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Whose Stories Underpin Design? Reworking Our Methods with Design Fabulations

Whose stories underpin design? And what methods might be possible if designers told those stories differently? These are the questions I explore in my book *Critical Fabulations* (MIT Press). *Fabulation*, from Latin *fabulatus*, means to “relate as a fable or myth” [1]. Foregrounding fabulation within design, I reflect on a mode of storytelling that helps expand designers’ prevailing methods of making things, technology, and worlds.

For example, in a collaborative project called Making Core Memory, I used design practices to examine the contributions of women elided within dominant historical accounts of core memory. Core memory is an early form of information storage underpinning the celebrated Apollo missions during the 1960s. It fit into the cone of a rocket ship with limited access to electricity and directed the spacecraft along its trajectory from Earth. Women operators at Raytheon in Waltham, Massachusetts, wove the software by hand across the 1960s, lacing wires through and around magnetized rings. To revisit this history, my collaborators Samantha Shorey, Helen Remick, Brock Craft, and I invited historians of science, design educators, and members of the public to weave their own core memory prototypes as quilt patches. Plugging their patches into an electronic quilt—a complementary form of memory work—triggered the quilt to play firsthand accounts of core memory development as well as to send accompanying tweets.

In convening a recollection of core memory production, we fabulated design practices to reveal different historical potentials. We foregrounded

the precision and skill of the core memory weavers over the disembodied cores discussed in historical accounts. We elevated the labor of production over the artifact produced.

This act of taking an underrecognized moment of innovation and rendering it material helps shift the focus of design from developing products to developing processes. It practically informs not only who we recognize as contributing to design practice, but ultimately who it affects and how. It exposes a process of design fabulation.

Feminist scholars Vinciane Despret and Saidiya Hartman have separately discussed fabulation as a type of storytelling that blends the real and the imaginary in order to rebuild the world around them. Despret, in her book *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, describes that complicated relationship between animals and humans, carefully multiplying and inverting the stories told about and with science. She observes, “To create stories, to make history, is to reconstruct, to fabulate, in a way that opens other possibilities for the past in the present and the future” [2]. Later from Hartman I learned what it could mean to make visible the scandal of the historical memory within archives that render the lives of people like Venus, a female slave, unknown and unknowable. Hartman coined the phrase *critical fabulation* in her vivid 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts” [3] to describe this approach of writing against the historical record—working to “write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” [3]. Weaving the personal, experiential, and archival, she depicts what she calls the “afterlife

of slavery” [4], histories of slavery alive in the present in ways that continually configure Black subjects as other. She writes, “By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” [3]. Her critical fabulations expose the traumas that exist in the cracks of liberal democracy in ways too deep to recount through archival accounts alone.

Bringing this fabulatory practice to design, I’ve tried to locate its work in wider processes of world building. Design operates as a tool with which to “narrate a certain impossibility,” to borrow a phrase from Hartman [5]—a powerful framework for challenging histories that not only reassert divisions between cognitive and manual labor but also hide the locales, practices, and bodies rarely associated with professional design practice.

Taking up these lessons, I suggest several ways of informing the design process:

- Form *alliances* across difference. To make way for partial connections, designers may ask: How can we inquire in concert with those in a design setting?
- *Recuperate* residues of erasure. To attend to those left in the shadows of a design setting, designers may ask: What histories of practice have been suppressed or elided? How might they inform inquiry?
- *Interfere* with dominant narratives. To sensitize designers to totalizing gestures that present the making of futures by some for others, they might ask: What representations feed a

Building the electronic quilt in the Making Core Memory project.

prevailing design narrative? Whom do they represent?

- *Extend* existing forms of circulation. To deepen responsibility for material outputs, designers might ask: What forms of collective authorship do actors already gather around?

Questions like these help expose the trappings of a field complicit with the responsibilities lost or obscured through the human-centered gaze. They require us, as designers, to rework our design methods by retracing our pasts.

My book began at a moment when I found myself searching for resources to give my students. The design history books and syllabi I came across tended to highlight widely celebrated scholars such as John Dewey, Herbert Simon, and Donald Schön—people who have had much to offer the design field, but who have had little to say about the hegemonic or patriarchal legacies that have long shaped it. I hoped to help students not just challenge a dominant canon but also illustrate that other lineages of world building are possible.

In this process of seeking alternatives, I came to Hartman's writing by chance. I had initially borrowed the term *fabulation* from the recent writing of Vinciane Despret and Donna Haraway

within the field of feminist technoscience before finding and interlacing Hartman's expanded theoretical threads. The fact that I found her writing late in part due to academic silos, even within feminist theory, points to important work left undone. "By throwing into crisis 'what happened when' and by exploiting the 'transparency of sources' as fictions of history," she writes, "I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe 'the resistance of the object,' if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity" [3]. I draw from this work an insistence on calling out entrenched forms of inequality and white supremacy that structure the way we read, think, and produce knowledge—injustices that eliminate the potential for thinking and producing otherwise. Learning from *Critical Fabulations*, I take up this concern in my teaching and revising of design methods, keeping in tension the potential and the power of technology cultures.

My abracadabra wish is for interaction designers to continue charting new intellectual inheritances—whether vis-à-vis critical race theory,

postcolonial theory, or other theoretical perspectives grappling with structural inequities. In reworking this path, I hope they help shift whose design practices shape what lies ahead, moving the field toward a more just future.

ENDNOTES

1. "Fabulation," *Oxford English Dictionary*; <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fabulation>
2. Despret, V. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2016.
3. Hartman, S. Venus in two acts. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, 2 (2008), 1–14.
4. Hartman, S. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Macmillan, 2008.
5. Hartman, S.V. and Wilderson, F.B. The position of the unthought. *Qui Parle* 13, 2 (2003), 183–201.

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