Theses and Dissertations

2014

Fighting for the Freedom of a Future Age: Afrofuturism and the Posthuman Body

Cayla McNally
Lehigh University

Follow this and additional works at: http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

"Fighting for the Freedom of a Future Age": Afrofuturism and the Posthuman Body

by

Cayla McNally

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

American Studies

Lehigh University

August 31, 2014

Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in American Studies.

"Fighting for the Freedom of a Future Age": Afrofuturism and the Posthuman Body
Cayla McNally

_____

Date Approved

                                             _____

                                             Dr. James Peterson, Thesis Director

                                             _____

                                             Dr. Dawn Keetley, Co-Director

                                             _____

                                             Dr. John Pettegrew, Dept. Chair

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

This work seeks to examine the relationship between Afrofuturism, the enduring legacies of systems of

oppression, and the effects of those systems on the oppressed body. This thesis is comprised of three

sections, all of which analyze the effects of posthumanism on the black body. Through the lens of

Afrofuturism, one can recognize that the image of the cyborg is part of a legacy of slavery, and that the

relationship between technology and blackness is fraught with signified legacy (as discussed in the first and

third chapters). The use of time travel creates a liminal space in which a person may either subvert

oppression or reify it (as examined in the second chapter). This work asks the question: when the atrocities

of the past are played out over a future landscape, how does the legacy of the atrocity change?

Chapter 1

Afrofuturism: Reappropriating the Discourse

When he coined the term "Afrofuturism" in 1993, cyberculture theorist Mark Dery was attempting to find a way to describe the cultural confluence of traditional African motifs with the expanding internet culture: "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture- and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future- might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" (Dery 180). By using projections of the future as a way to upend the imbalances of power that exist in the present moment, Afrofuturism is thus a reappropriation of history and an alternative view to mainstream attitudes towards technology, culture, and the future. It involves a collapsing of space and time, allowing for a trajectory from a mythic Egyptian past to a vastness of future possibilities. In this reframing of history and policy, those who are systemically oppressed are capable of transcending their less-than-desirable situation. Nothing- not even the sky- is limiting.

Afrofuturism serves to confront and soothe the burn of history and its perverse legacy that has seeped into what was once the paragon of futurity, the 21st century. The future world-building that typifies this aesthetic acts as a way to rewrite, reexamine, and come to terms with a lost or stolen past. Afrofuturism is thus simultaneously a reclamation of the past and a projection into the future, and further serves to decontextualize the tenuous confines of time and space. The dissolving of barriers that occurs here is further mirrored in the art form itself. When Sun Ra explains his utopian

all-black planet, in his 1974 film *Space is the Place* he stresses, "Equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended" (Space). Dery proposes that the most important question of Afrofuturism is: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (180). I argue that the only way to combat an absent past is through creating a future presence; there is a direct correlation between the hopeful and fantastical visions of the future and the loss of a past. Samuel Delany tells Dery, "The historical reason that we've been so impoverished in terms of future images is because until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past" (Dery 190-191). Afrofuturism fights erasure, pulling focus to the presence of the absence. When a history is so buried that no record remains (or, perhaps, ever existed), one of the only viable options that one can carry out while moving forward is to focus on creating a future that redresses past vulnerabilities. For this reason, the future presented in many Afrofuturist creations seems eerily like a mythic, partially-imagined past.

Afrofuturist film *Space is the Place* opens with one constant refrain: "It's after the end of the world- don't you know that yet?" (Space). In this respect, Afrofuturism takes the radical stance that the end of the world has already occurred; communities of color, right now, are living in the post-apocalyptic. These communities have suffered through slavery, lynchings, scientific experiments on non-consenting bodies, the AIDS epidemic, the crack epidemic, post-industrialism, urbanization, and gentrification. In short, life as they knew it has incrementally been reduced, leaving them pressed into the most liminal spaces. Samuel Delany notes that: "It struck me more and more over the years that one of

3

the most forceful and distinguishing aspects of science fiction is that it's marginal. It's always at its most honest and most effective when it operates- and claims to be operating- from the margins" (Dery 189). This marginalization is what allows for science fiction to be projected onto those who exist under the thumb of racialized or gendered oppression. Myth-making and the repurposing of symbols begin to combat that oppression, and becomes both a means to the end and the end itself. Tropes of self-mythologizing and linguistic symbolism are most evident in the works and lives of band leader Sun Ra and found-objects artist Rammellzee, two of the most compelling figures of the movement. Both Sun Ra and Rammellzee, as well as their cultural descendants, believed in the power of changing the terms and structure of the discourse, in the value of challenging the oppressor with his own language. J.G. Rollefson asserts that the strength of Afrofuturism lies within the repurposing of the mindsets that allow power structures to become imbalanced in the first place: "Much more than straightforward science fiction, however, the epistemes that accompany these identities reflect on oppositionality and an historical critique that seeks to undermine the logic of linear progress that buttresses Western universalism, rationality, empiricism, logocentrism, and their standard-bearer: white supremacy" (84). I suggest that this also applies to language, which has the capability to create or erase. Rammellzee's artwork has been described as an exercise in symbolism: "Its real purpose was to illustrate a deconstructionist-type dual philosophy, called Gothic Futurism and Ikonoklast Panzerism, that imagined a world in which Roman letters would arm and liberate themselves, at his command, from the power structures of European language" (Kennedy 2-3). Reflecting on the hegemonic structure of language, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states, "Human language is assumed to offer the most

4

productions if not the only possible models for understanding representation" (501). But of course this concept of "language" that she is ultimately criticizing is a language of Western oppression, and a tool that actively erases all other voices. Westernized language thus acts as an agent of the Othering process by reinforcing the hierarchies of power and access. If English (or any other Westernized language) is assumed to be the dominant language of humanity, than speakers of the dominant language are able to proceed as if any culture that does not speak the same language is inherently less human and thus in need of Western/white dominance.

Though Dery named Afrofuturism, he did not create it; while the term was not coined until the early 1990's, the groundwork was laid in the previous two decades, with musician Sun Ra being a notable forefather of the movement.   However, Greg Tate goes as far as suggesting that some works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright include aspects of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, and therefore are part of the Afrofuturist canon. W.E.B. DuBois's short story "The Comet" imagines the fraught aspects of race and gender relations of his contemporary time played out to the enth degree in a post-apocalyptic future where the fate of humanity rests on a black man and a white woman. Part of Afrofuturism's importance is thus its traceability through both mainstream and underground media in the 20th and 21st centuries. Musically, it spans from the orchestral sprawl of the Sun Ra Arkestra and George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic in the 1970's to the synth-funk of Prince and Grace Jones in the 1980's to the hip hop and neo-soul stylings of Outkast, MF Doom, Erykah Badu, Deltron 3030, Janelle Monáe, and Deep Cotton in the last two decades. Artistically, it is typified by visual artist Rammellzee, Jean Michel Basquiat, and innumerable graffiti artists, comic book creators,

and illustrators. Its predominant writers include Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Nalo Hopkinson.

All of these disparate mediums set forth with the goal of challenging the predominant narratives and hegemonic power structures. When speaking of Rammellzee, Henry Chalfont says, "He felt that even now if you control the language, you control the discourse, you control the power" (Kennedy 3). By redefining what the dominant language is and how it is utilized by different groups engaged in a struggle for visibility and power, Afrofuturists thus begin to redefine the entire structure of the discourse and ultimately, the balance of power itself. For this reason, Afrofuturism is perhaps at its most useful when it is closest to being a living, breathing organism, both an aesthetic and a movement. The power of the concept comes from the amalgamation that produces it, over and over again, different every time. Accordingly, the most interesting and important Afrofuturists are those who explore the possibilities of blending mediums. Though Sun Ra was primarily a musician, he was also a filmmaker; though Rammellzee was an artist, he was also a musician and actor. Butler's *Kindred* is in the process of being converted into a graphic novel by John Jennings, who consistently works to reframe blackness and comic book culture. What results from this spirit of collaboration is a blurring of borders, a crossing of boundaries. Rhizomatically, it branches out with neither beginning nor end, democratizing the process of creating art; anyone who is involved with Afrofuturism has the possibility of influencing the mainstream zeitgeist as well as the structures that uphold underground countercultures.

Black and Sci-Fi: the Posthuman Body

Afrofuturism opens a space in which the fraught relationship between blackness and technology may be unraveled and explored. Black bodies are used as technology, but technology is also wielded against black bodies. In this light, the concept of the black cyborg has roots in stark reality. The history of black bodies being used as technology, largely without the subject's consent, predates the founding of the United States. Slavery functioned under the constant and insidious assumption that black bodies- especially black female bodies- functioned only as technologies of production and reproduction. Subject becomes object, human becomes machine. In this capacity, it is not foreign to then imagine those same bodies being projected into the future as androids and cyborgs, occupying fraught and fluid identities with regard to being human. Afrofuturism acknowledges the slim boundary between man and machine, as each has the power to use the other for its benefit.

The idea of black (female) bodies as sites of commodification is furthered by the history of Henrietta Lacks, a tobacco farmer whose cells were taken secretly and without her consent. Though Lacks' body is dead, the components from which is created are still alive and multiplying. In a sense, her body is in a type of suspended animation; though she herself is dead, her life force is not, and the injuries that have been done upon her continue as long as her cells are used to propel a medical system that sees her as object rather than subject. The buying and selling of her cells repeat the injury of the buying and selling of her ancestors. Of course, though, "HeLa cells were the first human biological materials ever bought and sold, which helped launch a multi-billion-dollar industry" (Zielinski 3), the money went solely to her scientific exploiters.

Afrofuturism and Real World Applicability

As communities struggle to imagine their contemporary place within the larger social structure, Afrofuturism serves two purposes: firstly, it allows for a group to project itself into the future, despite how uncertain the present may seem; secondly, it allows for the past to be reframed in a way that examines it through the lens of a black viewership. This reviewing of the past through modern perspectives may contribute to the breakdown of history, but it is this very breakdown that allows for the emergence of Afrofuturism. The first wave of Afrofuturism reached its then-unnamed peak in the 1960's and 1970's, coinciding with the later years of the Civil Rights movement. It is useful to think that its hope in the future corresponds with the civil rights gains, whereas its cosmic despair stems from the ultimate failings of the movement and the subsequent postindustrialism of the late 1970's. The recent interest in Afrofuturist scholarship and creative works is perhaps an attempt to seek possibility in a world that is steadily limiting access to public services- healthcare, education, jobs- for populations of color.

In science fiction, the seemingly far off 21st century allowed for a type of fantastical dreaming that included flying cars and egalitarian, multicultural societies. But what happens when the future becomes the present, and seemingly nothing has changed, except for the ways in which the discourse is carried out? As claims of a post-racial society radically unlike any kind projected in science fiction have become a hard reality, the future gets pushed out even further with the naïve hope that the conflict will right itself naturally in the years to come.

As the descendants of aliens who were dragged across the Atlantic, African Americans are put in a position of being within a broken mechanism of time. Time and space lose their context, which is why Afrofuturism becomes a useful tool to examine the past and comment on the present without the knee-jerk sentiments that pervade modern attitudes toward race relations. Dery suggests that the possibility of the future haunts us; while we cannot change the events of the past, a malleable future still yawns out in front of us. This tantalizing futurity is what allows for a rescripting of history. History cannot be undone, but it can be uncovered and understood in a way that allows marginalized bodies to reappropriate their oppressed pasts. Afrofuturism helps achieve this goal by using a reappropriated past as a way to launch a culture into the future.

The various waves of Afrofuturism also appear to coincide with the emergence of new media. Its name came about during the wave of the movement in 1993, which conveniently coincided with the cultural expansion of the internet. The internet provided- and hopefully still provides- a possibility for the democratization of knowledge, a leveling of the playing field. It is in this space that young Afrofuturists such as Ytasha Womack and Alondra Nelson were able to connect with like-minded individuals. Chat rooms allowed for the groupings of unlikely parties with a common area of interest; without the presence of the internet, it is questionable whether these people would have ever been able to make contact. I would argue that this new wave of Afrofuturism is tied to the rise of new media and the further democratization of content. While the internet boom of the 90's allowed for a rise in media consumption, this current boom allows for an exponential increase in media production. Artists, musicians, and writers now have free spaces where they may share and promote their work and link to

9

the works of their colleagues. What results is an unending web of content that has the capability of existing without a middle man. This allows for a retention of one's own self and art, but with the constant possibility of high online distribution.

As the world becomes closed off to a large number of the population, the necessity of Afrofuturism becomes apparent; when the present seems beyond reach, one can react by sinking into despair or daring to dream of alternate worlds that have the possibility of becoming a reality. Though the images projected in Afrofuturism may not be technologically or ethically possible for a very long time, the strength and control portrayed in the images surge forward with an alarming urgency, a dire need to be applied right now in order to achieve a the possibility of a brighter future for marginalized bodies.

The next two chapters will build upon the above-laid groundwork, and seek to understand the fraught tension between blackness, technology, and the mechanisms that control the balance of power. The second chapter will explore the relationship between musician Janelle Monáe's Metropolis saga and Octavia Butler's neo-slave narrative *Kindred*. Both bodies of work provide a unique lens to understand the ways that monolithic institutions overpower the black female form. The third chapter presents the work of arts collective Black Kirby, which positions black cyborgs as the cultural descendants of slaves and raises the question: how does the concept of inhumanity change when the subject is no longer viewed as human?

Chapter 2

Electric Ladies and the Burden of History

One of the major tropes of Afrofuturism is the examination of the effects of posthumanism on the bodies of black subjects. Posthumanism is in many ways inseparable from the slavery model. Here, production has an insidious double-meaning, relying on slave women for both the labor of production (fieldwork) and the production of labor (breeding). The neo-slave narratives presented in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Janelle Monáe's Metropolis worldscape serve to demonstrate the mechanisms of power that exist to enforce the rigid hierarchies that profit and thrive off of the objectification of marginalized, enslaved bodies, especially female bodies. *Kindred* follows Dana, who upon moving in with her white husband, Kevin, is suddenly dislodged from her contemporary time period, 1976, and hurtled backwards to the Antebellum South and forced into the position of mediator slave. Through her subsequent visits she surmises that she is being sent back to protect young slave owner Rufus Weylin, so that he may eventually rape his slave Alice, leading to the creation of Dana's own bloodline. Janelle Monáe's narrative tells the story of Android number 577821, Alpha Platinum 9000, Cindi Mayweather, who's programming includes "a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul" (Metropolis), and who uses that soul to sow malcontented seeds throughout Metropolis, an autocratic city of the future. Monáe explores duty and desire in her Metropolis music saga, focusing on the complicated relationship between Mayweather and the human whose DNA she shares, Janelle Monáe. While Monáe sets her scene in a future dystopian city, Butler keeps one foot strongly grounded in realism,

portraying the ways in which the traumatic realities of slavery are played out on those in the present as well as those in the past. Both artists challenge the normative power structures that allow for privileged bodies to exploit marginalized bodies for financial gain and sexual pleasure.

The main parallels between Janelle-Cindi and Alice-Dana are the presence of a double, time travel, and the idea of the posthuman worker. Effectively, Butler and Monáe are discussing the same thing- the economic exploitation of a large underclass- but are using different words. One is utilizing the historical narrative of the slave system, while the other is using androids as a way to comment on the technological oppression of an Othered group. Monáe's creation becomes a useful lens for examining Butler's seemingly-straightforward novel. Monáe provides a way of looking at slavery that allows for subversive acts of rebellion to challenge the system; Butler is more concerned with working within that system and offering internal critique. The slaveries portrayed in the works of Butler and Monáe are brutal, mind-numbing, and exploitative. They are marked by a corporeal and mental violence that aims to transmute people into bodies and revert the self back to its most visceral state.

Time and Space

Throughout this discussion of Afrofuturism, the topic of time travel remains a constant, partly due to the importance of claiming ownership over a body that is mobile throughout both space and time. This is because historically, the descendants of slaves were robbed of both bodily agency and cultural memory. The mastery of time travel is thus the ability to control the body's situation to time and space, but it is also, perhaps more importantly, the ability to control the body itself, a way to regain agency and have a

different relationship with the concept of history, especially erased and/or lost history. The parallels between Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Janelle Monáe's lyrical account of Cindi Mayweather are first and foremost temporal. Both narratives include a non-linear movement through time and a narrator who is able to slip through the rigidity of time and space. Salamishah Tillet suggests, "Post-civil rights representations of slavery are neither antediluvian nor anticlimactic; instead, they reveal as an African American preoccupation with returning to the site of slavery as a means of overcoming racial conflicts that continue to flourish after the height of the civil rights movement in order to reimagine the possibilities of American democracy in the future" (2). The site of slavery allows for a space separate from time. Both Butler and Monáe use the site of slavery as an origin point to which protagonists must return. These slaveries are both physical and mental. They are revisiting these slaveries so that they may cast light upon them; by replaying the past and blurring the lines between future and past, ancestor and descendent, Butler and Monáe actively fight the erasure that plagues black female reality. The narratives of Janelle and Cindi and Alice and Dana demonstrate the ways in which time bends back on itself as a way to fight the erasures of the past. Both Dana and Cindi/Janelle are caught in between the haunting inescapability of the past and the pressing allure of the future. Both works serve to highlight the Afrofuturist attention to the space wherein present and future become one. Dana and Cindi exist on the liminal space where time folds upon itself, where reality is eclipsed by possibility. However, there are great differences to how they utilize their ability and what they're allowed to accomplish within the frameworks of their respective spheres.

Max Stellings, the gate keeper at the arts asylum where the character of Janelle

Monáe is held against her will, lays out the basics of the situation surrounding Janelle

Monáe and Cindi Mayweather[1]:

"As the director of the Palace of the Dogs Arts Asylum, a state-of-the-art federal facility
for mutants, lost geniuses and savants, I must tell you that Janelle Monáe is rather
unique… Her story has four major components:
1. That she, Janelle Monáe, is actually from the year 2719;
2. That she was snatched, genoraped and de-existed in that year- or in 21st
Century parlance, she was kidnapped by some bodysnatchers after work one
day, then she had her genetic code sold illegally to the highest bidder at a
body farm, and then lastly, she was forced into a time tunnel and sent back to
our era;
3. Back in the year 2719, there is now a famous android named Cindi
Mayweather whose organic compounds were cloned from Ms. Monáe's stolen
DNA;
4. Cindi Mayweather is the mythic ArchAndroid, who has been sent to free the
citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide, a secret society which has been
using time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout the ages."
(ArchAndroid).

This segment of world-building detail sets Monáe's drama as one that is first and

foremost played out over the concept of time itself, brilliantly positioning the early 21st

century as the potential turning point for humanity. What society does right now to deal

with concrete issues such as privilege and inequality will ultimately influence what the

societal outcome will be in 2719. Monáe thus introduces a kind of long term vision that

demands for her listeners to see causality between the present and future.

The story of Monáe and Mayweather visualizes what has gone forever

undocumented: the act of creating a slave. Monáe's DNA is stolen so that Mayweather

can exist as nothing more than a workhorse for the affluent. Time itself becomes

---

[1] Perhaps it isn't even useful to speak of this Monáe as a "character" separate from the performer, because
Monáe the performer maintains that they are one in the same. The theatricality of her live show is a
testament to this; she is brought out every night on a handcart wheeled by orderlies, wrapped in a strait
jacket, assuring the audience that she is only let out of the asylum to perform.

Monáe's version of the Middle Passage, existing as a space where meaningful connection is both lost and recaptured. Subsequently, the decontextualization that occurs within Afrofuturism is inverted. The listener is experiencing the erasure and decontextualization of the past while still inhabiting that past. It is in this moment that the critical dystopia becomes clear; the monolith of Metropolis can be undone because Monáe and Mayweather are able to move through the slipstreams of time and space, and are thus able to occupy spaces outside of dominant structures, represented by Metropolis.

In *Kindred,* Dana has an increasingly problematic relationship with time, and is called backwards through time from 1976 with increasing frequency. But when she stays in the 19th century South for months at a time, its corresponding chunk of time in 1976 is a matter of hours. While she spends the cumulative of years on the Weylin plantation, Dana's whole ordeal takes only two weeks in 1976. She is unhinged in time, which decontextualizes the concept of temporality. David LaCroix suggests: "While 'past,' 'present,' 'future,' and 'history' all capture elements of the novel's play with temporal concerns, as terms they are both apt and insufficient. These terms provide a warrant for reading *Kindred* as a drama of ethics, power, and ontology, but they also make it impossible to follow the implications of that drama to its most radical endpoint" (13). Because time becomes so muddled, reality suffers. Unlike Butler, who examines time travel on a very personal level, Monáe works to position Cindi's oscillation through time as part of a larger narrative of escaping the ironclad bonds of oppression: "We met alone forbidden in the city / Running fast through time like Tubman and John Henry" ("Neon Valley Street"). The use of the elusive power of Tubman and Henry positions time travel as a liberatory act. In order to flee what haunts them, Janelle and Cindi are able to rely

15

on the protection that is offered through their mastery over time. Unlike Dana, who is drawn through time to what harms her, Cindi jumps through time to outrun what dogs her. Stunningly, Dana and Cindi are both pulled to their history, on both a macro and micro level. Cindi reaches backward in time to pass on the warnings of what the future holds, but she also moves with the personal mission of freeing Monáe from her time-locked prison. Dana is called back to consent to her problematic bloodline, but she also bears witness to the minutiae of daily plantation life.

The collapsing of time also suggests the continuation of past atrocities; the past is never quite fully the past, bleeding into the present moment and coloring all which is given context through human experience. The past informs the present and the present informs the future; however, the use of time travel could suggest the use of the future as a means to inform the past, thus rendering possible the restructuring of history. Monáe has alluded to this in interviews, saying, "I love to talk about [the future] because the future has endless possibilities… we can stop all the negative things from happening right now. We can change it" (Hight 1). She thus offers her work as a way to fight back against the actions and mindsets that threaten the future.

But while Monáe remains hopeful, Butler's text is crushed under the weight of its own tragedy. While Monáe's world offers the possibility for improvement, Butler's world proves to be intractable. Butler unfortunately is not in the position to present a critical dystopia, and must rather present a critical reality. Though Dana's story is of course fictional, the world that she visits, the world that her ancestors inhabit, is not. Dana's 19th century Southern experience is already scripted, because those horrors are real and have already happened. Dana cannot change history because that history has

already engulfed and shaped her, years before she was born and thrown back in time to truly know the sins of past ancestors. Dana is thus stuck in a double-bind of history; she is already shaped by events, but is then put in the position to helplessly watch the events unfurl in front of her eyes, or so she believes. The greatest tragedy of the text is that neither Dana nor the reader can ever really be sure that Dana's assumptions are correct. The uncertainty of her situation and her choices is truly haunting. She already knows what the result will be, because she herself is part of the result.

Rather than the distrustful and limited relationship between Dana and Alice, Cindi and Janelle are able to engage in some type of synchronized attack that relies on the dissemination of information, thus preparing those occupying the present of the changes that will have to be made in order to ensure an improved future. Unlike their counterparts in *Kindred*, they see their oscillation through impassable spheres as an opportunity to meaningfully manipulate the past in order to secure a different future. Monáe and Mayweather are able to dominate space and time, rather than be dominated.

The Double

Both Butler and Monáe attempt to answer the question: what do the protagonists (and by extension, the reader/listener) owe to their forbearers? Both pairs of women- Janelle and Cindi, Alice and Dana- fall under the heading of the double; however, this is not a Gothic double, but rather a posthuman double. Like the Gothic double, the likeness between Dana and Alice or Cindi and Janelle is cause for disconcertion. This concept of the double, however, does not act as a stand in for a repressed-self. These doubles function as clone and originator. Janelle and Cindi are doubles in both form and mind, whereas Alice and Dana are doubles in form only. These doubles are ensnared in fraught

17

relationships. The progeny is forced to come to the aid of the originator. Cindi does this successfully, while Dana ultimately fails Alice.

Cindi Mayweather is an android, but she contains the same genetic makeup as Janelle Monáe. It is revealed that the DNA was taken against her will, which is called "genorape." Though there is not sexual assault in Monáe's case, there is certainly an invasive attacking of the female form taking place. Cindi lives in the year 2719, while Monáe exists in the present day (2010 or 2013, depending on the album). They are identical; Cindi is android no. 57821; Janelle is mental patient no. 57821. Monáe claims to have a legitimate, real kinship with Cindi Mayweather, and with androids in general: "The android represents something different for me. It represents the 'other,' a new form of being. She's the chosen one, like myself. She's in my DNA, to uplift the community and not back down from responsibility" (Patrick 4). Though they are separated through time and space, they have a bond that cannot be severed, which threatens the systems of oppression in both 2719 and 2013. As Dana is sent backwards through time for long periods in the past (as previous established, her trips take up little time in her contemporary time), she is able to bear witness to the life of her oldest recorded ancestor. Dana is ageless in the past, and in some ways, watches Alice grow up into her; while Alice is technically much older than Dana, Dana has the appearance of ancestor, which Alice grows into. When Dana appears in order to help Rufus, Alice is always on the fringes; while the disaster is usually averted by Rufus, it is redirected to Alice. Unlike Janelle- who sees Cindi as a part of her- Dana sees Alice not as a part of her, but rather as a child who needs to be watched over. But while Dana acts as guardian angel to Rufus,

she is little more than another agent of patriarchy, ensuring that Alice inhabits her "proper place."

Monáe makes it clear that the relationship between original and clone is dangerously fraught, as indicated by the lyric "And if you see your cloning on a street walking by / Keep running for your life 'cause only one will survive" ("Dance or Die"). This assertion is frightening, mainly because it implies that while original and clone are pitted against each other, neither side is treated with preference. To the ruling class of Metropolis, the lower class and the android class serve the same purpose, and there is little distinction between the two. From this, it is possible to surmise that those who are genoraped for the purpose of cloning are already of no social consequence, and are seen- because of their humanity- as only minimally better than a clone. Janelle Monáe is genoraped, but because she has more to offer than what society expects her to be, her clone becomes equally surprising in the future. Perhaps the relationship between Janelle and Cindi is different because they are not forced to exist in the same space, inadvertently battling over the rights to share a form[2]. The physical time and space between them allows for them to subvert the expectations for what an originator-clone relationship should be.

This concept of bodily closeness and confusion is echoed in *Kindred* when slave master Rufus Weylin begins to see Alice and Dana as two halves of the same being. This

---

[2] What if the songs that are assumed to be from Cindi Mayweather to her lover Anthony Greendown are really from Cindi to Janelle, locked away in the Palace of the Dogs Asylum? Similarly to the reframing of *Kindred* with the possibility of Alice calling to Dana through time, the option of Cindi using her cyber-soul songs as a way to reach Janelle despite the efforts of the Great Divide has an arresting saliency. This is mostly striking on the song "Oh, Maker," in which Cindi Mayweather implores, "Oh, Maker have you ever loved? Or known just what it was?" One must ask how the meaning changes if Cindi is speaking to Janelle rather than Greendown. If it is the case that she *is* speaking to Janelle, then she is putting Janelle in the role of Maker. Not original, not victim, but maker.

is oppositional to the dynamic of Cindi and Janelle. Time and time again the distinction

is made between the two, while the characters in *Kindred* spend their time reflecting on

how uncannily similar Dana and Alice are. Alice and Dana are made to fight over the

form they share. In meeting Alice, Dana comes face to face with the earliest known

manifestation of herself. They are kindred in blood, but also in spirit, which is why

Dana's favoring of Rufus over Alice proves to be the ultimate betrayal, the final straw

that closes off the possibility for ever truly knowing Alice outside of the context of

Rufus. The tradeoff that Dana must then make is that in order to learn the truth of her

history she must be an agent, as well as a victim, of that legacy of terror. She is

oppressed, but she is also oppressor. Dana betrays herself in order to preserve herself,

without ever asking the deeper purpose of the preservation. Alice's identity as a person,

rather than an object, is what is ultimately lost in that betrayal.

Though Cindi and Janelle have a relationship born out of brutality, their

relationship is much more symbiotic than that of Dana and Alice. Dana problematically

reads Alice, demonstrating how fragmented their kinship truly is. Dana, vexed with

Alice's insistence on escaping from the Weylin plantation after having been forced to

reproduce with Rufus, ruminates that, "Elsewhere, under other circumstances, I would

probably have disliked her. But here, we had a common enemy to unite us" (Butler 235-

236), but she never is able to realize the difference in their interactions with the enemy.

Critic Alys Weinbaum applies pressure to the bond between Alice and Dana, stating,

"Because Dana does not question the process by which she reproduces kinship and

genealogy, her present life in 'freedom' becomes contingent on another woman's

enslavement. And thus Dana's pursuit of kinship is killing in that it amounts to soul

murder" (Weinbaum 54). It is unclear, however, exactly whose soul is murdered by the process; no one makes it out of the Weylin plantation unscathed, if at all.

Their narrative examines two women who are inescapably bonded, yet know very little about each other; their stories are so entwined so tightly that one could not be cleanly excised from the other. Monáe thus provides a performed lived experience of a constrained body. She breaks free from her confines on-stage while her audience is there to bear witness to both the confinement and the escape. So while she is harkening back to the neo-slave narratives presented by Butler in the 1970s and 1980s, Monáe is simultaneously taking it back to the origin of African American writings and projecting into the future. What results in Monáe's work is the intersection of free and enslaved, owner and owned. Here, enslaved bodies are given the opportunity to act as mediators who have the possibility to right the balance of power.

Dana chooses to identify with Rufus rather than Alice, though she also constructs her existence through Alice. Weinbaum questions whether it is possible that Dana is repeatedly called backward through time not by Rufus, but instead by Alice (Weinbaum 54). This is a chilling interpretation, and shifts Dana from the position of victim to facilitator of trauma. However, Weinbaum may be attributing too much agency to Dana. While it is true that Dana is the person who inevitably facilitates the continuous rape that becomes her legacy and parentage, she is also a marginalized body acting within the limits of a system that expects her to obey without question. But Dana does have more agency than Alice, and thus exerts power over Alice's disenfranchised body. Dana prioritizes her bloodline over her own safety, as well as Alice's, using her relationship with Alice to create her own existence. Dana thus constructs herself in relation to Alice's

21

body. Dana's sojourn into the past ends not when Alice takes her own life, but rather when Rufus Weylin dies. Rufus makes the fatal mistake of trying to fit Dana into the role previously held by Alice. When prompted to become Alice, Dana can finally realize that she is ultimately not Alice, and can finally break free from her illusions of kinship and reclaim her role in her own time.

Posthuman Work Force

At their core, both narratives are driven by the concept of an underprivileged workforce slaving for an entitled, exploitative oligarchy. In Monáe's world the class divide is carried out by the "robo-zillionaires" of Metropolis, while Butler's perpetrators are Southern plantation owners. This then sets androids as the logical offspring and kindred of slaves. Both accounts thus serve as a way to bear witness to the indignities suffered at the hands of a ruling class. Like Butler, Monáe sees the ruling class as part of a larger plot to erase the presence and experience of the oppressed majority: "We're dancing free but we're stuck here underground / And everybody trying to figure they way out / Hey hey hey, all we ever wanted to say / Was chased erased and then thrown away / And day to day we live in a haze" ("Many Moons"). As if in a Marxian nightmare, the working strength of the underclass entirely supports the caprices of the ruling class. Similar to Fritz Lang's silent film *Metropolis*, from whence Monáe's concept stems, the conditions the working (or in the case of *Kindred*, slave) class is forced to suffer are little more than economic slavery. A marked, marginalized underclass being oppressed by a moneyed few is perhaps one of the most universal stories of all time, and has a saliency in the current moment that is almost frightening. But we must ask ourselves whether or not this concept of dystopia changes when it is androids who are the victims of human

22

oppression. If the dehumanized subject is not actually human, is the situation as damning?

The world presented in Janelle Monáe's body of work is certainly a dystopia. Metropolis is an amalgam, a city that is forged by the merging of the failed great cities after five world wars. In short, Metropolis is the last chance for civilized society to prevail, the last barrier standing between high society and a hierarchy-less void. Without Metropolis, rigid social hierarchies- which are what keep privileged and marginalized communities separate- would disintegrate. This is the main reason why the controlling organizations within Metropolis are invested in working the underclass to the point of physical and –more importantly- mental exhaustion. Metropolis thus takes on the role of an oppressive monolith structured to maintain a type of inequality that favors the upper class. Monáe explicitly describes the nature of Metropolis in a song of the same name from her no-longer-in-production first album, *The Audition*: "Population 10 zillion and six / Where signs say, 'Welcome to the Star Core Metropolis.' / Me, I live on the wired side of town, / Reaching and search for space called paradise found." When coupled with the description of the city having "a sky without any blue. / Breakfast on incandescent, built to chew" one gets the impression of a behemoth of a space that offers no substantial nourishment for body or spirit. Interestingly, this, as the first recorded mention of Monáe's Metropolis, paints the scene with much smaller brushstrokes than her later, more popular albums do. This song specifically details the spatial divisions of Metropolis, with androids on one side of town (the 'bad side,' no doubt) and the moneyed humans on the other. It also puts forth Cindi's discontent with the entire concept of Metropolis and her desire to elope into the slipstreams of time, imploring her lover, "I

wanna take you, take you with me to another land;" ultimately though, he does not

follow, it is made all too clear through her next to albums that as someone who greatly

benefits from the inequity of Metropolis, Anthony Greendown ultimately cannot be who

Cindi needs him to be. Cindi cannot exist within Metropolis, and as a result, must utilize

her singularity to destroy Metropolis from both without and within.

Monáe's "text" allows for a repositioning of thought regarding the brutal

conditions within *Kindred* . Monáe's adage is really a story about the disappearances of

the middle class, the stigma attached to mixed race and queer relationships, and the ways

in which a government oppresses and regulates disempowered bodies. The androids, to

some degree, make it a science-fiction world, but the issues being brought up are far from

foreign to even a casual listener. There is an irrefutable reality to her world. However, as

bleak as Monáe's Metropolis may seem to be, there is hope. Her world is an exemplar

critical dystopia because it provides a clear concept of what can be done to combat

despair. The underclass in Lang's *Metropolis* finds its hope through spirituality and

brotherhood, while Monáe's underclass has the potential to save itself through

community engagement. Through community action and outreach, Cindi Mayweather

has the possibility to end the suffering of her people, which is realized more fully as she

transforms into the ArchAndroid. Dana cannot be like Cindi in this scenario because she

does not believe she should cause ripples through time, ripples that would in the best

possible scenario serve to undermine the system that Dana is both benefitting from and

repulsed by. It is no coincidence that Dana's tolerance of the Weylin Plantation wears

thin after she is forced to work in the fields as punishment. Being in the fields ultimately

reminds Dana that she is not in control of her own life and body, but is rather at the

mercy of the whims of the white men who hold power over her (aka *any* white man).
When face-to-face with the system that she has unwittingly become part of, Dana hastens
towards the conclusion of her life on the plantation, further destabilizing her relationship
with the increasingly unstable Rufus. This however does not serve to throw a wrench into
the system of slavery, instead illuminating how much the system itself is controlled not
by the caprice of lone figures with authority, but rather by an intractable system that is
almost universally upheld (when Rufus dies, his slaves are not freed but are rather resold
and damned to unknown fates).

Both texts are, at their core, novels about the imbalance of power that occurs
when normalized bodies and aberrant slave bodies engage in acts of desire, and how that
act of desire can also undermine systems of oppression. Beyond desire, the oppressive
systems are further subverted by the rebellious forging of bonds between dominated
bodies. Ultimately, this is why Cindi's efforts succeed and Dana's fail. Cindi is able to
implicate herself within the larger societal framework for the underground, allowing her
to challenge the power of Metropolis, connect with her genetic forbearer, and warn
against the consuming threat of the Great Divide. Dana may succeed on a personal level
by ensuring the continuation of her bloodline, but it is an act so selfish that it has few
larger-scale ramifications, and leaves systems that thrive off of the oppression of bodies
marked as "Other" unchallenged. Dana causes very few ripples in the river of time, and
while she is personally changed, she remains simply an upholder of the status quo.

Chapter 3

Black Kirby and Black Cyborgs

Cyborgs: Confounding Borders, Concretizing Fears

Short for "cybernetic organism," the cyborg is a blending of organic material and technologic hardware. The cyborg body can thus be the field on which the complexities of constructed identity are played out. The mix of organic and man-made, nature and nurture, serves to question the concept of what is human and what is decidedly Other. Leilani Nishime notes, "Contemporary science fiction exploits the figure of the cyborg in order to interrogate and break down the distinctions between the human and the artificial, between machine and nature" (35). The cyborg's existence serves to confound boundaries that are seemingly rigid, boundaries that divide humans from everything else.

Androids exist under the broader heading of "cyborg." But while cyborgs are typified by their human appearances, androids are more often obviously machine. However, Nishime suggests that androids serve to raise important questions regarding authenticity and experience: "More than any other kind of cyborg, androids force the question of what defines someone as human. Does the definition go beyond biology? Does it reside in the spirit or the soul? Can those ineffable but defining qualities exist in machines?" (Nishime 39).

Although the android exists as a means to question what the essential traits are inherently human, it is the image of the cyborg that creates unease, because the cyborg is a mix of seemingly-oppositional origins. It is both human and other, and draws focus to the constant blurring of the boundaries between the two. Part of this stems from the inability to place our technophilia as part of a broader context that includes the merging

26

of man and machine; we are comfortable with a phone in hand for the entirety of the day, but we are repulsed by the thought of the phone replacing the hand. Cyborgs thus represent a breakdown of hegemonic barriers. The repulsion aimed at them signifies the fear that society directs at something that is Other. But more than other, the cyborg is frightfully Inter. It is familiar but entirely unknown, the skin of a human over the workings of a machine.

When we speak about the cyborg, we are really speaking about how the body functions within society in the present moment. If humanity has shifted its values to include technology as a leading tenet, those without access to these technologies become hierarchically less. The metal in the cyborg body thus reflects the rigidity of the present social structure that limits access to technological power. The black cyborg is decidedly posthuman, but it is also simply human. The black body as technology is nothing new (as alluded to in chapters 1 and 2); the cyborg is simply the physical manifestation of the mutual anxiety regarding race and technology. The black cyborg may also be understood as a physical representation of a brutal history that alludes to slavery, the Tuskegee experiment, and Henrietta Lacks. In most cases, the cyborg does not have the ability to make or remake itself. It is, through little choice of its own, cyborg. It is weaponized or subjugated. It is always controlled.

Cyborgs are important to the larger narrative of race because they demonstrate the fraught relationship between the private body and the public body. While there is simultaneous coalescence and clashing in the cyborg body on the private level, there is simply repulsion toward the cyborg body on the public level. As technology becomes more advanced, the gap between those with access and those without becomes more

pronounced. The body of the cyborg thus becomes a site of power struggle. Regarding the significance of the cyborg, artist John Jennings adds, "If you are black cyborg, your perspective is quite different [compared to a white cyborg]. I think the fleshy part of the cyborg is more important than the metal part. It makes the body legible in a very different way than a white cyborg. It's a soft machine meshed in with a hard one" (John). The black flesh of the cyborg is incongruous with its metal interface. While cyborg technology is constantly in use, the society writ large has a sort of blindness to it. Technology has become a societal necessity, but there is a great disconnect between the need for technology and the technology itself. The output has become divorced from the mechanism.

Cyborgs beautifully illustrate the growing divide between technology and power; as the flesh and the machinery dovetail, the access to that machinery becomes more elite. So what then happens when the body is machine and technology, but many do not have access to that technology? How does that affect access to one's self? Cyborgs serve to demonstrate the doubled identity of a racialized, sexualized body, highlighting the schism between who one is and how one is perceived by the world outside of the body.

But while some signifiers are universal to all cyborgs, the black cyborg has a markedly different experience. As fraught as the cyborg is, the racialized cyborg is even more so. As Stacey Robinson brilliantly asks, "Once you add hue to the body a cybernetic and what does that mean in reference to the endurance of pain, trauma?" (Stacey). Donna Haraway's cyborg is typified by its hybridity, but the black cyborg doesn't have the luxury of containing hybridity under the public gaze. The black cyborg contains within it a discontinuity in which the flesh may be considered the authentic self

and the machinery may be seen as the stereotypes projected onto a body, concretizing Haraway's claim that "the cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (149). The black cyborg is multitudinous, but it is not hybrid in the way Haraway means.

Haraway claims that "the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense" (149). But in the case of the black cyborg, the origin can decisively be traced to the switch from African humans to American slaves. In the moment when Africans were captured and brought to the Americas as slaves, they became technology. Slavery is in many ways the origin point of the black cyborg, much in the same way that it is the beginning of the posthuman.

The prevalence of posthuman bodies in Afrofuturist works points toward an attempt to reconfigure the ways in which racialized and gendered bodies function within the larger body politic. This is particularly noteworthy with cyborgs and androids, who act as uncanny simulacra to the human body; they appear human, but they are composed of inorganic materials rather than true flesh and bone: "As the body becomes technophilic, whether through the modification of functional organic structures or through genetic engineering, the quality of subjective experience mediated by this body is bound to undergo significant change" (Haney 157).

Afrofuturist art thus inhabits the gap between the prosperity of future technology and the despair of the current human condition. The breakdown of the cyborg body- the deficiency of flesh and the dependence upon machine- can be interpreted as a metaphor for the breakdown of coherent public relations with regard to race. Cyborgs are Afrofuturist because they seek to understand the problematic relationship between

blackness and technology, future and past. As the future image of blackness is portrayed

as increasingly posthuman, it reflects the ways in which the body is shaped by

technologies. These technologies may be helpful, but they also have the potential to scar.

Flesh and Circuitry: The Work of Black Kirby

Black Kirby is an arts collective that consists of visual artists and educators John

Jennings and Stacey Robinson. The collection itself is a reimagining of the artwork of

legendary comic book artist Jack Kirby; that is to say, Black Kirby seeks to imagine what

it would look like if such powerful characters as Thor the Thunderer and the Incredible

Hulk where black characters. It also creates original Afrofuturist art pieces that position

black characters as central within the cosmos. Black Kirby places itself firmly within the

Afrofuturist tradition, as well as in the pop culture, superhero zeitgeist, but it does so

genuinely. It attempts to find a way to project one's self onto the pages of one's

nostalgia; that is to say, Black Kirby understands the deep-rooted signifiers that

accompany pop culture. And by hacking these signifiers, Jennings and Robinson are able

to reprogram the images to reflect a broader readership. It uses media that already exists

in order to examine ideas of black strength and spirituality. But perhaps the work of

Black Kirby allows for a revision of the posthuman future. Their cyborgs hold a

possibility that the generalized black cyborg does not.

But while Black Kirby is- rightfully- gaining attention for its remix on the

presentation of the superhero genre, I think that it is their exploration of the cyborg that

needs to be further examined, as it raise the question: how does this image of the cyborg

change when the cyborg is given subjectivity over itself? In the works of John Jennings

and Stacey Robinson, cyborg images do not attempt to trick the viewer into seeing a

human; rather, the circuitry and humanity simultaneously battle and coincide. There is no attempt to hide the technological authenticity of the created body. Black Kirby provides a challenging look at the image of the cyborg, with special regard given to how the two parts of the cyborg- the metal and the flesh- interact with each other, beautifully illustrating the internal schism between conception and construction.

Black Kirby's mediations on the cyborg can be traced a few years back to Jennings' solo work from his *Matterz of the Fact* collection, where Jennings claims, "Welcome to the FACTory- where the black body is the top-selling, hardest working, most abused, horrifyingly cool, never ending cash crop in the world- a world that would not exist without these man/machines and their infinite products of sweat, sex, culture, and fascination" (Matterz 3). This cyborg represents the cruel potential of the posthuman worker; imagine a worker whose mechanisms do not require sleep or sustenance. They would be literally unstoppable. However, the persistent potential of the black cyborg is also why it is feared. If it is corrupted, if it is able to circumvent the circuitry, it would still be unstoppable. The cyborg thus has the risk to contaminate; or, perhaps, it is able to resist the contamination from which it results.

Case Studies: Looking at Three Black Kirby Cyborgs

"Electric Wetnurse V.1," (figure 1) a solo piece by Jennings, uses posthuman presentation to highlight a particularly gruesome part of America's past. In the piece, a woman is crouched, legs spread wide. Only her face, upper torso, and arms are flesh; she is truncated below the waist, collared and bolted to the ground by the machinery that comprises her lower half. Machinery is connected to her nipple, milking her. She is effectively pinned by her own body, yet she grins slyly at the viewer. Is this what black

31

female sexuality will look like in a dystopian future? Or is it alluding to the use of black

females as little more than livestock, kept in constant states of birthing and nursing? The

viewer is put in the position of voyeur, uncomfortably aware of Robinson's assertion that,

"the Black body has always been a technology, a breeding machine" (Stacey).

"First Kontakt" (figure 2) portrays a female humanoid android. Her human form

is made entirely by machine She contains no flesh, and is incomplete; she has no body,

she has no brain, but she has a face and breasts. Inky smoke fills out what could be the

rest of her shape. Her form gives the illusion of being human at only the most cursory

glance. Upon further inspection, the gears and plates of her body become obvious. One

must question is she is savior or avenging angel. But it is the title of this piece that fills

in much of its possibility. One may infer that the subject of the print is the first of her

kind. There is still so much of her that has to be filled in; the vital question is who will be

completing the production: the subject or an outside force? She then fills the role of

Gloria Anzaldua's mestiza, "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country"

acting as interloper between the human and the android (29).

"Makes Me Wanna Holler" (figure 3) is perhaps simultaneously one of the most

amusing and the most tragic of the Black Kirby cyborgs. A head, hemmed in by metal,

has two faces emerging from its hair. One is screaming, while the other head asks, "Hey!

You hear that tortured scream of pure rage and desperation?" to which the head

replies,"Hm? Nah. Was watchin' the game" (Black 40). Though sharing a body, the

faces appear to have no common ground. One can surmise that the three faces represent

three possible relationships with blackness: one face is questioning, one is screaming, and

one is oblivious. They share the body, but the minds lack connection. It is the actual

head that is oblivious, while the other voices emerge simply from faces. These faces

have no real embodiment and, along with the head, offer the only organic material on the

body. Though little more of the body can be seen, it is metal; a helmet and collar serve to

contain the body's flesh, which brilliantly demonstrates the ways in which technology

impresses upon the psyche of power. The limiting factor of technology has physical

ramifications against both the cyborg and the human body. One may infer that the two

faces emerging from the hair- black rage and black thought- are attempting to break free

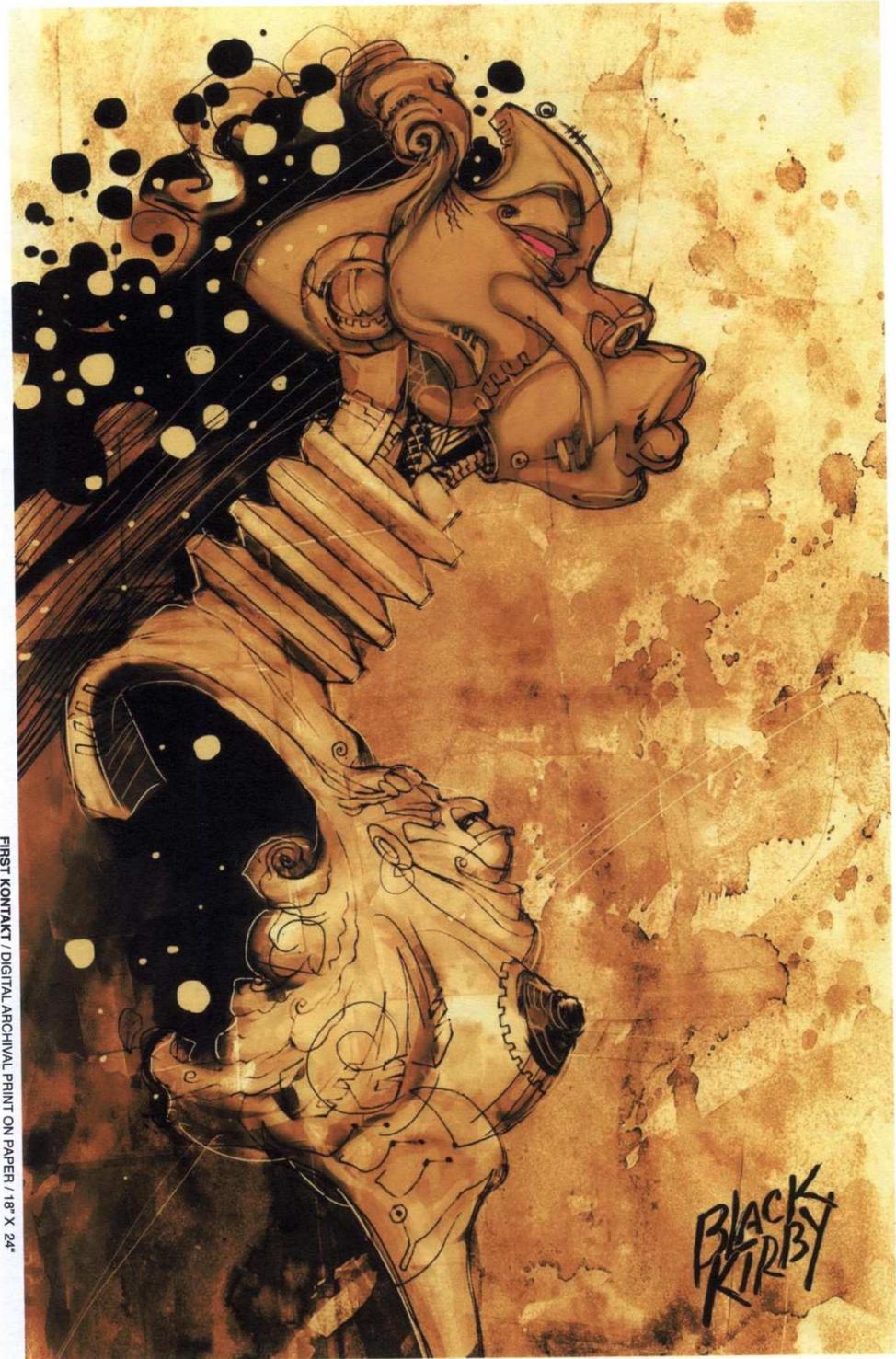from the limits of technological hierarchy, unsuccessfully.

Figure 1: Electric Wetnurse V. 1
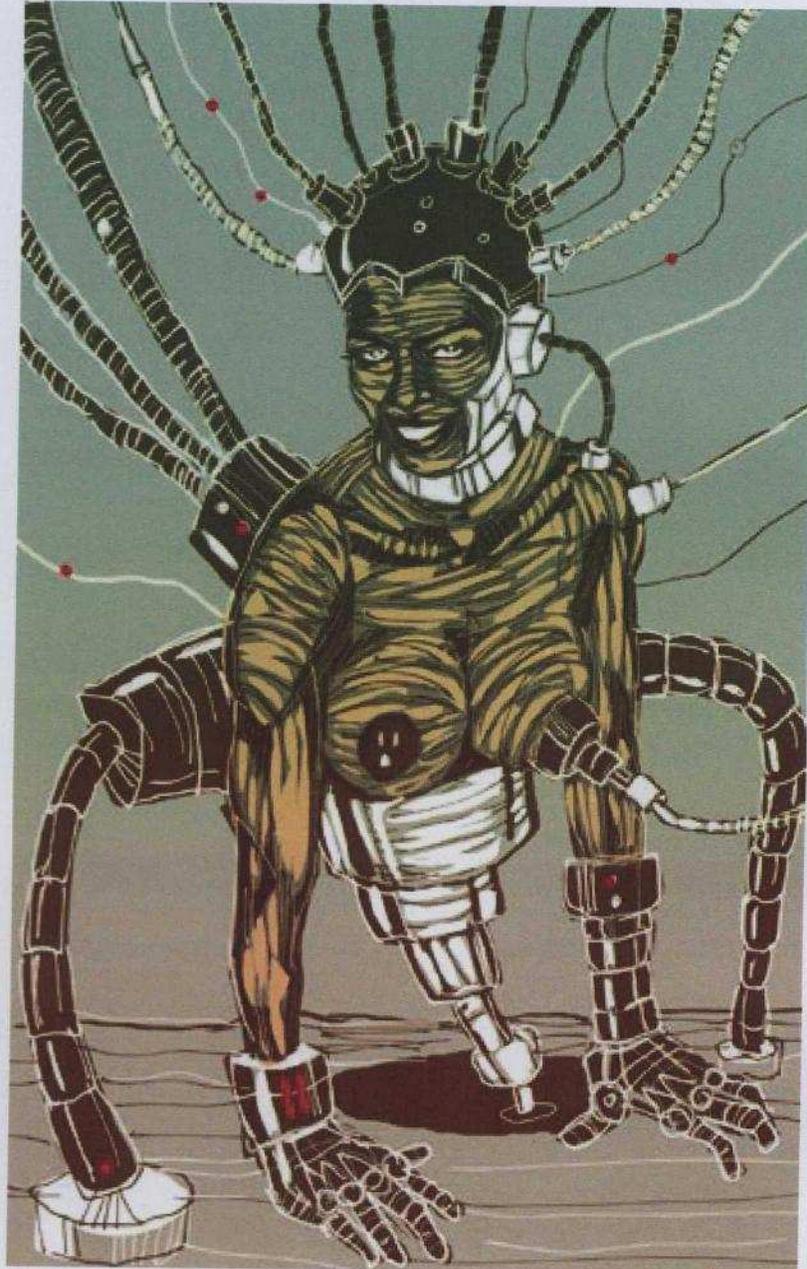
ELECTRIC WETNURSE V.1

Figure 2: First Kontakt

FIRST KONTAKT / DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT ON PAPER / 18" X 24"

43 JENNINGS / ROBINSON

35

Figure 3: Makes Me Wanna Holler

Appendix A: Transcript of Interview with John Jennings

Why do you think Afrofuturism is having such a huge moment currently?

That is an interesting question. I think that- me and my friends talk about this quite a bit, actually… I think that we have this idea of a monolithic notion of blackness, and I think it's being challenged... So when you think about possibilities, I think Afrofuturism and all these other spaces become like, a really good way to talk about those issues, politically and about identity… I think it's becoming a necessity, to a certain extent.

What's the current relationship between blackness and technology? What would an ideal relationship be?

I like to look at [blackness] as a medium too, especially something you can work with and make; different types of assumptions about race… this isn't something we made up. We inherited it, we didn't make it… I think blackness is a result of technology. It's a product.

Have the goals of Black Kirby changed as time has progressed?

That's a great question, actually, because at first it was a conversation. It was "what if Jack Kirby was a black guy?" and that's where we started… and then what happens is once people start look at the work they're like, "Hey, I want a t-shirt! Are those stories? Are those comic books?" And we're like, "Nnn-yeah, there can be." But maybe they should be stories, right? There should be brand new Black Kirby stories… creating as a studio, or as an entity. So as it progresses people can interact with it. And there's a certain amount of call and response too… so it's become this playing with the audience that we've been listening to.

How do you and Stacey decide which types of media are appropriate for a certain piece (for example, why photos in some, etc)?

Stacey worked photographically first… it's interesting because we trust each other's work, we trust each other's sensibilities, and I think what started happening was he started seeing that stuff photographically. He really wanted to mark those icons in that way, and then project the Jack Kirby aesthetic into it. Cuz with the Raheem piece he uses Black Bolt, who doesn't speak as well, just like Raheem doesn't speak. They speak through the intonation. Black Bolt's voice is so powerful that he can't even whisper; he'll knock down a mountain… I think that it was kind of like a response to what the notion was of what the media was. Like, the original piece was a photo, so he worked photographically. And for me, I started working directly with the Kirby vernacular a little bit more at first, and I think Stacey started doing a little bit more later… When people ask "who is Black Kirby?" it's like "it's both of us, but neither of us at the same time."

How is Black Kirby affecting the ways the audience views the history? What kind of feedback do you get from people who see the collection?

Hm. That's interesting because- here's the thing- people, I think, are relating to the work of Jack Kirby differently…they start to learn more about his effect on popular culture. But also, it's made people a lot more objective and analytical about the fact that he did create some of the conventions of superheroes; and also, that's problematic too, because that convention has been a hypermasculine, white, male, straight body too. So I think that people have been questioning those conventions as well, and then also maybe looking backwards through these historical lenses a little bit more playfully too. That this

38

is actually an interesting and fun history too. And it's definitely heavy, but there's a lot

of play. It allows people to put their notions of their childhood into the work too, because

I think it's really intergenerational. Like if you look at the "Make to Want to T'challa"

piece, with all the picks; people love that piece because it has all these weird sayings,

because we come from a particular standpoint…

on we're not just conscious, we double conscious: When we came up with that, we were

like "okay, we just- it stepped up the idea"- I've got goosebumps a little bit just thinking

about it!- because it's definitely edifying that notion of looking forward and looking

backwards simultaneously, but also saying that these particular heroes can be analyzed

and made fun of too.

Is there a risk of forgetting Jack Kirby? (especially with Marvel being culturally

synonymous with Stan Lee)

I feel bad for Stan. I mean yeah, he gets a pension of one million dollars a year and that's

awesome, I wish I had that. But at the same time, he has become a kind of parody of

himself too. A lot of people think of him as the Walt Disney of comics. He's very

recognizable. But he also kinda- he's almost become a shell of the shell to a certain

degree… And then you have this haunting weight upon him too, that I don't know if he

wants to deal with; this old, beautifully squarish Jewish dude with a cigar in a corner, just

drawing all the time. I wonder if he can hear him in the corner drawing all the time.

Twenty-five thousand pages in this lifetime?! From corner to corner. And the brilliance

that that man had- they must've hated each other and loved each other. So, it's got to be

a haunting space to know that a lot of the stuff would not have happened [without Kirby].

They needed each other in this really interesting way. And I think that Stacey and I end

being Black Kirby to a certain degree, but we're also Black Lee at the same time. We're

kind of talking about this- comics, as a medium, they opened us up to elaboration so

readily. Another thing that Lee and Kirby understood is that comics are inherently

surreal… a tall green butterfly woman could come up to us, if we were in a comic book,

and she could join our conversation, and we'd just be like "oh, hey, how're you doing."

What do you think the role is of cyborgs/androids in race and/or gender relations?

You know, that's a *very* interesting question… I have a collection called *Matterz of the*

Fact and it's over 60 pierces. It uses the black cyborg as a metaphor; like, the flesh part

being the real black identity, and the technological part being the construct. And how we

have to circumvent that construct. So it is like, either DeBoisian to a certain degree, or

even Fanonian, where it's like a third consciousness, where I'm outside of this and I can

actually see these other spots too, interacting with each other. So it becomes even- that's

why I call it *Matterz of the Fact*, because it's looking at the fact of blackness. And so I

think that the cyborg starts to talk about the stereotype is meant to be reified and to be

reconstituted constantly; that's the nature of the stereotype.

What's the value of creating one's own artistic space?

It's definitely countercultural; like, this is a countercultural movement, I think, but in

different ways. And it opens up a lot more possibilities, because a lot of times the

mainstream has to cater to what they think people want to read, which is unfortunate.

One of the worst things too is that Marvel was counterculture at first. It was the cool

comic books. They were pushback against your mom and dad's DC comics; and you

love those too [DC], but you wanna love these other ones too [Marvel]. I like some of

them; I like some of the horror stuff, I like Green Lantern, but I also love Quicksilver who was kind of a butthole, and I loved Spiderman.

Do you think we'll ever get a Black Panther movie?

I don't know. Hopefully. I don't know. I don't think- will they be ready for that? And if we do- here's the thing. Ok, so you look at like, even one of the men who created Black Panther couldn't even do a good Black Panther. He took it back from Don McGregor, as a writer, and totally turned Panther into this weird cosmic odyssey thing where he's serving this dude with a monocle… McGregor had him doing tons of radical stuff, actually. So I don't know. I don't want to say no, I don't want us to give up on it-

But would you even want one?

I would rather see a Black Jack film, honestly, or a Brotherman film, or a Eating Vampires film; something that we've put out. I don't know. So if it's done well, yeah I'll check it out, but *shrugs*. Once Wesley Snipes took something like Blade, which was like a c-level character and turned it into a phenomenon, they totally snatched it from him… Because Blade is the movie that started the superhero craze… So I don't know. I have issues with black superheroes in film. I do. That's a whole other thing.

Addendum: John's answers via email

Why do you think Afrofuturism is having such a huge moment currently?

I think that we are living in a moment that has allowed an unprecedented amount of images to be created. When you look into the media landscape and you don't really see yourself there or you don't like the way you are being shown then you take action. A great deal of our shared history has seen black bodies being simply the shadow or

opposite of whiteness. Now, people of color around the world are able to position themselves as subject in virtually every mode of cultural creation. People are seeing themselves in the future and that's a beautifully radical notion.

What's the current relationship between blackness and technology? What would an ideal relationship be?

I think that blackness was created by the technology of race. I think that it's relationship is what is always been; a product of the systems that created racism and other controlling technologies. I am not talking about black people mind you. I am talking about "blackness" as a construct and as a category that was made to be a negative aspect. However, NOW the people who have been forced to be in that aspect have hacked their way out of it and are now composing a multivalent blackness that is a formless medium; a boundary object that changes with context. What happens when your shadow moves on its own? That's kind of terrifying isn't it?

I think the ideal relationship would be for it not matter as much as it does. However, those old programs dig in deep and are hard to be re-written. We still have a great deal of hacking to do.

What do you think the role is of cyborgs/androids in race and/or gender relations?

I think that the cyborg is a great metaphor for the racialized body. I think that Donna Haraway did a great job of using it as a tool in her manifesto. However, she doesn't account for race in her assumptions that a cyborg is a positive thing. If you are black cyborg, your perspective is quite different. I think the fleshy part of the cyborg is more important than the metal part. It makes the body legible in a very different way than a white cyborg. It's a soft machine meshed in with a hard one.

42

What piece(s) do you feel best represent(s) Black Kirby?

I think that The Unkillable Buck, The Mighty Shango, Magneto x, Odin Bambaataa

and The Motherboxx Connection are some of the more representative pieces.

Appendix B: Interview with Stacey Robinson

Why do you think Afrofuturism is having such a huge moment currently?

I'd speculate that it's due to a lack of diverse intelligent media showcasing Black people and talent. As a result many people are looking for new forms of representation that show the Black future, beyond stereotypes and White fear of the fast growing and inevitable heavily melaninated populous. I also think that Black creators are tired of waiting for mainstream to represent us in ways that we are satisfied with. Many of us don't have a "why won't they…" approach anymore, we as many other underrepresented creators have an "I will create my own image" type of mentality and work ethic.

What's the current relationship between blackness and technology? What would an ideal relationship be?

Black people have always been at the cutting edge of technology. Whether it's the traffic light or the Blues. We're the first people on the planet, we gave the world religion, sciences, the arts and many of its most used technologies, past and present. It's crucial that we use whatever technology available to us, by direct utilization or innovation to create new ways of interaction. It's imperative that we be versed in technology's affects and detriments. It's also crucial that we don't cower away from new technology as it may have a steep learning curve. Tech is always the future whether it the Guttenberg Press, the IPad or time travel. Much of which is free at the local library.

I could go much deeper into Blackness as a technology, melanin as protection from the imposing sun due to abused Ozone layer, or Black commoditized, fetishized bodies as style via surgery i.e. silicone lips, plastic butts and padded underwear, all corporate orchestrated. Or Black imagery broadcasted through the airways and radio waves as a

44

self-suppressing, self-castrating technology in the form of mainstream Black music. The lack of arts in inner city schools which leaves young minds unimaginative and susceptible to media depictions of Black adults with few career and higher educational options with a multitude of criminal opportunities. And there are many other examples of Blacks and technology.

Blackness as technology can't be overlooked in the global relationship as well. From pre-emancipation in America to today the global financial market has benefited heavily from the exploited labor of Black people. Because of the slave industry America was able to export internationally for example. Southern and northern finances depended on slavery. The emancipation of slaves was a military strategy to dismantle the southern economy during the civil war, resulting in the confederate army's failure to win the war. Other nations at the time also relied on Black slave labor to advance their economic power globally. The American prison system is privatized. What does that mean for stockholders in the prison? An invested interest in the filling or refilling of empty cells, which means more low to no pay for inmates and the alleviation of education within its walls allows for a culture of resurgence with threes trike laws that guarantee that private investors will have profitable futures.

The Black body has always been a technology, a breeding machine. As America becomes browner White America's concerns swell as media promotes fear of Mexican border security, Islamic terrorism and Black criminal activity. Yet most of this propaganda is targeted toward the ethnic men. The progenitors of Black and brown families. The fear, the strategies and minute tactics of media "subtlety" promote the idea that White women

are unsafe in America, that White men will suffer financially if immigration laws are equal.

Simultaneously popular culture promotes a consistent image of interracial relations between White men and women of color. Dr. Francis Cress Welsing for the last 40+ years has been unpacking these notions and it's more evident now than any other time in American history. Control of the non-White population by mating with the women of color as a means of producing White heirs with what is considered genetically dominate people. Those of high melanin content. While justifying reasons of the incarceration of non-White men.

The most popular shows and movies many times consist of Women of color who can't exist in successful relationships with men of color but can overcome every life obstacle and climb the ladders of success by coupling with White men. Not to say that the reverse is not illustrated, but it is very controlled. And only exist as a further means of population control. So the Black relationship to technology is one that must be researched and taken control of by those most exploited by it, us.

What do you think the role is of cyborgs/androids in race and/or gender relations?

Cyborgs and androids are ways of existing for extended or infinite periods of time outside of natural means. There's a commentary there as to why we can't exist within natural means for longer periods of time also.

Cyborgs and androids are also alternate identities. They are forms that are used to express what the creators of them can't. They are unapologetic in speech and action. Importantly they usually if not always are able to endure more pain than the natural human.

This is why these cyber forms are alternate identities. Janelle Monáe for example uses the Mayweather android personae to express what she has difficulty doing in human form. Once you add hue to the body a cybernetic and what does that mean in reference to the endurance of pain, trauma? The Black body has always been a tool of experimentation, whether sports or Tuskegee. Black people are thought of as being hyper advanced physiologically. The cyborg/android is a parallel example of that many times as a counter commentary about the exploited Black body.

Have the goals of Black Kirby changed as time has progressed?

Yes, we've gotten smarter in the last 2 years. So we've planned more. Initially we weren't planning to create comics based on the Black Kirby characters. As we began lecturing in various spaces the questions became consistent. "When are you making the Unkillable Buck comic?" Or "Sooooo is there gonna be an Odin Bambaataa book?" As a result the characters we entertained thoughts of as comic art "peaces" became seriously planned comic series.

How do you and John decide which types of media are appropriate for a certain piece (for example, why photos in some, etc.)?

We work to what feels right. Speaking for myself I'm led by the art. I let the ideas work through me. Sometimes, it's pencil, sometimes ink, sometimes photo collage. It almost always includes a digital component. In my limited answering for John I know that he is moved by the aesthetic of the line, use of color and again the digital component, beyond that I'd be uncomfortable speaking for him.

How is Black Kirby affecting the ways the audience views the history? What kind of feedback do you get from people who see the collection?

We make it a point to counter the mainstream culture with our untold history, in comic form. Responses have been great, beyond what either of us were expecting. It's led to several exhibitions, many of which have been simultaneously viewed in various cities, due to the digital nature of the work.

Feedback has been amazingly positive, more than I ever expected. Folks get what we're doing and why. This exhibition has changed my life. Before finishing grad school this collaboration awarded me access to gallery spaces and lecture halls that would've taken many more years to attain. It's also currently part of my thesis writing and thesis exhibition. How can it not? No matter what else I create, folks are intrigued more by the Black Kirby collaboration.

But beyond the initial exhibition the books are what people are excited about. And our collaborations with other artists and our upcoming projects. Our first books to see production are of a transgender known as Jenni Deth, time-travelers Kid Code with his partner Roxy Clockwise, the Unkillable Buck, and Pick. I'm really excited about Night Boy, a dyslexic teen who protects the city of Buffalo from monsters who reside in the margins of the comic book. We are working with some Univ. of Buffalo alum and current students. As well as my son and daughter who are my inspiration for the look of two of the main characters Jamal (Night Boy) and Tia his sister.

What piece(s) do you feel best represent(s) Black Kirby?

First Contact, MotherBoxx, Mo Blacktus, Magneto X, Major Sankofa, Our Abstractions of Kirby tech which are design for technologies that solve societal ills. I Am A Man are a few works that come to mind.

How do you draw off of the work of someone but still allow your artistic style to come through?

With trust, patience and understanding. John and I are both artists. Meaning we don't just draw, or ink, or paint or perform. We see influence from everywhere and incorporate it into our own style. That comes with maturity of our individual processes though. Everyone copies. That's how you learn. But in time individuality grows and the influences are evident within ones artistic style.

For Kid Code for example John is finishing my work. Meaning I'm drawing, he's inking and coloring. That's this projects particular process. Once I draw it, I let it go and trust John to do this thing with the work. His aesthetic is very different than mine. But I trust his professionalism and passion for quality, which is key in our collaboration. We both plot it, develop the characters etc. and Damian Duffy will be lettering and maybe scripting, While Damon Baker will be developing the Augmented Reality piece of the exhibition. We all have our individual styles and trust each other's creative process. It's an experiment that is working well and allows for us to work very fast without sacrificing our personal aesthetic or production quality.

Is there a risk of forgetting Jack Kirby? (especially with Marvel being culturally synonymous with Stan Lee)

I hope not. We as American creators make comics while being influenced by Jack Kirby, even if we are countering them, we are influenced by his approach to idealized heroes.

But in reference to forgetting Jack Kirby, that's the reason we created Black Kirby, kind of. When the Avengers movie was about to hit the screen, there was controversial talk of residual income for Jack Kirby's decedents. Kirby created the Avengers and was paid years ago for his work, but we questioned and debated heavily on a moral vs. ethical obligation and sharing of wealth. In our effort, we celebrate and criticize Jack Kirby. We love his work while analyzing the heavy White male dominated "Super Men" that he, Joe Simon and Stan Lee fictionally created in America ironically after Hitler's failed attempt to literally create.

With regard to comic book films- even when these films have a black character, it's usually a black male. Why is it that there doesn't seem to be a space for strong females of color in mainstream comics & their subsequent film representation?
Simple, most creators in the mainstream are men. Dealing with our own issues as men first. Comics are extensions of us; ways to challenge, correct, self-examine and fantasize ourselves. It's (Me)search. Black Kirby is not mainstream, but we also create FIRST from our perspective. I think most conscience-centered creators women and men work logically from this perspective first, then examine outside. Black Kirby was questioned recently about our heavy male commentary in our catalogue. The question hit me in the heart. Not that we didn't have Black female representation, we did. I.e. Jenni Deth, and Roxy Clockwise. Jenni Deth was actually our first book in production. But the audience member didn't know of these works and her passion inspired me. So upon coming home that feeling of fair representation drove me immediately to start work on a solo adventure for Kid Code's partner Roxy Clockwise.

However I don't subscribe to the idea that there is no room for Black feminine creativity mainstream or out. Heck no, I have a son and daughter who both need to see various representations fairly. I think Black Kirby does a good job of making them. But we are Black men making them, from our perspective on the research that we do, relationships that we have, etc.

I don't see that our work will represent all people fairly and equally. We do what we can to contribute to diverse uplifting commentary, but I don't see how we can represent all people. People are too complex, too vast in number, with new ways of identifying. That's why counter movements are important. There is plenty of room for new ways of thought. There are also plenty of women of color making comics and countering male dominated expressions, some even in the mainstream. Afua Richardson and her collaborative team project 'Genius' for example. Spike Trotman, Leisl Adams, Micheline Hess, Ashley woods, Arie Monroe, Jennifer Crute, Regine Sawyer, and so many others.

As far as television some, not all Black creative women are still creating IMO bad stereotype and sexual White male fantasies. Seemingly riding whatever is popular in promoting Black fears instead of venturing new territory, countering exploitative culture and creating avenues of Black healing from colonial wounds. I believe that this is as dangerous as Black male created works that play into bad stereotype or sexism for example or one-dimensional hyper-masculinity. My opinion but many other Black women and even men do not agree with me on this, and that's ok, but at least examine the images, writing, etc. and contribute to the commentary, counter the arguments, vice-versa and etc. But do something to artistically contribute to a cultural change.

However there are so many under-the-radar Black/women of color film creators also. I'm not as versed but a few come to mind with some recent research I'm been conducting Julie Dash, Cheryl Dunye, Kasi Lemmons, and Nnedi Okorafor as only a few. Furthermore, at the end of the day I believe that too many people want to be in the mainstream instead of countering the culture. Since creating comics is my occupation I can speak on it more confidently. We are in a time where self-publishing can take place relatively easy. 10-12 years ago, it cost a lot more to publish. It would have cost approx. $3000 for 1000 books, in black and white. Today for a full color book of 24 pages, it's roughly $2.50 per book and there are places to distribute, hardcopy and digital. Similar eases to production can be made in the areas of film, literature and music.

It's too easy to counter the mainstream culture with imagery and writing that represent personal interests. It's also way too easy to sit back and complain without making an artistic counter argument. And this goes for any underrepresented peoples outside of the mainstream.

Also the use of Social Networking is a great intervention and interruption for those looking to make themselves visible. Artists need to use them to advertise products and advance their brand.

Bibliography

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999. Print.

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon, 2003. Print.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism In the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-81. Print.

Hight, Jewly. "For All Her Talk of the Future, Janelle Monáe Is Perfectly Suited for the Pop-parsing Present." *Nashville Scene*. N.p., 14 Nov. 2013. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

Jennings, John, and Stacey Robinson. *Black Kirby: In Search of the Motherboxx Connection*. Buffalo, NY: Black Kirby Collective, 2013. Print.

Jennings, John. *Matterz of the Fact*. Chicago: n.p., 2009. Print.

"John Jennings Interview." Personal interview. 17 May 2014.

Kennedy, Randy. "Art Excavated from Battle Station Earth." *The New York Times*. N.p., 23 Feb. 2012. Web. 6 Jan. 2014.

LaCroix, David. "To Touch Solid Evidence: The Implicity of Past and Present in Octavia E. Butler's "Kindred"" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 40.1 (2007): 109-19. JSTOR. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

Monáe, Janelle. The ArchAndroid. Bad Boy Records, 2010. CD.

-- The Electric Lady. Bad Boy Records, 2013. CD.

-- Metropolis the Chase Suite. Bad Boy Records, 2008. CD.

Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000. Print.

Nishime, Leilani. "The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future." *Cinema Journal* 44.2 (2005): 34-49. Web.

Patrick, Ryan B. "Android Love." *Exclaim*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Rollefson, J. Griffith. "The "Robot Voodoo Power" Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith." *Black Music Research Journal* 28.1 (2008): 83-109. *JSTOR*. Web.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins." *Critical Inquiry* 21.2 (1995): 496-522. *JSTOR*. Web.

Space Is the Place. Dir. John Coney. Perf. Sun Ra. 1974.

"Stacey Robinson Interview." E-mail interview. 27 May 2014.

Weinbaum, Alys Eve. "The Afterlife of Slavery and the Problem of Reproductive Freedom." Social Text 31.2 (2013): 49-68. Print.

Zielinski, Sarah. "Henrietta Lacks' 'Immortal' Cells." *Smithsonian*. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Jan. 2014.

Cayla M. McNally
Curriculum Vita
1128 Eaton Avenue, Bethlehem, PA 18018
610.570.4907   cayla.mcnally@gmail.com

Education

Lehigh University, Class of 2014
- Masters in American Studies
- MA Thesis: "Fighting for the Freedom of a Future Age": Afrofuturism and the Posthuman Body

Bryn Mawr College, Class of 2010
- Bachelor of Arts in English, Bachelor of Arts in Spanish. Cum Laude.
- BA Thesis: Wrote a senior thesis on the intersection of ethnicity and comic book culture in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.
- Publicist for Mujeres, a social club for Latina women on campus.
- Studied abroad for one semester in Granada, Spain.

Professional Experience

File Clerk
St. Luke's Hospital, Department of Radiation Oncology, Bethlehem, PA
July 2007- present
- Provided ancillary help to the secretarial staff.
- Aided in the office's transition from a paper-based system to a paperless electronic design for storing patient information.
- Provided Spanish language translation for patients.

Auxiliar de conversacion (Conversation Aide)
Colegio San Jose and Instituto Fuente Roniel, Fuente del Maestre, Extremadura, Spain
September 2010- April 2011
- Coordinated with Spanish-born English teachers in order to discover ways to better implement the learning and use of the English language in the classroom.
- Taught daily classes, both with and without Instructor supervision, that covered grammar, colloquial American phrases, and standard English literature.
- Led class discussions about global issues.

Study Abroad Student Coordinator
Office of International Programs, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA
September 2009- May 2010

- Hosted 12 information sessions per semester where students could meet with representatives from various prestigious international programs.
- Organized and Co-led 6 information sessions per semester enumerating the benefits of studying abroad.
- Acted as a liaison between students who were interested in studying in a foreign country and those who had already studied abroad. The result was an open conversation about the advantages and setbacks of living abroad.

Internship

Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce, Allentown Iniatives, Allentown, PA
May- September 2009
- Assisted with the planning and execution of community-building programs, such as farmers markets, weekly concerts, and the city of Allentown's tourism guide.
- Acted as fact checker for the Allentown guide, which entailed communicating with several prominent businesses in the city.