Electric Peoples:

Towards an Afrofuturist Body Politic

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Abstract

The Black speculative body is one whose agency, construction, presentation, and function are undergoing a constant set of tensions and paradoxes of power and possibility. This project aims to trace the body politics threading through the Afrofuturist imagination, interrogating them for implications of cultural history and embodied possibility. To do this, I use an interdisciplinary approach that threads scholarship around superheroics, Modernity, Afrofuturism and geography with an eye towards critical visual studies and cultural histories. In this thesis, the figure of the superhero is contextualized, analyzed, and deconstructed as a cultural artifact with significant influences on the approach to posthumanism in the Western psyche. Concurrent engagement with Afrofuturist and postcolonial thought presents a critique of what superhumanism has made possible and re-examines possibility itself. Intersecting this critique with contemporary shifts in critical geographic studies, I form a cultural and historical framework of the nuances of urbanism and modernity, through which one can interpret the formation of the Black super-body in the popular psyche. My analysis of critical geographies and critical topographies of empowered Black figures are followed by the breakdown and reformation of Black bodies through speculative lenses of possibility. Along the way, I use Afrofuturist and superheroic scholarship to critique the liberal humanist notion of the self, opening up space for alternative constructions of the human and interpretations of embodiment. Concluding with a critique and negotiation of posthumanism for othered bodies, the android, the electric, and the freakish are used to frame the Black speculative super-body as an essential site of queer reimagining and mythological reclamation.
Introduction:

The super-body as cultural artifact

In order to form an analytical framework around speculation, power, and humanity, this project turns to one of the most influential and ubiquitous contemporary cultural forces actively questioning the physicality and capability of the body: the superheroic genre. In a broad sense, the superheroic figure can be said to be a pop cultural force mediating the understanding of self and future, as well as today performing the cultural labor of reshaping and expanding how we envision human ability and identity in a post-industrial age. The narratives that they drive are usually centered around an “epic moment” in which civilization is threatened far beyond what non-super humans are capable of handling, be it deliberate villainy or natural forces; superheroic power, and often violence, must always be used when all else fails (Rosenberg and Coogan 2013; Reynolds 2013).

The superheroic genre, or supergenre, can be defined as the historical and ongoing collective work of a myriad of superheroic protagonists, consisting of thousands of self-contained issues, following dozens of franchises. These individual storylines collectively feed into metanarratives that take the form of universes or multiverses, usually delineated by publisher, with a few notable exceptions. Over three quarters of the past century, a virtually incomprehensible canon has manifested into what Richard Reynolds calls the superculture: the collective text and narrative that once produced by the superhero genre, pervades the broader...
cultural realm. The pervasiveness of the superheroic figure through so many facets of cultural thought brought notions of trans- and post-humanity into the mainstream, as well as reoriented ideas of human possibility in the popular psyche (Reynolds 2013).

Creators, whether artists, writers, or both, manifest their ideas surrounding morality, society, and subjectivity through the superheroic genre. Due to the nature of the genre and the medium of comics, fantastical metaphors and abstract concepts can be brought to life in increasingly unique and nuanced ways. For this project, creators are sometimes categorized into “mainstream” and “independent.” Mainstream entails mass produced comics, mainly from the “Big Two” (Marvel and DC), which take up the vast majority of the superhero comics market. Independent (or “indie”) entails creator-owned and driven series, usually produced by smaller publishers, or independently online. Although the dichotomy between mainstream and independent comics is somewhat of a heated debate, especially among Black creators, value judgments will not be made of either one over the other. Both are essential to the genre, feed into each other, and perform different cultural labors for different reasons. Although much scholarship on the subject will delineate the two fields into the mainstream’s reinforcement of the status quo and independent’s challenge of established order (Phillips and Strobl 2013), the actual relationship between the two is much more fluid. For example, Black superheroes produced by the mainstream, while justly criticized for any number of problematic characteristics, settings, and storylines, have a far larger cultural reach than their independent counterparts, doing the work of opening up imagined future-spaces for young and/or aspiring creators of color. It is this labor that inspires the creation of Black superheroic figures through a variety of Black cultural outlets, be they comics, music, or visual arts.
A (Post)Modern Genealogy

Much of the cultural history surrounding the superhero genre can be summarized by shifts in Post/Modernism. The early twentieth century rise of Modernity saw rapid industrial growth, a shift from the rural to the urban, global war, and scientific relativity and uncertainty. It identifies technology as an encroaching evil, with machines increasing in size and ability, as well as the world becoming more ambivalent and humanity less sure of itself. Scholars of modernist cultural production locate the beginning of the advent of Modernity to the First World War, after which the modern subject becomes split, and individuals are no longer understood to be holistic or unified (Wright 2014). In “Superheroes and the Modern(ist) Age,” Alex Boney positions early superheroes as a response to the resultant anxieties over nebulous nature of abstractions like truth, justice, morality, and the self. Superheroes thus became embodiments of these abstractions, gifted with transcendence of and control over modern forces in the name of hammering out instability and uncertainty. For example, speed becomes a major theme early on because of anxieties over the increasing pace of modern life. Protagonists like Superman or The Flash had to be seen moving faster than, and sometimes disrupting, the most advanced trains and automobiles, to ensure readers that these facets of modernity were not nor could not be insurmountable. This, in addition to mid-century legal codes surrounding print comics, resulted in a powerful legacy of upholding institutions of power, fighting for the interests of the ruling class, and reaffirming hegemonic narratives of white, heteropatriarchal masculinity, embodied by paragons of masculinity and righteousness (Phillips and Strobl 2013).

The postmodern critiques modernist categories and moral abstractions as subjective, claiming that social order as constructed and inherently unnatural. The postmodern media environment is akin to an “infinite hall of mediated mirrors,” in which fast-paced packages of
information and entertainment are produced and reproduced, resulting in a “circulating central fluidity that overwhelms any certain distinction between an event and its representation. Images of reality increasingly constitute reality itself, bringing it into the hyper-real and blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined (Ferrall, Hayward, and Young 2008; Phillips and Strobl 2013). The postmodern superhero is usually the result of some form of subversive artistic experimentation, and becomes a locus of ambiguity and uncertainty. The work of defining modernist abstractions of righteousness and justice is given up as futile, and instead the superheroic figure itself is questioned. With most of the mainstream superhero narratives taking place in universes closely parallel to our own, superheroes must answer for their shortcomings and their failure to bring about a just and utopian society over the past seventy-five years (Phillips and Strobl 2013; Reynolds 2013). Phillips and Strobl frame the current state of superheroism in terms of the post-9/11 sociopolitical landscape. Creators openly express a diverse and complex arrangement of political stances, fleshing out anxieties of the role of the United States, the possibilities of global security, and the increasingly ambiguous role of superheroic moral codes.

**Contextualizing the superheroic figure**

Contemporary superhero scholarship does the work of deconstructing the superheroic figure into an unraveled and interconnected cultural state. In the words of Kurt Busiek, “Superheroes are metaphors, and you can pour anything into them. Superheroes are something writ large, and that something depends on what you want to write large.” Busiek’s philosophy positions the superhero as merely an embodiment of a superhero milieu: a cultural framework in which the protagonist is contextualized and given meaning. This contextualization is dependent
on a certain level of cultural boundedness, with superheroic narratives being related and relevant to a specific culture at a specific time. This contemporary culturally bound mythology has been theorized as a connective tissue that joins the individual to society and society into the field of nature. Although moral universalism is touted as the underlying current throughout the supergenre, heroes can really only be analyzed based on the specific cultural context from which they emerged and for which they fight. Aggression is oriented outward from the specific in-group of those whom the superhero associates with and protects (Ghee 2013).

Contextualization of the superhero must also necessitate a contextualization of identity. In order to have a significant impact on the development of one’s personal growth and sense of self, contemporary superhero narratives must do the work of grounding the message in a specific locus of the cultural milieu and connecting to personal experience (Ghee 2013). For example, when individuals can connect to the kinds of utopian models of futurity found in superhero narratives, they gain the ability to create new images of themselves in their own constructed and culturally contextualized future-spaces (Phillips and Strobl 2013). What Mike Alsford identifies as “coadunacy,” pop cultural figures, especially superheroic ones, evoke a sense of interconnectedness and interdependence of the individual to the values and needs of their community, society, and humanity (Ghee 2013).

However, cultural context and coadunacy become highly problematic when one takes into mind the extent to which the superhero genre is dominated by white male heteronormative hegemonic narratives. Through Kenneth Ghee’s Black Superhero Identity Complex, one can disrupt the bounds of the superhero’s milieu. Traditionally, the most notable Black superheroes have been created by white men to fight alongside, and often under, white heroes for Eurocentric values and Western notions of justice and morality. Fighting for white America is not necessarily
in the interest of Black America when the system of Whiteness underlying American justice and
moral codes actively disrupts and destroys othered bodies. According to Ghee, in order for a
superhero who is Black to be considered a *Black superhero*, they must prioritize cultural
relevance and accountability\(^3\).

*Analyzing the superheroic body*

Although much of the scholarship surrounding the superheroic genre takes a literary or
political view, this project seeks to foreground the importance of analyzing the superhero as
visual artifact. The superhero is a force thematically organized around power and action.
Superheroic activity is primarily performative, in terms of appearance, movement, and dialogue.
This is partially due to shrouding of the face by the iconic mask, necessitating that emotional
expression become an embodied performance. This performance, and more strongly,
iconography, is carried by the costume, a factor unique to the genre in its fantastic, eclectic, and
symbolic nature (Bukatman 2009). Symmetry, color, design, and symbolism are carefully crafted
and imprinted onto each super-body, producing a powerful marker in how that figure stands in
relation to morality, justice, power, and righteousness. For example, John Jennings identifies
visual and metaphorical symmetry as integral to the superhero’s positionality around balance,
justice, goodness, and perfection. Visual analysis frames the superhero as a symbol of power that
is reified as the hyper-physical body, which then comes to be a symbol of that power. This

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\(^3\) Ghee follows this logic of Black cultural boundedness to the extent of essentially differentiating
between Black superheroes and superheroes-who-are-Black, setting up a culturally bounded
dichotomy in which Black superheroes’ relevancy and importance to Black communities and
identities is dependent on some arbitrary definition and magnitude of Blackness. While I agree
that Ghee’s approach to cultural boundedness is a cogent and essential part of (pop) cultural
analyses, I would critique his delineation of superheroic Blackness. Within the context of this
paper, the term Black superhero(ine) includes any superheroic figure that is Black, regardless of
creator, publisher, or identity politic.
metaphorical feedback loop allows the superhero to simultaneously control and embody particular forces, technologies, and values (Jennings 2013).

From the cultural-historical standpoint, the superheroic genre functions as a modern mythology, a reification of mythological narratives circulating throughout cultural contexts. Both superheroic figures and their more traditionally mythological forebears possess fundamental parallels: extraordinary strength, individual and collective conflicts, and themes of voyage and adventure –what Dennis O’Neal refers to as a “maniacally accelerated version of the folkloric process…begun by one author but revised and altered by many others (Arnaudo 2013; Reynolds 2013).” Although mythological themes usually manifest unconsciously, they are often brought about deliberately, most notably with the characters Thor and Wonder Woman, belonging to Marvel and DC, respectively. Established mythologies are brought into the “supergenre” due to a lack of copyrights, in addition to a strong familiarity and sense of cultural history attached to them. A great deal of work in establishing the power and importance of these pantheons has already been done, and is still being perpetuated through the reproduction of hegemonic narratives surrounding Western cultural heritage. This is a major reason why the vast majority of mythological figures and creatures that appear in superhero narratives (and really pop cultural products as a whole), belong to ancient mythological systems to which the West ties itself, reinforcing a mythological heritage dominated by Whiteness.

**Problematizing superheroic justice**

As mentioned above, the superhero milieu claims to be driven by social justice, yet it is foundationally built upon a white patriarchal universalism. More often than not, white, male, heteronormative, able-bodied heroes, protagonists, and victors are contrasted with villains,
losers, and sidekicks belonging to othered groups. Due to the pervasiveness of the superhero milieu, this has resulted in a public dialectic of minority inferiority that gives marginalized readers a sense of incapacity, incompetency, and impossibility (Howard and Jackson 2013). This is compounded when readers of othered communities are denied access to their own stories and their own cultural narratives, and instead forced to accept the West’s fantastical narrative of its own cultural development and their place in relation to it.

Furthermore, the Black superheroic figure becomes a paradox when one considers the inequality of power and agency. Although gifted with incredible power and even global significance (e.g. Black Panther), they are often relegated to and responsible for their respective community, usually in an urban, low-income, predominantly Black area, fighting petty crime and urban ills. Even when interacting with major player in world-scale conflicts, they are never allowed to express power or competence beyond that of their white male counterparts. All too often, the task of saving the world (and sometimes the multiverse) is placed upon capable white male heroes, with everyone else tagging along for the ride. Black-created heroes, however, have traditionally been granted far more power and agency. Sheena Howard’s public dialectic fits into broader cultural narratives surrounding the relation of the heteronormative white male figure to what is just, powerful, and moral. The work of refuting this is being carried out through the cultural reimagining of Afrofuturistic creativity.
Black to the Future:

Afrofuturism and the Implications of Postcolonial Speculative Thought

The subculture of Afrofuturism can be summarized as a literary and cultural aesthetic that encompasses historical fiction, fantasy, myth, and magical realism. It draws upon Black diasporic cultural contexts to interrogate and critique current conditions of people of color, examining the past and constructing speculative futures. It does this imaginative work by encouraging experimentation, reimagining identity, and activating liberation, while prioritizing Black agency and creativity (Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2011; Womack 2013).

A discussion of futurity, especially as it relates to the American context, necessitates a look into the “technological sublime”. Summarized as a powerful emotional and metaphysical reaction to technology, especially with its relationship with the natural, the technological sublime has been central to modern constructions of humanity and subjectivity. The capacity of human subjects to be made and remade in the new scope of technological possibility, the technological sublime became an answer to the aforementioned anxieties of modernity. Notions of powerlessness and incapacity in the face of urbanization and scientific advancement could be assuaged with the possibility of redefining what it means to be human and artificially improving upon what is possible for the human body (Wanzo 2013). The promise of the sublime in regards to bodily possibility is strikingly similar to what one would now theorize as posthumanism, the artificial and deliberate advancement beyond traditional impressions of normal human capability and function (Braithwaite 2011). Consequently, posthumanism has been framed as the answer to much of the theorization surrounding the embodiment of technological forces and the possibility of super-humanity.
In the 19th and early 20th centuries, forces of industrialization fused the physical presence of technology with natural landscapes with such speed and ubiquity that it significantly impacted the ways in which landscape, space, and geography was interpreted in the American popular psyche. The sudden presence of factories, progression of development, and rise of cityscapes placed the rural and the urban into a syncretic state that became fundamental to the ways in which they are deployed in Western cultural production. This led to the formation of a set of dialectics, summarized as Nature/Technology, History/Future, Progress/Destruction, and Whole/Fragmented. Rebecca Wanzo adds Freedom/Enslavement and Raced/Un-Raced to her construction of an Afrofuturistic technological sublime. Although all colonized subjects have been excluded from technological sublimity and modern possibility, colonial thought has placed Blackness and technology in diametric opposition (Wanzo 2013). This contradiction nullifies the possibility of Black bodies existing in a posthuman state, as posthumanism is part of the same hegemonic framework that denies Black bodies the capacity for scientific advancement or engagement with the technological sublime.

Expounded upon in a later section, the work done by Afrofuturistic creators often involves critiquing, interrogating, and seeking to solve the tenuous relationship between Black bodies and modern (im)possibility. This labor can be theorized through the post-colonial notion of “writing back to the center,” in which colonized peoples create their own Western cultural artifacts from their own perspective, resulting in hybridity and creolity (Ashcroft 1989). Cauleen Smith places cognitive estrangement at the heart of the Afrofuturism movement, shifting perceptions of familiar images and Western constructs, re-envisioning them through African and

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4 Here, it is important to keep in mind that although Blackness and technology are placed in opposition as social and theoretical constructs, innovation and invention by Black people has been central to scientific and technological advancement in the Western, albeit often unacknowledged and uncredited.
diasporic cultural lenses. This postcolonial framework can be applied to much of the work being done to bridge the gap between Afrofuturism and the superheroic genre. In fact, Afrofuturist scholar Reynaldo Anderson situates the rise of the Black superhero and the Afrofuturist movement at the same cultural moment, both born from the sociopolitical productions of the Black Power movement. He attributes the development of post-Cold War Afrofuturism to the Black masculine superheroic figures created by iconic artist Jack Kirby, and credits the burgeoning Afrofuturist movement to the Afrocentric and Afrofuturistic characters created by Black comic artists in the 1990s. A fairly recent project that “wrote back to the center,” *Black Kirby*, is an art exhibit and embodied think piece carried out by John Jennings and Stacey Robinson. By taking Jack Kirby’s iconic mainstream superheroes and reimagining them through Black cultural lenses, they created an artistic space in which Black life can be fantastical and abstract outside the context of Whiteness. What Adilifu Nama theorizes as a “remix” of the original, Robinson and Jennings utilized comic space as a place of counter-action. Renderings of the Black body were grounded in familiar frameworks, but presented a brand new way of seeing and perceiving Blackness (Nama 2013; Womack 2013). Black Kirby turns the Black superheroic body into a site of resistance and postcolonial reimagining.

Some of the most important work done by Afrofuturist cultural creators involves the collapse of time. Factors like time travel, reincarnation, immortality, and parallel universes allow one to supersede the limitations of history while restoring power to the narrative and the reader (Womack 2013). Time travel as an artistic and literary device has a particular emphasis in Black narratives, due to the ahistorical nature of Blackness. By reclaiming time and controlling its flow and direction, Black creators can refute colonial notions of Blackness as outside of history and linear progress, creating timelines with their own rules and narratives. Alexis Gumbs takes this
manipulation of time even further with her theorization on Black queer futurity. She unlinks queer time from the patriarchal familial notion of intergenerationality, halting the cycle of reproduction of the self and intervening in biopolitical narratives. José Muñoz calls for queer politics, especially those of queer people of color, to be radically futurist, as the imagination is the only hope for survival (Gumbs 2011). Superheroic narratives explore very similar relationships with time, usually exploring the dynamic between nostalgia and desired utopia (Phillips and Strobl 2013). Superhero narratives, by nature, are based around endlessness and immortality, bypassing the permanence of death and stretching time beyond our universe’s rules.
Space is the Place:

Visual critiques of geography, topography, and metaphor

A discussion of super-bodies, super-narratives, “post-”s, and futurisms necessitates a spatial contextualization in both metaphorical and material terms. Borrowing from Tim Cresswell’s interconnection of metaphor, geography, and power, one can form an analytical framework through which space becomes an essential factor in interrogating the very loci of cultural production upon which this project focuses. Cresswell’s “geography of metaphors” can be mapped through connection and connotation along lines of ecology and (dis)placement, not only allowing us to trace how and where metaphors are popping up in the popular psyche, but to also make inferences on the structure, flow, and enforcement of sociopolitical power. Cresswell notably deconstructs the figure of the weed, and its connotations of displaced nature within urban space. A “metaphor of displacement,” the niche of the weed in the popular psyche is that of “matter out of place,” analogous to dirt, the undesirable, untended, and unearthed. The application of metaphors of displacement against bodies and communities reflects and reifies hegemonic geographies, controlling which spaces bodies should and should not exist in, and how bodies are allowed to move through them. This application of spatial thought undergirds the function of the popular psyche, both in terms of quotidian lived reality and cultural production, especially for those othered through Blackness (Cresswell 1997).

The history of Black American social and political life is largely contextualized through geography and space, and heavily influenced by metaphors displacement, placelessness, and eventually, reclamation. In the words of Katherine McKittrick, “Black matters are spatial matters,” and Black culture and history is usually described and narrated in terms of spatial binaries. If one thinks of cartography as a tool through which to construct and reify sociopolitical
hierarchies and forms of oppression, it comes as no surprise when Black American lives are often rendered “ungeographic” and must depend on space and place in order to find meaning and concreteness (McKittrick 2006). Wanzo’s aforementioned Afropfuturist technological sublime furthers this discussion on critical Black geographies. Putting Wanzo and McKittrick into conversation allows us to frame Blackness on the level of landscape, looking at movement within and movement between socially and physically constructed geographies of the urban and the natural. In the twentieth century, Black American sociality, politics, and culture became centered on navigation and place within the landscape of the city. Mass physical movement (i.e. the Great Migration) had a deep cultural impact and meaning, and in conjunction with racist policies and control over Black geographies and existence in urban space, this resulted in deep set tensions over the fate of Black bodies in the face of urban modernity. Blackness is heavily determined by geography regardless of landscape, but this project’s focus on the urban as a primary setting is informed by the cityscape has to tell us about highly dynamic negotiations of movement, place, and space. Hegemonies of place and power strongly influence the set of geographic rules that have come to dominate modern urban America; one of the most prevalent results is the “ghettoization of difference” encoded into city plans themselves. Oftentimes the reification of social distinctions, segregation, and accessibility (or lack of) is carried out as part of large-scale trends of gentrification, zoning, and housing discrimination, because of which “inequality is blazoned onto the geographical landscape (McKittrick 2006).”

In a cultural-historical parallel, the intersection of technological sublimity and twentieth century modernism that produced the superhero genre were intimately connected with and spatially contextualized by the construction and proliferation of urban space. The city, as organic, dynamic, and ecological, effectively gives rise to the superhero by functioning as a
space of possibility and fostering the development of the superheroic body in the face of the physical manifestations of modernity. Urban space functions as that which heroes have to transcend, navigate, and overpower in order to become super. In fact, Ahrens & Meteling argue that North American comics have always been a “genuine medium of urban modernity,” inseparable from the landscape of the city. They connect the rhythm and speed of metropolitan life to the experience of engagement with the comic medium, an “integral restlessness” that reflects the “loose and moving gaze of the urban flâneur.” The relationship between comics the urban landscape deepens when one considers the “structuring gaze” of the reader, drawing connections between the panel layout of most traditional comics and the layouts of most traditional cityscapes, both of which are experienced in similar ways. Introducing topography in how both the cityscape and panel layouts are read, Jens Balzer draws attention to the three-dimensionality of experiencing both comics and the city, which allows one to engage with the text with a sense of verticality and to decentralize the image (Ahrens & Meteling 2010). Because Black superheroic figures do not appear in the North American mainstream until well after the Golden Age of comics is spurred by the modern urban moment, scholarship focusing on them usually neglects to bring up anything before the Black Power movement. The rise of urban modernity is a foundational moment not only for the superheroic genre, but also for the foundation of Black politics and culture in the twentieth century; these facets shouldn’t be viewed as a set of cultural parallels, but as a mutually-constitutive dynamic. In fact, scholarship around the cultural history of “Afro-Modernity” brings to light the appropriations and counter-appropriations that were central to the development of the modernist psyche in the West. Not only Black American, but also Black diasporic cultural exchange was a significant force in the artistic response to the rise of the modern age (Barson 2010).
Black superheroes can be considered a creative and fantastical result of the meeting of these theorizations around modernity, geography, and Blackness; an Afrofuturist solution to the anxieties of urban modernity as they are encountered by Black bodies. Forces of state neglect, police brutality, medical malpractice, the proliferation of food deserts, and many more forms of institutionalized violence have been deployed in heavily racialized ways, throughout the twentieth century, leading some Black artists to deploy strategies of myth-making and wish fulfillment. Many origin stories and major narratives attached to iconic Black heroes have these forces threading through them in eerily realistic forms. For example, Static, known largely due to the popular TV show *Static Shock*, embodies these anxieties and systems of violence as they were distinctly faced by Black urban youth in the 1990s. In both the comic series and the TV show, genetic mutations that lead to fantastical abilities are caused by exposure to an experimental gas that is released during a gang fight between mostly of lower class youth of color. The vast majority of them die, but the ones that survive manifest a variety of physical and genetic changes, with their own sets of complementary abilities. In the TV show, the gas is the property of a scientific corporation stored in the vicinity and explosively released when police open fire. In the comics, it is a method of riot control deployed by the police themselves. Known as the “Big Bang,” the event caused the origins of both the protagonists and the villains in the series, and was itself caused by scientific forays into transhumanism in conjunction with state violence (Static Shock 2000; McDuffie 1993; Carpenter 2009).

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5 It’s hard to miss the irony in the use of the term “Big Bang.” The event that initiated multiple narratives following super-human urban youth of color is directly referential to one of the most well-known scientific theories about the origin point of the universe and our own lived reality. The term “Big Bang” places one of the most fundamental cosmological theories into the experiences and lingo of these mostly Black bodies.
Because the landscape of the city is such a critical location for Black superheroic narratives, one of the primary functions of the Black hero has been the transcendence and navigation of urban space. In order to address this, one must also include discussion of movement and position within and without the landscape of the city, forming a critical topography of Black superheroics. The superheroic milieu and its suite of possibilities allow figures to more fully explore the third dimension and engage creatively with verticality through a variety of means, be they flying, web slinging, teleportation, or many more. Due to the structure of the city, especially as its envisioned in the American psyche, urban landscapes are rife with critical possibilities when it comes to topography. For Black heroes, this is an acute point of intervention, due to histories of lack of spatial agency among Black urban communities. Movement and verticality are restricted both physically and metaphorically due to political, economic, and social forces; therefore, the positioning and movement of Black Superheroic figures becomes especially important in terms of reflecting these anti-Black forces and manifesting creative wish fulfillment. Looking at early covers of Black Lightning (a.k.a. Jefferson Pierce) and Luke Cage (a.k.a. Power Man) (Figure 1), the viewer is gazing towards them in the process of physical destruction of urban space: the broken window through which we see Black Lightning and the broken concrete wall through which Luke Cage lunges towards us. They move through the cityscape in unconventional, yet straightforward and determined ways, the physical makeup of urban space

![Figure 1 - Black Lightning (left); Luke Cage (right)](image-url)
falls apart in the face of their implied indestructability. However, they are both still surrounded by, and in some sense subject to, the cityscape itself. Analyzing the Black Lightning cover more closely, the city is ever-present in the background; it looms in the still-intact background window, with the moon reflecting the brightness and vertical height of skyscrapers, contrasting with the enclosed and spare warehouse in which Black Lightning seems to be doing more grounded dirty work. They can break urban barriers physically, but it’s only in later decades that they get to transcend. In the initial issues of the most recent runs of *Miles Morales: The Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Static Shock* (*Figure 2*), our heroes aren’t grounded, but in fact freely navigate and face these urban landscapes directly. With his back towards the viewer, Miles is seen facing the city with a serious and determined expression on his half-turned face. The very same skyscrapers from Black Lightning’s day now take up the field of vision, and yet Miles is not drowned out or contrasted. With the viewer unable to glean his exact position or height, he appears to be on ambiguous or equal terms with the cityscape. Static’s more confident smile, open-armed dynamic stance, and highly colorful surroundings contrast with the more static, quiet mood of Miles’s cover, yet he also has this confidence in his positionality in terms of urban topography. The viewer sees him actively moving through a Times Square-esque city-space, using his power to demonstrate free reign of the urban landscape. Here, we see a
reification of Wanzo’s thoughts on the subversion of technological sublimity. Miles and Static are engaging with the urban landscape in direct and dynamic ways, with a bodily co-dependence with modernity, as opposed to an opposition to it. In contrast to Miles and Static’s vertical engagement with urban space, Misty Knight, a Black female superhero and detective with a cybernetic arm, is usually relegated to ground level, focusing on street crime and urban super-communities. At the level of the street, Misty forms a subaltern space separate from the global (and sometimes universal) scale superheroism located in skyscrapers like Avengers Tower or the Baxter Building. She must constantly reaffirm her position as independent of and unbeknown to the more traditionally modern moral code, instead working through her own ethics and complicating the binaries of modern notions of morality and justice. For example, in the 2006 Marvel crossover event Civil War, she must enter the space of the iconic Superheroic skyscraper and personally face down both Iron Man and Spider-Man, asserting her identity and politic as a Black woman in her refusal to engage in any part of their superheroic squabbles (Gray 2006).

Although Misty Knight functions as a powerfully “urban” figure, she’s actually in the minority when it comes to Black superheroines. Black superheroic existence within and navigation of urban spaces manifests in gendered and queer ways, pointing to a strongly masculinist subcultural trend, in which specific issues and narratives that are relevant to Black women and/or queer and trans people are relegated outside of the scope of vision. Narratives of Black superheroes, especially those transcending forces of modernity usually center straight Black cisgender men, which erases the lived realities faced by Black women and/or queer and/or trans people. For Black superheroines, their bodies and narratives are often removed completely from the urban landscape and placed in the natural. In Figure 3, Storm (left) and Vixen (right) present a significantly different notion of landscape than the earlier examples. They are relegated
to a vaguely Africanist landscape outside of urban modernity, with confluences of spirituality and animalism. The Black superheroine, unsurprisingly, has always been far removed from the promise of modernity. Her erotic and racially othered body has traditionally navigated the line of hypersexuality and bestiality, legacies of colonial logics surrounding the monstrosity of Black women’s bodies. Additionally, one can see the exotic naturalism of Africa, as well as ghosting Dark Continent themes of undefined spirituality, mysticism, totemism, and voodoo (Howard & Jackson 2013). The imaginative cultural context that surrounds the Black superheroine consists of a confluence of factors that have no place and no meaning within the urban modern landscape.

The 1990s is notorious for highly, usually inappropriately gendered depictions of the superheroic body. Milestone Media however, strove to subvert this with a lineup of young, inner city superheroes of color that are portrayed and narrated through a progressive Black gender politics. Two of the most prominent were Static and Rocket (Figure 4), whose respective covers display very similar stances, positions, and body types. Both of our young heroes have an air of cleverness, confidence, and youthful rebellion, facing the viewer from the side in a stationary yet dynamic pose. Static’s iconic cap under the words “Don’t start none, won’t be none,” paralleled with Rocket’s hoop earrings, jacket, and graffiti-esque title reflect a strong influence from a distinctly ‘90s Black youth culture; one that is capable, strong, and celebratory. These elements of urban Black cool are reflected in the graffiti-like presentation of Rocket’s titular secret

Figure 3 - Storm (left); Vixen (right)
identity, a graphic representation of hip-hop culture being casually painted over what is “supposed to be” the title/focus of the text. Rocket’s graffiti serves a similar function as Static’s power line-surfing and manhole-riding: a radical reclamation of structurally defined space. Rocket’s deployment of graffiti also connects to the superheroic imagery that ghosted through hip-hop youth culture. Ed Piskor expounds the deep connection between urban signs, graffiti, and comic space on in his sequential art breakdown of Hip-Hop history and genealogy. Not only was the art form of graffiti heavily influenced by the style and visualized sonic emphasis (e.g. POW!, ZAP!, WHAM!) so iconic in the superhero genre, but early groups very frequently derived names and collective identities from the superheroic milieu of the time (Piskor 2013). Graffiti adds yet another layer of depth toward Ahrens and Meteling’s theorization around the comic space as city space. Comic layouts can be read as geographic urban landscapes in a conceptually similar way that urban layouts can be read as comic landscapes. Graffiti adds a meaning, depth, and texture to the materiality of the cityscape, an artistic human touch that functions in a subcultural conversation with that of comic production itself. Gazing through a broader theoretical lens, one can also read this through scholarship around the intersection of Black studies, body politics, and disability.
Body Talk:

Speculating beyond the liberal humanist Man

By returning to a more strongly metaphorical contextualization of the Black super-body, we can open up a more highly nuanced critique of superheroism, posthumanism, and their utopian tendencies. From here, I will be taking a critical look at Afrofuturist body politics and queer body possibilities. As the figure of the superhero becomes progressively loose and postmodern, more ambiguous terminology of super-bodies and super-embodiment will be used to thread the notion of the extraordinary through interrogations of traditional ideas of humanity and humanism.

To maintain a nuanced and dynamic notion of the intersection of bodies, space, and context, we can rely on theorization around “Field”. The metaphysical space in which history, culture, society, and politics converge upon the Black body, Field puts Black expression and imagination into a discourse with the cultural and political context that produced it. Thomas DeFrantz invokes Frantz Fanon to envision the Field as a “Circle” in which Black cultural expression, more specifically Black dance, is protected and permitted to exist, yet still accessible by cultural outsiders. While permissible to all facets of Blackness, the openness to consumption by outsiders puts the Circle in constant danger of perforation, re-shaping, and hybridization. The integrity of the Circle depends on a certain amount of Black communal input and protection, but is de-stabilized by the White gaze. DeFrantz analogizes the shift from Black communality within the Circle to White consumption without with the shift from the ring-shout dance to concert dance. In the former, the audience is actively engaged in the performance and all members are agents of a shared cultural moment; in the latter, the audience is only there to consume the performance and does nothing to preserve cultural integrity or communality (DeFrantz 2001).
Afrofuturist thought brings in a critical interrogation into what is protected and who is permitted in DeFrantz’s Circle. As Black speculative creators freely explore and manipulate temporal narratives, the cultural, historical, and geographic context of the Circle shifts and blurs. This invites the Black cultural space to have a more significant role in informing the physical space in which it is performed and expressed. As cultural imaginative power bleeds into the physical space upon which the Circle sits, new spatial contexts are constructed for the purpose of fulfilling the demands of these Black fantastical cultural producers. A fluid set of geographies and time-spaces ghost through these constructed spaces, and the Circle finds place in the temporal narrative by anchoring itself at multiple points in the timeline. What results is a collapse of the traditional progress narrative around the imagined Black body.

Situated in Black cultural legacies with an eye toward the Afrofuture, Black artists have used individual and concert performances to create discursive spaces that can be simultaneously rooted in Black historical legacies and actively moving into the unknown and imagined. This effect has been bolstered by the development of new production technologies and the reimagining of Black bodies and voices through them. Reynaldo Anderson goes so far as to situate the birth of Afrofuturism in the Black queer club space of the disco era and the early House and techno scenes, their “technological, futuristic liminality” arising through “rituals of imagined identity and dance performance (Anderson).” The underground early disco scene existed at an intersection of queer radicalism and black liberatory identities. It reimagined and reframed the Field of Black dance, and really dance in general by queering notions of time and physicality. The underground party scene provides a space for queer bodies to gather and interact in relative safety under cover of darkness, allowing for the expression of full spectrums of non-normative sexualities and gender presentations without risk of retribution from coercive and
violently normative heteropatriarchal hegemony. The lateness of the clubs themselves inverted society’s focus on daytime productivity; bodies could exist freely without being defined or valuated based on personal gains or contributions to oppressive capitalistic systems. It was a circle meant to protect the body and permit the self. There was no end goal to being there, the point was the embodiment of performance. Disco DJs would mix records in such a way as to collapse and extend time into marathon dances of polymorphous rhythm, in which bodies became permeable and fluid, the entire dance floor moving as a singular synthesis of individual dancers; an amorphous “whole body” eroticism (Lawrence 2011; Dyer).

The contextual space of the club was deliberately constructed as a subversion of hegemonic narratives that constricted one’s relation to time and body. The smoothing of time and emphasis on radical queer pleasure-as-politics ethos allowed for the expansion of the Black imagination into a “celebration of the fantastic (Shapiro 2000).” Disco’s postcolonial body ethic opened the door for speculation into new ways of existing and new body possibilities in imagined future-scapes. These reimaginings gained influence in both pop culture and politics through figures like Sylvester James, whose Black queer futuristic performance opened up new discursive spaces. On the album cover for Do Ya Wanna Funk (1982), we see a profile of Sylvester embodied as a Sphinx-like form, recalling Afrocentric legacies of ancient Egyptian royal heritages (Figure 5). On his face and wrist are futuristic accessories that blend with his corporeal form, accentuated by androgyny of the nail polish, lipstick, and jewelry. Sylvester deliberately roots himself in a glorified and fantastical Black historical legacy while simultaneously calling up a futuristic post-gender façade. All these factors blend into each other and into his body, allowing him to exist in a state of poly-temporality and collapse these temporal anchors onto his form.
For Black bodies, these new spaces of possibility often run into intersections and associations with a deviance from traditionally modern notions of being, notably in *Static*’s mutant narrative and its Black queer connotations. The aforementioned moment of systemic violence that caused the creation of Static’s super-bodied teenagers leaves these “Bang Babies” without a support network and further deprives them of full humanity. Subsequently, the labels of “(super)hero” and “(super)villain” form from a divide between those with invisible mutations and those without. Someone like Static has the privilege of being able to possess a secret identity and function as a superhero because he doesn’t have the physical markers (beyond those associated with his own Blackness), which would push him further out of society and further into otherness. The Bang Babies, who are visibly and unquestionably mutated, end up banding together to support each other in inner city enclaves. In addition to the isolation and rejection which result from reactions to their mutations, they go on to experience even more forms of social death, forcing them to turn to criminal activity and come up against the state and Static himself. The situation faced by these communities of Bang Babies is reminiscent of that faced by many queer collectives of color in urban spaces, especially those with visible markers of (gender) non-conformity. Often subjected to state neglect and police brutality, they band together in mutual support and redefine notions of familial ties and queer time. In this way, the Bang Babies can be

Figure 5 - "Do Ya Wanna Funk" album cover
read through theorizations on Black queer collective club spaces, much of which was occurring in a moment contemporaneous with the production of Static and the Milestone universe. Their collective interdependence comes about for the purposes of survival, normally through what would normatively be called “villainy.” However, a very queer notion of physicality and individuality arises; how bodies should behave and function is completely thrown out the window, and both bodies and collectives become sites of possibility and non-normativity.

Engaging with verticality, it’s also important to note the “underground” space to which the Bang Babies are relegated. They are forced to survive and support each other as a collective beneath the landscape of the city, in stark contrast to Static’s individual and agential navigation of city space itself. In a similar sense, the Bang Babies are visibly and permanently othered in a way that marks them for state persecution and social exclusion, taking away the ability or freedom of existence of movement throughout the city. The characters of Static are a prime example of the themes of speculative and supernatural body horror and monstrosity that so often ghosts through narratives of superheroic Blackness. They also provide a critique of how engagement with Afrofuturist body possibility can result in fundamental interrogations of the construction of Black bodies themselves.

What happens to the flesh when Black bodies are transformed into a more visually reified negotiation of the human? If we look to Alexander Weheliye’s theorization on racializing assemblages in Habeas Viscus, we can re-work our ideas of Field into something more closely tied to the flesh; a negotiation of embodiment, subjection, and humanity. A set of social and political processes, including sites of subjection acting upon the body, racializing assemblages place individual bodies into categories of human, not quite human, and subhuman. When super-humanity gets mixed in, we end up with a fundamental complication that places many othered
heroes into superpositions and negotiations along spectrums of human-ness. Static must be read simultaneously through the Blackness of his flesh, the cultural histories and connotations behind his locs, and the superheroic transformation brought about his costume and symbology. His locs and his lightning bolt are both iconic factors in his superheroic visage, but do they cancel each other out are they mutually constitutive through other avenues of possibility? In a similar sense, Static’s arch nemesis, Ebon, is quite literally an inky shadow, formless and infinitely shape-shiffable, who somehow always has unmistakable cornrows running along his head. Is his Blackness read through his racialized embodiment or his literal blackness?

As Weheliye points out, there is no avoidance of racialization and its implications as far as human status. Consequently, posthumanism (and *superhumanism*) in mainstream scholarship has failed to account for the paradox of (im)possibility that surrounds the figure of the Black superhero. Some posthumanist scholars’ reliance upon the liberal humanist notion of human as a bounded, defined, discrete Man shuts out any other possibilities for the construction of the human and (falsely) assumes a universally accessed human state that must be overcome in order to become something greater, more advanced, and more *able*. In order to seek a resolution that includes the possibility of the Black superhuman, one must search through the “demonic grounds” of alterity separate from the liberal humanist Man (Weheliye 2014).

The critique of liberal humanism and breakdown of traditional notions of the body and the self are reified in the popular cartoon series *Steven Universe*, notably through one of the main characters: Garnet. Following the adventures of the eponymous hero, *Steven Universe* can be considered a postmodern reimagining and interrogation of Superheroic and magical-girl genre cartoons of the late twentieth century. Its world-building follows the Crystal Gems, a rebel group of humanoid, space-faring, magically and technologically empowered living gemstones with a
self-imposed mission of protecting the Earth and its people from the imperial and colonial aspirations of their own species from the Gem home world. The leader, Garnet, although technically a reified, magical gemstone with two garnets in her palms, bears an uncanny resemblance to a Black woman (Figure 6). In fact, she is voiced by British singer Estelle. Among the Gems’ many abilities is the power to magically fuse their bodies through complimentary, coordinated dance routines, which result in brand new beings with emergent properties, identities, and abilities that are constructed from the personalities and power sets of the individual gems from which they are constructed. For example, Garnet fusing with Amethyst forms Sugilite, a monstrous, violent and unstable gem, voiced by Nicki Minaj. Furthermore, in the finale of the first season, it is revealed that Garnet is herself an especially stable fusion of Ruby and Sapphire, two gems so closely engaged in a queer relationship that they exist as one being. The approach to fusion in Steven Universe presents a new and sometimes unsettling transcorporeal critique of the body. According to Garnet, she is simultaneously a singular being and the manifestation of multiple individuals; she identifies the fusion state as not merely a body but also an experience. A close reading of an excerpt from a song she delivers expounds on this idea further:

“This is who we are.
This is who I am.
And if you think you can stop me,
Then you need to think again.

’Cause I am a feeling,

And I will never end,

And I won't let you hurt my planet,

And I won't let you hurt my friends.

Go ahead and try to hit me if you're able.

Can't you see that my relationship is stable?

I know you think I'm not something you're afraid of,

’Cause you think that you've seen what I'm made of.

Well I am even more than the two of them.

Everything they care about is what I am.

I am their fury, I am their patience,

I am a conversation.”

Garnet is a multiplicity of individual actors and individual forces as well as a dynamic exchange between them. She identifies herself as simultaneously the embodiment of the interiority of her constituent gems in addition to her own emergent and constructively powerful being. She presents an unfamiliar and exciting way of interpreting the body and the self; one that deeply troubles Western reliance on liberal humanism. Notably, she is also the only gem that codes as a Black woman, even though it appears that Blackness is an emergent property that appears in her but not in her constituent parts (Ruby is red, Sapphire is blue, Sugilite is purple). Racializing assemblages may very well not exist in this universe, but they are still a factor for the
viewership, exemplified by the fervor that many Black people, especially Black women in the
Steven Universe fandom, have for Garnet.

The near infinite set of bodily possibilities for superheroic Blackness exemplifies this
need for a demonic ground separate from liberal humanism, which may be found in David
Fryer’s reimagining of posthumanism as a more nebulous space of embodied possibility. Fryer
traces analytical linkages between phenomenology, postnormativity, posthumanism, and queer
thinking. Fleshing out his thoughts on queerness as a politic, he frames it as an embodied and
performed practice of actively anti-normative thinking and interrogation, activating a
postnormative framework. From a postnormative standpoint, he is able to critique and reject
humanism’s essentialisms as well as antihumanism’s reactionary nature, building towards a state
of posthumanism, in which multitudes of possibilities and modalities for individual human
bodies are recognized as valid. He invokes and houses all of this within the purview of
phenomenology and explicitly points this politic of queer thought toward an anti-racist mission.
In framing queerness as a way of thinking and acting that actively goes against and moves
beyond normativity, this also allows it to critique normative structures under its own umbrella
and carry out a self-regulatory anti-normative project. By intersecting this more nebulous theory
with the critical posthumanist work being done by many Afrofuturist thinkers and creators, we
can move toward a body politic of speculative possibility that more strongly engages with
enfleshment, embodiment, and phenomenology.

New frameworks are needed to theorize the implications of Black bodies that can
function in superpositions of more-than-human and less-than-human. One such framework that
pops up fairly frequently in Afrofuturist writing is the Divine Feminine Principle, a Mother
Nature ideal valuing nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition, and healing as partners
to technology, science, and achievement (Womack 2013). We’ve seen this pop up with the
gendering of spirituality, naturalism, and power through figures like Storm and Vixen. Other
theorists, such as Cauleen Smith and Kodwo Eshun, have taken the Blackness-Technology
dialectic and theorized Blackness as a form of technology itself. Eshun frames this notion in
terms of Black musical products and the importance of music and sound technology to Black
culture (Womack 2013). Tracing a lineage of Black popular music throughout the latter twentieth
and early twenty-first centuries, there’s no shortage of incorporation and remixing of what are
now considered Afrofuturist themes and aesthetics. Musical phenomena such as Sun Ra,
Parliament-Funkadelic, and Lee Scratch Perry cultivated mixtures of deep space aesthetics and
mythological formations of Blackness with innovations in the technology of music production
itself. The intersection of Blackness and futuristic technological achievement should come as no
surprise considering the most influential breakthroughs in musical technology were pioneered
largely by Black producers and filtered through quickly evolving trends in Black culture. The
creative use of synthesizers, samplers, drum machines, and eventually digital software became
integral to musical production across the Black Diaspora, not only changing the course of
popular music in general, but also defining what today are still considered futuristic sounds
(Eshun 2003).

**Shock To Your System**

The intersection of technology and the Black body, with modernity, electricity, and music
often ghosting through, has been a significant factor in the creation and portrayal of Black
superheroic and Afrofuturistic figures and narratives. Technological enhancement and android
aesthetics do the work of intersecting imagined future-spaces into the Black super-body,
resulting in a dynamic and identifiable fleshed site of possibility and power. For example, the short-lived franchise *Steel* followed John Henry Irons, a Black man who designs and builds an armored suit, replacing Superman after his death in the 1990s. The character of Steel is marked with Black American historical and cultural symbols, becoming an Afropfuturistic embodiment of the Black American mythological figure John Henry. From folk hero to Superhero, Steel is in some sense an answer to modernist anxieties over science and technology, especially as they pertain to Black bodies and Black agency.

Irons literally builds a shell of technological power and Afropfuturity, allowing for bodily control over and embodiment of modernist forces.

In the urban modern moment, and more strongly with the rise of the postindustrial digital age, this engagement with technology became more strongly paired with an embodied electric aesthetic, manifesting in Black superheroic power sets in disproportionate rates. It’s this electric power that is embodied by three of the most iconic Black superheroes: Static, Storm, and Black Lightning, pictured in the top row of *Figure 7*. These three protagonists came about from different creators and publishers, with Static emerging around fifteen years after the other two, yet all share a strong similarity in color scheme: black and gold, with electric blue (*second row*). It can be said that their respective creators were in an artistic dialogue, building off of each other over a few decades to create a powerful Black
electric aesthetic. This aesthetic pops up in contemporary works like that of Black Kirby and John Jennings. In the third row one sees the Electric Slider, Janelle Monáe / Cindi Mayweather, and Kid Code. They all embody this aesthetic, yet in the latter two, the electric blue becomes a signifier for technological power.

Comparing Static and Storm, we can see the ways in which even these commonalities are delineated along lines of gender. Static uses his power over electromagnetism to very actively disrupt, navigate, and transcend the force and materiality and urban modernity, repurposing the metallic background noise of the cityscape for his own superheroic needs. For example, by flying on trashcan lids and manhole covers, and skating along power lines, he subverts normativity around the use and navigation of urban space, charting his own topographically queer path. Furthermore, he actively negates those forces of urban life that threaten, corral, and destroy Black bodies. Police brutality and gun violence become negligible in the face of raw and intricately directed electric power; Static is able to maintain a magnitude of agency and individuality that is simply not available to so many Black lives within the cityscape. In a similar sense, Misty Knight parallels Static’s figure of the Black electro-vigilante. Misty, armed with pistol and bionic arm, has a similar proclivity towards electromagnetic manipulation of

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6 Parkour can be considered as an interesting real-world complement to this idea. Navigation of physical urban space that requires an active improvisation of creative new uses and embodied critique of established routes and rules.
urban modernity (Carpenter 2009). In Figure 8, we see Misty using her cyborg enhancement to cease the motion of bullets in mid-air, providing an embodied defense against tools of modern violence. As mentioned above, Storm’s deployment of her electromagnetic power set more closely matches the roles to which Black superheroines are often relegated. Storm, in contrast with both Static and Misty, is a weather witch, manipulating the natural landscape as opposed to the urban. While the latter two use their power to nullify the weaponry of gang members and police officers alike, as well as negate any computerized or technological enemy, Storm uses hers mainly in form of the raw power of nature. Both can electrocute, vaporize, and disrupt when need be, yet readers are much more likely to see Static using more direct forms of attack than Storm. While Storm’s attacks, and more broadly, the deployment of her power, is usually less linear and direct, she does move closer into a fearsomely sublime state of being when she’s in action.

We see Storm flipping over trucks, stopping a tsunami with multiple tornados, and remotely heating up air molecules to such an extent that a section of forest is incinerated. While Static faces and navigates the urban landscape, Storm can actively manipulate the natural one, using her proficiency with wind and specially designed suit to achieve far more atmospheric heights (Pak 2014).

Wielding electromagnetic power within, around, and through the Black body occurs between natural and urban landscapes, bridging these seemingly disparate ecological spaces and their gendered connotations. Electricity, and its metaphorical associations with power, work, and control is necessary for the function of both natural ecologies and urban modernity, reified in the popular psyche. It is this electric aesthetic that fuels the Black Android narrative of Janelle

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7 Storm’s fearsome sublimity can be critiqued as a trope of many empowered female characters. Emotion, discipline, and control are often much more significant concerns for her than for her male counterparts.
Monáe’s alter ego Cindi Mayweather. Monáe engages in a tradition of Afrofuturist imaginative freedom to build an android mythology around Cindi, who travels through space and time with a collective of musical radicals, becoming the iconic figure of the Archandroid, taking the Superhero-as-modern-myth theorization and placing it far into her own imagined future. She engages with the figure of the Android to craft a commentary on social death for Black, queer, disabled, and othered bodies, collapsing them onto her own form. Her movement and narratives clearly show life and energy, but maintain elements of roboticism, critiquing its associations with lifelessness and non-personhood. The embodiment of the android aesthetic is fundamental to Monáe’s live performances and the radical spaces that she creates.

Given a pamphlet called the Ten Droid Commandments (Figure 9), the audience is warned the songs themselves are electric, implying an unpredictable and uncontrollable power that concertgoers must experience at their own risk, which includes fantastical maladies such as shockjaw, sweat-tech, and electrobutt. Instilling a heightened sense of danger and anticipation, she also stresses a focus on dancing and a necessity of movement. Audience participation is requested implicitly, and is necessary in order to get the full experience. People who feel her fabled electric power and recognize the

![Figure 9 - The Ten Droid Commandments](image-url)
android embodiment within them are rewarded by being able to fully engage with the dynamic, poly-temporal crafted space of the concert venue.

Monáe reifies this sentiment in the performance and portrayal of disability that she carries out upon her own fictional visage. Disability, both physical and mental, comes about as a result of the bodily non-normativity that is inherent to her robotic alter-ego. What she can and cannot do, can and cannot be, is a point of constant tension in her work, manifesting in themes of malfunction and artificiality. In her 2008 hit Many Moons, she lists off “Plastic sweat, metal skin / Metallic tears, mannequin” as part of a stream of social ills and brief reveries; in the video, as the song climaxes, Cindi Mayweather rising up and explosively glitches. Monáe’s imagined body is a set of seemingly contrasting physical states, the robotic and the biological in fantastic synthesis; a freakish postnormativity.

“Am I a freak for getting’ down?”

This freakishness further manifests in Monáe’s poly-temporaneous 2013 single Q.U.E.E.N. As the video opens, the viewer is introduced to the twenty-eighth century “living museum” of the Time Council, in which Janelle Monáe and her Wondaland troupe are featured in suspended animation, caught for musical revolutionary tactics in the twenty-first century. Not only have their individual bodies been suspended, keeping them stuck in time, but they’ve also been involuntarily displaced from their native temporal locale. They are agents are frozen until a James Brown-esque bass line starts and Funk replaces the classical Eurocentric sound profile of the museum—at which point the movement restricts itself to following the bass line. Literally and symbolically, their bodies are controlled by the funk. In accordance with the funkiness of the sound, the dancers in the video keep to its rhythms with bent knees and low centers of gravity. In
the words of Jacqui Malone, “To Western and central Africans, flexed joints represent life and energy, while straightened hips, elbows, and knees epitomized rigidity and death. The bent kneebone symbolized the ability to ‘get down (Malone 1996).’” The dancers are animated by the culturally Black sound and compelled to perform its rhythms among an Afrofuturist aesthetic that begets and necessitates life.

In the chorus, Monáe openly questions the freakishness that is imposed upon her performative body (“Am I a freak for getting’ down?”). Afrofuturist Ytasha Womack describes that freakishness as a material, self-sustaining independence that contradicts societal norms for women of color; Monáe’s female bodily autonomy and open use of Black dance forms is interpreted as unsettling (Womack 2013). The brand of freakishness is a legacy of settler colonialism imposed on the Black female body, and Monáe actively deploys futurity to unsettle it. By openly questioning freakishness, she is rejecting the colonial gaze and turning it onto itself by directly addressing the viewer. The museum in which the video takes place is a time-displaced prison of sorts, but the Wondaland troupe uses Black dance forms to disrupt the space and turn it into a postcolonial site of poly-temporality and active engagement across time. This disruption allows Monáe to question and subvert colonial notions of time and distort the Western linear progress narrative. By asserting themselves as culturally bound Black bodies in that time-space, they are reclaiming history and reframing their cultural timeline however they see fit.

The intersection of roboticism and freakishness is a futuristic engagement with colonial logics surrounding and defining the Black female body. Dating back to the fifteenth century, European justifications for racial governance were intimately tied to the othering of Black women’s bodies through fantastical depictions from white travel writers, later bolstered by European anxieties to distance themselves both culturally and physically from the African form.
According to historian Jennifer Morgan, family planning strategies such as relatively longer breastfeeding times and post-partum sexual abstinence, which increased infant survival rates and spaced out births, were perceived as sexual promiscuity and indifference by European explorers. Furthermore, African women were faced with a persistent trend among European travel accounts and pictorial depictions of having pendulous, cumbersome breasts upon which their infants could suck from over their shoulder. These travel accounts reflected a widespread trend in European exoticization of women in both Africa and the Americas, in which monstrous depictions were used as a pretense for harvesting of productive (and reproductive) value, as well as establishing “a gendered and…stabilized whiteness on which European colonial expansionism depended (Morgan 2004).” By distorting African women’s bodies into caricatures of dichotomous beauty and savagery, their power of self-definition and self-portrayal was usurped by a burgeoning white identity complex. Black women’s hold on their own humanity, and later re-classification into the inhuman (or subhuman), was placed into the hands of European colonial sensibilities. With the removal of agency and humanity came a need to bring order into the lives of those without it.

It was Enlightenment thought that would reframe Black bodies, especially Black women’s bodies, along the lines of use, positioning bodies as analogous to natural resources. Thinkers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel would solidify the non-personhood of colonized peoples by placing them in a “State of Nature.” Enlightenment thought placed Western civilization on a perpetually increasing linear progress narrative, one in which Western thought and society was developing towards logic, reason, and order. This thesis depended on Nature as the antithesis, a site of disorder, instinct, and timelessness; a two-dimensional background with which colonized peoples were flush. Hegel’s writing placed the inferiority of colonized peoples
in their lack of conscious thought and resultant failure to perceive themselves as historical agents. This ahistoricity, Hegel argues, negates the achievement of any progress or consciousness, leaving colonized peoples as subjects of the natural hierarchy imposed by European powers (Eze 1997). Without the legitimacy of cultural historicity, Black bodies could be relegated to a colonially defined natural space, and Black cultural practices could be collapsed into the instinct and illogic that European thinkers theorized as integral to their constructions of nature.

This brings us back to the earlier critique of landscape and what it means for Black bodies. Both natural and urban spaces have fundamentally defined and redefined the construction and possibility of Black bodies, especially in terms of how landscape intersects with Field and racializing assemblages. The implications of the intersection of postnormativity, critical geography, and Black speculative bodies can be drawn from a comparative critical visual analysis of Janelle Monáe’s *The Archandroid* and Erykah Badu’s *New Amerykah Part II* (Figure 10). Monáe’s album cover is usually claimed to be reminiscent of the 1927 German movie *Metropolis*, widely heralded as one of the first science fiction films. Both posters show technology growing out of the head of the main figure: Monáe has a city while the figure in Metropolis has a tower. Monáe’s city is gleaming set of chrome, gold, and pearl, standing together and pointing/moving upwards toward a bright future, which scifi has traditionally not reserved for Black women. The urban landscape is a crown, an icon of power imbued onto and claimed by Monáe’s resolute visage. Badu’s album cover plays on the same tropes as Monáe’s
Archandroid. They both position themselves as the fount of their respective ecologies, centering on the head. However, Erykah’s metallic form is contrasted by the imagery of naturalism and spirituality that surrounds her. She does away with the binary between the robotic and the biological, positioning the android as an inheritor of, and contributor to, life. Instead of facing the landscape or being relegated into it, they are themselves the embodied landscape.

The politics behind futurist portrayals of Black female bodies has strong reminiscences of the aforementioned Divine Feminine Principle, the ecological and technological entering a mutually constructive syncretic state. To see this in action, one can look towards Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, which follows Lilith, a Black woman who must negotiate her own humanity in the face of an alien race, the Oankali, who seek to genetically assimilate the stragglers of humanity a couple of centuries after the apocalypse. *Dawn* carries out the work of Fryer’s phenomenological, postnormative posthumanity, addressing the question of how it feels to embody non-normative modalities of the human, critiquing the normative view of the discreteness and boundedness of individual beings. In *Dawn*, the human as a concept is strongly questioned and actively altered on the genetic level. What is commonly defined as human, and what the “human” characters in the novel would define as human is actually subject to the genetic and biological manipulation of the Oankali; the human becomes a constant state of negotiation between individual and the self, as well as individual and community. As the Oankali freely adjust and manipulate Lilith’s body down to the genetic level without her consent, she is relegated to the subhuman category of natural resource and reproductive bio-machine, yet gains superhuman abilities of strength and indestructibility, as well as a physiological porosity with the Oankali space ship and its biomechanics. Fryer’s theorization of postnormativity provides a satisfying solution to the anxieties faced by the characters of *Dawn* on the subject of their own
humanity. They are forced into defining what it really means to be human, and revealing that that definition is inherently exclusionary. The human becomes defined by what it is not, and when the other humans exclude Lilith from that self-determination, she becomes stuck with all too familiar colonial logics of freakishness and monstrosity. The Oankali, on the other hand, define their own species as one of perpetual hybridity, porosity, and evolution: they are a genetically queer process. The Oankali even take this posthumanist perspective to the level of the very superstructure that they inhabit: a living organism/spaceship that they can engage with on a genetic and physiological level:

“She explained what she could of the changes that had been made in her body chemistry, then, with both men watching, she grew another room. Twice she stopped to allow them to inspect the walls. She said nothing when they attempted to control the walls as she did, and then attempted to break them. The living tissue of the walls resisted them, ignored them. Their strength was meaningless. Finally they watched silently as Lilith completed the room.

"It's like the stuff my cell was made of when I was Awake before," Curt said. "What the hell is it? Some kind of plastic?"

"Living matter," Lilith said. "More plant than animal (Butler 1993)."

Described by Lilith as “almost like a small world,” this space vessel contains distinct ecosystems and functions as a super-organism: growing, dividing, digesting its inhabitants’ waste and recycling it into food and biomass. The Oankali have no problem with the lack of biological
boundaries, recognizing their ”selves” and their surroundings as biologically and genetically fluid and porous. The queer logic of possibility is the very foundation of their mission.

The deconstruction of spatial binaries and spatial structures allows for nuanced ways of postcolonial re-formations of Black bodies as themselves sites of possibility and critique. The Black speculative body is that which has virtually no choice but to break down the liberal humanist specter of Man through a dynamism and transcorporality that in many instances does away with the need for the mundanity of human-ness. To go beyond the human is a possibility being perpetually reimagined.

Reclamation and mythological embodiment

Threading throughout the project is the need for, and trend of, embodied reclamations of cultural histories and geographies through Afrofuturist and superheroic creation and critique. Reaching back to a moment of American industrialization and mechanization preceding modernist superheroic anxieties is the emergent aesthetic of Steamfunk. Functioning as a subcultural intersection between Steampunk and Afrofuturism, Steamfunk intersects postbellum / Victorian Era aesthetics with Black historical narratives and futuristic possibilities (Davis & Ojetade 2013). This form of Black retrofuturism allies itself very closely to (Afro)punk scenes and must navigate Afropunk, Afrofuturist, and Steampunk spaces in imaginative and innovative ways. Although representation is lacking among mainstream Black culture creators, Steamfunk is manifested strongly through Black cosplayers, indie artists and writers, and online enclaves, including everything from music to webcomics.

Arising as a response to lack of representation of Black Steampunk narratives, Steamfunk often functions as a direct response to the Utopianism of both Steampunk and Afrofuturism, and
the tension between both subcultures surrounding the positionality of nineteenth century Black bodies. Although it celebrates itself for its punk and radical interjections, traditional Steampunk narratives tend to glaze over issues of race, gender, and sexuality in the Victorian Era, usually imagining worlds in which certain systems of oppression don’t exist, yet the bodies they oppress are coincidentally still backgrounded. Afrofuturism glazes over the specter of postbellum Blackness due to anxieties surrounding how exactly to interpret slavery and its immediate aftershocks while still maintaining positive, utopian Afrofuturist visions. Steamfunk, however, faces that tension head on and embraces the messiness that comes with it. Black bodies of the Victorian and post-bellum eras faced deep dilemmas over the establishment of personhood, self, and society. Steamfunk provides a framework from which one can directly address these anxieties and tensions, fleshing out issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, recognizing that this was a moment simultaneously of darkness and possibility.

Steamfunk can be theorized as a project of myth making through the reclamation of one of the most pivotal moments in Black American history. Steamfunk’s engagement with very real histories and historical figures allows creators to critique the historiography of the mainstream narration of post-bellum America. It allows agency to be returned to Black bodies as thinkers, creators, lovers, and even adventurers. It allows all due respect to be paid to the sacrifices and mythical actions undertaken by figures like Harriet Tubman, whose in appearance in Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter can be argued to be a Steamfunk critique on depictions of fantastical histories of Blackness (Hobson 2014). Analyzing how Black bodies were perceived during the period and how they themselves perceived concepts of freedom, adventure, and bondage, one can pick up on a blending of myth, legend, and technology that is ripe for a Steamfunk-inspired artistic engagement. Notions of Black automata, Magical Black Folk, and the mythical
Underground Railroad are interwoven in this moment and can be argued to be the beginnings of a distinctly Black American mythology, one which hints toward and points to a coming dialogue between Blackness and technology in the face of twentieth century modernity. Steamfunk engages with a Black American mythological landscape, forming a radical interjection with contemporary theorizations of the future and the fantastic.

With the superhero milieu undergirded by a Western mythological framework, creating a space for mythologies from colonized cultural contexts requires an Afrofuturistic interjection. The work of Nalo Hopkinson, for one, blurs the boundaries between the technological and the divine, putting them into an active discourse. Her work *Midnight Robber* follows an Afro-Caribbean community that has migrated to and colonized a distant planet, yet stays connected to the vast network of humanity through “Granny Nanny,” a sentient system of nanites that exist within their bodies, allowing them to gain control over their own corporeal forms as well as tapping them into the vast database of human knowledge. In the specific cultural context of the book, Granny Nanny is reified through *eshus*, modeled after Eshu-Elegbara, the mediator between the human and the divine. Alisa Braithwaite’s theorization of this narrative sets technology as a facilitator of community, allowing one access to the self and the universe.

The syncretic relationship between divine and technological forces becomes much less symbiotic in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Toronto’s urban center, the “cartwheel half-mired in muddy water,” is decaying due to the flight of the middle and upper class towards the outer ring suburbs, leaving the impoverished communities consisting manly of people of color, free to reclaim and reshape the urban space through their own cultural contexts. The people of the Burn exist on an ecological plane (horizontally with Nature and each other), leaving them subject to the power of the spirit world. Syncretic interaction between the mythological and the technological allows
Afro-Caribbean deities to manifest in the human world as powerful natural forces, acting on the urban environment with hyper-real consequences:

“The chandelier was swaying. In fact, the whole structure of the CN Tower was shaking. An 1,800-foot needle, trembling…. Ti-Jeanne was facing one of the windows that ringed the observation deck, so it was she who saw the flash of white light flower in the night sky, zigzag down, and strike the glass. The building flashed into the negative against her abused retinas. Black flared to blinding white, colour to dead black. The structure of the tower creaked. Outside in the miles-high air, Shango Lord Thunder drummed his rhythm while Oya of the storm flashed and shattered the air like knives. Ti-Jeanne had an impression of an ecstatic woman’s features, silver dreadlocks tossing wildly as she danced around a hugely muscled, graceful man who clasped a tall drum between his knees. The lightning flashes crawled, whipping around the length of the tower. The first of the Oldest Ones had arrived.

Rain pelted down like boulders. The lightning cracked fissures into the tower’s structure, and water began to leak in, buckets of it. The water traced forms along the wall, and two majestic Black women stepped out from its current: graceful Oshun and beautiful Emanjah, water goddesses both, anger terrible on their unearthly faces (Hopkinson 1998).”

Hopkinson’s flood functions as a powerful natural force beyond human control, yet rests solidly in the hands of the spirits, who possess the “super” power to transcend and control both natural
and the technological power. These Afro-Caribbean deities can be argued to fit easily into Boney’s philosophy on the superhero as reaction to, and transcendence of, modernity. Furthermore, Phillips & Strobl’s thoughts on the postmodern superhero are embodied by their moral ambiguity and chaotic neutrality. Envisioning them as superheroic would require very little mental exertion if they belonged to mythological pantheons that the West claims as its own. Had it been Thor instead of Shango, the scene described above could fit right into a two-page spread in a Marvel comic. Yet, mythologies invalidated and ignored by Whiteness seem to have no place in the American superheroic framework.
Conclusion

There is much to be said about, for, and by those whose bodies are critiqued, celebrated, or denigrated as non-normative; those whose bodies are too much and yet somehow not enough. This project is a celebratory look at the work being done through postcolonial frameworks of imagining and re-imagining, (re)framing Black bodies as sites of possibility, through which future-spaces can be opened and new cultural narratives built. Thanks in large part to decades of cultural production within the superheroic genre and its direct connections back to mythological constructions, ideas of posthumanity, of bodies beyond the human, have become explicitly and implicitly engrained into the Western psyche. Thanks in large part to decades of Afrofuturist cultural production, mainstream speculative work has always been under critique for its gatekeeping of who can enter the realm of the posthuman; of who can be heroes. Conversations in the realm of marginalized bodies seeking their own reflection in the realm of speculative work very frequently rely on tactics of inclusion, representation, and assimilation into a set of subgenres and subcultures that were built upon the aforementioned white patriarchal universalism its post-liberal humanist-humanity. In our postnormative explorations of what bodies can be capable and how they can behave, it’s important to remember that othered bodies have always been monstrous, freakish, and impossible. That colonial logic has always marked them as incapable of humanity and subject to violence, reifying this embodied inhumanity through geographic control and spatial dialectics.

The excess that has no place in the realm of Enlightenment Man has always speculated on the postnormative. What remains to be seen is how these speculations can fundamentally influence a much-needed ethic of futurist and post-colonial body politics. As we are opening our own imagined spaces and creating our own imagined bodies, it is essential to look critically at
which body types are being prioritized and which modes of body possibility are being left out. Through Black, queer, and disabled imaginative frameworks many creators have carried out the work of (re)building the human, negotiating between the inhuman to superhuman scales of Western Man and eventually dismantling it altogether, forming new spaces of alterity and speculation.

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