



Article

A Hesitant Futurist's Reflections on Feminist Design Beyond Binaries

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Abstract

*Reflecting on the arguments made in *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future* (Milojević, 2024) and drawing on feminist approaches to temporality, this article explores whether/how design futures can move beyond reproducing the binary systems of thinking that are central to social and environmental injustice. It begins by defining intersectional feminism and argues for an approach that challenges the ways that systems of oppression are maintained through 'othering'. It outlines how some design futures work risks reproducing existing inequalities and explores the potential of the 'thick present' for fostering radical alternatives.*

Keywords

Feminist Temporalities, Thick Present, Radical Futures, Intersectionality

Introduction

Over the last decade there seems to have been unprecedented growth in interest in futures among academics, industries and governments. While my research interest may make me more aware of futures projects, it is hard not to correlate this surge with a response to the polycrisis, a means of trying to react to, solve, or fix futures in the face of increasing uncertainty. As Pink (RMIT, 2024) suggests, recent motivation to engage in futures thinking includes technology companies keen to embed their products into the collective consciousness, local governments eager to foster resilience, and NGOs wanting to make a difference in light of climate change.

My own interest in futures began when I encountered speculative design and its orientation towards provoking discussion about alternatives. This was an attractive prospect to me both in terms of thinking about a place for design outside of capitalism and making radical feminist visions material so they could be experienced. As Coleman and Jungnickel note, 're-imagining worlds and re-making futures have always been central to feminism' (2024, p.1) and, done well, speculative design has a participatory ethos able to enable the public to reflect upon these visions. Nevertheless, when I started using futures methodologies with designers and design students I found that even among those you would perceive to be some of the most creative people in society, future imaginaries were heavily influenced by the techno-utopias of Silicon Valley and/or the dystopian scenarios that circulate in the media. These future visions have changed little since the 1950s. As memories of the future, they influence, and constrain, the collective imagination, designers included.

Visions of feminist futures, while provocative, were no exception. For example, when working with design students to consider the future of domestic labour, their attention would almost always turn to automation. While the potential of dramatically changing the gendered division of labour in the home using technology should not be overlooked, focusing on more efficient automated futures can flatten out many of the complexities of the everyday experience of gendered labour. For instance, do domestic technologies increase rather than decrease standards of cleanliness, who/what takes on the cognitive labour necessary to running a household, what resources are used to create new technologies, and what does it mean to be disconnected from dust?

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These experiences encouraged me to reflect upon both what constrains visions of equitable futures and how we can foster ‘thicker’ futures. Thus, in this article, I begin by defining my approach to intersectional feminism and briefly document how binary systems of thought such as self/other, man/women, culture/nature, modern/traditional, technical/organic have influenced Western design approaches and perpetuate inequality. I outline the concept of the ‘thick present’ and explore its implementation in design futures projects. Considering the prevalence of interest in futures at the current juncture, I conclude by reflecting on whether an emphasis on design futures (as they are currently conceptualized) is the right strategy to foster gender justice.

Defining Intersectional Feminism

While I am more resolute about the need for feminism and hesitant about futures than the position outlined *The Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future* (Milojević, 2024), I consistently agree with the definition of, and need for, feminism argued for in the text. As stated elsewhere (Baker, 2024), the intersectional feminism that I align with is one that strives to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression for everyone, and recognises the negative impact of heteropatriarchy on all people including men (hooks, 2000). Intersectional feminism highlights the connection between all fights for justice (including environmental justice) and recognises that the systemic redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders will only be achieved by challenging the oppressive systems of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism and colonialism. Rather than working towards a genderless society in the first instance, the intersectional feminist approach I take seeks to create a world whereby all manifestations of sex and gender are possible without negative social ramifications.

This perspective on intersectional feminism and feminist futures is similar to the one outlined by Milojević (2024), and challenges misunderstandings of intersectionality as an extension of ‘identity politics’, or some sort of additive hierarchy of identity categories based on the number of inequalities experienced. These interpretations of the theory of intersectionality are fundamentally wrong, and the fact that these misunderstandings can be found within future studies (e.g. Anthony, 2020), further exemplifies the need for greater knowledge of the nuances and complexities of feminist theory. Rather than suggesting that identity is static, knowable and held by a person, intersectionality describes the way that interlocking systems of discrimination impact upon people differently according to various contexts. It purposefully moves away from the ‘either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought’ and ‘the belief that either/or categories [and their associated qualities] must be ranked’ (Hill-Collins, 1990, p.225).

Moving away from binary systems of thought is essential in order to foster social and environmental justice, including gender justice. This is because the power that is integral to maintain systems of oppression is sustained ‘not only through extermination and structural exploitation’ of people ‘but also through systematic corporeal segregation and othering’ (Canli, 2018). To hold its ground as the major authority and the norm, Canli writes, ‘Western hegemony enforced the binary system of thinking, deploying the “modern”, “enlightened” and “civilized” subject at the centre, while externalizing any living being or idea that would challenge this rationale to the total opposite, as the “other”.’ (2018, p.652). The binaries of self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, man/woman, modern/traditional, objective/subjective, rational/emotional, human/non-human, technical/organic etc are not only posed in opposition to each other but are assigned positive and negative value. As Canli argues, this binary logic has permeated into every single bit of modern human condition including design. Echoing this perspective, Riane Eisler sees binary thinking as characteristic of ‘domination systems’ that should be challenged and transcended by partnership models of social organisation centred on interconnectness (Eisler and Fry, 2019). In regard to design then, if we want to move towards social and environmental justice, it is essential to begin by challenging the binaries and associated hierarchies that inform much of design methodology and practice. We might go on to imagine what design looks like if partnership and interconnectedness are at the centre.

From my perspective, the argument for the need to move beyond binary logic extends to calls for the creation of new matriarchies. Even when the idea of matriarchy is employed as a means to foster inclusion, participation, collaboration and understanding (Escobar, 2018), I am suspicious, like Milojević, of the use of the mother-figure as metaphor because it reasserts the associations of woman-nature that are easily assimilated into patriarchal hierarchies of domination (Sandilands, 1997, p.19). New matriarchies ‘inspired by matriarchal principles of the past’

and informed by ecofeminism (Escobar, 2018, p.37) slip too easily into a ‘glorified celebration of the eternal feminine and in doing so reinforce the very dichotomies [...they] purported to unmake’ including man/women, nature/culture, and spirituality/science (Braidotti, 2022, p.87).

Feminist Temporalities and the Thick Present

As feminists such as Haraway have argued, temporality is not exempt from binary thinking and its associated hierarchies. In their discussion of speculative fabulation, Haraway (2011) writes how ‘the unbridgeable dichotomy between the traditional and the modern is as much a frontier myth as the cordon sanitaire between nature and culture or the organic and the technological’ (para 18). In design, this has informed the ways in which craft practices are typically associated with traditional pasts, and industrial processes with modern futures. The imposition of ‘clock time’ was part of colonization and, in terms of design innovation, this means that it is frequently ‘developing nations’ that are viewed as needing to catch up.

Linear narratives of the history of feminism, such as feminist waves, are also problematic. As Gunkel et al. (2012) note, the notion of ‘waves’ simplify concerns and lump them together, when, in reality, one feminist voice has never existed. Linear time, as feminist genealogies remind us, closes down the possibility of radical change. As Söderbäck argues (2012, p.8), linear time runs the risk of ‘forgetfulness’ in that it does not allow for a return to the past that would ground us in history and continuity. Whilst, at the same time, through repetition it simultaneously and paradoxically traps us in the past, foreclosing the possibility of a radical break.

Among many other feminists to problematise the notion of linear time (e.g. Felski, 2000), both Haraway and Barad have used the concept of the ‘thick present’ to challenge temporal linearity as employed in Western salvation history, modern science’s progress narrative, and future-oriented advanced capitalism. The concept of ‘thick’ time, or ‘thick present’ has multiple etymologies. For Barad (2007), time-space-mattering, or the thickness of the present moment, emerges from their interpretation of quantum physics and the work of Niels Bohr. In a number of experiments, Bohr’s work demonstrates how time, like space and matter, is tied to particular phenomena rather than an external parameter (as cited in Barad, 2007). The past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold. At each point in time there is an entire world in a very specific configuration, a thick now simultaneously made up of pasts and futures. These pasts and futures are alive in present not only as personal experience and as social reality, but materially in bodies and environments. Barad (Karen Barad, 2016; Aarhus University, 2016) suggests that quantum physics joins forces with indigenous knowledges and afrofuturism and blows away any homogenous notion of progress and time.

The entanglement of places, times, matters and meanings is also central to Haraway’s (2016) use of the concept of the thick present. They write that the thick present works to move us away from Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures on response-ability, or ‘environmental, multi-species, multiracial, multi-kinded reproductive and environmental justice’ (Haraway in Paulson & Haraway, 2019). Thus, the thick present is an invitation to move beyond linearity and simple binary categories into complex situated, attentive and relational accounts of the world. It compels us to ‘stay with the trouble’. Good stories, Haraway writes, ‘reach into rich pasts to sustain thick presents to keep the story going for those who come after’ (2016, p.125).

Thus, taking the ‘thick present’ seriously as designers means exploring the lived relations of everything around us, our partnerships and our entanglements. It involves an ethics of care that recognizes the responsibility we have to people, animals, plants, places and things for generations past and for those yet to come. Design futures inspired by the thick present would avoid both nostalgically looking back to a pristine ‘natural’ past, as well as the progress narratives of a technologically advanced future.

This approach has informed the numerous iterations of feminist speculative design workshops I have conducted in the last five years or so. One of the first activations began by asking participants to complete a gender journal whereby people would explore their pasts/presents/futures by reflecting on their own experience. Two related activities proved powerful in terms of inspiration for participants’ speculative designs. The first was to ‘tell a story about when you have felt the weight of your gender’ and the second was to ‘tell a story about when you have felt free from, or comfortable in, your gender’. For example, a first-generation kiwi Chinese participant, spoke of her realisation that if she had been conceived in China her life would have been very different, in fact she might have

ceased to exist. She researched the legality of invitro sex selection across the world and designed ibaby, an imagined biotech device and app, to draw attention to the ethics of sex selection technology and fertility tourism (Figure 1).

iBaby™



Fig 1. Ibaby, Cynthia Wang, 2018



Fig 2. The Invisible Worker, Jean Derome, 2019.

Another participant, reflected on, despite how much she tried and used new technologies, household labour and emotional labour seemed to fall to her. She remembered the unending drudgery of filling and emptying the dishwasher with small children. This led her to create ‘The invisible worker’, an exercise bike/VR powered dishwasher that takes dishes straight from the table. Wastewater is used for a kitchen garden. Part satire, this project aimed to draw attention to the ironies of household technologies (Figure 2).

Due to the autoethnographic exercise at the start of the workshop, this first activation enabled exploration of the complexities of gendered experience, and the speculative designs proved relatively successful in asking questions about gender norms and systemic inequalities. However, I questioned the extent to which the speculative projects themselves really produced ‘thicker’ stories. Were they still within the realm of critique and/or apocalyptic and salvific futures?

The second workshop activity I devised attempted to lean into the idea of past/present/futures. It combined childhood memories of material things with analysis of feminist technologies (meant in the loosest sense to include people, objects and processes) in order to imagine alternative futures. Participants were asked to come to the workshop with an early memory of an object or space in their home. After an icebreaker, each group of participants was given a feminist technology to discuss. The local and global technologies included Mary Watson’s Mobile laundry in the 1950s, David Bowie, the self-cleaning home, and *taonga Māori* (Maori treasure/prized artefact) depicting non-binary sex and gender roles (Figure 3). Taking inspiration from ‘A Thing from the Future’, we created cards using both the feminist things and personal memories and used these as inspiration for imagining objects that could exist in 2040. The futures that were imagined included a bathroom with integrated hormone supply and measurement, and a festival where people would break down gendered objects and use the parts to build new things.

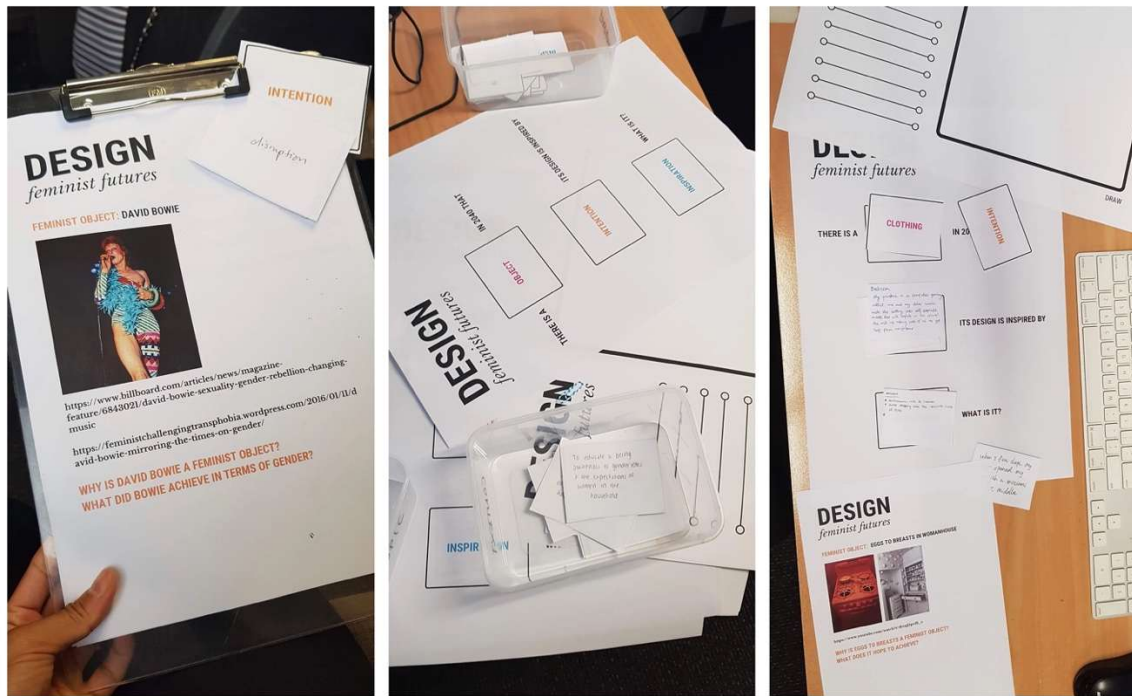


Fig 3. Feminist Futures Workshop, 2019.

This workshop was successful in part because it enabled participants to discuss feminist politics and gender inequalities. The use of personal memories enabled more emotive and visceral responses. The inclusion of inspirational past feminist technologies, of which some have been deemed failures, disrupts progress narratives, the notion of waves of feminism and linear time. Yet, I still questioned whether the futures imagined were evidence

of thick futures. There seemed to be an absence of material embodiment and the entanglements of space-time-mattering that I am now convinced are necessary to imagine and create futures beyond the binaries that are central to the reproduction of social inequality.

More recently, Ståhl *et al.* (2024) have used the concept of the ‘thick present’ to explore pollination and counter ‘thin’ stories about the loss of pollinators. As part of their co-creation design-led collaboration project, *Un/Making Pollination*, they created a set of posters and held workshops with participants with the aim of enriching ‘current ecosocial sensibilities’ and ‘making liveable futures’ (p.145). Before creating the posters, they set about ‘inviting participants to make appetizers from food and drink ingredients that [...they] hoped would amplify engagement in the decline of pollinators’ (p.165). From their documentation, Ståhl *et al.* seem to have done a great job at engaging participants in the materialities of human–plant–pollinator relationships, the sweaty, loud, tasty and sticky work of pollinators. However, they write that ‘transferability of the labour and experience in the workshop did not quite stretch into imagining thick futures’ (Jönsson *et al.*, 2021, p.11). They reflect that perhaps the present became so thick and stories so hard to navigate, that the future and how to intervene was deferred to others and other times. In hindsight, they write that:

experiencing disappointment, failure and lack of solutions is part of thickening the present and moving beyond polarised responses of game over and tech-fix (Jönsson *et al.*, 2021, p.12).

In retrospect looking back on many of my activations I would agree. In my experience, either futures are imagined at the expense of deep engagement with our material entanglements, or engagement in thick presents negate the articulation of futures as we currently know them. So, where to go from here?

(Not a) Conclusion: Thickening and Failing

In *The Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future*, Milojević writes:

Feminist futurists acknowledge the possibility that the future has already been colonised by patriarchal imaginings. If and when this is deemed to be the case, two parallel projects need to happen. First, the project of critiquing and decolonising. And second, the project of envisioning different, post-patriarchal futures (Milojević, 2024, p.75).

At the beginning of my feminist futures work I would have agreed with this statement, but now I wonder if these strategies are enough. Given the prevalence of futures initiatives and our seeming inability (at least in the West) to move beyond solutionism and futures that flatten the complexities of time-space-mattering, perhaps we should be focusing on queering (resisting, challenging, and disrupting) the norms of gender, critique, and futures thinking. Can we reframe our approaches to be fully responsible in the thick present with all the contradiction and complexity that comes with that. As Bayo Akomolafe (2024) suggests, there is a space between salvation and surrender that, while may well feel frightening, is creative and generative. The ‘spawling, open-ended, indeterminate cosmos is never fully available for salvation, and never fully available for our surrendering’, and perhaps working with the thick present we can more acutely experience our material entanglements in past/presents/futures (para 4). Akomolafe writes, it’s ‘difficult to be there though...we’d rather just save the world’ and ‘reassure ourselves we have ‘done the work’ (para 3.). Perhaps then if we want to move away from the binary logic that sustains social and environmental injustice we need to cultivate space for the thick present, to step into our non-binaries lives, and ‘unbecome’ and ‘unworld’ together. I am in no doubt that often this will be uncomfortable and feel like failure, but perhaps that is what it means to design beyond binaries.

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