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# **Reimagining the Future with Liminal Agents: Critical Interdisciplinary STS as Manifestos for Anti-Essentialist Solidarities**

Ihnji Jon

## **Abstract**

This paper traces the recent trend in interdisciplinary Science and Technology Studies (STS), especially those of the Black feminist tradition, to make an argument for how its critical scholarship on data, science and knowledge production can be interpreted as manifesto-istic texts advocating for anti-essentialist solidarities. Dorothy E. Roberts' work demonstrates how debunking essentialist categories backed by the foundationalist veneer of science must be situated at the heart of anti-racist and anti-ablest politics of co-liberation. Ruha Benjamin's work, meanwhile, not only analyses the technologies/knowledge production practices designed to maintain the status quo, but projects a new vision of 'retooling' science as a means of reimagining justice in the rapidly shifting technological climate of the twenty-first century. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick discuss human subjects often trapped in-between orthodox discourses, who must then strive to reimagine/define their collective future through intersubjective creativity. What remains, in the end, are embodied narratives that escape reductionist logic through their welcoming of new perspectives, experiences and innovations—all of which are constantly being renewed through the arrival of new generations and diasporic traversements of ideas.

## **Keywords**

anti-essentialism; Black feminism; truths of solidarities; sciences and technology studies (STS); Sylvia Wynter

Anti-racist, disability rights, and economic, gender, reproductive, and environmental justice movements all have a stake in fighting the emerging racial biopolitics. These potential coalitions provide hope for a broad-based social movement that rejects biological definitions of race and citizenship in favour of the radical restructuring of our society into one that respects the humanity of all people.

—Dorothy E. Roberts, *Fatal Invention* (2011, 312)

In each episteme, the unfree experience liminality. ... When political orders decay, liminal agents are the catalysts in epistemic reorderings of polities. Slaves are an order's most liminalized group. Liminal agents have their own metaphysical myths, secular views of social ordering, and embodied phenomenology of comparative freedom vis à vis the landscape. They are the potential revolutionaries.

—Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (2015, 160)

## Introduction

Spivak (1988)'s powerful essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', ends with a polemical story of a girl waiting for her menstruation to begin before killing herself, thereby proving that her agency to immolate herself lies beyond prescriptive gender norms. Worried that her suicide will be taken as an honour death, the girl counts the days till her impending period. From this grim scenario, Spivak petitions for the role of a subaltern intellectual: 'The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish'. This remark is further elaborated in Spivak's book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Spivak 1999), where she lays out the female intellectual's 'undercover' strategies in attempting to both retain her subversiveness (i.e. 'not-disowning her circumscribed task') and reconcile her being as an 'already-Westernised' subject (e.g. 'the fact that I speak English does not condone the colonial past'). Here, the female intellectual's assimilation is an individualistic mode of survival—i.e. self-flourishing through abandoning the historical entanglements that rendered her contemporary environment. Undercover subversiveness—through which the West's fetishization of 'different cultures' is reappropriated in ways that excavate silenced narratives—is a collective political project requiring the rhizomic intentions and efforts of subaltern intellectuals everywhere.

More often than not, 'subaltern academics' as liminal agents—those who write for the endurance of marginalised, silenced voices—are anti-essentialists, as they recognise (1) the arbitrariness of social categories and their sociopolitical order; and (2) how these categories—developed by the present 'order of things'—unfairly perpetuate the oppression of those placed at the bottom rank or excluded entirely from the dominant paradigm/worldview. Among all subalterns, however, Black feminists have been recognised as the most radical anti-essentialists, particularly in the U.S. Their 'most liminal' position, compounded by race, class and gender, places them in a strong position to speak for the marginalised—especially those silenced not only in the political sphere but excluded from knowledge production more generally (Collins 2000). Particularly in the 1980s, Black women scholars contributed to developing the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), whereby scholars posited the intersections that exist across the various axes of domination and systems of oppression (Davis 1981; Lorde 1984). The liminal position of people racialised as Black and gendered as women offers a unique perspective on systems of power and prefigures practices beyond the dominant culture, of which practice reaches back to feminist standpoint theories (Hartsock 1998) and wider Black radical traditions (Robinson 1983, 2007).

In unravelling the arbitrariness of the present 'orders of things', the mission of Black feminist thought is ultimately to challenge the dominant epistemological paradigm and power dynamics underlying 'what counts as legitimate knowledge'. Hence, untangling the symbiotic relationship between 'knowledge' and 'power' takes up a significant portion of Black feminists' work, especially with regard to how the presumed 'neutrality' of science, technology and 'objective truths' are harnessed in ways that consolidate present systems of oppression. In this essay, I focus on the particularities of Black feminist science and technology studies (STS), which contains a dedication to anti-essentialism that offers invaluable insights when it comes to rethinking and reimagining the future of politics.

Humanity is at a crossroads: the reality of the current climate crisis and global racial reckoning, accentuated by the COVID-19 crisis, point to an urgent need for new paths of solidarities across genders, races and species. In this context, I demonstrate how Black feminist STS scholars' proclamations in favour of anti-essentialism and 'solidarities of non-essence' are translating 'the Black/feminist political project' into a 'humanist political project'. According to this approach, racism, sexism, ableism and human-centrism can best be tackled through reference to the perspective and experiences of the most liminal agent. I synthesise the trajectory of the arguments made by Black feminist STS scholars into the following two areas: (1) anti-essentialism to multi-generational progressivism; and (2) non-reductionism to (climate-conscious) humanism. The incessant efforts of these scholars to critique and dismantle Cartesian norms, Western-centric worldviews and the power

dynamics underlying knowledge production amount to a ‘politics of the future’—one which is open to generational change and the creation of new cultural narratives that stand in defiance of what the present episteme frames as ‘normal’. This, of course, involves the *refusal* of any linear projection of predetermined futures. What remains, in the end, are embodied narratives that evade reductionist logic through their welcoming of new perspectives, experiences and innovations—constantly renewed by the arrival of new generations.

Through a bricolage review of different authors’ writings as ‘manifesto-istic’ texts—the main characteristic of which is its boundedness to the historical conditions of their production and reception (Lyon 1999), this essay demonstrates *how* the operationalisation of anti-essentialist thought (and its aspirations for interhuman solidarities) unfolds in practice. In doing so, it discusses specific contexts in which a writing can effectively (1) raise consciousness ‘by narrating a foreshortened history of oppression and outlines a program of action that is often enumerated for clarity and brevity’ (Winkiel 2008, 12); (2) exhibit its phenomenological performativity, effectively interrupting the linear progression of time through the insertion of ‘NOW’ between past and future (Puchner 2002; Winkiel 2014). After all, anti-essentialism itself rejects any kind of predetermined norm endowed from on high; its research interest lies in the *on-going, actually-existing processes* of how its own temporal propositions and forms of connectivity are disrupting the naturalised, hegemonic logics of ‘being human’ (Koopman 2013; Jackson 2020). By composing a narrative that crosses its way across different genres, times, and sectors—studying different texts as acts of situated redescriptions corresponding to a historic moment in time—I draw important connections among different senses and traditions of critical Black thought that invoke alternative epistemologies, heterogenous ontologies, and pluralistic futures.

While this particular paper primarily focuses on the important contribution of Black feminism in critical STS, it is not my intention to propose a fixed, or definitive, version of its epistemology nor to delineate unilaterally its shapes of subjectivities. As a woman of colour writing this paper, I am cautious here especially because I am not racialised as Black; I recognise that there is a risk of an essentialism from the outside, a possibility of epistemological violence. But as Simone (2010) notes regarding Spivak (2004)’s meditation on Harlem and the political strategies of ‘refusing to disappear’, it is also possible to attend to the relationality of interhuman solidarities—of which aspirational presence, in our everyday lifescapes, could overwhelm a set of predetermined identities:

This refusal to disappear can only “succeed” if it jumps headlong into the distance, imagining new affiliations, new ways of “touching distant others”, building up new legacies. It does not have a chance if it tries to hold on to or claim some kind of overarching identity

or authenticity. ... the residual and always incomplete signs of a collectivity steer us to the “hope of resonance” with possible ways of being together that the disappearance compels us to imagine. It is this possibility that refuses to disappear. (Simone 2010, 264)

The present paper is invested in drawing radically expansive connections across such more-than-essentialist, ever-enlarging, notion of identity—and the on-going formulation of interhuman solidarity that flows from it—through an *interpretive* engagement with critical Black thought.

### **From Anti-essentialism to Generative Justice: Dorothy E. Roberts and Ruha Benjamin**

In an interview with Ruha Benjamin in 2019 (Benjamin and D. Roberts 2019), Dorothy E. Roberts reveals the primary research question behind her seminal work, *Fatal Invention* (D. Roberts 2011): Given that all the internationally commissioned scientific research (such as the Human Genome Project) has repeatedly validated that race is a social rather than biological category—i.e. there are *no* discrete genetic boundary lines distinguishing the ‘racial groups’ we are prone to use (Africa, Eurasia, East Asia, Oceania, America)—*why* are we so preoccupied with ‘genetic differences’ in explaining health inequities, and, more importantly, what are the sociopolitical implications of this obsession?

Roberts’ core argument in *Fatal Invention*—that ‘race’ is a *political* tool invented by colonial ideology and now exploited by pharmaceutical businesses attempting to commodify ‘genetic differences’ in order to sell ‘personalised drugs’—is supported by the anti-essentialism that fervently questions ‘biological essence’. Roberts synthesises the scientific findings, which repetitively demonstrate how human genes, over the course of their migratory trajectories, have become so enmeshed with continuously shifting environmental factors that it has become impossible to demarcate any single ‘race’ over another: ‘The genetic difference that exist among populations are characterised by gradual changes across geographic regions, not sharp, categorical distinctions’ (D. Roberts 2011, 53). Despite the overwhelming presence of this scientific evidence, the ‘genetical turn’ taken by health science in the twenty-first century remains fixated with the idea that there is and always will be an indisputable, genetically-determined biology behind human diseases and even social behaviours. According to Roberts’ investigation, the scientists who continuously seek ‘inherent’ differences in races—and whose findings are constantly being fed into popular genomics—treat ‘race’ as a predetermined biological category, taking it for granted that ‘human beings are naturally organised into definable, genetically cohesive populations’ (75).

This treatment of race as a biological category means that scientists' racial ideology predicates their research findings—i.e. whatever they end up finding is crammed into predetermined racial categories in ways that consolidate the idea of 'fundamental differences' across different races. In doing so, they arbitrarily favour 'genetic explanations' over the socio-environmental factors that contribute to Black disadvantage in health disparities. For instance, there are many preventable social reasons behind Black women's greater burden of diabetes, obesity and breast cancer, as well as the higher rate of death in Black neighbourhoods: these include the systemic concentration of 'pollution, substandard housing, inadequate public services, and stress from economic deprivation and racial discrimination' (D. Roberts 2011, 138).

The sociopolitical implications of 'biological essences' being prioritised in health science are immense. Above all, should the public be convinced by the idea that there are fundamental 'biological explanations' and 'technological fixes' for health inequities—an ideology fed by scientists importing racial biases into their bioinformatics programming and algorithms—the result will be a world of 'biocitizens' where (1) growing apathy towards institutionalised discrimination, fuelled by the idea of 'inferior genes', leads to decreased public support on social welfare; and subsequently (2) every individual is deemed responsible for 'managing their own lives at the genetic level instead of eliminating the social inequalities that damage our entire society' (D. Roberts 2011, 310). Ultimately, our contemporary obsession with the indisputable explanatory power of 'gene-determinism' threatens to create a more unequal future *not just* because genetic products will only be affordable to the rich *but because* it shifts our attention and resources away from addressing social biases and discriminatory structural designs. As Roberts puts it, gene editing is problematic not only because it privileges certain elites, but more profoundly so because 'it pinpoints the problem in a "dangerous mutation", as opposed to dangerous social structures' (346). Thus, Roberts' imagining of a more just world is inseparable from a questioning of biological essences, as only by pursuing the latter will we be able to choose a collective political project for social change over the inward-looking individualism that accepts the status quo of the world as-is.

Ruha Benjamin's writing expands on Roberts' anti-essentialist project, revealing how our new faith in digital algorithms, coding and modelling—driven by the prioritisation of economic efficiency over all else—works to deny the most 'humane' quality of humans: the possibilities of coordinated human action and its capacity to induce social change. In *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Benjamin discusses the danger of an unquestioned pursuit of 'digital efficiency', arguing that predictive algorithms—developed to attain 'high productivity' through expediting decision-making

processes—rob us of interhuman communication, the capacity for context-based judgements, and our potential to think outside societal norms.

Through their pursuit of ‘efficiency’ as an unquestioned social value, tech industries hope to reduce humans and their judgements to atomised data-points. In the process of doing so, however, they eliminate the collective thinking processes that allow reflective policy practices (Lake 2017). For instance, home insurance adjusters continually disadvantage Black people through their indifferent use of location-based risk scores (which is the outcome of decades of systemic racism, such as redlining). A variety of ‘tech fixes’, in the name of ‘objectivity’, streamline existing social biases by digitising them: crime prediction algorithms for preemptive policing in Black neighbourhoods inevitably manifest as a self-fulfilling prophesy, with the tendency to find stable patterns based on past events leading to the targeted criminalisation of Black individuals, thus reifying social prejudices against them. One of the key functions of an algorithm is to find a linear projection of the predictable and categorisable, meaning it gains ‘strength’ from controlling outliers. While making the future anticipatable may possibly save us time and energy, blindly aspiring to ‘predictability’ and ‘control’ (without society-level reflections on the potential impacts of using certain algorithms/projections/scenario modelling) *incites* the perpetuation of discriminatory policy practices by propagating indifference to history, moral inquiry and the need for social change.<sup>1</sup>

This point about the dehumanising impacts of mindlessly following ‘efficiency’—noted by Benjamin in her example of how e-monitoring repudiates prefigurative politics—is consistent with Roberts’ anti-essentialism when it comes to genetic profiling. As noted above, Roberts’ *Fatal Invention* is particularly concerned with genome science, not merely because genetic engineering is something that only the rich can afford but due to the *social message* that the ‘genes-can-explain-everything’ ideology propagates. Gene-fundamentalist ideas are at the root of circulating state and federal genetic profiling databases in the U.S. (D. Roberts 2011, 264-277): in 18 states, anyone who has been arrested (regardless of whether this is due to taking part in social protest or being suspected of a serious crime) must submit their DNA, which then becomes part of a dataset used for unsolved crimes. In 35 states, the genetic collection laws extend to children, casting them as potential suspects for any crime committed thereafter. Such practices—driven not only by market-led efficiency but our unquestioned fascination with ‘science’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘problem-solving’—are problematic as, once again, they

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<sup>1</sup> McKittrick (2021: 103-121) continues a similar dialogue on how the unquestioned, positivistic urge to ‘solve problems’ can lead to dehumanisation of Black life and livingness. For instance, predictive algorithms often fail to acknowledge the sociopolitical processes of differentiation and discrimination. Behind the claims of codifying (or ‘algorithming’) the mirror of objective reality, what gets obscured is the historically contingent processes of legitimising why certain ‘differences’ are currently perceived as more distinctive than others.



foreclose the possibility of futures ontologically unknowable to us under the current episteme.

Thus, it could be said that Roberts' and Benjamin's fight against essentialism—i.e. an orthodox belief in modern science, technologism and economic efficiency—is born of their defence of a multi-generational justice that is open to different, freshly imagined, futures. What they deem most abhorrent in their scenarios of gene-determinism or efficiency-determinism is that youth and new generations may be forever bonded to the ancestral past of those deemed to be of the 'same race'.

As Ramon Amaro's (2019) work on Black facial (mis)recognition emphasizes, computer vision indeed consolidates the myth of individuals constituted on the basis of coherence and categorical division. At the same time, however, he also notes that the human-technical composition always is directed toward transmutation, a means of accessing a 'multiverse of Blackness'—implying that the digital might also exemplify a process of incessant recombination and arbitrary figuration that eludes ideological fixity. Such entanglement of heterogenous technicities in our contemporary social life points to circumstances of existence detached from the imposition of human will, but that nevertheless expands the scope of human enactment. A political project for anti-essentialist thought then is not necessarily to unveil the 'true' (e.g. atemporal) capacities of human agency, but rather to develop practical strategies of how to account for 'what escapes probability and thus the excess of the possible on the probable' (Rouvroy and Stiegler 2016, 8). In other words, what is required (in addition to the theoretical games of position-makings) is an engagement with actually existing situations materialised through practical enactments and intra-activities that generate novel ways of *embodying* the relational existence between technics and meaning, culture and machines (Parisi 2021). Such anti-essentialist rendering of hybrid ontologies—which refuses any artificial dualism in the intersecting encounters of plural knowledge programs—is at the heart of Black feminists' prefigurative politics that materially and spatially experiment new logics of relating (with others and our surroundings) 'otherwise' (Gaskins 2019).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gaskins (2019), for instance, proposes a framework of 'Techno-Vernacular Creativity and Innovation (TVC)' through which the African diaspora can be expressed as continually evolving cultural practices. Gaskin (2019)'s TVC—cultural art, science, and technology of African and indigenous cultures—sheds a light on the agency of 'bricolage', i.e. improvisation and spontaneous mix of materials and cultural practices for everyday use. Gaskin (2019)'s examples include a variety of innovations: Culturally situated design tools (CSDTs) that provide computer/web-based engagement with heritage artifacts; a music system ('Beatjazz') that uses handheld controllers, smartphone apps, and a mouthpiece to combine and repeat the movement of entire body; a 'FabLab', a fabrication lab in Benin to help people get accustomed to the use of technology. Further, 'OX4D Plays' program in Oxford Place (a Houston Housing Authority (HHA) community) helps youth to redesign their common areas/streets into more colourful and playful spaces, using circular motives (from Kongo cosmogram) and hip-hop culture; Learn 2 Teach/Teach 2 Learn program in Boston's South End Technology Center helps youth explore new interactive technologies.

## From Anti-reductionism to (Climate-conscious) Humanism: Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick

As Hartman (2019, 347) notes, Black feminist politics' radical imagination for a future of 'otherwise' evokes crucial questions for all planet-earth-residents facing existential crisis; defying the pessimisms of those who doubt whether it empirically 'makes sense' to desire a different life other than the ones dominated by market rationality or the storylines of Capitalocene. As will be highlighted below, Sylvia Wynter's work is an exemplar of one of those imaginations that challenge our mainstream epistemologies of experiencing and projecting the world beyond pre-prescribed scenarios of 'the future'.

As a decolonial scholar, Wynter's work begins by questioning why humans fabricate a fictitious narrative in which certain human groups are inferiorised/superiorised over others—i.e. the instrumentalisation of 'race' (and 'Othering' as a political tool aimed at advancing a particular group's interests at the expense of dehumanising others). Thus, Wynter asks: 'Why... did the fact of Blackness have to be a fact of inferiority, the face of whiteness, vice versa? ... What was this something, I asked myself, that needed as its own condition of existence the systemic impoverishment of the darker peoples of the world?... Why the necessity for this insistent and obsessive degradation of a specific category of humans?' (Interview with Scott 2000, 200). This question, of why society and its members would internalise a fictitious 'racial code' to the point that our global socioeconomic system is now governed by this narrative, is a *human* question, rather than a Black question: as arbitrary and fictitious as seeing the Jew or the Black as 'an inferior race' has been, any human group perceived as deviating from 'the normal' can become the next target.

Challenging the fictitiousness of racist narratives—and the reductionism that dehumanises individuals by grouping them into an expendable mass—acts as a starting point for co-liberatory politics, as it allows us to acknowledge the 'sociogenic' side of humans. Wynter argues that the 'universality' of humanness can be useful in so far as it recognises that humans are 'biological' *and* 'narrative' animals (Wynter 2003): the moment we are born into this world, we are not only subject to biological/survival needs but to situated, context/genre-specific 'sociogenic' principles particular to one's geographic location and historic moment. Our mode of existence differs significantly across time and place: while the current overrepresentation of *homo economicus* makes it difficult to imagine a life ungoverned by global capitalist logics, anthropologists and human geographers have demonstrated the presence—both historical and contemporary—of cultural and sociogenic principles that cannot be explained by economic logics. For

instance, Wynter discusses the importance of decorative materials that archaeologists/excavators have found from the ‘cavemen’ epoch (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 66-69). In demonstrating that myth-generating arts and decorations have always been at the centre of what constitutes ‘humanness’, the ideology of biological determinism is undermined. Such historical objects prove, in effect, that humans are ‘reborn’ in communal/symbolic life terms through specific cultural narratives (i.e. ‘genre-specific’ sociogenic principles): we may be born biologically in the first instance, but it is only when our birth is acknowledged by a collective community’s rituals—which in turn leads to an individual’s internalisation of communal social norms—that we achieve the status of ‘being human’. It is these sociogenically encoded norms that enable inter-altruistic or kin-recognising human behaviours (which many different cultures have in common).

In short: the historical existence of various ‘genre-specific’ cultures—whose operational logics cannot be reduced to the narrative logic of ‘Economic Men’ (e.g., individualistic economism)—demonstrates that humans are ‘hybrid species (biological + narrative)’; that is, ‘storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological’ (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 11). According to Wynter, acknowledging the ‘sociogenic’ side of humans is a hopeful enterprise: as much as we have been subject to the neoliberal/‘Economic Men’ narrative that has permeated the global sociopolitical sphere, the possibility remains of imagining a different future *through* resuscitating, reinventing and mainstreaming narratives that cannot be subsumed into reductionist logics.

According to Simone (2010, 2015) and McKittrick (2006, 2021), such practices of creative storytelling (beyond reductionist meta-narratives) have been at the heart of the Black diaspora, with its worldly character born out of the traumatic dislocation and reinvention of collective identity. As Mulira (2015, 116) puts it: ‘Hailing from different ethnic backgrounds and realities, enslaved Africans found ways to weave the fragmented pieces of their past into a cultural fabric that could support their lives in a foreign land’. Moreover, Simone (2015) points to the fugitive character of Blackness in its attempts to escape the reductionist reasoning (of the state or other institutional structures) that ceaselessly fabricates ‘something wrong’ with darker-skinned peoples:

All of the attributions that something was wrong with Black people converging with the insistence that there was ‘nothing wrong with us’ generate a space where no norms exist. ... It has learned to live with incessant transience, quickly decide how to recoup opportunity from sudden detours and foreclosures. It has learned to mine the city for beats and polyphony that reverberate across generations and nations, so as to attune bodies to each other from Rio to New Orleans to Luanda. (Simone 2015, 216)

As a result, Black culture has developed particular sensibilities conducive to inventive storytelling. This is due to (1) Black people's collective experiences of being forcedly undocked onto a new world; and (2) their efforts to escape reductionist attempts to inferiorise and eliminate outliers, strangers and Blackness through oppression and cultural domination. For McKittrick, this fugitive practice of challenging the dominant discourse (through creative narrative generation) is best explained through excavating the narratives of the most marginalised: Black women. In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick (2006) returns to the site of the slave auction block to discuss the situated, ongoing (re)production of lived experiences 'unknowable' to Cartesian geography—unknowable because 'it is continually being intersected by different forms of power, knowledge, imagination, contestation, and contexts' (McKittrick 2006: 70). In this re-description of 'history'—a multi-faceted collage of lived experiences depicting 'how the events unfolded intersubjectively'—McKittrick reclaims the narratives of Black women previously buried beneath the overrepresentation of Man's geographies and 'History', e.g. the regimes of colonialism, racism, sexism and transatlantic slavery. These new narratives can be communicated not only through academic/non-fiction writing, but via poems, novels, music, photos and other multi-media avenues.

What is important here, however, is *not* that black women's stories will strengthen the 'diversity' of representation (by simply 'being' an underrepresented material). Rather, it is the fact that the world can be seen in a radically different way through the window of the most marginalised, as their buried stories *reveal* what our present system of knowledge prevents us from knowing what's possible beyond the mainstream, Western-centric hegemonies of 'being human' (Jackson 2020).<sup>3</sup> In other words, through the praxis of retelling the stories of liminal agents/'outliers', we can imagine a future yet to be grasped by the currently dominant system of knowledge. As McKittrick (2021, 51-52) puts it:

If we are committed to relationality and interhuman dialogue, if we are committed to academic practices that disobey disciplines, then the song, the groove, the poem, the novel, the painting, the sculpture must be relational to theory and praxis. These kinds of strategies—reimagining the Black biologic as creative knowledge, disobeying the disciplines, sewing Black texts as verbs rather than nouns, engendering interhuman relationalities, asking the groove and the poem for theoretical insight—provide intellectual spaces that define Black humanity outside colonial scripts.

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<sup>3</sup> It could be cautiously noted that the question of 'who is the most marginalised' requires a moving, contextually-dependent debate; several identity politics writers (Young 1995; Butler 2015) take on a historicist perspective to highlight that a collective moral decision on who should be heard first (more than others) depends on the sociopolitical conditions of a specific time and place (Jon 2020).

Such narratives/creative storytelling offer the potential to not only defy colonial reasoning and modernist reductionism, but dismantle the human-exceptionalist discourses that continue to negate our connection with land, nature and the environment (Glissant 1989; N. Roberts 2015). The anti-essentialist struggle against *a priori* categories (such as gender and race) can lead to a questioning of essentialist boundaries between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’—because, after all, every living being exists relationally in the shadows of others. Borrowing the words of McKittrick (2021, 106): ‘our collective assertions of life are always in tandem with other ways of being’. Or, as Fisher and Tronto (1990, 40) put it: ‘[our] world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web’. If, as McKittrick (2021, 57) contends, embodied stories of Black life—as an ongoing praxis of performing/reinventing collective identity—allows us to ‘witness and live a script that delights in and profits from dehumanising most of the world’, could new storylines of human–nonhuman material entanglements recast ‘life’ and its unexpected webs of interdependency in a new light?

Many recent ‘more-than-human’ works (Tsing 2015; Lobo 2019) have attempted to resuscitate/redescribe alternative ‘life-sustaining’ logics that have historically been (and continue to be) prevalent in non-Western cultures, and which cannot be captured or interpreted by modernists’ linear projection of ‘human disturbance = ecological harm’ (e.g. Malthusianism). The connection between this more-than-humanism and Black feminism can be made through their common fight against a reductionist knowledge system that displays little tolerance for the stories told by silenced voices. It is the *living* presence of these silenced voices, however, that chips away at the authority of what currently counts as ‘legitimate knowledge’ (and the political/economic/social structures such knowledge underpins). One of the key legacies of Black feminist scholarship pertains to thinking about/redescribing the world from the vantage point of the marginal (Collins 2000). This invites a performative storytelling of heterogeneously lived experiences, the complexity and strategic secretion of which continue to evade ‘the statistics’.

More specifically, the liminal agent’s fight against reductionism (or, their refusal to be ‘algorithm-ed’) can be translated into a more conscious effort aimed at uncovering how their ongoing life experiences are occurring *in conversation* with surrounding life-sustaining networks—i.e. their ‘landscape’. Drawing from Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, N. Roberts notes how a liminal agent’s connection with (or alienation from) the immediate physical environment can shape their perception of political freedom—‘Slaves walk on land, unable to be *of* the land or to recollect how to benefit from its resources’ (N. Roberts 2015, 158)— asks liminal agents to restore their embodied cognition, identity and associative freedom vis-à-vis the surrounding landscape: ‘The environment, physical and

embodied, metaphysical and mythic is where the transformative in freedom begins' (N. Roberts 2015, 160).

## Reimagining the Future with Liminal Agents

Building on the above emphasis on the power of creative narratives in challenging the dehumanising impacts of reductionism, I below set out a provisional argument as to how Black feminist STS scholarship can be interpreted as manifesto-istic texts advocating for anti-essentialist solidarities, thereby allowing the most 'liminal' agents in the current episteme to proclaim their desire for a more humanistic future.<sup>4</sup> In making this argument, I focus on three themes informed by the existing manifesto studies (Lyon 1999; Puchner 2002; Winkiel 2008, 2014, 2017):

- (1) Disclosing the limits of the present episteme and the injustices this inflicts on heterogenous modes of being-in-the-world.
- (2) Advocating for human existence as a constantly evolving, performative site of redescribed 'truths'.
- (3) Anticipating and working towards intentional change, paced according to the world's ongoing transformations.

Underlying these three themes is an intention to demonstrate why liminal agents are most qualified when it comes to reimagining an egalitarian and anticipatory future, as well as why anti-essentialism lies at the heart of this radical imagination.

### *Disclosing the limits of present episteme and the injustices this inflicts on heterogenous modes of being-in-the-world*

Lyon (1999) and Winkiel (2008) noted how manifestos make visible of the struggle faced by the agents of 'the periphery', as they strive to reclaim 'modernity' in their own terms—by exhibiting the occluded history of racial, gendered, geographical exclusions persisted in colonial imperialist modernism. Relatedly, Black feminist tradition's contribution to

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<sup>4</sup> By 'humanistic', this paper refers to Wynter's prioritization of plural sociogenic cultures over the overrepresented Western culture of Economic Men (*homo oeconomicus*). In essence, I argue that the continual volition to regenerate intersubjective narratives and creative storytelling is what makes humans 'humanistic'—hence the paper's focus on interpreting liminal agents' discourses as manifesto-istic texts that reinvent how we perceive and experience the world. The contribution of Wynter is substantial here. For instance, Wynter notes how cultural norms (e.g., languages, expected social behaviours) can govern our biological reaction (or what Wynter calls 'neutral firings'); the continuing existence of customary habits and logics (that function outside of Western modernity), albeit many have altered and adapted to the changing world, proves that humans need much more than meeting the utilitarian needs. Wynter's decolonial humanism therefore asks us to revive the 'narrative side' of humans.

philosophy and political thought is particularly substantial with regard to exposing the 'cracks' within the current knowledge system (Ladner 1972). As Collins (2000) has shown, Black women not only fought for 'political representation' in the public sphere, but for the legitimacy of alternative knowledge systems arising from their lived experiences, often dismissed by Western science and medicine. In presenting concrete examples of alternative epistemological viewpoints that prioritise *lived experience* over 'objective truths', Black feminist scholars have successfully demonstrated how the very documentation of heterogenous modes of being-in-the-world can puncture the present episteme's limits, while exposing the potential injustices inherent within *any* kind of forced conformism. As Collins writes: 'Alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth' (Collins 2000, 290).

It is therefore worth noting that Ruha Benjamin's broader concern with 'people's science' (Benjamin 2013, 70) includes disclosing the variegated worldviews of (dis)ability activists and what they see as 'the good life'. While patient advocates of stem cell initiatives petition for a 'good life' for everyone, the underlying assumptions of 'what constitutes the good' often artificially draw a line between 'normal' versus 'defective' bodies: 'Regenerating the body, worthwhile as that may at first seem, grows directly out of an able-ist paradigm that defines the good life, and the good citizen who is obligated to pursue that life, in ever narrower, technoscientifically mediated, and often antidemocratic terms' (71). Such narratives inferiorise certain body forms or ways of life as 'abnormal' or 'to-be-fixed', appendaging pathological solutions to what is essentially a *social conception problem*. 'The catastrophe of disability' and the 'hope for a cure' is 'a myth that undermines the dignity and personhood of many disabled people, the majority of whom do not accept the inherently pitiable images that dominate mainstream representations of disability' (77).

Putting forth an incessant anti-essentialist critique on what society sees as 'normal' is ultimately to fight for heterogenous claims to life, the barrier to which is a positivist, reductionist, essentialist ideology that attempts to impose a universal 'what's good' onto plural ways of being-in-the-world. Such efforts are important for any co-liberatory politics that regards collective wisdom gained from lived experiences as being of equal validity as Cartesian science. Such an approach is different from relativism in that it situates collective dialogue and interpersonal communication/connection at the heart of knowledge production processes. The 'humanisation' or 'socialisation' of different individual perspectives stands in opposition to atomised individual conformism/assimilation to an unjust status quo—this is because, in the case of the former, 'knowledge' emerges through the very process of exchanging dialogues. Collins (2000), drawing on bell hooks (1989) and

Belenky et al. (1986, 279), writes that: 'A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that *connectedness rather than separation* is an essential component of the knowledge validation process'.

The current dialogues within Black feminist STS advocate for democratic knowledge production and a welcoming of radically heterogeneous, constantly evolving, embodied narratives: 'In moving forward, it is vital that we construct participatory models for the development of science and technology ... A number of analysts have drawn upon the classical idea of the "agora" as a civic platform or process to bring together different perspectives about science and technology' (Benjamin 2013, 179). The role of liminal agents is central to this process, as their experiences deviate significantly from accepted social norms or what members of society often internalise without question. Indeed, the lived experiences of liminal agents acts as an *antidote* to the authority of mainstream life and the knowledge claims that sustain it. In its continued questioning of the 'normal'—the definition of which should evolve according to the constant changes taking place in the world and those living within it—anti-essentialism can be seen as a critical element of any radical invocation or rebellion. Within such processes of edification, however, the historical specificities of a situated context and the *collective* enunciations of intersubjective values/experiences are critical. As Collins (2011, 11) warns: 'People do not passively receive or undergo experiences. Rather, experiences result from people's active engagement with their social worlds. The phrase "situated creativity" within specific social contexts captures this robust understanding of experience whereby people creatively construct their environments and whereby their environments shape human subjectivity'.

*Advocating for human existence as a constantly evolving, performative site of redescribed 'truths'*

Winkiel (2017), in her essay 'Anti-foundationalism in the Avant-Garde, Feminist, and African American Modernisms', discusses the colossal role of pragmatism (William James, Alain Locke) in American Black thought—especially with regard to its emphasis on lived experiences and creative redescrptions that resist the Kantian premium on 'rationality'. Winkiel argues that the social value of manifestos comes not from the logical strength of their argument, but its affective effect that speaks to people's immediacy of lived experiences—encapsulating 'an aesthetic appreciation that enhances everyday life, and a pragmatic sense of culture "still...in the making"' (Winkiel 2017, 280).

Relatedly, Black feminists have reinstited their place in the mainstream world through the power of creative storytelling (Boyce-Davies 1994; Davis 1998). As Audre Lorde (1984, 27) puts it: 'The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black



mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.’ The question remains, however, as to whether this investment in ‘my story’ leads to an alienating effect on others: simply put, aren’t we replacing ‘the essentialist categories’ with ‘the essentialist selves’? It is therefore critical to keep in mind the temporality and ‘livingness’ of the ‘truths’ we create about ourselves, which are subject to continual reshaping over time. As Collins put it: ‘As social phenomena, identities are never finished but are always in the making via human engagement with the social world’ (Collins 2011, 18). Moreover: ‘Community can never be a finished thing... but is always in the making. More dynamic, future-oriented understanding of community creates space for imagining something different than the present and a worldview that critically analyses existing social arrangements’ (Collins 2012, 447).

A ferocious critic of Eurocentric philosophy and positivistic reductionism, Rorty (1989) also argued that poetry and creative storytelling is the only way we can develop ‘truths of solidarities’ (as Wynter refers to Rorty’s work in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 22, 65; see also Wynter 1995, 20)—i.e. weave connections with those who haven’t gone through similar life experiences (‘the Other’). The idea of an irreducible ‘essence’ within oneself—that ‘I already have the *definite* description of who I *really* am’—forecloses any need to communicate and build connection with others. Rather, the motivation to generate new creative narratives stems from *the process of finding one’s* identity through ‘re-describing’ ourselves (and the world around us) over and over again (Glissant 1997).

The power of anti-essentialism rests not in the cynical claim that ‘there’s no essence so why do we care about anything at all’, but in *its invitation* to ‘use this insight [that there is no inherent essence] as the basis for a constructive and systematic attempt to find out further truths about human beings’ (Rorty 1979, 378). It is precisely because humans are continually evolving subjects who time and again discover themselves anew—through meeting new people, reading new books, having new encounters—that there exists an ongoing desire for conversation and communication, from which new solidarities can emerge. This is consistent with what Audre Lorde has envisioned for intersectional feminism with the claim that the task for liminal agents is to ‘make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish’, and ultimately, ‘learning how to take our differences and make them strengths’ (Lorde 1984, 105). As such, Collins (2012) makes a direct connection between American pragmatism and Black feminism, highlighting their overlapping concerns regarding (1) embodied narrative generation and (2) the role of language as a mediator between subjective experiences and symbolically represented collective identities. Pragmatism blurs the distinction between language and experience, advocating

for the plurality of the social and the importance of recognising underrepresented narratives inseparable from marginalised experiences (Fraser 1998). Black feminist tradition began with questioning the mainstream logics (e.g., Western science) that have previously disregarded the lived experiences of groups in the periphery (Collins 2000). Subsequently, what comes to the fore of justice imagined by Black feminist tradition is *epistemic justice*; in prioritising collective experiences as the means by which new knowledge systems and technologies emerge (via symbols and interhuman communications), the key question related to realising radical politics becomes one of whether these radically plural epistemologies are given an equal right to flourish under their concurrent conditions of existence in relation to one another.

Through ‘personally-political’ writings and provocations, Black feminist STS scholars have shown that liminal agents—in their spotlighting of livingness and their constant reshuffling of identities via collective conversation-making/discourse sharing—are often at the frontline such practices (McKittrick 2015, 149-150). The continued efforts made in the work of Black feminist STS writers to disobey/escape ‘statistics’, predictive algorithms and a prescribed ‘future’ should not merely be read as signifying the diversity of human conditions (and modes of being-in-the-world). More than this, they facilitate a continually evolving site of performative storytelling/redescribing that allows for the *letting go of* one’s individual ‘irreducible essence’ in order to *provide space for* the unceasing, multi-generational conversations to come.

### *Anticipating and working towards intentional change, paced according to the world’s ongoing transformations*

Black feminist STS is anti-essentialist due to its concern with the relationship between the social and the technical—looking not only at how technologies reflect existing social injustices and unequal power dynamics, but how humans of ‘the social’ can design the new technical in a way that helps us see the world anew (Simone 2021). It in that regard shares the most important quality of ‘manifesto’ in terms of its performative effect on temporality, constructing a rupture between past and future through its very phenomenological insertion (Puchner 2002). However, what I find to be unique in the writings of Black feminism is their prefigurative politics of seeing ‘future’ as a continually evolving, organic *environment*, rather than a far-fetched, abstract, conceptual stasis (Wynter 2003). The time machine in which we are all traveling often demands adaptation (to the changing world) and appropriation (of technologies that have accidentally been developed through global modernity). Nettrice Gaskins (2019), through examples of Techno-Vernacular Innovation (i.e. hybrid technologies that reassemble modern and

vernacular technologies) in the Global South, asks us to get onboard with constantly evolving technological shifts not because they're inevitable, but because they may offer serendipitous encounters that allow us to harness *and* propose new versions of knowledge systems for social change.

Fouché (2006) has argued that, while Actor Network Theory (ANT) has deservedly been criticised for its flattening of power dynamics in which some actors are systematically excluded from the game (e.g. African American inventors having a hard time mainstreaming their visions due to lack of financial/political resources), applying assemblage theory to STS is useful for exposing how liminal agents (e.g. post/non-Western users) are not just victims of modernity but creative re-appropriators, taking what is already available and producing something that works for their own purposes. Fouché discusses such creative acts in terms of three key strategies: (1) redeployment; (2) reconception; and (3) re-creation:

Redeployment is the process by which the material and symbolic power of technology is reinterpreted but maintains its traditional use and physical form, as with blues musicians extending the perceived capability of a guitar without altering it. Reconception is the act of redefinition of a technology that transgresses that technology's designed function and dominant meaning, as in using a police scanner to observe police activities. Re-creation is the redesign and the production of a new material artifact after an existing form or function has been rejected, as in the case of DJs and turntablists developing new equipment. In developing this framework, the goal is not to make evaluative statements or privilege one type of Black vernacular technological creativity but to express multiple ways that African Americans as culturally and historically constituted subjects have engaged the material reality of technology in America. (Fouché 2006, 642)

In short, the reason we should pay attention to how liminal agents adapt to a constantly changing status quo through disassembling and reassembling technologies—in the process treating these technologies not as holy symbols of Western supremacy, but as accidental byproducts of modernity—is because such acts reify how we can 'humanise' what is given/present through making our own world out of it (Wilkins 2000, 2007).

Thus, we should regard the efforts of Black feminist STS scholars as arguing for 'humanising the technical', whereby any situated human community can be considered an active agent capable of redeploying, reconceiving and re-creating existing technologies for their own purposes. The stories of how liminal agents have 'made lemonade out of lemons' should not be taken as fortifying the myth of 'bootstrapping', but rather engaged as *kaleidoscopes of human creativity*—which, through unexpected or incoherent collages of materials, techniques, and logics of heterogenous modernities, courageously embark on

an already-different future. As we learn from Wynter, such efforts not only include attending to differently situated social realities (and inequities that discriminately affect certain communities more than others), but involve debunking human exceptionalism through elucidating the cultures and sociogenic principles of nondominant groups (and their underrepresented epistemologies). Liminal agents, in creatively carving out their own spaces in a world that denies or delegitimises their existence and knowledge systems, have a crucial role to play in this process. This is not to romanticise their inherent capacity for generating unexpected subjectivities; rather, it is to elucidate the fact that their performative resistance against the mainstream worldviews (and the kinds of ontologies that these prescribe) has a humanly critical stake: no human is free until a Black woman is free. More than ever, our present epoch of Anthropocene and climate crisis requires a cross-fertilisation of ideas, techniques and beliefs that acknowledge the planet to which we owe our physical existence.

## **Conclusion**

Currently, in 2021, 'liminal agents' or 'subalterns' take a variety of shapes and forms: the immigrant women working in massage parlours in Atlanta; the refugees of Christmas Island, who remain state-less; the aboriginal denizens of Darwin, Australia, who protest global modernity through their sheer physical presence in the city. As Spivak claimed, their voices go unheard due to their distance from/dissonance with mainstream language. Even so, collective imaginations about these landscapes of marginalisation can expose the many, often complex, ways the world remains unequal across various facets of the social. To what extent, however, are the conditions of such a possibility inextricably linked to an inseparable dimension of expendability and dispossession that also entail, technically, their liminal moments, where what is broken, ruptured exists through a moment that suggests something else aside repair or the reiteration of something more humane? Only through generating creative storylines about our changing world and our situated relationship with it can we hope to keep up with the shifting positionalities of liminal agents, whose 'identity' evolves ceaselessly over time—with the risk of radical imaginations demanding something unfathomable (under the present episteme) in practice. The status of 'the most marginal' varies across temporalities and places: the 'subalterns' are everywhere and radically heterogenous. The task for diasporic writers, then, is to continually locate and illuminate them, searching for the threads of co-dependency that link them to other marginal and now-mainstreamed claims to life.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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