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Mapping the Black Comic Imaginary: Beyond the Black Panther at the MSU Museum

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The historical link between Afrofuturism and comics offers a vital avenue to explore black speculative practice. Identifying comics that reflect the structure of Afrofuturism provides a critical way to understand the intersection between liberation and speculation at the heart of Afrofuturism. This commentary explores the curator's framing of the utility of organizing *Beyond the Black Panther: Visions of Afrofuturism in American Comics* exhibition presented virtually and physically at the MSU Museum in Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI, USA. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the MSU Museum was closed to the public and this exhibition was re-imagined as a virtual experience and published online in February 2021.

What can we learn about black speculative practice by engaging with comics? Theorist Reynaldo Anderson argues that Afrofuturism allows us to explore overlapping "tropes of science fiction, history, trauma, reparation and politic" in the service of transformation and liberation (Anderson, 2020). *Beyond the Black Panther: Visions of Afrofuturism in American Comics*, a virtual exhibition hosted by the Michigan State University Museum in East Lansing, MI, is an opportunity to explore the place of comic books in the black speculative tradition (**Figure 1**). The choice to pursue comics to understand Afrofuturism grows from the term's origins in the 1990s. In his essay "Black to the Future," cultural critic Mark Dery called our attention to the fact "African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come." Dery urges the reader to seek Afrofuturism in "unlikely places" and explore "far-flung points." As he laid the ideological groundwork for Afrofuturism, Dery relied heavily on *comic books.* Indeed, Dery argues Afrofuturism "percolates" through "black-written" and "black drawn" comics produced by Milestone Media and uses that company's characters to illustrate his groundbreaking essay (Dery, 1994: 182). The bold visual style and the complex world offered by Milestone was not an outlier. Instead, careful consideration of comics produced by African Americans highlights an engagement with speculation and liberation that defines Afrofuturism.

Building on the global impact of *Marvel's Black Panther* (2018), the premise of *Beyond the Black Panther* seeks to understand the wider scope and differing impacts
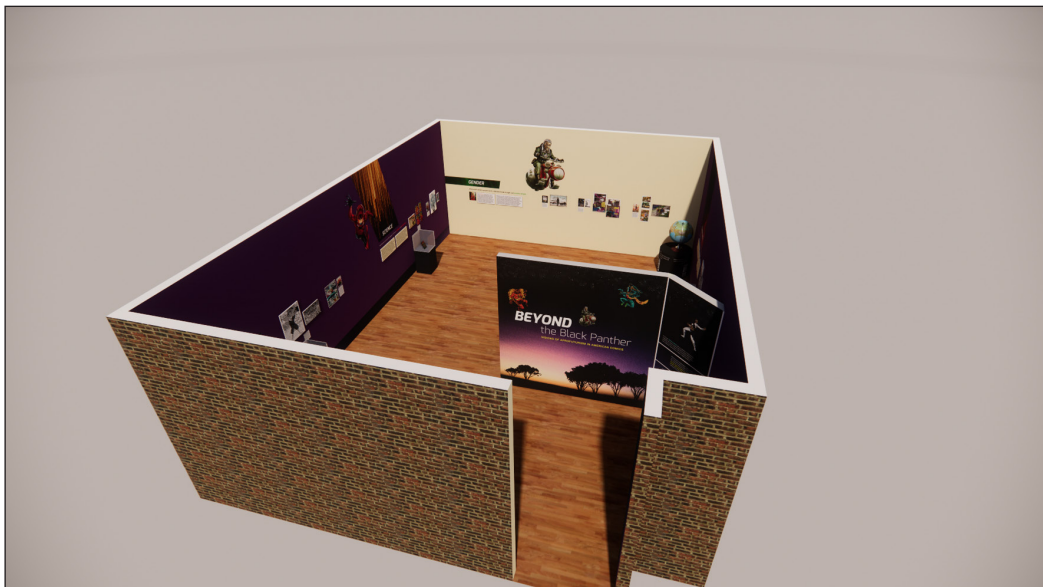
Figure 1: Beyond the Black Panther Virtual Exhibition Still Image, copyright © MSU Museum, used with permission.

represented by Afrofuturism. The logic behind the exhibition explicitly moves beyond the definition of Afrofuturism as, "Speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technolculture—and, more generally, African-American dignification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" offered in Dery's original essay.(Dery, 1994: 180) Instead, the exhibition builds on Alondra Nelson's framing of Afrofuturism as a way to think about black speculative practice and its connection to modernity (Nelson, 2002: 6).

While comics may seem an unlikely space to revisit the definition and meaning of Afrofuturism, questions about race and the meaning of modernity defined comics in the United States. As a "humor-based" response to rapid social, political, and economic change created by urban and industrial growth, comics documented both the reality of these changes and the imagined disruption offered by blacks and ethnic immigrants in cities (Gordon, 2002).

Comic scholars have explored how the popular imagination informed by comics offers a fertile ground to consider how a predominantly white audience engaged with questions of identity and power in a rapidly changing culture. The story of how black comic creators offered alternative views of black life and culture is less well known. Nonetheless, these contributions were significant. Rebecca Wanzo rightly calls our attention to how "...the wide circulation of comic and cartoon art" contributes to a language of "national belonging and exclusion" in the United States (Wanzo, 2020: 3). This language suggests comics have a privileged position in popular discourse. However, as Thierry Groensteen's classic essay "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" suggests, the nature of the engagement with comics as a transformative and impactful artistic practice remains a complex cultural narrative, especially in the United States (Groensteen, 2008: 3). In the United States the rise of the "graphic novel" is linked to social and political critiques of the underground comix movement. This association has shaped a particular view of those graphic narratives worthy of popular celebration and critical investigation. Yet, if we consider Afrofuturism as a critical framework and its clear links to the comic medium, a broader approach to thinking about comics and futurity emerges.

Beyond the Black Panther follows a path highlighted by Kodwo Eshun in his 2003 essay, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." Eshun suggests Afrofuturist practice is a "program for recovering the histories of counter-futures" and that it highlights the "critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention" for black people (Eshun, 2003: 301–302). In this light, examining comics through an Afrofuturist lens offers a vital way to explore how transformative narratives created by comic

creators have a history beyond Black Panther's debut in 1966 or the Milestone comics Dery referenced in 1994. *Beyond the Black Panther* offers the viewer a chance to engage with the transformative themes of Afrofuturism through the accessible pages of comic books. The themes in the show: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Gender, Science, and Community, are explored through various comics created in the post-WWII period. In thinking about Afrofuturism and comics books, Reynaldo Anderson argued one challenge linked to determining Afrofuturist practice in the medium was exploring "dimensions of de-hierarchization" to determine meaning or interpretation (Anderson, 2015: 175). Anderson's focus was rooted in a concern that the fixity that characterized popular understanding of comics would undercut the liberatory message central to Afrofuturism.

This show attempts to better understand black speculative practice by exploring how the structural tenets manifest across comic pages. The comics chosen for the show are a deliberate exploration of themes articulated by Afrofuturists across a variety of books and essays. Still, I'm especially drawing on critical frames articulated by Reynaldo Anderson, Kinitra Brooks, John Jennings, and Isiah Lavender in thinking about the intersection of speculation and liberation in the pages of black comics (Anderson, 2015; Brooks, 2014; Chambliss, 2017; Lavender III, 2019).

Collectively, the comics in the show are an attempt to engage with the transformative theme associated with Afrofuturism. In designing this exhibition, I recognize how the Museum offers an essential space for aesthetic and cultural affirmation. Therefore, the choice to explore comics created by African Americans representing Afrofuturism nurtures a transformative moment for the audience from two perspectives. The first is the somewhat limited definition and understanding emerging about Afrofuturism in our contemporary moment. The second, equally important, is the need to decolonize the museum through material culture created by and to some extent *for* African Americans.

This exhibit comes as exhibitions at major museums such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Oakland Museum of Art about Afrofuturism have opened. By and large, those shows have not *centered* comics and missed an opportunity to engage with a medium central to the dynamic nature of black speculative practice. While Dery's framing of the concept was brilliant for its time, thinking about the long history of black speculation in comics offers an important opportunity to see black speculation on the meaning of liberation in the past and its links to the contemporary moment. For example, Lion Man, a character first published in the pages of *All Negro Comics* in 1947, is presented alongside several re-imagined versions created by John Jennings, Artist and Professor from the University of California, Riverside.

Published in the page of the first comic book written, drawn, and published by African Americans, Lion Man protects uranium deposits in Africa. Appointed by the United Nations, the character carries many of the tropes we attached to Black Panther today. Yet, taken in historical context, Lion Man highlights an internationalism and fascination with innovation central to African American vision of freedom in the 1940s. Published the same year National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) presented "An Appeal to the World: A State on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of the Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of American and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress," Lion Man tapped into the internationalism that defined post WWII black political activism (Louis-Jacques, 2012). While presented in comic form, the idea of black diaspora animated black American speculative practice since the 19th century. Often lauded as the first black nationalist, Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-1861) offer a critical assessment of slavery and its cruelty through a story of slave revolt organized by a black man completely aware of the international scope and systemic injustice of the system (Chiles, 2012).

The challenge of systemic injustice is crucial to Afrofuturism. As a critical framework, it asks us to consider the cause of oppression and the consequences of subjugation, and it speculates on alternative paths and brings them to life. Any consideration of Afrofuturism must contend with questions of gender. Afrofuturism is guided by black feminist ideology grounded in intersectional consideration of power. Ytasha Womack describes a pattern of black women concerned about "encouraging free thinking" in opposition to the "-isms" that plague society (Womack, 2013: 104). This idea is central to black political activism. While scholars have confronted the history of erasure of black female voices, the broader public often overlooks the names of black female visionaries. The comics in *Beyond the Black Panther* are an attempt to engage with this central tenet of Afrofuturism. For example, the choice to include *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2017) by Damian Duffy and John Jennings addresses the literary roots of Afrofuturism and the centrality of Octavia Butler's work to our understanding of Afrofuturism. Butler is often described as the founding voice in modern Afrofuturism and her novels feature speculations on the cause of oppression and alternative structure that offer freedom. Adapted by Duffy and Jennings, two scholar-artists with a long history of collaborative work linked to Afrofuturism, this graphic novel calls attention to the literary roots to Afrofuturism and highlights that tone and scope of comic storytelling linked to Afrofuturism is vaster and more complex than the viewer might consider. If the public that engages with the exhibits seeks out the independent works created by Duffy and Jennings, they will see an example of the Afrofuturist logic Dery

called our attention to in 1994. However, if they seek out Butler's novels, they will also be given access to transformative literary figures and hopefully, discover the countless writers inspired by her legacy.

Such attempts to bridge the "hidden" past of black speculative practice while engaging with contemporary creators offer the opportunity to consider how the museum might serve as a platform for lesser-known creators. One of the great ironies of the historical moment that gave rise to Afrofuturism was the explosion of African American comics linked to the independent comic market of the late 1980s and early 1990s. These comics produced outside the corporate structures shared a careful engagement with unique artistic practice, alternative narrative pathways and rejection of mainstream tropes(Hatfield, 2005: 1–3). Black creators made a significant creative contribution to this independent comic moment. While Dery focused on Milestone Media, other publications from the era highlight that African American vision offered something different (McDuffie, 2010). In considering what comics should be included in Beyond the Black Panther, a major goal was an engagement with this independent comic market. As the title suggests, I wanted to look beyond those characters at the center of the popular discourse and understand the ideas presented in *Marvel's Black Panther* could be found in various black comics. The decision to include creators such as Shawneé and Shawnelle Gibbs or Jiba Molei Anderson captures independent comic creators' diverse material (Anderson, 2014; Gibbs and Gibbs, 2018). As was the case three decades ago, these contemporary creators build different story worlds.

In the case of Anderson, his work *The Horsemen: Divine Intervention* captures the idea of how Afrofuturism might reshape a superhero narrative (Anderson, 2014). Much of our contemporary superhero media is rooted in European pantheons. The widespread presence of gods and goddesses is barely interrogated. Anderson's decision to draw on his West African roots and be inspired by that cosmology to craft a story of African gods that seek to change the world is refreshing. Gods are not new in comics, but because the cultural milieu that shapes his story offers characters and traditions as rich and complex as any we have seen before, we gain something from seeing how he embraces the transformative potential he sees in his cultural context legacy. The Gibbs Sisters are equally inspiring in their independent work. Storytellers inspired by the real-world history of African American activism in the late nineteenth century, their comic, *The Invention of E.J. Whitaker* builds on the history of Tuskegee University to imagine a transformative black female inventor who captures the ways black men and women sought to liberate and elevate black people in the early 20th century(Gibbs and Gibbs, 2018). These creators offer an essential reminder for readers of the dynamic vision that drove African Americans to create institutions and promote actions that supported black progress.

In bringing together the comics in the exhibition, we point the way to a complex understanding of the scope and depth of Afrofuturism. The creators in the exhibition draw inspiration from the full complexity of black diaspora to create the story they tell. In doing so, they entertain us and open the door to new ideas and pathways for us to explore. In this way, they are a powerful reminder that our popular culture plays a vital role in societal change.

Competing Interests

The author is the Val Berryman Curator of History at the MSU Museum and served as the curator of the exhibition.

Author's Note

The exhibit was supported by a grant from Michigan Humanities Council in 2020. The virtual exhibition can be viewed online at the MSU Museum website. A physical exhibition debuted on September 7, 2021 when the MSU Museum re-opened to the public. The physical exhibit will be on display until May 2022. Exhibition Development and Virtual Exhibition production was provided by Teresa M. Goforth, MSU Museum Director of Exhibitions, Exhibition Design was provided by Kelly Hansen, University Outreach and Engagement Graphic Designer, Education material was developed by Denice J. Blair, PhD, MSU Museum Director of Education. Promotion and Outreach was provided by Stephanie Palagyi, MSU Museum Director of Communication. Artists and Writers included in the Exhibition: Jiba Molei Anderson, Greg Anderson-Elysee, Dawud Anyabwile, Octavia Butler, Damian Duffy, George J. Evans Jr, Orrin Cromwell Evans, Tim Fielder, Robert Garrett, Shawnee Gibbs, Shawnelle Gibbs, N. Steven Harris, Mark Hernandez, John Jennings, Hansani McIntoish, Tony Medina, Stacey Robinson, Guy Sims, and Jerome S. Walford.

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