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Positioning Afro-diasporic speculative design episteme in South African higher education institutions

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Abstract

The watershed Decolonial and Fallist movements in South African universities have reawakened and reignited the necessary, urgent, and compelling need to foreground and position Afro-diasporic episteme in South African university curricula and everyday practice. This article posits that centrally positioning Afro-diasporic Speculative Design (ASD) episteme in South African higher education design institutions, without necessarily displacing or subordinating other knowledge lenses, could positively contribute to engaging with some of the concerns raised by the Decolonial and Fallist movements in design pedagogy and praxis. It contends that African, and its diasporic, speculative designs draw on the retrospective but also project into the future. It sees this as a confluence between critical and technical design lessons, insights, and inspiration from the past and imagination, projection and visualization into the future. The article proposes that failure to engage with ASD or other Afro-diasporic episteme has the potential of excluding certain knowledge systems, especially from the Global South, from design education curricula therefore denying students an important design lens for their work.

This article lenses these design inspirations on two Afro-diasporic movements, Négritude, a movement that it sees as speculating on a probable past and Afrofuturism, which speculates on a plausible future. It draws parallels between these two movements and the Decolonial and Fallist movement identifying similar progression from alienation to revolt, followed by novelty and invention, and through to self-affirmation and self-fulfilment, which is discussed in all three movements. Afro-diasporic scholars such as WEB Du Bois, Abiola Irele, Kodwo Eshun and Woodrow Winchester III, among others, inform the discourse in the article. It concludes that design departments in institutions of higher learning are the ideal spaces to offer platforms, tools, methodologies, and direction to inspire novelty and invention that could launch design students' journeys towards self-discovery and self-affirmation, positioning them for design journeys into the core of the fourth industrial revolution.

Keywords: Afro-diasporic, afrofuturism, decolonial and fallist movements, négritude, speculative designs

Introduction

Recent Decolonial and Fallist movements in South African universities have reawakened and reignited the need to foreground and position episteme from the Global South, broadly, and those from Afrika and its diaspora, specifically, in university curricula and everyday practice. It

is of importance that majority of students who are currently in South African universities are able to see, and believe, that they are capable of being central and integral protagonists in shaping and participating in knowledge generation and design solutions not just in our contemporary times but more importantly, in the future. Eshun asserts that "the powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past (Eshun 2003, p. 289). Speculating about a probable and possible future, as Eshun asserts, is no longer simply a creative endeavour. It plays a significant role in managing and shaping power.

It is over a century since seminal scholar and civil rights protagonist, WEB Du Bois (1906, p. 2) coined the term double-consciousness, which he described as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness […] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder". This sense of double-consciousness persists, for majority of South African design students, for as long as the epistemic lenses they encounter in lectures and other academic spaces, and use to design and to problem solve, are almost exclusively from the Global North. There is an urgent and compelling need to offer knowledge and design lenses from Africa and its diaspora to South African design students, not necessarily to displace and subordinate other knowledge lenses, but to facilitate equitable recognition and space within academia and design praxis.

Sengers (2018, p. 7), while discussing the designing of contemporary technologies, asserts that current design approaches may be inadvertently narrow because of the dominant design lenses, practice and focus. He convincingly proposes that "how we design technologies reflects what we value; who we think is important, and in what ways; which places, people and possibilities are in our imaginations, and which are not. Current ways of designing technologies frequently narrow these possibilities". Winchester III (2019, p. 56) concurs, he asserts that it is equally important for designers to be mindful of the sociocultural implications of their practices and designs even as they focus on the technical aspects of these designs. He argues that many contemporary designers are often not sufficiently equipped to grapple with non-technical aspects of design. He sees this narrowed perspective as potentially resulting in "a more monolithic view of both user and context of use that could lead to technological solutions that are devoid of any responsiveness to the needs and considerations of socio-culturally diverse groups (Winchester III, 2019, p. 56). It is imperative that South African universities' design curricula and praxis foreground and reflect all design knowledge, spaces, communities and, perhaps most importantly, possibilities, that are important. I emphasise 'possibilities' as this is central to imagining and speculating into, and about both the past, as well as the future, a core argument in this paper.

How then do South African design institutions, faculties and departments cultivate not just fleeting optimism for our design students' and practitioners' design practices, but a sense of feasible and plausible futures in which they see themselves as central and integral protagonists and not just as part of a supporting or peripheral cast? What approach or curriculum content could reflect what South African design institutions value; who they think is important, which ways, places, people and possibilities are in designers imaginations? How can we identify theories or knowledge sources that could lens design education and praxis in South African design institutions?

As one potential pedagogic trajectory, this paper posits that centrally positioning Afro-diasporic Speculative Designs (ASD), could positively contribute to engaging with these challenges. As the terms suggest, ASD is premised on speculative designs from Africa and its diaspora. Wong and Khovanskaya (2018, p. 2) define speculative design as "critically oriented

research practices that create artifacts, representations, or depictions of possible and often alternate futures, removed from immediate practical concerns of implementation and commercial viability". They see speculative designs taking on several forms, which may include design proposals and built artefacts "used to imagine alternate sociotechnical configurations of the world as a way to interrogate questions about values and politics through design". Dunne and Raby (2013, p. 2) note that speculative design,

> *… thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely.*

They contend that speculative designs are premised on a possible future that can be used to better understand the present and to discuss the future that people want and those they would want to avoid. Dunne and Raby (2013, p. 3) argue for an interdisciplinary approach for a more holistic and rounded methodological approach for speculating through design. For them, design speculation should "draw on other fields such as cinema, literature, science, ethics, politics, and art; to explore, hybridise, borrow, and embrace the many tools available for crafting not only things but also ideas—fictional worlds, cautionary tales, what-if scenarios, thought experiments, counterfactuals, reductio ad absurdum experiments, prefigurative futures, and so on".

A number of speculative design discussions and definitions focus on the future and how this future relates to, or is informed by the present. This article argues that the future is intricately and cyclically intertwined with the past and that it is not only possible but also necessary to speculate about a probable past especially in instances in which deliberate and systemic attempts have been made to subordinate, stifle or erase these pasts by systems such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid. It becomes increasingly important, in these contexts, for designers to speculate about probable pasts so that these speculations can contextualise possible and plausible presents and futures.

Afro-diasporic speculative designs therefore refer to designs that speculate or fictionalise on pasts that are probable, an alternative present that is plausible and believable, and futures that can be inspired by, emerge from and feature people, philosophies and designs from Africa and its diaspora. This paper posits that Afro-diasporic, speculative designs draw on the retrospective but also project into the future. It sees ASD as a confluence of critical/theoretical and technical lessons, insights and inspiration from the past and imagination, projection and visualisation into the future.

This article will be discussing two Afro-diasporic lenses that could offer a theoretical foundation for design pedagogy in South African design institutions. It looks at Négritude, a movement that it sees as speculating on a probable Afro-diasporic past and Afrofuturism, which speculates on a plausible future. Although the focus in this article is on these two theoretical lenses, it is acknowledged that there are several other Afro-diasporic theories, movements and frameworks that could offer a lens through which speculative designs could be understood. Some of these include, but are not limited to, the following; Black Quantum Futurism, African Futurism, Afrofuturismo, and Afrofuturista, Astro Blackness, Afro-Surrealism, Afro-Pessimism, Ethno Gothic, Black Digital Humanities, Black (Afro-future female or African centred) Science Fiction, The Black Fantastic, Magical Realism, and The Esoteric (Anderson, 2016).

Unpacking Négritude and Afrofuturism

Négritude, a literary and ideological movement, was led by French-speaking intellectuals from France's colonies in Africa and the Caribbean in the 1930s who were studying in France at the time. It emerged from experiences of oppression and discrimination by these students who saw the need to revolt against the dominant discourse in France at that time and challenge stereotypes about people of Africa and its diaspora in order to create a new black consciousness. The movement's founders, generally referred to as the fathers of Négritude, were poets Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana. Senghor (Mazrui, 2014, p. 111) explains Negritude as "the whole complex of civilised values – cultural, economic, mythmaking, the gift of rhythm, such are the essential elements of negritude, which you will find indelibly stamped on all the works and activities of the black man".

Irele (1965, p. 499) opines that "no better phrase could be found to sum up [Négritude's] double nature, first as a psychological response to the social and cultural conditions of the 'colonial situation', and secondly as a fervent quest for a new and original orientation". He argues that Négritudes' imaginative work offers a precious testimony to the human problems and inner conflicts of the colonial situation and that their propaganda writing, their choice and use of techniques such as Afro-surrealism and other activities represent an effort to transcend the immediate conditions of this situation that they found themselves in, by a process of reflection. He asserts that the kind of work that emerged from Négritude's proponents symbolically demonstrated a sense of progression from subordination to independence and that the work had an overarching trajectory that evolved from a place and space of alienation to a demonstration of revolt and eventuated in self-affirmation.

Afrofuturism, a term coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in an African-American context in 1993 has evolved over the years and can now be defined as a philosophy and aesthetic that uses the tools and tropes of science fiction, as well as African and its diasporic references to confront and analyse contemporary concerns faced by people of colour. It lies at the intersection of black cultures, imagination, liberation, and technology (Winchester III, 2018, p. 42, Elia, 2014, p. 83). Eshun, who argues that power functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures, asserts that Afrofuturism provides opportunities 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". He contends, "power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively" (Eshun, 2003, pp. 289,301). His assertion is that Afrofuturism, as a philosophy, provides a space to challenge and deconstruct dominant narratives that offer certain histories as the most plausible, and premised on this, project a particular future as the most probable. Afrofuturism therefore has the potential to de-stabilise narratives that have relegated Afro-diasporic people, experiences, and spaces to the margins of power while entrenching those from the West at the centre. He eloquently concludes that Afrofuturism, "is concerned with the possibilities within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional (Eshun, 2003, p. 293).

Winchester III (2018, p. 42) seems to concur, proposing that Afrofuturism provides a lens for more empathic, inclusive, and impactful design solutions that facilitate engagement of underrepresented and disenfranchised groups. He sees the philosophy as providing the requisite rigour that can uncover blind spots such as biases, privilege, and power that could prevent the designer from approaching a design dilemma more holistically. Additionally, he contends that Afrofuturism has the ability to enable a more empathic design engagement by

placing marginalised Afro-diasporic voices at the centre of the design narrative with the intent of universal betterment through technology.

Journeying back and into the future

Several overarching experiences, actions and intents converge at the confluence of Négritude and Afrofuturism as Afro-diasporic movements. Irele (1965), as already mentioned, identified what he refers to as a symbolic progression that the proponents of Négritude went through, which are alienation, revolt and self-affirmation. I argue that both the proponents of Afrofuturism and the students who participated in the Fallist and Decolonial movements in South African institutions of higher education went through and continue to experience these progressions. Perhaps in addition to Irele's three phases, a phase that entails novelty and invention could be added to the progression. I propose therefore that this confluence between Négritude and Afrofuturism, and to a significant extent, the Fallist and Decolonial movements in South African universities aspire for self-discovery and self-affirmation as the ultimate goal. Proponents of all three movements found, or continue to find, themselves in a context of alienation best captured by WEB Du Bois experience of double-consciousness (1906, p. 2). They then go through a phase in which they revolt against this double-consciousness which usually compels them to be novel and inventive in order to culminate into is a state of self-discovery and self-affirmation.

Alienation

Proponents of the Négritude movement, the majority of whom were Afro-diasporic students studying in France in the 1930s, found themselves in a system that did not fully accept them as members of the societies in which they lived. Irele informs us that for these students to be accepted socially in the world they lived in, they had to deny a part of themselves and conform to the ideals of the dominant French culture at the cost of repression of their original selves (Irele 1965, p. 502). This can be paralleled to the context that proponents of Afrofuturism emerged from. They find themselves in spaces in which their people, cultures and experiences are absent in probable and plausible dominant representations of futures. Where these experiences, people and cultures are included, they are either on the periphery or in supporting and fringe roles, and in many instances in pessimistic narratives of catastrophe, dystopia and futility. I argue that this was a dominant motif in the pre-1980s and 1990s sci-fi and other narratives that projected into the future.

This alienation does not only manifest in narratives and creative works but also in design and technology. Winchester III's study into the design of wearable technologies found that some designers are not sufficiently equipped to appropriately understand and address socio-cultural and non-technical aspects of their designs. He sees this narrowed perspective as leading to a limited consideration of both the design's users and the context in which these design solutions are used. This, he asserts, may culminate into technological and design solutions that are neither responsive nor considerate of socio-culturally diverse groups (Winchester III 2019: 56). He cites an example of current fitness technologies that are neither effective nor efficient for some African-American women. He draws on studies that have established that "error rates in heart rate detection are often higher for individuals with dark skin as the optical heart rate sensors used by many of these wrist-worn devices have difficulty inferring pulses rates of individuals with higher melanin levels, reflective of many Black/African-American women (Winchester III, 2019, p. 58).

The actions of the Decolonial and Fallist South African university student movements within the last six to seven years is arguably a fissure moment for the simmering pent up feelings of alienation and double-consciousness that have weighed them down. These forms of alienation, as documented in the public sphere at the height of the movements' revolt, have emerged, and continue to emerge from experiences of financial difficulties and exclusion, questions of dominant and prescribed languages of instruction, critical engagement and communication. Other sources of these students' alienation have been from a sense of cultural dislocation, subordination and ambivalence that emanate from episteme that are predominantly outside of their realities, experiences, histories and knowledge systems. These are emphasised by the ubiquitous icons, statues and symbols of power, authority and knowledge within their learning and living environment.

Revolt

Irele points out that victims of oppression can take one of two binary reactions – total submission or total refusal (1965, p. 504). Proponents of the Négritude, the Fallist and Afrofuturism movements chose the latter. The Négritude philosophy has been criticised by intellectuals such as Franz Fanon, Wole Soyinka and Ousmane Sembene, among others, as romanticising the African past and endorsing colonial stereotypes related to the intellectual inferiority of the African. Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, for instance criticised the movement in a presentation at a conference in Kampala, Uganda in 1962, arguing that "a tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces". Meaning that overly focusing on a romanticised African past does not provide a conceptual framework for engaging with contemporary Afro-diasporic challenges, and that a deliberate and outspoken pride in their colour placed black people continually on the defensive.

Although there is merit in these criticisms, the stance taken by Négritude is primarily a form of revolt. An attempt to disassociate from cultures that they felt marginalised and subjugated them as a people. Romanticizing about their past could be interpreted as a suggestion that there is an alternative to the dominant discourse that they were revolting against and that this alternative could be found in their own cultures, histories and traditions. Mazrui (2014, p. 111), for instance sees some positive aspects in the movement's ideology. He argues that, "Négritude is not merely a description of the norms of traditional Black Africa; it is also a capacity to be proud of those values even in the very process of abandoning them. Sometimes it is a determination to prevent too rapid an erosion of the traditional structure". Mazrui concedes that Négritude is premised on a philosophy of nostalgia that idealises the African past but he offers that this can be used as a guide in formulating contemporary policy.

The Négritude revolt unravelled in a context underpinned by a void in conceptual or theoretical direction as the dominant discourses at the time may not have been specifically responsive to their conditions. A significant number of Négritudes were people from the African diaspora who had been torn and dislocated from continental African histories, experiences and cultures. Romanticizing about an ideal African past and reversing or deconstructing Western symbols that were loaded with negative connotations about Africa, its history, cultures and people was not only a form of revolt, it was a way of *speculating* about an African past that could provide a lens through which Afro-diasporic voices could theorise about their condition. It was, and still is, important for the process of speculative histories to gain traction as these countered Western histories that centred, and gave power to, the West while completely erasing or relegating African histories to the periphery, or loading these African histories with negative connotations. Speculation is not only a futuristic undertaking, it can and has been a retrospective process. Speculating about an ideal African past, therefore, offered a framework through which Afro-diasporic excellence and pride could be premised.

Eshun notes that seminal thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Franz Fanon revolted against colonial power structures that relied on the control and representation of history to rationalise and entrench power on those they had colonised. He argues that this is the reverse in our contemporary times such that, “the powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past (Eshun 2003, p. 289). Speculating about a probable and possible future, as Eshun asserts, is no longer simply a creative endeavour, it plays a significant role in managing and shaping power.

Similar to the The Négritude revolt, Afrofuturism demonstrates its revolt by subverting and reversing narratives, contexts and designs that completely erase or relegate the Afro-diasporic condition to the periphery, or by loading these African symbols with positive and aspirational connotations. These subversions can be seen in Afrofuturist works such as sci-fi films, fashion design, photography and architecture, among several other design and creative works. Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu in her film *Pumzi,* for instance, revolts against pervasive representations of the future in science fiction films that predominantly position African women in peripheral characters. She chooses to place women in key archetypal characters such as the film’s hero Asha, the hero’s key ally the Cleaner and the antagonists – the three Maitu women council members. The protagonists revolts against authority in Maitu in her quest to search for life outside the confined spaces of the Maitu community. The film’s resolution similarly subverts dominant dystopian narrative structures by having the protagonist sacrifice herself for liberation, freedom and improved quality of life.

The South African University students’ Fallist and Decolonisation revolt has, and continue to, manifest in several ways. Some of these ways include critical and academic engagement with their concerns, others have taken expression through poetic, creative and design work while some of the most visible ways have taken on a very public performance of revolt through demonstrations and destruction of icons and statues that represent oppressive forms of power.

Novelty and invention leading to self-discovery and self-affirmation

The quest for Afro-diasporic self-discovery and self-affirmation cannot be achieved merely by revolting against power, it must embrace an approach that uses novelty and invention to advance and eventually achieve its objectives. The Négritude for instance used surrealism as one novel approach to advance their course. Irele notes that, “the surrealist technique is here employed in a manner appropriate to the alienated condition of the black man. It offers the black poet a means of projecting his dream of violence, and becomes in fact a symbolism of aggression” (1965, p. 506). Although surrealism has its roots in the West, the concept is very relatable in African contexts as religious, medicinal and cultural processes operate within surrealist realms.

Architect Diébédo Francis Kéré from Burkina Faso was commissioned to design the iconic tree-inspired Serpentine Pavilion erected outside the Serpentine Gallery in London. The novel and inventive Afrofuturist architectural design is made of “an indigo-blue structure with a latticed canopy and a courtyard at its centre that will be transformed into a waterfall when it rains (Mairs, 2017). The work inventively uses traditional African building methods and materials and is inspired by African cultures and symbols. Kéré says that the design concept was inspired by the form of a tree in the [African] landscape and references the idea of a tree as a gathering space as commonly practised in African communities. In one of his interviews, Kéré concedes that, "Maybe naively, we wanted you to be still connected to nature. As you enter this pavilion you will see the trees, you go inside this void and you will have the connection to the sky” (Mairs, 2017).

Novelty does not only entail technique and design products, it arguably also entails promoting methods, processes, methodologies and persuasive conceptual arguments that can be used by designers to develop their work. Winchester III (2018, p. 42), for instance, proposes that "Afrofuturism represents a means by which diverse solution possibilities can be cultivated and realised, expanding the solution space both in novelty and, equally as important, inclusivity. He emphasises that failure to follow appropriate processes could lead to designs that are stereotyped and biased against those on the margins.

Conclusion

Just like proponents of Négritude and Afrofuturism who found themselves living in contexts of alienation, the protagonists of the Fallist and Decolonial movement in South Africa have the ultimate quest of journeying to a point of self-discovery and self-affirmation. This article has argued that Afro-diasporic speculative design could offer the vehicle through which this journey could be travelled. It concludes that institutions of higher learning in South Africa are ideally positioned to offer platforms, tools, methodologies and direction lensed from Afro-diasporic Speculative Design episteme for novelty and invention that could launch student's journeys towards self-discovery and self-affirmation.

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