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Future girl? Exploring girls' digital sexual cultures through speculative fabrications

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ABSTRACT

Research reveals a significant gap between young people's lived experience with digital technologies and the scripted content of online safeguarding programmes that focus on young people's rational, individual decision-making regarding safe and responsible use. Rarely do online safeguarding programmes engage with the wider gender and sexual norms shaping young people's digital cultures. This paper outlines how experimenting with speculative fiction offers generative possibilities for digital sexualities research and education. Drawing on group interviews and arts-based data produced by five girls aged 11–12 years old, it explores the competing and contradictory demands of contemporary digitally-networked girlhood. The paper briefly outlines how girls are promoted as empowered, choice-making agents in contemporary digital culture before examining the difficulties girls encounter when expressing their frustration at enduring gender and sexual inequities at school and online. It moves to explore how experimenting with speculative fiction through arts-based methods allowed new forms of voicing to emerge which challenged the vision of girls as vanguards of a new socio-economic order. By engaging in a diffractive analysis of the cut-up poem 'Test Subject 15066' and the fabricated future girl figure produced by three girls in the study, this paper explores alternative figurations of future girlhood.

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Introduction

In *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, Harris (2004) explored how girls were positioned as the primary benefactors of late modern, globalised and de-industrialised societies. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the figure of the girl was weighed down by adult anxieties and hopes about the future. Girls were understood to either embody postfeminist neo-liberal ideals of girl power, success and self-invention, or lack the necessary competencies to overcome structural classed, racialised, sexualised and gendered inequities that rendered them 'at risk' (Renold and Ringrose 2008). The advent of social media, smart devices and gaming technologies brought a new dimension to perceptions of girls as either vanguards of a changing socioeconomic order or objects of risk. While some early Internet scholarship argued that the increasing visibility that online

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platforms afforded girls and young women was empowering (Stern 2007), others found those claims to be overly optimistic (Kanai 2015).

In a disciplinary postfeminist media context where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved and women are supposedly enjoying the same sexual freedoms as men (McRobbie 2008), notions of empowerment became tied up with performing a 'confident, knowing hetero-sexiness' online (Gill 2012, 737; Dobson 2015) that gestured towards sexual agency. At the same time, the visibility of gendered performances of sexuality was subject to harsh judgement as attention-seeking or self-exploitative. Numerous studies have documented the gendered and sexualised harassment and abuse that girls, young women and other minoritised genders face online with social media and gaming platforms found to be sites of unprecedented hostility (Jane 2016). Social media and mobile communication have been integral to the increasingly visible uptake of feminism and girl-fronted activism providing new avenues for them to speak back to intersectional gender and sexual injustices (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019). Online platforms are being used in powerful ways to foster solidarity and activism on a range of social justice issues as well as embrace fluid sexual and gender expressions beyond cisheteronormative gender binaries (Bragg et al. 2018). Yet these expressions continue to rub up against 'sedimented sexist, homophobic and transphobic sentiments, discrimination and violence' (Bragg et al. 2018, 431).

Amidst this shifting gendered landscape, Harris and Dobson (2015, 152) interrogate the idea that girls can resist cis-hetero-patriarchy simply by 'claiming their own choices, feeling more empowered or expressing their voice'. They propose conceptualising girls as 'suffering actors' to 'recognise and work with the impasse of "pure" agent/victim dichotomies' whilst still making space for girls' agency (Harris and Dobson 2015, 152). Informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship, Renold and Ringrose (2011) have examined the schizoid pushes and pulls of contemporary girlhood where navigating contradictions creates micro-moments of rupture through which girls may become otherwise to cisheteronormative developmental linearities. They highlight the political role of feminist analysis in calling forth 'alternative figurations' that 'illuminate the complexity of ongoing processes of subject formation' (Braidotti 2019, 217) and map the shifts that make it possible to move beyond the heteronormative and phallogocentric coding of gender and sexuality (Braidotti 2011, 170).

In this paper, I consider how working with the speculative figure of the future girl through arts-based methods allowed new forms of voicing to emerge. It draws on data produced during a doctoral research study, entitled Exploring Young People's Digital Sexual Cultures through Creative, Visual and Arts-based Methods. Over a period of fifteen-months, I employed a range of creative, visual and arts-based methods in group and individual interviews that elicited insights into many facets of young people's digitally-networked peer cultures. I concluded fieldwork by co-facilitating a participatory arts-based workshop, entitled the Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop, for Safer Internet Day 2019 (Marston 2022a). This workshop sought to run interference into the way young people's digital relationships are typically understood and relayed in educational settings. By engaging in a diffractive analysis of the cut-up poem 'Test Subject 15066' and the fabricated future girl figure produced by three girls aged 12 years old in the Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop, this paper explores alternative figurations of future girlhood. It questions how it feels for girls to embody

hopeful future possibilities when technological innovations are reinscribing conservative gender and sexual norms and the future of the planet is threatened by climate change.

The study

This paper assembles arts-based data produced by five girls aged 11–12 years old as part of a study exploring young people’s digital sexual cultures (Marston 2020). The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences. Apart from the author, all the names in this paper are pseudonyms including the name of the school. Green City School where the study took place was an English secondary school situated in an affluent inner-city suburb. The study was promoted to potential participants in Years 7 and 8¹ via an assembly and a taster lunchtime workshop led by the author. This workshop gave potential participants an opportunity to try out creative research activities, ask questions about the research project, and collect information and consent forms. In line with institutional protocols, parental consent was required for all participants under the age of 16.

Following the recruitment assembly and taster workshop, Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara signed up to participate in the research. Although this group was not representative of the social intake of the ethnically and socio-economically diverse Green City School they attended, they were differentiated by class and race. For example, Mia and Isabella were from notably more affluent backgrounds than Safa, Imogen and Chiara. While Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara were White British, Safa had South Asian and Sikh heritage. All five girls participated in all phases of the research throughout Year 7 and at the beginning of Year 8. Research activities included assembling a map of their digital world through collaging; navigating social media and gaming platforms with the researcher; designing digital avatars and making stop-start plates to articulate key messages for change around the way digital relationships were addressed in school (see Marston 2020). Safa, Mia, Isabella and Chiara also participated in semi-structured follow-up interviews. In these interviews, I elicited discussion by returning to contributions made throughout the creative and visual group interviews (e.g. maps, avatars, screenshots, plates).

At the end of Year 7, Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen, and Chiara expressed an interest in continuing with the research in Year 8. Therefore, it was agreed that I would return after the summer holiday to co-develop the Fabricating Future Bodies (FFB) Workshop with them for Safer Internet Day (SID) 2019. Elsewhere, I have detailed the process of co-developing this workshop with the group, their teachers and two artist facilitators (see Marston 2022a). This workshop employed cut-up speculative fiction and textile arts to intervene into the typically scripted way young people’s digital relationships are explored in educational settings. Inspired by Renold’s (2017, 2019a, 2019b) theorising of the making and mattering of data and datafacts in their solo work, and in their writing with co-authors (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Renold and Ringrose 2019), I was interested in how young people’s experiences with digital relationships could be communicated through objects and creative writing that might carry affects and feelings into new places and spaces. In a three-hour workshop the girls produced cut-up science fiction texts and life-sized body fabrics that re-imagined what bodies might do, be, and become in the future.

Project upgrade

The video-sharing site YouTube remains one of the most popular social media platforms with YouTube celebrities proving particularly popular amongst children and young people. Berryman and Kavka (2018, 86) note that the recipe for success for popular YouTube vloggers commonly relies on ‘the make-over, the make-better, the aspirational and the comic’. This was exemplified in my study by the Merrell Twins, a celebrity YouTube duo who promote messages of confidence and self-love to girls. In the following extract from a group interview, Safa details her enjoyment of the Merrell Twins.

Safa:[...] I had these like YouTubers they are called the Merrell Twins and I watch them and they're the sort of YouTubers who are like always believe in yourself, it doesn't matter like what you look like and stuff like that and they made a mirror, called mirror plus plus, and it was like a mirror and it had YouTube tutorials and make-up tutorials and a little err, it had your google reminders in there and it had little messages come up like every day or hour

In this extract, Safa describes a Merrell Twins series called Project Upgrade that encourages girls to be interested in science by working with a team of women engineers and computer coders to create a smart mirror (King 2018). The content is indicative of the messages of empowerment and self-belief that are characteristic of a post-feminist media context. Gill (2017, 606) observes that in this context it is not only the body that needs to be transformed, but one's psychological attitude to ensure one cultivates ‘the “right” kinds of dispositions for thriving in a postfeminist neoliberal society’. This is encapsulated in the key features of the Merrell Twins smart mirror which advises how to transform the body through make-up tutorials and the mind through affirmations such as ‘always believe in yourself’ and ‘do the best you can today’. While the aim to ‘empower young girls’ through showcasing women in science and devising a mirror that encourages girls to ‘go confidently into the world’ may seem admirable (Twins 2018), feminist scholars have observed that such affirmative and inspirational messages in girl-centred media function as regulatory ‘feeling rules’ (Kanai 2017). The relentless demand for happiness, positive mental attitude and resilience contains and constrains outward expressions of negative emotion.

The Merrell Twins’ focus on developing an empowered individualistic self overlooks the deeply ingrained barriers to women entering and staying in science and technology fields. Rather than upgrading the mirror, the series functions in a paradigm of self-transformation that incites girls to upgrade to a confident selfhood at the expense of feminist socio-political critiques of enduring intersectional gender and sexual inequities (Gill and Akane 2019). It is part of a culture of ‘fashion feminism’ whereby girls and women ‘endeavor to achieve empowerment by exerting their consumer agency and using their bodies as political tools within the parameters of a capitalist economy’ (Genz 2006, p. 333). Feminist media scholars have illustrated how cultural representations such as the Merrell Twins underpin the affective and psychic life of post-feminist neoliberal capitalism (Gill 2017). However, these analyses can fail to engage with how girls themselves make meaning of, and negotiate, the competing and contradictory demands of their everyday digitally-networked lives.

Voicing frustrations

Over the course of the fieldwork sessions at Green City School, I observed how the optimistic orientation towards girl power and self-transformation sat in tension with their frustration at the multitude of practices that worked to regulate and shape the meaning of their gendered bodies. The topic of gender inequality was a thread that ran through fieldwork discussions with the group, particularly after a fieldwork session that involved designing their own digital avatar. In this session the girls discussed the change they would like to see in the world. In the exchange below, participants began to voice their desire for change in a playful way in which fantasies of being a unicorn and transforming into a mermaid accompanied talk of halting global warming and taking down Donald Trump.

Kate: So, what else, what can your avatars do when they're a unicorn?

Mia: Mine farts rainbows

Kate: Farts rainbows?

Isabella: Delightful

Mia: That's what unicorns do!

Safa: Mine can make her imagination real so like if she like imagines something it just goes

Kate: Oh wow

Safa: or if she wants to stop global warming in her head she'll stop global warming

Kate: That's cool, do you wish you could change things?

Safa: Yes

(all talking at once)

Kate: What would you change?

Safa: I want to be a mermaid, if I couldn't be a human I'd be a mermaid

Mia: I would change that Donald Trump was born

Isabella: Ooooh me too, me too!

Safa: I would change Hitler!

Isabella: Ooh yeah!

Mia: We would stop lots of bad things from happening and then we would probably not be alive, because that wouldn't have happened so nothing would change

Kate: That's very philosophical

Mia: Hahahaha!

(all talking at once)

Safa: Miss, what do you think about sexism?

Kate: Sexism, I don't like it. What do you think about sexism?

Safa: Well we had a discussion about it yesterday

Following this exchange, and throughout several fieldwork sessions, the group shared their frustration at the range of everyday sexism they observed at school and online. They asserted that 'it's evil!' to differentiate between 'boys' sports and girls' sports' noting how Green City School's physical education (PE) policy required boys to do parkour and girls to do gymnastics. They thought 'boys should be allowed to wear skirts' and questioned why girls' clothes always 'shows more of our body' (Safa's words). After hearing that a boy in Year 8 had been sent to isolation for wearing a skirt to school, Chiara summed up the group's incredulity when she asserted that Green City School was 'all about not being sexist and now [they are] being sexist, so what the fuck is up with that?!'

The girls were also critical of the hetero-patriarchal narratives they encountered in popular culture including on social media and gaming platforms. They problematised the music videos they saw on YouTube where 'the boys were topless' and 'the girls were wearing hardly anything' (Mia's words). They engaged in an extended critique of the gendered politics of older Disney films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989) noting how 'girls are always expected to sacrifice something' like their voice. Safa questioned why 'girls always have to meet the expectations of [...] boys, when they should meet our expectations!' and Isabella rejected the idea that women should just 'stay there, look pretty and look after the baby!' Chiara and Imogen also noted how they were treated differently in online video games because they were girls (Jensen and Castell 2013). For example, Chiara observed how her brother's friends 'kept promoting [her], demoting [her], promoting [her], demoting [her]' on the video game *Clash Royale*.

The girls were raucous and energetic in expressing their feelings about the competing and contradictory demands of 'this whole gender thing' (Mia's words). They punctuated their points by leaping on tables and swinging between chairs. When I concluded the first phase of research by dedicating a fieldwork session to making stop-start plates, they paraded around the classroom with their plates chanting 'Change the world! Change the world! Change the world!' They discussed how they could create change if they 'just refuse to go to school!' and 'strike' (Isabella's words), 'sit in the playground cross-legged and say I want shorts!' (Mia's words) or sign the already circulating petitions that were demanding changes to the school uniform and PE policy. They also offered up cartoonish plots to assassinate the US President Donald Trump, a symbol of virulent racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and far-right populism, by 'drowning him in orange juice!' (Isabella's words) or 'fake tan spray' (Imogen's words).

Despite offering sustained critiques of the way hetero-patriarchal culture regulated their bodies and thrust them towards heteronormative future imaginaries, the girls disassociated with socio-political movements such as feminism in a post-feminist fashion. When I asked if they had heard of feminism in a follow-up interview with Mia, Isabella and Safa, they answered in the affirmative but disagreed on whether feminists 'take it too far' (Mia's words). While Safa was supportive of feminism and noted that her cousin was a feminist poet, Mia and Isabella did not like the word 'feminism' because 'it doesn't show that it's wanting it to be equal, it shows them as only wanting rights for women' and

preferred the term 'equal-ist'. These comments highlight a 'quintessential dynamic of postfeminism, where feminism and gender equality has to be blended into a generalised equality remit deemed to be more equal' (Retallack, Ringrose, and Lawrence 2016, 90). Despite sexism continuing to shape their lives, the girls struggled to move out from under the weight of discourses that demanded a continued orientation towards can-do girl power trajectories. Rarely did the participants acknowledge the struggles or stresses that accompanied the everyday gendered inequalities they experienced, instead there was a levity and playfulness to their critiques. This supports wider feminist research that demonstrates how girls struggle to produce themselves as empowered, choice making agents whilst still laying claim to being affected by enduring cis-hetero-patriarchal power structures (Harris and Dobson 2015; Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013). In the following discussion of the FFB Workshop, however, I illustrate how their rebellious zest was channelled into and took on a more dystopic form through working with speculative fiction.

Experimenting with speculative fiction

Speculative fiction refers to an expansive literary genre encompassing science fiction, fantasy, the supernatural and horror that embraces 'a different version of reality than the empirical-materialist one' (Oziewicz 2017, 1). Across this study, participant's talk of new technologies, such as smart mirrors that gave them affirmations, sounded to me like the plot to a science fiction film (see Marston 2020). Correspondingly, I became curious about working with speculative fiction as a 'mode of attention' (Haraway 2016, 230) that could throw 'open the question of pedagogy to consider how we might learn from being affected by the inherent queerness of the world' (Taylor and Blaise 2014, 389). The FFB Workshop built upon the earlier design a digital avatar research activity where participants had talked of making their 'imagination real' (Safa's words) by engaging speculative fiction as a mode of storytelling and engaging their bodies in the process through body mapping with fabrics. As Brians (2011, 121) observes, speculative fiction has long shaped the popular imaginary around new technologies and operated as a site where advances in science and technology are debated, elaborated, and re-imagined. While mainstream speculative fiction has tended to uncritically reinforce the figure of the white male saviour and his Western imperialist vision of rational scientific progress, the genre has a long-standing history of challenging normative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, ability and race as they intersect with techno-science (Truman 2018).

Donna Haraway draws from speculative fiction to posit affirmative and empowering feminist figurations that address the ever-shifting terrain of our technological, political, economic, environmental and social landscape. She asserts that humans cannot be separated from non-humans conceptually, as we are constantly in contact with other animals, materials and technologies as we go about our everyday lives (Haraway 2008). Therefore, she encourages other scholars to work with speculative fabulation to imagine alternatives to the mundane fiction of nature/culture, human/more-than-human, male/female, agent/victim binaries. Feminist figurations offer an 'alternative – affirmative – feminist subjectivity, articulated in the figurative form' that point to ways out of the hegemonic heteronormative and phallogocentric coding of gender and sexuality (Lykke 2010, 205). Haraway (1991, 149) famously proposed a cyborg creature 'simultaneously

animal and machine' as a new figuration for feminist subjectivity in a world that is 'ambiguously natural and crafted'. The cyborg is one of 'a whole kinship system' of feminist figurations in Haraway's (2004, 327) work. These feminist figurations challenge 'the separation of reason from imagination' (Braidotti 2002, 3) by creatively expressing an imagined elsewhere in ways that critique and urge us to re-think the here-and-now situation.

Fabricating future bodies workshop

The FFB Workshop was delivered in connection with Safer Internet Day 2019 and comprised two key arts-based practices: 'assembling speculative fictions', and 'fabricating future bodies'. For the speculative fiction activity, participants were provided with anonymised research quotes from my doctoral study alongside a selection of extracts from speculative fiction literature, popular culture, contemporary art, news reports and academic texts that provided rich descriptions of bodies, feelings and/or technologies. They were invited to underline and cut out words or phrases that grabbed their attention in order to assemble a piece of speculative fiction that imagined it was the year 2119 and considered: What will our bodies be made of? How will we express our feelings? How will we know what other bodies are feeling? Starting with a range of text prompts that the participants could cut-up and re-assemble offered an accessible way into the task and each group created a short piece of speculative fiction in twenty-five minutes.

For the fabricating future bodies activity, participants were asked to create a bodily pose that reflected a feeling from their cut-up text. A volunteer from each group then took up the pose by lying on a large sheet of felt and, once comfortable, other members of their group carefully drew around the body contour. The resulting body shapes depicted power poses, exuberance and movement, vulnerability, protectiveness and tension. Participants were then provided with fabric pens, paints, scissors, fabrics and other materials that could be used to colour, pattern, annotate and embellish the fabricated future bodies. Focusing on future bodies functioned as a distancing technique that allowed participants to explore the gendered and sexualised topic of the digitally-networked body without revealing too much of themselves (Renold 2017, 2019a).

Thinking-with theory: a diffractive analysis

In the remainder of this paper, I engage in a diffractive analysis of the cut-up poem 'Test Subject 15066' and the Fabricated Future Girl figure produced by Mia, Isabella and Chiara during the FFB Workshop. The concept of diffraction as developed by Haraway (1997), Barad (2007) and Lenz-Taguchi (2012, 267) is a useful tool for analysis that seeks to 'imagine other possible realities presented in the data' beyond binary positionings. Describing 'the way waves pattern as they overlap, bend and spread' creating change (Allen 2015, 949 drawing on; Barad 2007), diffraction is an optical metaphor for attending to patterns of difference rather than reflecting back and mirroring what is already known. Instead of uncovering the meaning of data, the researcher is invited to explore how data works and what it can produce. Diffractive analysis is an 'engaged and creative' process that incorporates the researchers' own affective entanglements, experiences and insights (Fox and Alldred 2023, 96).

In this paper, reading the girls talk and creations diffractively and recursively through feminist, queer and trans writing about speculative fiction and media responses to climate activist Greta Thunberg, activates different ways of seeing the figure of the future girl. Since the knowledge we produce has the potential to make a difference in the world, data analysis can be treated as an ethical responsibility to intervene in the way power is understood and relayed. Specifically, the analysis I offer unsettles postfeminist can-do girl power trajectories whilst holding onto the capacity for girls to be resistant agents.

Fabricated future girl

In the cut-up writing exercise, a piece of text on ‘shifting postures in light of connective technology’ (Harbinson 2017) provided the initial inspiration for Mia’s, Isabella’s and Chiara’s poem. Specifically, a misreading by Mia of the line ‘spines curve over laptops’ prompted the group to think about digital technologies being pushed into the very fibres of the human body as opposed to the texts intended reference to the way bodies comport to accommodate technology. In the following poem and fabricated figure, Mia, Isabella and Chiara consider what happens when the inhuman forces of technology find their way into the body.

POEM TWO: TEST SUBJECT 15066

We haven’t always been like this
 Not quite one thing and not quite the other
 Technology is part of our lives and it
 Has become
 Part of our evolutionary journey
 All that you change
 Changes you
 You can easily transform yourself
 We change between states
 We will become something else
 Spines curve over laptops and minds hum from blue light
 “To make robots practical, flaws must be removed.
 To make robots endearing, flaws must be added”
 Life is bigger than your programming
 My whole life I felt as though I lived between two states
 Now, the sun falls.

This atmospheric poem was translated into a disconcerting fabricated figure of a girl pinned down by several hands and chained at the wrists (Figure 1). A green microchip is sticking out of her brain. The fabricated figure is annotated as ‘Test Subject 15066’ with the group elaborating in the workshop that ‘she’ is now an ‘it’, one amongst many to voluntarily undergo this micro-chipping procedure.

The group’s striking, dystopic vision of girlhood powerfully unsettles the idealised images of girls as vanguards of social change (Harris 2004; McRobbie 2008). The cut-up



Figure 1. Fabricated future girl.

poem references the seeming ease with which you can 'transform yourself' in contemporary social and cultural life as well as the careful balancing act required between being too flawed or too flawless, too real or too fake. Investment in the body is seen to aid women's social mobility yet comes with 'intense forms of surveillance, scrutiny and individualism' that operate as new modalities of constraint (Rich and Evans 2013, 20). While Mia, Isabella and Chiara stated that the fabricated future girl volunteered to be micro-chipped, this 'choice' is accompanied by several hands interfering with and seemingly restraining her body. Rather than upgrading to the empowered self, the figure complicates neo-liberal logics of rational consent and individual humanist agency which underpin the construction of girls as newly free sexual agents in control of their own bodies (Evans 2014).

Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's vision of body transformation can also be read as an allegory of the physiological flux of sexual puberty and entry into womanhood, particularly as it was created by pre-teenage girls at an age typically associated with pubescence. Here sexual maturation is marked not by the onset of menarche but the force of technological intrusion, capture and control. Puberty has long acted as a site for societal

and cultural anxieties surrounding girls as ‘both bearers of power and objects of risk’ (Renold and Ringrose 2013, 248). In line with popular representations of ‘possessed’, ‘demonised’ or otherwise monstrous pubescent girls (Creed 1993), Mia’s, Isabella’s and Chiara’s vision of adolescent transformation also invokes a tradition of monstrous femininity within literature, film and art. Creed’s (1993) concept of the monstrous feminine celebrates women and girl’s potential to disrupt the cis-hetero-patriarchal order by embracing their abject powers. Correspondingly, the girl’s fabricated figure can be seen not just as a ‘scary futurology’ of girlhood increasingly controlled by technology but as a potentially agentic and resistant figure (Smith 2010).

Notably, the figure also disrupts any linear trajectory towards womanhood, as the gender is rendered ambiguous and fluid as a more-than-human ‘it’, shifting ‘between states’ and in the process of becoming ‘something else’ as the ‘sun falls’. The figure resembles a Frankensteinian monster. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* tells the story of an over-reaching young Enlightenment-era scientist who attempts to master nature by creating new life forms but succeeds only in constructing a hideous monster. Crucially, however, the scientist fails to master the monster he makes as he cannot control its mind or its feelings (Stryker 1994). Similar to Frankenstein’s monster, the fabricated future girl is granted a voice through the cut-up poem which questions what it is in the process of becoming and asserts that ‘life is bigger than your programming’. This line suggests an ability to undo the coding of the body. Furthermore, the fabricated future girl refuted and exceeded Mia’s, Isabella’s and Chiara’s own creative intentions as they observed that she was meant to look sad, not scary. The figure’s sharp teeth and beaming red eyes give the restrained figure a threatening edge as if it might rip itself free from its chains and wreak havoc on its creators.

Rebel girls

With their dystopian vision of future girlhood, Mia, Isabella and Chiara stated that they wanted to question the presumption that the future will be positive, thus complicating the narrative that girls represent ‘a brighter, better, more hopeful future’ (Taft 2020). Keller (2021) observes that the climate activist Greta Thunberg, a spectacularly visible figure of mediated transnational girlhood, also resists the demand to make adults feel good about the future. By offering ‘a glimpse of the failed futurity possible if we do not act on climate change’ (Keller 2021, 685), Thunberg threatens cis-hetero-patriarchal power structures. Correspondingly, the visibility of Thunberg’s activism has exposed her to gendered, sexualised and ableist harassment both online and offline (Park, Liu, and Kaye 2021). Nevertheless, I consider here how the girls’ engagement with Thunberg and environmental activism momentarily disrupted the gendered bodily regulation they strongly felt at school and online.

As the following exchange from a fieldwork session with Olivia and Chiara illustrates, the threat of climate change loomed large in the participant’s thoughts about the future.

Kate: Do you think about the future of technology?

Olivia: Yeah, I’d like to think it would be like, we would get like sky pods and stuff where there little, little kind of spaceships that fly around in the sky

Kate: Oh yeah

Chiara: I think what most people think is actually like tonnes of sci-fi spaceships and stuff like that whereas actually I think it's not going to be like that, I think the earth will like die out before that happened

Concern about climate change was further highlighted towards the end of fieldwork at Green City School when Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen became involved in the school climate strikes. The girls had learned about the activism of Greta Thunberg through Instagram. Following this, they created a 'huge' Whatsapp groupchat that reached over a hundred classmates and facilitated their participation in the strikes. In 2019, Thunberg's solitary act of protest inspired millions of children and young people worldwide to go on strike from school to call attention to the urgency of climate change (Barclay and Resnick 2019). This mass movement is part of a wider socio-cultural juncture in which youth-led, and often girl-fronted, activisms are becoming increasingly visible around the world (Renold 2019a; Strom et al. 2019).

While Thunberg's stratospheric rise as a global icon of climate activism captured the imagination of the world's media and brought renewed attention to the change-making energies of girls, the reception of Thunberg's activism works to re-centre the individual empowered white, European middle-class girl as the locus of social change (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). Media accounts of the 'Greta Thunberg effect' erase rich histories of collective climate action led by girls and young women outside of Europe as well as side-steps the colonial, classed, raced and gendered politics of climate change (Unigwe 2019; Nxumalo 2018). Furthermore, mainstream affective attachments to Thunberg as a saviour conveniently overlook her own indignation at adults who 'come to us young people for hope', expressed through the repeated refrain 'How dare you?!' in her viral speech at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit.

It is significant that Thunberg's activism has attracted the ire of many commentators in sexualised, gendered and ableist ways (North 2019). For example, Keller (2021, 684) discusses media depictions of sexual violence against Thunberg, noting their attempt to 'assert control over her via imagined violence to her feminised body'. Significantly, Thunberg has also been ridiculed for her supposedly robotic body language and facial expressions with one white male French 'intellectual' describing her as 'not sexy enough', having 'a cyborg face that ignores emotion' like 'those silicon dolls heralding the end of humanity, the post-human era' (White 2019, para 1, n.p). Such comments indicate that Thunberg taps into anxieties about the return of the monstrous feminine as a teenage girl who unflinchingly chastises adult policy makers for their failure to tackle the climate crisis and harnesses the power of social media to amplify her voice. The comparison of Thunberg to a cyborg recalls the long-standing associations made between 'the female body and the accelerating powers of technology' indicating that the figure of Thunberg unsettles and threatens humanist, male-centric forms of being in the world (Braidotti 2013, 105). Not only does Thunberg forgo subservience to those in power but she has inspired other young people to challenge the hierarchical institutional structures of education too by staging school walkouts. Correspondingly, Thunberg offers an alternative feminist figuration whose networked activism works to temporarily re-route the circuits that bind technology to cis-hetero-patriarchal power structures.

While the girls at Green City School had jokingly talked about going on strike from school before Thunberg began her protest in August 2018, learning about Thunberg through social media provided the impetus for Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen to engage with a wider public political protest. Joining this mass movement disrupted and refigured how their bodies were usually fixed and the bodily regulation that they strongly felt at school and online (Ringrose and Renold 2014; Retallack, Ringrose, and Lawrence 2016). Following the first climate strike, they shared images of themselves stood in fountains outside a city council building, shouting and brandishing placards and banners that expressed their anger at adult inaction, including one that stated 'my anger won't fit on this placard' and another urging people to 'raise [their] voice not the sea levels'. The group spoke energetically about how their activism had garnered visibility with people wanting to photograph their placards and banners for the local news. Not only did the protests disrupt the way in which their bodies were usually fixed and restrained but by participating in their local climate strike they joined hundreds of children and young people who collectively brought their city centre to a standstill by blocking the movement of cars through the streets. In contrast to the inhibition and restraint conveyed in the fabricated future girl through this public political protest, the girls actively impeded the movement of adults.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to offer more dynamic accounting of digitally-networked girlhood that moves beyond the static, binary positioning of girls as either savvy agents or objectified victims.

By working with the speculative figure of the future girl through arts-based methods, this paper has considered how mobilising creative writing, images, colour and textures enabled the girls to 'cocreate and communicate complex ideas' that made 'cultural, lived ephemeral issues visible' (Hickey-Moody 2020, 724). Specifically, the girls' dystopic vision of future girlhood offered form-force to experiences of bodily regulation and challenged idealised images of girls as vanguards of social change. Through my diffractive reading of the girl's cut-up poem and fabricated future figure, I have considered how they complicated the postfeminist construction of girls as newly free sexual agents by pushing the impulse to self-transformation to monstrous ends. I argued that their fabricated future girl offered an alternative figuration of feminist subjectivity beyond can-do girl power trajectories, unsettling a straightforward linear transition of girl-teen-woman and the over-coding of the girl body as a site of hopeful possibility. The figure nevertheless maintains a threatening edge that can be read as resistant, particularly when considered alongside feminist, queer and trans appropriations of the monster as an empowering figure of 'creatively queer embodiment' (Jones and Harris 2016).

Considering the girl's engagement with activist girl figure Greta Thunberg, I also explored a grander narrative of resistance. This paper maintains an investment in girls' capacity to be change-making agents, particularly illustrating how the girls' engagement with the school climate strikes momentarily disrupted the gendered bodily regulation they strongly felt at school and online. This raises more questions as to what it means for girls to embody hopeful future possibilities in the face of the existential threat of climate change. Further research is needed to explore how girls experience the call to be

empowered, choice-making agents in the context of creeping technological intrusion and environmental decline, and engage with their own future visions of girlhood. This paper has highlighted the value of research with girls that draws on arts-based methods and the role of feminist analysis in opening up interpretation, diffracting it, and calling forth alternative figurations of girlhood. These insights are not just methodological but could inform pedagogy and practice in digital sexualities education. The FFB Workshop moved beyond solely discursive online safety interventions that focus on young people's individual, rational decision-making regarding responsible technology use by engaging the participants bodies in the process. Such embodied pedagogies could be a valuable tool for digital sexualities education that seeks to be attuned to the complex ways in which gender and sexual norms play out in young people's digitally-networked lives. Working with speculative fabrications offered a curious and imaginative way of opening up conversations with young people about their digitally-networked bodies whereby typically private emotions were given vivid expression in the semi-public space of the workshop without necessarily being reduced to the personal or confessional (Renold 2017). Future digital sexualities education could usefully embrace creative pedagogies to develop engaging and safe learning environments for young people to feel, embody, question and share their lived experience with digital technologies.

Note

1. In the UK, the age range for year 7 is 11–12 years old, and for year 8 it is 12–13 years old

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