

A relationship between Science
fiction and the Black/African
diaspora: Afrofuturism in the wake
of the Black live matter movement

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‘Blackness is often recognised as a signifier of the multiethnic underclass, as well as an increasingly commodified image of residence.’ (Bould. Mark 2007, 181)

A hegemonic affinity exists between the genre of science fiction and race, black racial identity and representation in the contemporary space has never been more relevant in viewing contemporary matters of the current political and cultural climate. There is an ever increasing speed to which individuals and more directly Black/African viewers have access to information, and an even growing range in which have to engage in this web of information, the public sphere is able to observe matters of race locally in addition to globally which has further revealed deeper connections of institutionalised and systematic racialism against the African Diaspora. Modern technology from phones, social media and video platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter, has proven to be a contemporary ground for racism to be challenged and discussed even to the extent of creating the beginnings of social movements. This similar parable can be recalled to mirror certain speculative fiction and the science fiction genre from fictional authors W.E.B Dubois (b1868) and fictional poet Amiri Baraka (b1934).

In this essay I aim to examine the discussion of Afrofuturism and the affiliation between science fiction which has presented allegories in talks of race, blackness, and Africana diaspora. I will explore fictional materials that have been applied to race which has manifested into a kind of social activism following earlier black movements. By exploring the works of John Jennings and Stacey Robinson’s *Black Kirby Exhibition* I will be looking into the

relationship between Science fiction in comics and black race. Through this I aim to understand the influence that mainstream comics afflicted on young black viewers of the 60s -70s. This additionally leads into the question of science –fiction materials and their relation to the current black lives matter movement. I briefly address how closely race and technology draw parallels with each other in the works of Fatimah Tuggar, *Fusions Cuisine*. This is aided in illuminating a glimpse of how racism against black bodies has been a long, established, coded system within some key institutions yet has been applied to become a tool of activism and social change. This is evident in the text by Writer Beth Coleman’s *Race as technology*, where Coleman notes ‘technology can be exploited to liberate race from an inherited position of objection toward the greater expression of agency – but also includes systems. How beings are subjected to systems of power, ideology, and other networks’ (2009, 177).

Afrofuturism as coined first by the American Author, writer and critic Mark Dery (b1959) in his *Black to the Future* collection of interviews with Samuel R Delaney, he notes ‘Speculative Fiction that treats African-American theme and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the twentieth century technoculture and more generally, African- American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future-might, for want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism.’ (Dery.M, 1994, page 180).

Afrofuturism, which broke free from its speculative fiction parent, gave power to writers, musicians, poetics, and theatrics. This includes authors Octavia Butler, Sam Delany, Sun Ra,

and Charles Saunders who framed black specific racial materials and appropriated these in a futuristic spaces from Afrocentric myths, legends, art, and music. When the world asked 'what will the world look like in the future?' these writers and artists asked 'what will we look like in the future? This basis would later encompass the afro-futurist ideology which could reinvasion the past and present without the Eurocentric and white dominated beliefs. Yet still carry on the aesthetic tradition based conceptions of utopia, dystopia, worm holes, parallel dimensions, and time travel.

'Contemporary Afrofuturism is an intellectual and artistic movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with musicians '(Gateward. F, Jennings. J page 181) Artist, jazz composer and cosmic philosopher Sun Ra, has been noted to have originally brought the literary and artistic movement to light in his early years of college. He had hallucinations of an experiences involving his own abduction and was brought to Saturn by higher power beings to be shown prophetic futures of earth and space. Sun Ra comments:

'I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. I do not come to you as a reality, I come to you as a myth because that's what black people are: myths. I come from a dream that the black man dreamed long ago. I'm actually a presence sent to you from your ancestors.'(From Space is the Place page...)

The Afro-futurist wave shook conventional domains of looking at race and black specific materials in American mainstream media. This movement looked at the future by acknowledging and recognising the past. This is questioning how black faces could possibly stand and dominate against a western non-black mediated genre. The black body embodied the science fiction alien experiences which 'Afrofuturism claims are at the heart of the African American consciousness' (Hicks, C 2011, page 4). This is manifested from early W.E.B Dubois' (b1868) 1920s science fiction literature and Sun Ra's own adoption of the Black Consciousness in wake of The Black power movement. Hicks talks further on the future stance taken by Ra 'represented a rejection of his Christianity' (that is to say a form of an oppressive system and turned toward his own cultural regeneration). Science fiction and black matters manifested in all forms of music, literature and art. This became a new lens to view a strikingly repetitive system of racism which mirrors current *Black Lives Matter* movement and the issues of police brutality in the US prison system.

Firstly, comic books, which are noted to be an allegory the social and political issues in black / Africana, can initiate this conversation. From the X-men's mutant leader, teacher Charles Xavier and rebel and liberator Magneto were created influenced by the social activist climate or the era. This was also drawn from Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X respectively, after the Civil rights movement and the eventual rise of the black power movement in the 60s. From this, the publishing company Marvel, debuted their mainstream title *Black Panther*. (Figure 1) Black panther explored very primitive speculative black fiction

ideology formerly before the first fully acknowledged conception from a perspective other than from the eyes of the black body. Black Panther was heralded as the forerunning Black superhero in mainstream comics, in 1966 writers and editors Stan Lee and Jack Kirby depicted the all-American nuclear family in *Fantastic Four* issue 52 which was featured before Marvel's own blaxploitation era. Black Panther initially voiced the account of young prince T'challa earning the responsibility as the Black Panther, a Ceremonial title given to the chief of the Panther tribe in his fictional country. After the previous king and former Panther, (T'challa father) was killed by tyrant and white male Ulysses Klaw in search for a rare earthly material hidden underground of the king's nation.

The character represented a black superhero possessing his own superhero abilities. As author of *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha L. Womack believes that 'Seeds were planted in the imagination of countless black kids who yearned to see themselves in warp-speed spaceships too.... With the diversity of the nation and the world increasingly standing in stark contrast to the diversity in futuristic works, it's no surprise that Afrofuturism emerged' (Womack L. Y, 2013, page 6). Although Womack comments on the emergence of Afrofuturism this too can be applied to the 60s appearance of the Black Panther superhero.

Young Black readers were subject to a primarily intelligent young and migrant leader that proudly embraced his rich black and African tradition, as well as serving and protecting his country. Yet the Panther also struggled, in his internal turmoil, with the death of his father but furthermore the Panther's acceptance into a fresher larger than himself persona as the

chief and bearer of the mantle of the Black Panther. The character was introduced and set against a white picket fenced landscape in a nuclear family style and pitted against one of the fictional universe's most astute and gifted minds (Reed Richards or Mr fantastic). Nonetheless Black Panther challenged these initial philosophies as he could hold his own intellectually against Richards, almost unseen before in science fictions. This served defiance or resistance to the cast of black-faced individuals who were pinned by crime and subservience. Delany further talks that 'until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past' Delaney further implores that we need "images of tomorrow" (M.Dery 1994, page 191). Readers identified with a strong, black, male character that was not introduced as a sidekick to the orthodox white, male, lead character. From a technologically and scientifically superior nation this further brought, to a young mainstream lens, issues of systemic racial divides and segregation. During the 1960's, an apartheid ruled South Africa, The Black Panther was an example that juxtaposed the real life events that were occurring. However, Black Panther later confronted this issue of racial divide through the introduction of the 'White Nation of Azania'. This nation bordered the Homeland of The King T'Challa and sprung forth champions of its own that battled against the Black Panther.

The sudden embracing of a chief spoke to young African Americans. This was particularly relevant to black, male Americans, as in the 60's mostly black, latino or other non-white gang crime and activity was becoming a rising issue in the streets and cities. 'The increased violence first noted in the 1960s for black gangs in Chicago has become the norm. Perkins

(1997) identified the influence of drugs, corrupting prison experiences and the effectiveness of community-based programs as the contributing factors to these increases in violence' (Charles V. 2016). This rise in the influence of drugs, and inner city crime brought with it the ' male homicide rate doubling from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, increasing from 4.6 per 100,000 U.S. residents in 1962 to 9.7 per 100,000 by 1979' (A. Cooper and E. L. Smith page 2, 2011).



Figure 1 Black Panther makes his Marvel debut in 1966

Professor of visual studies Stacey Robinson and artist John Jennings recently explored this dialogue concerning black diaspora questions and science fiction comic books in a collaborative exhibition formerly open at the *Hall Walls Contemporary Art Center, 2012*. This showcased digitally created works and 'Celebrates the incredible work of Jack Kirby and his contributions to the pop culture landscape. Black Kirby functions as a rhetorical tool by appropriating Kirby's bold forms and energetic ideas combined with themes centered around Afrofuturism, social justice, representation, magical realism, and using the culture of Hip Hop as a methodology for creating visual communication.' (Hallwalls 2012) Titled *Black Kirby* (Figure 2 and Figure 3) playfully handles Jack Kirby (1917-1994) who gave life to a modern Marvel fictional world we see in contemporary film and media. They note through a

‘white normative narrative of comics’ as Robinson explains in a Q&A interview with *Northwestern. Edu.*

The alliance between the two came from a love of comics as young black kids during the late 70s. However, the two note that they could not see their faces in these Science fiction comics and materials. Robinson continues to disclose that they put themselves in the stories of science fiction much like Octavia Butlers (b1947) fictional novels such as *Kindred* (1979), *Fledgling* or *Parable*. Jennings and Robinson further envisioned an established white dominated character stories and used Afro inspired historical contexts, myths, and legends to present those characters as Afrocentric heroes.

Exemplified in Figure 2 the cover strikingly catches comic readers and early pop culture fanatics as the viewer is presented with a similar yet eerily stark image, inspired by the action pose of a Captain America issue #193. The all American superhero is instead replaced by a traditional African, garbed black, male wielding Captain Americas signature red, white and blue shield. The figure carries with him a Tribal African shield reminiscent in design to Traditional Zulu or Maasai shields used by tribesman in parts of Western Africa. These were used in battles that date back to early 20th century that were used and seen as a social and political symbols.

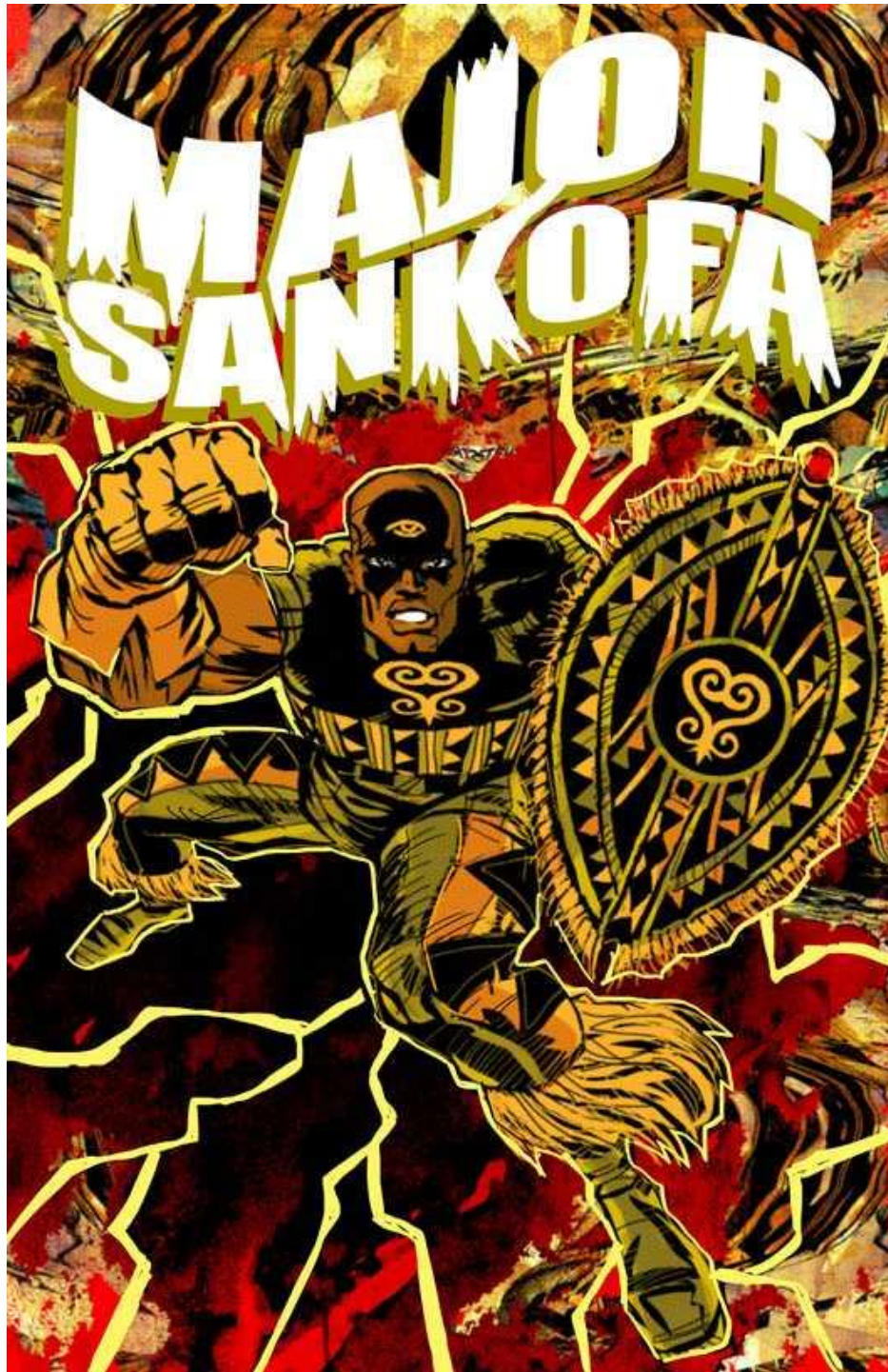


Figure 2 Black Kirby (John Jennings & Stacey Robinson), Major Sankofa, digital. Print on paper, 2013

The shields were bestowed to young adult male tribesman in Maasai Culture as a rite of passage. The character sports a darker colour scheme consisting of earthy yellows, browns and greens embedded in the figures costumes, as well as being laced with Egyptian inspired glyphs or symbols in place of the American flag's tradition of the five-pointed white star. Behind the figure is a menagerie of mixed media influenced design backgrounds using again bold bloody tones of reds, and earthy shades of brown, similar to the use of animal blood mixed in with the earth to be used as paint on the shields and bodies of tribesman. This is contrasted with bright golden bolts of yellow that mirror the dry cracked ground in the savannah landscape.

Above the powerfully assertive character, is situated in text that reads 'Major Sankofa' in place of the captain America issue title. The title is boldly raised against darker tones is derives its origin from the Akan people of Ghana, which literally can be translated to mean 'to go back and get it' reminiscent of the 1993 Movie of the same Name directed by Naile Gerima(b19..) (IMDB) As an article by the University of Rochester continues to say 'Taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive

progress through the benevolent use of knowledge. Going back and reclaiming our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.’ (1996)

The artists begin to use this idea of the Sankofa to reinvent the Captain as a character that physically and aesthetically embodies the definition of ‘to go back and get it’. The artists are ‘reclaiming’ the past, using African traditional materials exemplified by the simple black triangular shapes of the character’s costume. The use of a rough bush or fur like garments wrapped around the figures calf and around his shield that recalls using of animal leather or fur by Maasai culture, draws a new dialogue between the Black body and science fiction by asserting them on a figure that also physically manifested the hegemonic patriarchal white America, Jennings and Robinson begin to look at future by looking into the past.

Jennings and Robinson further explore Sankofa’s idealism, in a further work show in *figure 3*. Again the viewer is presented with a familiar ghost of a pop culture character, were the barbaric blonde haired blue-eyed Viking Norse god Thor should be. Instead displayed is another dark faced interpretation. The artists reshape the character with bold angular lines and contrasting bright psychedelic colours to recall Jack Kirby’s Comic book Frantic and feverish style. Like Kirby, these imaginings styled odd geometry, exaggerated lines, shapes and shadows further adding quick bold movement. This quick movement and contrasting bright colours harks back to the 1970s styled New York Graffiti and the hip hop genre seen by such infamous artists such as Bil Rock, Lady Pink and Jon One. These artists share a rebellious, anarchist idealistic connotation but are laid the foundations of a acknowledging

of the past towards a resistance to the impassable force fields of intolerance 'if you look at the graffiti art done in New York subways throughout that era By artists such as Rammelize, phase 2 Kase, and Blade, there's an incredible interest in fantasy in the SF (Science fiction) vein especially in the apocalyptic sense involving the insertion of black figures into post-holocaust landscapes' (Dery.M 1994, page 209).



THE MIGHTY SHANGO / DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT ON PAPER 24" X 36"

118 BLACK KIRBY

Figure 3 The Might Shango, John Jennings & Stacey Robinson, Black Kirby, Print on paper, 2013

Next the viewer sees in place of the Norse thunder god grew almost impossible lengths of dreadlocks, based on the African mythos of Yoruba God of Thunder Shango or similarly said to be Sango who was a fourth king of the Oyo empire of the west African culture which thrived up until 1835 that fled into the forests of his kingdom and died yet some believed he rose into the heavens by old gods and was send back to earth emerging as the god of fire and instead of the famous hammer Mjolnir this wielder carries a shiny Axe as he poses into a position of battle and power.

traditional artwork and shared and passed story telling by the Yoruba people depicted the god possessing powerful mystical energy and even later reared as a symbol of power and resistance to the Yoruba People in the 19th century when many were taken from their homes and villages As slaves to be forced into the American slave trade, the African god's tale of being falling from the heaven, again shared similarities with original comic book conception, as well as both Thor and the god Shango shared pantheon as God of Thunder, additionally it is noted that both characters equally told the similar tale of falling from the heavens although Thor was cast out of the heavens of Asgard by all father God Odin, onto

earth where he lay dormant trapped in the body of a mortal human man until later freed on earth.

The collective duo begin processes of these illustrative creations, commences with Stacey drawing and sketching out rough comic book inspired panels on paper which he then using an old phone and his old phone camera which he then digitally sends to his partner Jennings that fully realises these conceptions into pop culture style pieces again the artists incorporate their epitomes of looking back and using the past to see the future in their system of producing the work using old school styled rough sketches on physical material, which had been the most advanced mode of Creating comic book panels and characters by illustrators in the early 60s and 70s which the Jennings transfers the hand drawn renderings digitally, these begin now exists in the digital space where the Artist Jennings further manipulates and adds digitally enhanced colours and effects.

Seen in *The Blacker the in: constructions of black identity in comics and subsequent art* it is further discussed how 'comics have proven a fertile territory for the depictions of race and "visually codified representations in which characters are reduced to their appearances' (F. Gateward, J.Jennings, 2015, page 183), Artists Jennings and Robinson embrace and challenge this theory by using science fiction comics as another space to create a dialogue between the viewers about establishing a ground in which racial matters could take form and be discussed, the artists used a collection pop culture idioms taken from their favoured comics, spy thriller, and science fiction in a black revolutionary framework to motivate the consciousness of the African American population.

From *Star Trek's* (1996) intergalactic communicators into fully recognised mobile phones of today and from *Back to the Futures* (1985) video conference calls and 4D cinematic experience, Science fiction based material has been physically engineered into our real-time space becoming now into everyday life, Blackness and black bodies still radically contrasted with science fiction. The vision of a white utopian society pushed by the advancement of almost impossible technology so too did the image of non-white faces fall along with this, so here draw on the association between technology and the black body to continue the discussion of black racial matters in the future. when cops were 'beating black asses left to right... when they caught it on video that felt like some science fiction' a satirical writer and activist responds to Afrofuturism meeting black lives matter (La Leon.A, 2016) Writer *Alonda Nelson* further invokes a discourse of race and blackness integrating with technology she notes that 'Race identity and Blackness in particular it's the anti-avatar of Digital life' (Nelson. A, 2002, page 1) and additionally propositions of what Technology would bring forward in constructing a space to see blackness in the future she goes on to voice in ' the 'virtual age' our awareness the fragmented self is heightened by computer-mediated communication" (Nelson. A, 2002 page 3) the black Lives matter movements has recently begun to reveal notions on Race with or as technology.

After the social media launch the of Black lives matter movement at the hands of the social media site Twitter spiked as the mass media now served as a convenient and integral platform for people to gain knowledge and share information globally, Black lives matter became an international activist movement in the black community after following the

events of Black high school student and seventeen year old Trayvon Martin's Murder in 2012 at the hands of George Zimmerman a 28 year old mixed race Hispanic man in a fatal Gunshot wound within the neighbourhood that Martin had been temporarily living in, after the trial have been acquitted on the grounds of Self defence against Martins and lack of evidence to support anything other than that, social media platform Twitter gave rise the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and the support from online users who voiced a change in the racial inequality of the American justice system, police brutality, racial profiling and to lift the veil of the Racially motivated systems against blacks around the world, the 'African Diasporic communities in cyberspace offer the opportunity for fostering the black public sphere and for strengthening the links of the African diaspora using information technology as a tool for activism and social cohesion' (Nelson. A , 2002, page 11) .

Documented cases began to appear across the internet following Trayvon Martin's case, Videos taken by onlookers by their phones showcased the full racial power of the American police system, such as the recent fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 another young 18 year old black male shot by Police offer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri ' Weheliye offers a therapy of the digital age subjectively centered around the encoding of black diasporic forms in terms of the new technologies that contribute to the daily realities of black life' (Nelson. A, 2002 page 10) discusses the conjunction between man and machine with the use of a human voice sintering device or a Vocoder to produce a "machine black voice", the black Africana diaspora utilised the power of Social media and technology and rallied in sharing, posting stories and video cases that brought to light a deliberate systemic

prejudice against black we see that 'over and over again the pattern of resistance to the Apartheid –created structures that ha(ve) been the same. First, open and defiant rejection, second, sullen acquiescence and reluctant collaboration, lastly capitulation and corruption' (Biko.S, 1978, page 47)

Biko addresses another social structure built within the South African political system which served as a form of oppression against black individuals. What black lives matters and the emergence of technology to view global racial issues was reveal to the black community a set of coded systems in which 'scholars of the history of race generally argue that the advent of the transatlantic slave trade originated the modern system of racial meaning... one that has enacted (and continues to enact) ideological, material and political realities based on the devaluation of peoples who are not western or white.... This set in motion a binary logic of master / slave, man/machine or man/beast with deep long consequences for western culture as a whole and for the fate of black, brown and yellow people in particular' (B.coleman, 2009 , page 190). This system stretched into the Tuskegee experiments 1932 that date back to 1895 in which lead to the improper treatment of Male syphilis careers even after Penicillin was researched into becoming the drug of choice to combat the diseases, the male careers where not informed of this promoting a public outcry and investigation against the study. Delaney comments further that when 'we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean specifically, that it was founded on the systemic, conscientious and massive destruction of African cultural remnants (M.dery, 1994, page 191).

Nigerian Born multidisciplinary artists Fatimah Tuggar Explores power dynamics in the agency between technology the body and, race in relation to an emerging post human cyber feminist to context in her Collages style series of works seen in *figure 4, fusion cuisine* combines found footage style image, object sound, from diverse and ranged geographies, histories and cultures, such as personal images and videos of African woman performing domestic tasks with archival videos of 50s and 60s Commercial video.

Tuggar builds up a narrative the explores how technology impacts internal and global realities, which demonstrates a kind 'necessity for more critical analyses of the intersections among technology, globalisation and gendered and racialized subjectivity' (Du Preez.P, 2008, page 161) further comment to which the artists presents to the viewer a juxtapositional mix of Post-world war II found domestic technology styled footage commercial that blatantly target the American middle class white woman against interlaced clips that the artists herself records of black African woman in Nigeria, this fusion critically and playfully depicts a kind of cold war American fantasy laid in consumer technology as a 'gendered emancipation of nation progress while exposing the racial and geographic erasures that form the basis of these visions of the future' (Feetwood. N 2011 page 177), her video jumps and contrasts using jarring jump cuts and varying landscapes, sounds,

moments and, locations that begin to render their respective spaces obsolete, they seemingly blending them together.

The artists carefully crafts a narrative that builds on the incongruent subjective matter of the middle class White woman in contrast with a Rural Nigerian Woman to present an ideology that symbolises and exposes issues of an underdeveloped technologically scarce geographic, its plays on the modern of use of technology and its use with the body, her contrast in these subjects acts as a form of activism and revelation of the black body using or integrating with technology. Tuggar brings forth these implication of the Technology being seen as a norm when surrounded by the white individual however she challenges when introduced into blackness these two begin to create a dialogue that works against the view of technology and black especially African individuals are oppositional.

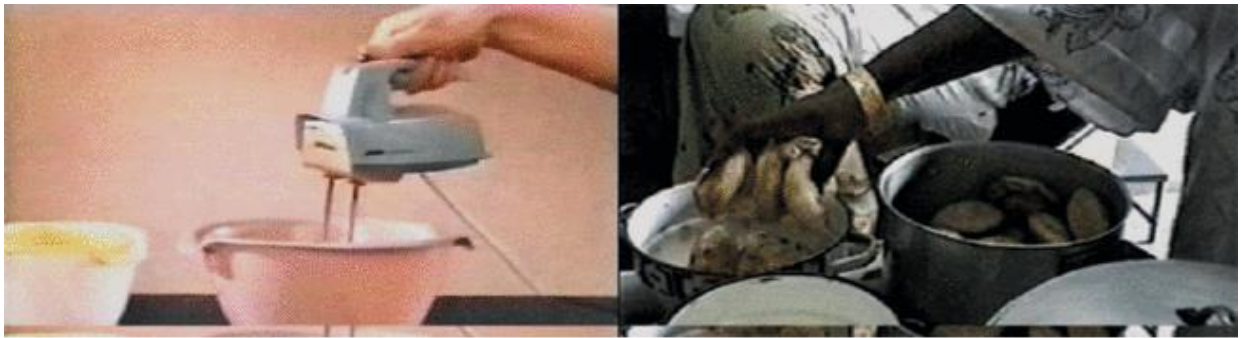


Figure 4 Fatimah Tuggar, Fusion Cuisine, 2000, Video Still

In conclusion, It is brought to light that early science fiction comic book novels became an early mainstream medium for writers who were influenced by the events of the time to present to a young viewer relatable allegories for the issues of blackness in the American social political climate in the 60s and 70s, forerunning Black superheroes emerged at an era that only saw black representations dominated by incarceration, homicide and violence.

A character in opposing of this served as a form of activism against the white normative system which progressed from in early Dubiosian science fiction literature of the late 18th century. Corresponding with the emergence of comic book black characters further saw other literary authors, musicians and artists to respond against their representations in science fiction material pushing their own black speculative movement in challenge and resistance, science fiction and the technologies that followed converted into not only a ground where blackness could be envisioned and were the diaspora could look at the past and inform the future but a space to view racial and systems and institutions of the societal oppressor propagated from early Slave trade through to the modern criminal justice system, the American Sports League which further enforces and exploits stereotypes and the black body. The Black lives matter movement served in rallying together the African American diaspora through working through and with technology. This further opens a speculation into Afrofuturism manifesting through technology and allowing the blackness to exist and in the digital space.

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