undesirable elements of the present. When young participants mentioned the kinds of change they desired, these were described as areas particularly resistant to change. Max observed:

> For example, in my parent's generation, there was even more blatant racism and homophobia. But there has been a lot of progress and maybe things will be better. That's what we want.

At the same time, this hope was tempered with fears that things could get worse. One concern was that social divisions would widen, leading to 'extremism and conflict in human populations and societies' (Faith). Other participants echoed these views. Lana imagined a future referencing *The Hunger Games* series of young adult books and movies:

> … (just like) where two sides are not able to talk to each other because values are so different … but this is true even today. People from my rough area will not mix with someone say, from Harrow … not because we don't like each other but because we don't mix … it's really materialistic … some have no wealth … or health … .

The lack of contact, of 'mixing', and of understanding different life experiences would steadily increase, entrenching differences and exacerbating the inability to empathise with others. Max who also hoped to work in health care, felt there would be a greater

'segregation of people', and even more 'racism and homophobia'. Lana echoed these views saying, ' … there will be more problems. Like with gay marriage. I'm okay with it now, but some people who I've grown up with, (even) when they're 60, they still won't approve of it'.

Reports of acrimonious relations dividing families and communities were making the U.K. news headlines during this period of post-Brexit fieldwork. This, and the sense of resurgent ethnonationalism, xenophobia, and racism in public discourse were highlighted as concerns.

> Q: What methods and practices might help focus attention on building futures that avoid the worst of present trends? In this case, how might they extrapolate a future that built connections across seemingly insurmountable differences?

Futures that are 'Already Here'

As mentioned earlier, there was a mood of scepticism that progress or development was inevitable or irreversible. At other times, there was scepticism about the idea that humans at the individual/local level could resolve global challenges: ' … At the individual level, people may not change. Big things, like energy sources may change and become more eco-friendly, but at the individual level, people will still be greedy, using cars, not buses' (Max). This suggests that even if the future were different, it would not be because 'human nature' had evolved into something better. Lana who was drawn to retro-futuristic conceptions of the future, displayed a unique sensibility to time and futures. She remarked that 'the past always gets in the future', referencing a circular rather than a linear understanding of time as expressed in her favourite steam-punk genre. While perusing images of robots and robotic arms, she observed that even the field of robotics did not really feel futuristic enough, as 'it's already here'. This grasp of the non-linearity of time and perhaps non-progressive futures for humans meant that my application of image/photo elicitation for example, did not yield radically different visions of the future, but instead reinforced the grim inevitability of stasis.

These sensibilities to time also provoked in me, a consideration of how images can signal temporal values – a jetpack, robot or a flying car may be assumed to signal the future even if there is nothing inherently futuristic about them. It seemed that the perceptive comments of Max and Lana rejected 'the wish-fulfilment development paradigm' imbued in dominant projections of the future (Chattopadhyay 2021, 10) and thus forced a reconsideration of the materials/activities/packs of resources I had made available.

> Q: What images and prompts could succeed in instigating a different sensibility to temporalities and futures? What mediating objects could signal something 'futuristic', and under what conditions?

Unspeakable Futures

While there were a number of useful insights, even 'successes' on this project, I am interested in those areas where my expectations for the project, in terms of generating visions/desires for other futures, fell short. This gap in expectations of/from speculative future-making research and the wise, yet dystopian critique of presents-futures by the young

people also prompted reflections on the institutional, and socio-political context of research and how this might inform research design. The location of the workshops with the young people was on school premises, conducted after school hours. While educational institutions attempt to be about developing anticipatory sensibilities about the future, and indeed, the development of the young themselves for bettering futures, there is as yet, no program for how this can be achieved. As research shows, there is an oft-repeated but under-examined rhetoric that schooling prepares pupils for the future (Amsler and Facer 2017; Facer 2016). On examination, it seems that there is more often, an abstract assumption about the relationship between education and futures, and that the effects of a pre-set curriculum, and lack of critical professional training on integrating future dimensions within the curriculum that hampers efforts towards building anticipatory capabilities (Bateman 2012; Mandich 2023). In other words, there is a gap between formal education's orientation to individual, immediate student futures and the desire of young people to know how to alter their collective futures. This was reflected in observations from the project: Jo (and others) noted that schooling was more focused on the pragmatic and mundane routines of the present – choosing the right subjects, attending revision sessions, gaining better grades, applying for a university place, attending careers fairs and gaining work opportunities. She added, ' … but reality is more complicated. They never go there'. Although adult actions through institutional mechanisms were seen as being involved in securing certain neo-liberal futures, these were not always essential desired futures from young peoples' perspectives.

> Q: Is it possible to circumvent participants' institutional/social contexts or override how this affects their preparedness to engage with speculative tasks such as imagining new/surprising futures?

Invisible Worlds

When asked to speculate on how schooling could be different, a specific and unexpectedly imaginative wish list for a future curriculum emerged: skills to assess news and media reports from a variety of sources; discussions of party political manifestos and promises made before and after elections and referendums (even if they were not yet allowed to vote); sessions on coping with 'life after school' including at university (from doing laundry, managing money, and cooking one's one meals); and 'living with student debt'. A participant in another site wished for students to be able to access 'preparedness classes' for a range of scenarios such as power outages, pandemic outbreaks,[4] outdoor survival skills, and subsistence skills such as growing food/vegetables and making/mending skills. This list juxtaposes myriad anticipations of the future, offering an insight into the 'non-worlds' of the young, i.e. worlds that are prone to be invisibilised in favour of pre-decided curricular, assessment and employment-oriented priorities. These non-worlds also reveal something about how education and educational research can become complicit in ignoring the more complex relationships between young people and their worlds. Research plans are drawn up to fit the rhythms and time pressures of institutions and researchers, and in retrospect, my research plan/design had few contingency spaces to respond thoughtfully to the questions that arose.

I also recognise that my dissatisfaction with the way the project had unfolded lay partly in the lofty ambitions of speculative research to develop alternative sensibilities to

approaching and shaping futurities (Bryant and Knight 2019; Facer 2011; Salazar et al. 2017; Wilkie, Savransky, and Rosengarten 2017), i.e. new orientations that move us away from predictable orders of thought, logics and rationalities that are prone to reproducing the present in the future through either colonising or setting aside (as irrelevant or implausible), potential futures, before they can be born. A key tenet of such speculative research is to consider the conduct of research as itself inseparable from future-making. Thus it seems that speculative research must actively intervene, challenge and create new futures as part of doing research (Salazar et al. 2017). This interventionist ethos of deploying research to birth alternative futures is disruptive of traditional understandings of methodology's role in research and knowledge production (cf. Futures Anthropologies manifesto, EASA 2014; in Salazar et al. 2017, 1–2). Such a recasting of research as future-making rather than reality-rendering, positions previously 'neutral' data-gathering methods of research as fully 'engaged' technologies to make new realities. This also raises questions of what kinds of research desires may shape futures and what new inclusions or exclusions they will bring. Notwithstanding the extensive critical scholarship on the need for recasting research in the service of social justice, decolonising or liberatory ideals, this merging of the 'doing of research' with the specific task of 'making' futures arrives with attendant risks and dangers that may re-ify the present or uphold neoliberal/neo-colonial ideas about teleology and progress. It is these accompanying dangers when method becomes a tool for world-building that turns my attention towards the genre of Afrofuturism and black feminist science's attempts to focus on 'method-making' itself, as the next step.

Afrofuturism as Genre and as Praxis

Spanning multiple media, Afrofuturism is a movement across literature, art, music, gaming, fashion, films, that imagines futures centring black culture/people/technology from Africa and the global African diaspora.[5] Afrofuturist work can function as both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory (Womack 2013) as it can allow us to 're-examine how the future is currently imagined, and to reconstruct futures thinking with a deeper insight into the black experience' (Brooks 2018, 101). A central impulse is to make visible alternative futures through creative fabulations that centre minoritized knowledges, histories and cultures that have traditionally been relegated to a 'primitive' or 'backward' status, with little to offer for the future. Thus, although Afrofuturist work varies in content, their visions 'are necessarily transgressive and subversive in relation to dominant discourse' (Morris 2016, 33).

Often seen as a sub-set of speculative/science-fiction (sf), most Afrofuturist work attempts to reframe, remake or reconstruct the genre. It rejects the politics of sf historiography which tends to ignore how storying/visioning the future for liberation and justice is a well-established practice in most indigenous and native communities. The works of novelists such as Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin, Nisi Shawl; music acts such as Drexciya, Janelle Monae and Sun Ra; artists such as Ellen Gallagher, Wangechi Mutu, etc. have all been studied for the ways their creations reject traditional sf's blind-spots: binaries between humans and aliens, racist caricatures/tropes, white historiographies, origin myths, linear time and colonial teleology, white/nationalist space, etc., and offer in its place, plural, cacophonous, futures. Thus, while the sf genre traditionally

allows for the 'novum' to emerge through a process of 'cognitive estrangement' (Suvin 1979) from everyday reality, Afrofuturist work is said to offer cognitive reconstruction, through pluralising futures in fiction that 'conscientiously misrepresents' (Delaney 2012, 6) the awfulness and the stubborn unchangeableness of life that is taken for granted in realist fiction. Afrofuturist work therefore involves the triple work of resisting violence/ injustice in the present, rescuing the past from singular narratives (of death/destruction), and using it to fuel alternative, fabulous, less rationalised visions of better worlds. The ability of such works to imagine a break from the past was the primary draw for me as it spoke to the dilemmas arising from my project.

The genre's approach to temporality is central to its offer of new futures. Octavia Butler, whose works are hailed as the dominant blueprint (Morris 2012) for contemporary Afrofuturist work described herself as a 'histofuturist' – someone who extrapolates from human and technological pasts and presents (Butler 1981). Hoydis (2015) claims this relationship with time as a particular feature of women doing Afrofuturist work. Butler's works, specifically, resist 'the equation of black women as the dead weight of the past while also resisting the "futurist" construction of the past as uninstructive or useless' (O'Neill 2021, 70). The past is thus told afresh, through a reliance on black, often female experience, and unafraid to both challenge dominant narratives of that past or to reframe it from black feminist perspectives. In such works, we can notice new ways of gathering histories and making new possibilities, allowing for 'futures that carry a recognition of all the violence of the past and the present, but which, for precisely those reasons, also carries a profoundly hopeful cultural memory of healing and renewed balance' (Chattopadhyay 2021, 16). Thus Afrofuturism becomes a program for recovering both pasts and counter-futures.

In direct reference to the method-making concerns of this article, Afrofuturism has been recognised as 'a space to manufacture tools capable of intervention' to envision and deliver non-hostile, non-dystopian futures (Eshun 2003, 301). Feminist critique and creative strategising occupy a central role in the construction of such tools of intervention. For instance, Afrofuturist novels often feature black women, femmes or children as protagonists, as figures who become experts of survival, and through whom female experience/perspective, desire and strategies are voiced. Their strategies are usually at some distance to heteropatriarchal and capitalist modes of winning. For instance, they may involve at different moments, acts of 'resignation, sacrifice, accommodation and assimilation' (Kilgore and Samantrai 2010, 355), but always moving towards liberation. Most visible in the novel form, these fictions tend to project minoritarian figures as breaking from everday violence and as striving for futures free of gender, racial, sexual or class-based oppression through strategies of building alliances and unusual/unexpected solidarities across human and non-human boundaries. In Okorafor's Binti trilogy, the protagonist Binti, progressively moves to appreciate a vastly expanded sense of self, starting off as a Himba girl, to becoming part alien, part indigenous, part bio-spaceship. At each stage, she relies on objects, aliens, alien heritage, and a healing/living-space ship to form new identities, allies, and in the process, becomes a 'conjoined' hybrid – a 'more-than', posthuman being. By staging persistent, everyday inequalities in the sphere of the fantastic, surprising and under-appreciated feminist strategies for addressing disparity or injustice – the tools of intervention for a better future – come to light.

In this creative space of manufacturing tools and strategies to intervene in making futures, a feminist sensibility is clearly visible. When a feminist sensibility is consciously

centred within the genre, it becomes a space where the disruptive forces of *Black Joy* and *Feminist Killjoy* fruitfully meet. Black Joy, a relational emotion engendered by a racialised society, has socio-historical underpinnings (Tichavakunda 2022) and is most visible in the celebratory contributions of black, African and diasporic culture. Freedom, imagination, community, creativity and love are central constructs of Black Joy (Adams 2022; Boseley et al. 2022; Brock 2020) and Afrofuturist works bring these energies to answer the question of what the future ought to and could look like. On the other hand, the Feminist Killjoy stance generates several effects, one of which is to attract blame for ruining 'joy/fun' when calling out injustice and discrimination rooted in racism, misogyny, patriarchal culture, etc. The Feminist Killjoy stance insists on joy being shared across the spectrum of life, and certainly not at the expense of the minoritized female and thus has the effect of threatening an established/dominant 'fantasy of happiness, an idea of where and (in whom) happiness can be found' (Ahmed 2023, 13). Afrofuturist feminist works bring together these affects of celebratory joy and of critique, often by exploiting the queer/non-realist affordances of sf to highlight a variety of older and more newly imagined, more-than-human identities and genders. Queer Afrofuturist texts such as Nalo Hopkinson's works (*The Salt Roads, The Chaos*) for instance, subvert the erasure of black queer bodies from both the past and the future, challenging white hegemony and heteronormativity (Faucheux 2017) while proposing other, more capacious relations and desires. The joy of liberatory potential is meant to be global, for all, made possible by accommodating differences and complexities within diverse black histories and allowing for such differences to co-exist as a condition for building solidarities across boundaries (Chattopadhyay 2021).

To be clear, Afrofuturism as a genre, does not purport to solve the world's problems, but rather (like other minoritized cultural knowledges) uses re-imaginings of pasts and projections of the future to suggest historically sensitive, ethically alive ways to imagine better worlds. The genre becomes an avenue through which black women's spoken/written/creative outputs reveal their manifestory nature – that is, their desire for, and ability to manifest different futures. These works are thus a tool of intervention, akin to 'training simulation to keep minds sharp, battle ready, and prepared for a range of different scenarios that are progressively plausible … ' (O'Neill 2021, 78). If there is a grammar/code to the best of Afrofuturist work, it may be that they invite audiences to collaborate in conjuring and enjoying new sensibilities of how a multiplicity of futures may break away from tedious, singular teleological frames. Thus, questions of who will feature in the future, who will survive or thrive, where, why, how, for what purpose continue to be answered in multiple ways in Afrofuturist narratives.

Black Feminist Science[6]: Research as Method-Making

In this part of the article, I focus on black feminist science, noting parallels and similarities with Afrofuturist feminist work in its impulse to invent strategies/methods to cultivate different futures. This literature also spoke to the dilemmas and disaffections I experienced on my project, particularly regarding challenges that speculative researchers face.

Katherine McKittrick (2021) draws attention to the project of 'method-making', by theorising afresh, the role of methodology in creating the kind of science/knowledge that makes new worlds. Method-making, if it wishes to remake the world for greater equity and justice, must dare to be disobedient, rebellious and rogue. Its starting point is the

critical stance of 'Discipline is empire' (McKittrick 2021, 36, 38, 39), which exposes disciplines as territories where replaying the act of researching in recognisable ways is expected and rewarded. McKittrick, drawing on William Clark's (2006) works on the origins of the research university, notes the evolution of disciplines, departments of study (even of counter-normative sub-disciplines such as ethnic or women's studies), and how they become invested (economised) and financially and geographically organised. Under these conditions, even a stance of 'biology as social construction' may end up empowering biology rather than displacing it as the primary way to study identity. Biocentric, colonial knowledge can become entrenched even with the best intentions: 'Academic disciplines make knowledge into categories and subcategories; methodology and method make discipline and knowledge about categories' (McKittrick 2021, 35). However, this does not have to mean abandoning the academy altogether. For many critical black scholars, this awareness offers an opportunity to use one's insider analysis of how current, self-replicating methods and their justifications, can be unjust or ethically unsustainable, and thus to provide insights and rationale to invent and argue for, better methods. We can see in this impulse to reconstruct academic fields, the echoes of efforts of Afrofuturist creatives to remake the shape and nature of the sf genre itself.

By way of example, the work of Kathryn Yusoff (2018) reveals the effort to remake a discipline, in this case, the discipline of geology, a science that she exposes as marked by categorisations of race and land. Focusing on the impossibility of separating geology from the violence/dispossession enacted through the extraction of mineral resources, she asks for a move away from methods that reinscribe geology as neutral, as merely about 'rocks and deep time' (Yusoff 2018, 13), to transform the discipline, to show how it 'might look otherwise' (Yusoff 2018, 12). In this process, geology is exposed as 'a hinge that joins indigenous genocide, slavery, and settler colonialism through an indifferent structure of extraction, indifferent to the specifics of people and places … ' (Yusoff 2018, 107). To refuse accounts of earth and its beings as units of economic extraction leads to new methods/approaches to shaping knowledge. Here, the new post-disciplinary approaches move away from long-standing methods that rely on dividing materiality (slave, plantation, sugar, coal) as agentic or inert, and away from the segregation & hierarchisation of human, sub-human and non-human. Such moves are instrumental in reducing the 'fictive distance' (created between disciplines, their inhabitors and the world) caused by standard disciplinary methods/categorisations.

This kind of method-making is thus always curiosity-driven, creative, and emphatically, not just about applying established techniques. McKittrick (2021) notes how applying techniques to situations of enquiry will inevitably generate unsurprising findings and lead to data-driven description rather than change. If established pathways/methods for scientific enquiry participate in the 'systematic replication' of the world and restrain radically new conceptualisations, then rebellious method-making has to start outside pre-existing modes of enquiry. Black Studies scholars ask that we are sceptical of everyday vocabularies and concepts guiding our enquiry – ideas such as proof/evidence, rigour, validation, theoretical framework, reproducibility, transparency, for example – and ask if/how they play a part in reproducing narrow, disciplinary, colonial and positivist research. Here too, we can see the parallel with Afrofuturism's rejection of everyday sf motifs and language, as a strategy to reframe and invent the field afresh.

To create an alternative frame and language requires making up, crafting and inventing methods, the purpose of which is to allow other worlds – currently 'nonworlds' – to become visible. While this nonworld may not be proved or authenticated on realist and positivist terms, proof of the world-making abilities of this kind of science can be seen in black scholarship – from devising alternative citational practices, new analytic approaches, new research sensibilities or methodological innovations (cf. Ahmed 2014; Benjamin 2020; Hartman 2019; Keeling 2019; McKittrick 2021; Nyong'o 2019; Sharpe 2016 and many more). For instance, it has been argued that traditional research methods work through finding marginalised subjects who are positioned as 'raw data' and then analysed through theoretical frameworks of canonical thinkers, in order to formulate the politics of moving the vulnerable from oppressed to free. As an antidote to this dismal production process where 'abjection, subjection and objectification' (McKittrick 2021, 46) become the main way of knowing black existence, black feminist science proposes acknowledging and protecting the space of not-knowing, a space where it is possible to acknowledge that one 'cannot fully know but certainly feel in our hearts' (McKittrick 2021, 12). This epistemic humility allows the partial-knower to avoid conferring an inert objecthood on the yet-unknown.

Such counter intuitive practices are proposed as a way of offering healing and balance to previously insensitive processes of research, in ways that are similar to how Afrofuturist works seek and make visible counter-futures. Saidiya Hartman's (2019) work in conscientiously reconstructing the lives of young, African-American women in the 1900s–1930s is a demonstration of such speculative method-making. Incorporating letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, photographs, surveys, snatches of songs, she recreates the missing lives of black women through speculative reconstruction. Her methods bring to life, a non-visible world through a rigorous attention to archival sources alongside an empathetic imagination. This attention to detail and precision combined with speculation to fill in missing histories has been described as a practice of 'liquid rigor' (Robinson and Sodipo 2020). This approach signals rigour not through 'reams of positivist evidence' or 'impartial treatises' (McKittrick 2021, 7, 9) but through prioritising a relationality and connectedness that underpins the research imagination. This is a type of 'fugitive science' that valorises forms of knowledge/existence that have survived cruelty, annihilation/genocide, and initiates creative, reparative texts/acts (music, poem, novel, painting) that go beyond the binary of oppression/resistance and become acts that 'recodes' life itself (McKittrick 2021, 57). Here, fugitivity lies in the act of evading established disciplinary methods and protocols that may obscure the forging of relations and connections.

A key feature of this kind of scientific enquiry is that it is not just meant to be relevant for a particular category of humans or even just all humans. It draws its energy from disparate global struggles that are as yet 'unfinished' (Wynter 2006, 163), and which are sensed or experienced differently in different spaces. By insisting that the benefits of such enquiry are conferred well beyond specific peoples, struggles or spaces, black feminist science shows that this kind of method-making is 'a way of knowing and belonging capaciously and generously' (McKittrick 2021, 33), an orientation away from bio-centric or human-centric methods towards inter-species, inter-ecological frames of knowing that value pathways to better relationality and connectivity. A core imperative of this method is to pay attention to the specificities of different kinds of struggle, while working out how bodies, voices and histories relate to, and connect with one another.

Rather than 'hold others in place', the focus is on the kind of bridging work that needs to be done to get closer to people, ideas, stuff; to seek collectivities and build alliances (Ahmed 2000).

In sum, black feminist science and its unique grammar of method-making can be described as: a deep dissatisfaction with descriptive, data-induced answers and a preference for curiosity and wonder (attentiveness). These methods may refuse or defer an engagement with only what counts as realistic in the effort to make visible, current non-worlds. It encourages anti-disciplinarity, detail and precision that is redefined through attempts to improve relationality and connectedness in research. It necessarily breaks/ignores some rules of knowledge production and makes new ones to allow unusual combinations to emerge that help account for the struggles and complexity of life. It seems that these principles and features of method-making in black feminist science, can be set to work and experimented with, in the making of speculative research methods in a variety of situations and projects.

Prompts for Method-Making

The three areas discussed so far – the youth futures project and insights from the Afrofuturist genre and from black feminist science – each exist in different conceptual spaces but also speak to each other in response to the challenges raised by the project. I propose a bridging framework, articulated as a set of prompts that focus on key actions that can map or plan pathways that can push beyond the arresting impasse of the present. This is not offered as a solution but as a tool of intervention that invites dismantling, re-writing, and being 'put to work' in other speculative research encounters.

The prompts are organised around familiar elements of research endeavours: purpose, space, temporality, methods, rigour and ethics – as these give form and expression to empirical research projects; but when informed by Afrofuturist and black feminist science's impulses, they transform into less familiar modes: articulation, sharing, retelling, creating, relationality and recognition. These prompts also have the potential to act as a theoretical-methodological-ethical compass in navigating everyday speculative research practice.

Articulation (or Purpose)

- How is (proposed) research allowed to depart from the everyday rationalisations and organisations of research processes – from their pre-determined focus and objects of inquiry? In what ways is it anti-disciplinary?
- How can any original purpose/starting point of the research be differently articulated over time, without foreclosing on emerging agendas and surprising knowledges that arise?

Invention (or Method)

- Are planned methods/design in danger of reifying the world? Will they reproduce the production line of 'abjection, subjection and objectification' (McKittrick 2021, 46)? How can they transform into a springboard for more liberatory imaginaries?

- How does the method support making visible, current non-worlds and surprising perspectives that may be marginalised or ignored?
- What kinds of prompts from Afrofuturist or radical speculative fiction – images, objects, fashion, technology, music, stories – would be useful to assemble in a methods toolkit? How can representations of cosmic and global elements – muti-species, multi-cultural, multi-modal (through vignettes, song, images, art, games, film, TV) – enter the design?
- What sort of design or method can best support the collective reimagination of liberatory futures, a cognitive 'rescontruction' (Delaney 2012), rather than an apolitical opening? Does the method offer a mode of talking-thinking-making/doing for participants?

Sharing (and Space)

- Are the spaces and places of research conducive to speculative imagination? What is its nature (open, mundane, critical, convivial, creative, safe, etc.), and what actions can help create a productive space? What limits or possibilities exist for creating this space?
- How can the space for a subjunctive mood (what could be), one that proposes radical futures, be cultivated? What kind of space will allow participants to attend to and improvise beyond current limitations/constraints?
- What space allows them to repeat, collaborate, innovate and create from each other's expressions?

Re-Telling (and Temporality)

- How can we attune to/recognise/respond to unusual understandings of time and temporality that can support the imagining of other futures?
- Is there space to be a 'histofuturist' (Butler 1981), concerned simultaneously with retelling what was, resisting what continues to be, and creating what can be?

Relationality (and Rigour)

- Where does the detail and precision of a new rigour (liquid rigour/rigorous empathy) lie? In what ways does this rigour create new kinds of research – in caring relations, or commitment to connections; in new approaches to speculative analysis; in new representational practice; and in new understandings of positionalities/identities?
- How does the method/design allow one to discover/express how one is affected; how one could desire otherwise? How can it encourage a sharing of struggles and concerns as well as desires? Does it allow for an exploration of connections and disconnections?
- Does it avoid the extractive mode, does it allow sufficient time for meaningful rather than contrived engagement of/with participants?
- How can the analysis/interpretation support a generous, capacious way of knowing the world? Does it facilitate the seeking out of relations and connections between struggles, bodies, voices, objects, histories? How does it allow for connections to be made rather than missed?

Recognition (or Ethics)

- How can the experience allow for, support or inspire the 'recoding' (McKittrick 2021) of life and futures in generous, more-than-human ways?
- Have possibilities for alternate sensibilities/futures in the spirit of Black Joy + Feminist Killjoy been encouraged?
- How can the research find ways to highlight/credit the contributions of minoritized/ marginalised knowledges/creations as part of the process?

Speculative Method-Making

Two kinds of challenges became apparent as I reflected on the youth futures project. One was the challenge faced by participants in breaking away from the weight of the dismal present and to imagine otherwise. The other was my, the researcher's difficulty in inventing methods that would effectively bridge everyday research practice and the aspirational goal of instigating new futures while doing speculative research.

My turn to Afrofuturist works sought inspiration from black creatives who have broken the stranglehold of the unrelenting past–present to imagine otherwise. Their histofuturist impulses illustrate how one can/must look back to look forward with hope. They centre knowledges and queer strategies that tend to be overlooked (resignation, assimilation, accommodation, sacrifice, collaboration) but which are akin to training simulations that prepare one to open futures to new identities and unimaginable possibilities. Taken together, these principles may allow a response that can read/join with less visible youth imaginaries.

The works of black feminist science also illustrate the importance of deviating from disciplining procedures, even as they appear to speak the language of freedom. By focusing on relatedness/connectedness with subjects and their invisible worlds, they disobey research traditions that subjectify/objectify participants and find ways to recode both research and life. Most of all, they take a 'cosmic' perspective in being capacious enough to speak to different sorts of unfinished struggles irrespective of the specificities of life forms.

If, as I note in the introduction, speculative research approaches are as susceptible to reproducing the problems of the present as any other form of research, then these two bodies of work allow us to 'make method' in ways that acknowledge and avoid this problem. To retain its radical future-making potential, speculative research needs a guiding compass. The works of Afrofuturists and black feminists can act as this compass, precisely because they speak from an intimate knowledge of past and current injustices that bring a chilling clarity to the urgency to manifest alternative futures. They reorient the sorts of obligations, critical questioning and planning required for radical speculative method-making.

Where the youth futures project opened up distinct non-worlds, these also revealed everyday challenges in meeting the goals of speculative research. The framework explored in this article is intended to support researchers in similar situations. It is an attempt to bridge the world of empirical research with its particular challenges, and the inspirational-aspirational world of black feminist science and Afrofuturism. As argued here, both bodies of works set out an explicit set of principles that clarify the wider liberatory and manifestory qualities needed for future-making speculative research.

Notes

1. For example: https://www.iftf.org/; https://wearefutures.com/; https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/futures-and-foresight-studies.html.
2. I use the lowercase 'b' to denote black unless I am quoting a previously published piece that has capitalised the 'B'. Debates around the use of the lowercase or capital letter are not settled, and there can be no one correct usage that fits all contexts/purposes. However, for this article, I am persuaded that the lowercase 'b' suggests a less essentialist or homogenised reading of diverse histories and traditions that comprise black knowledge. The uppercase B is still useful in contexts where strategic mobilisation for political purposes is necessary.
3. Brexit – the departure of the UK from the European Union following a referendum held in 2016, in which 51.89% of voters voted to leave the EU.
4. Reminder: this data was gathered a few years before COVID-19 struck.
5. Some creatives such as Okorafor deliberately label their work as 'Africanfuturism', not Afrofuturism: 'Africanfuturism is similar to "Afrofuturism" in the way that Blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West' (Okorafor 2019).
6. McKittrick (2021) notes how 'Science' may mean different things – the disciplines of Science (biology, physics, etc.), or, the methods of science (processes, procedures, experiments). And then there are studies of knowing (explorations of how we come to know), which are also a science. McKittrick's work, as well as those of other black feminist scholars such as Hartman, Keeling and Sharpe (to name a few) around studying, experimenting and inventing methods towards a science of how we come to know (black) life (afresh) signals a distinct, emergent field of 'black feminist science'.

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