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Stellar Transfigurations of Disabled Bodies : Wangechi Mutu and Afrofuturism

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ABSTRACT

Stellar Transformations of Disabled Bodies: Wangechi Mutu and Afrofuturism will examine how Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972) depicts futuristic black bodies. Utilizing three of her collages, *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* (2010), *My Strength Lies* (2006), and *Homeward Bound* (2010), I will analyze Mutu's themes of Afrofuturistic alienation and the grotesque. I will use Afrofuturism and Mutu's renderings to reveal a future visibility for the black female body.

Mutu collages images from fashion magazines, car manuals, *National Geographic*, and catalogs to construct bodies with missing limbs and severed appendages. Critics have called these bodies "grotesque", whereas Mutu has called her bodies "disabled". I will be using both terms "grotesque" and "disabled" in conjunction with black grotesquerie to examine Mutu's vision of a black female body in the future. With black grotesquerie, I will explore the connection between Mutu's own labor as a collagist, her Africanness, and the construction of her composite female bodies. The theme of Afrofuturistic alienation will be examined by analyzing the backdrops of each collage as they relate to the black female body's historical and future sites of habitation. My analysis of each backdrop will highlight questions of ecocriticism and body/land politics pervasive in all of Mutu's collages. Afrofuturistic alienation will be *cyborged* out of "homelessness" and into an *abducted alienation* as a way to create a site of habitation for the self-curated black body. *Cyborged* will refer to the physical manipulation required by Mutu to create black female bodies in the future, both theoretically and materially. With her use of

popular magazines and her own physical dissection of popular culture, Mutu offers us a self-curated black body *living* and *being* in the future.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Stellar Transfigurations of Disabled Bodies:
Wangechi Mutu and Afrofuturism

by

Addys Lorenzo Gonzalez

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

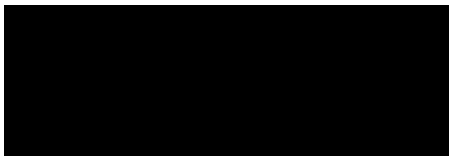
For the Degree of

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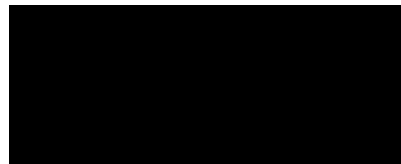
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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STELLAR TRANSFIGURATIONS OF DISABLED BODIES:

WANGECHI MUTU AND AFROFUTURISM

A THESIS

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ADDYS LORENZO GONZALEZ

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2020

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I. *The Aliens have Landed*

“Trade means change. Bodies change. Ways of living must change.
Did you think your children would only *look* different?”

-Octavia Butler, *Adulthood Rites*

INTRODUCTION

On September 9, 2019, the Metropolitan Museum of Art became a site of an extraterrestrial encounter. Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972) unveiled four bronze sculptures, *The Seated I, II, III, and IV* (2019), in the empty niches of the museum’s façade. Originally designed by Richard Morris Hunt, the four exedras have been vacant for the last 117 years, making *The NewOnes, will free Us*, as the sculptures are collectively called, the first inhabitants to complete the Neoclassical promise left unfulfilled since the museum’s construction in 1902. Instead of being satiated by the long-awaited desire for a Neoclassical body, the museum’s façade wrestles with Mutu’s sculptures by their foreign element of materiality and their foreign subject matter. The bronze sculptures stand seven feet tall and weigh 840 pounds with golden discs grotesquely fused onto the foreheads and mouths of the four seated caryatids¹. The Body on the pedestals is not that of Athena, Apollo, or Aphrodite. On the contrary, the four statues appear alien, futuristic, and discernibly African. Taking into account Mutu’s oeuvre along with the fact that the four female sculptures are at rest (simply sitting), one can read their habitation of the museum’s Neoclassical alcoves as an act of *invited invasion*. The Met has commissioned (welcomed) a public display of a self-curated black body in a space once constructed for showcasing canonical art supremacy. In other words, the African warriors have

¹ Caryatid is a stone carving of a draped female figure common in Greek buildings. These statues were used as load-bearing pillars to support the entablature of a building.

stormed the kingdom and now sit on its throne. This *invited invasion* contrasts with the many canonical paintings, contemporary artworks, stolen cultural keepsakes, and dubious religious iconography inside the museum that use the black body one-dimensionally (the paintings of Nicholas de Largillierre, Pierre Louise Dumesnil the Younger, and the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe come to mind).

“Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined,” wrote Toni Morrison. This thesis extends that literacy to the body: the black body has belonged (physically and metaphorically) to the audience, not to the performer (190). Mutu’s self-curated black body *is*, however, a body *constructed* through Afrofuturistic aesthetics to allow for an agency in representation. Both Mutu’s mode of production (her body) and her commodity (in this case, her sculptures) make her work instrumental in the crafting of a new black body of the future². Considering she is the first artist commissioned by the Met for what will soon be a rotating roster of who’s who of the contemporary art world, Mutu’s anachronistic insertion into the museum’s long-awaited completion claims the self-curated black body as the natural citizen of those four niches. The seismic shift following this *invited invasion* alters the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s curatorial history as well as its curatorial future. For as contemporary art critic Kelly Blum states, “had the niches been filled in 1902, the artist would certainly have been male and white” (Princethal). Instead, what fills those niches in 2019 is black and female.

The four seated caryatids are different versions of the same body Mutu has crafted for decades through video performances, collages, and sculptures. Their construction began nine months prior to their arrival at the Met, reintroducing Mutu as a sculpturist to the mainstream art

² There has been a history of eliminating the black body from white popular science fiction discussed fully by Isiah Lavender in *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*.

world. For the last decade and a half, she had been mostly associated with her collages of female bodies. I would argue that *The Newones, will freeUs*, with its references to classical Greek architecture and traditional African clothing, is just the latest reiteration of Mutu's collaged female body. All of Mutu's work is either collaged through the material, or collaged through the theoretical. Although the sculptures are not materially collaged, they are theoretically collaged in their fusing of the historical implications of the Greek caryatid and the African woman. This thesis focuses on Mutu paper collages as they depict composite bodies that are both materially and theoretically collaged. In her paper collages, social, racial and gender theoretical frameworks collage together with clippings of carburetors, animal feet, and human lips to showcase a composite body that art critics have deemed "grotesque" and Mutu herself has called "disabled". By collaging pieces of paper from fashion magazines, mail-order catalogs, car manuals, and advertisements, Mutu *transforms* the commercially photographed, desired and exoticized black female body into projections of African futures and post-colonial possibilities. It is a transformation in which disability is read as virtuosic. I will focus on three collages, *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* 2010 (Fig.1), *My Strength lies* 2006 (Fig.2), and *Homeward Bound* 2010 (Fig.3) to interrogate the seemingly sudden invasion of Mutu's disabled grotesque body onto our collective cultural landscape. My visual analysis is rooted in Afrofuturism's questions of the grotesque and alienation as they are reflected in critical race theory, ecofeminism, and disability studies. Who are these figures in Mutu's work? Who are these beings part animal, part machine? How does Afrofuturism function as a theoretical lens for a close reading of materiality and performance in these works?

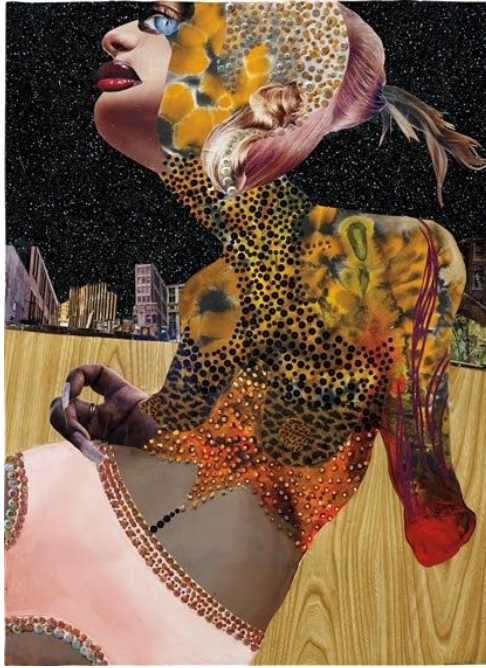


Fig. 1. *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* 2010
ink, acrylic, watercolour, glitter, sequins, contact paper, collage on paper
76.2 x 55.7 cm
Phillips Gallery, New York



Fig. 2. *My Strength Lies* 2006
Ink, acrylic, photo collage, contact paper, on Mylar
228.6 x 137.2 cm
Saatchi Gallery, New York

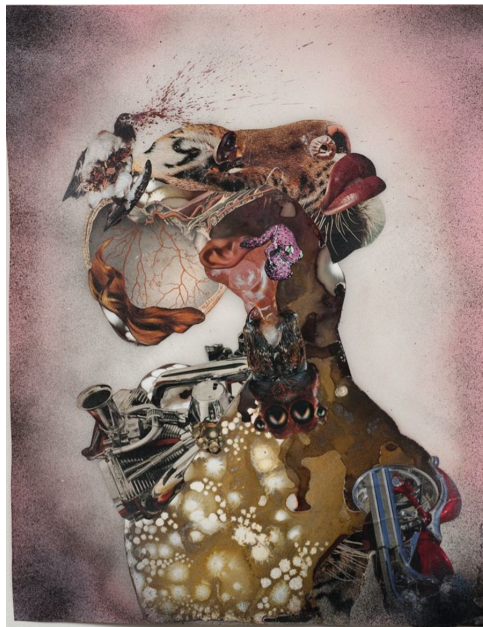


Fig. 3. *Homeward Bound* 2010
Archival pigment print with silkscreen on archival paper, printed by Jacob Samuel
61 x 46.3 cm
Private Collection. image retrieved:
<https://artinprint.org/article/international-geographic-wangechi-mutu-on-paper-print-and-printmaking/>

BLACKNESS³

These collages depict disabled female bodies mangled, dissected, and collaged back together with assembled clippings from fashion magazines, pornography, instructional manuals, and shopping catalogues displayed against different Afrofuturistic landscapes: an urban setting and night sky, a post-apocalyptic wasteland, and an abstract background of colors and hues. In an interview with Kasper Bech in 2014, Mutu stated that her “obsession with the black female body is the obsession with myself navigating the world in a very sort of processed form.” She sees her own identity as a woman and an African as a collage made up of social assumptions and social histories. Although Mutu is a Kenyan born artist yet her art is mostly rendered in Brooklyn, New York. She is seen as black in America, and then re-identified as African. Her African blackness is rewritten as black legibility in America. Her body is both misnamed by America’s racialized history as well as incorporated into the larger diaspora. Mutu herself attests to this legibility as “there are many ways to describe how Africa has been colonized and modified and packaged and branded by the West, by Europe, and certainly by America. The image of Africa is much more abstract and problematic...” (Mutu, *MotherJones*). Black in this thesis functions as a modifier strictly speaking to the diasporic representations created by Black artists and all artists of color generated through a symbolic or geographical American lens where “disabled” is what is outside of the perceived white norm. In other words, even though Mutu is a native African and her art can technically be classified as African modern art, her American body and the American subjects it creates are read through disenfranchisement in the same way Afro-Latinos, African-Americans,

³ For further critical notions of the diaspora, refer to Richard Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 200.

and all encompassing Africanness are misnamed in America. “Disability is in the details,” says Mutu. “Disability can be hair color, body, accent, race, gender...” (Mutu, *MotherJones* interview). I choose to focus on the disability ‘detail’ of blackness.

Mutu’s common theme of severed limbs, bloody stumps, and disabled representation of the body highlight the body being disenfranchised and violated because of its “details” that run counter to the popular white visual culture⁴. Those fragments of bodies represent “ideals of bodily perfection” (Porter XIII) in our cultural proliferation of glamor magazine ads and pornography -- two main mediums that rely on women’s body parts substituting the whole body as the area of desire. With this thesis, I seek to interject that though Mutu’s work satisfies our fetishism for fragments of bodies, for the “detail”, there is a need to see these corporal fragments as a form of disablement. Are we not seduced by the crimson lips in *Homeward Bound*? Are we not colonially comforted by the *Leopard woman*’s blue eye? Titillated by her Sheneneh nails⁵? Are we not entranced by the ability to separate the constructed body in *My Strength Lies* apart from its “natural” diptych ancestor of the old woman?

Mutu is not the only artist working under Afrofuturistic parameters nor is she the only black artist drawn to Brooklyn. Since setting up her brownstone as studio and home in 2005, Mutu has found a community in contemporary artists like Simone Leigh, Clotilde Jimenez, Vanessa German, Amy Sberald, ruby onyinyechi amanze, and Lina Irish Viktor. Through sculptures, performances, and collages, these artists are also in direct dialogue with Afrofuturism and Brooklyn. The migration of the black art world from uptown Harlem to North Brooklyn at the turn of the 21st century is akin to a post-apocalyptic relocation of a population seeking

⁴ Wangechi Mutu also references the Rwandan Genocide (April 7 - July 15th 1994).

⁵ Acrylic nails: reference to Sheneneh Jenkins, a character played in drag by Martin Lawrence.

survival⁶. In the same way science fiction portrays humanity grappling with its demise and relocating to another planet, so does the black art community escape the disease and war of gentrification and sets off for Brooklyn. That shift to Brooklyn has become a symbol of a future imagining of the black body through queer parties, femme visibility, and art making. Brooklyn is the present day land of Afrofuturism. It has become, in the cultural imagination, the relocation to a new world for self-curated black bodies. These three collages were chosen not only because of Mutu's cultural relevance as she is admitted into the exclusionary status of "high art", but because through her physicality, Mutu does not only project images of future black bodies, but she builds them. When speaking of her latest constructed body inhabiting the Met's facade, Mutu emphasizes that "the facade and entryway [of the Met] were designed before women, and especially black women, in the United States had rights as full human beings" (Mutu, interview *NewsArtNet*). The implication is that through anachronistically inserting the black female body into this space, Mutu gives an aesthetic biography to her depictions. For how are future black beings "born" when their mother tongue has been severed and their fatherland violated? What is the futurity of a being that has been surgically scalped from its cultural and geographical past, and circumscribed from the cultural and political experiences of the present? Mutu's future Body, therefore, is not a product of technological advances in fertility, birth or "reproductive futurism"⁷ that negate colonial history and its repercussions. Instead, it is interested in

⁶ This black arts movement that exploded in Fort Greene during the mid 1980s and late 90s was chronicled by directors Nelson George and Diana Pargas in their 2011 documentary *Brooklyn Boheme*.

⁷ Reproductive futurism is a term from Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that imposes ideological limitations on political discourses for the preservation of heteronormativity, negating other forms of communal kinship (2).

body-displaying, in the representation of a constructed black body that does not hide the disparate parts that form a collaged female Blackenstein⁸.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examining Mutu's work consists of criticism, exhibition catalogues, and interviews with the artist. Mutu's new astronomical fame has given rise to interviews by all the major art magazines and periodicals of the time. This research has benefited from having access directly to Mutu's interpretations of her work. In her interviews, Mutu addresses the concept of disability connected to that which is outside of the norm. In conjunction with Leonard Davis's *Disability Reader* and Carol Breckenridge and Cander Volger "The Critical Limits of Embodiment," I posit blackness as a theoretical disability. Donna Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto" heralds a future cyborg disembodied from a "conscious coalition of affinity, [and] political kinship." (296) This assertion became the nucleus in examining the future of the black body when it cannot disassociate itself from its "natural identification" of cultural and historical embodiment. Is there blackness in the future?

Mark Dery's interview of Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose, "Black to the Future," as well as Kodwo Eshun's "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," introduces the theoretical framework of Afrofuturism. With these articles, I place the black body in the future and examine two close tenets of Afrofuturism: the grotesque and alienation. Aliyah

⁸ Blackenstein (black Frankenstein) alludes to director William A. Levey's 1973 blaxploitation horror film *Balckenstein*. Loosely based on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a black Vietnam war vet loses both his arms and is surgically and genetically altered by his fiancée.

Abdur-Rahman's article "The Black Grotesquerie " attributes a kineticism intrinsic in the black grotesquerie that is absent in the traditional discourses of the grotesque. For Abdur-Rahman, the "grotesque" merely signifies "excess, dread and decay" whereas black grotesquerie delineates an expressive methodology of "contortion, substitution, inversion, and corruption." I am using this article as a way to complicate the beauty performed by black female bodies, as well as question what is required to *be* seen as beautiful and grotesque.

Books like Andre M. Carrington's *Speculative Blackness: the Future of Race in Science Fiction* and Stacie Selmon McCormic's *Staging Black Fugitivity* frame debates on black visibility. Carrington's book analyzes the racialized genre of speculative fiction, whereas McCormic's book extends that analysis to contemporary theater and the legacy of slavery. Both texts lead me to extend black visibility into an action of self-curated blackness by contextualizing Mutu's work within science fiction tropes and black performance. I extrapolate their analysis as a method to visually read Mutu's backgrounds as depictions of Afrofuturistic alienation. Noël Sturgeon's *Ecofeminists Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist and Political Action* sets the premise that landscape and nature is reflective of the historical injustices inflicted upon gender, race, and class. Her research allows me to connect the body (Mutu's subjects) to the land (Mutu's backdrops). But when viewing Mutu's collages through Sturgeon's ecofeminism, it becomes difficult to expand beyond its essentialist perspective⁹. Sturgeon does not take into account the black female body's historically commodified relationship to its environment nor Africa's own geographical exploitation. I rely on Cheryl Frazier's "Trouble Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism", to bridge this gap.

⁹ For further critique of ecofeminism and essentialism, Greta Gaard's "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Replacing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism."

Frazier offered me a contemporary reading of Mutu through the established literature of Octavia Butler¹⁰.

Apart from the foundational texts listed above, I have relied on critical writings about collage-making as a feminist protest and as a form of queer viewing. These writings have helped me contextualize Mutu's artistic practice within the history of collage in the 20th century¹¹.

METHODOLOGY

Although much has been written about Mutu's collages after her first solo American exhibition *A Fantastic Journey* (2013), not much has been said about how an Afrofuturist's reading of the "grotesque" and "alienation" alter perceptions of "beauty" and "home." What is "grotesque" and "alienation" when they are enacted by a black body? In the same way Mutu collages composite bodies from mediums that undermine a self-curated body, so does this thesis *cyborged* traditional discourses that elide Afrofuturistic methodologies. Opting for the verb instead of the noun, *cyborged* refers to the scientific fantasies Mutu's collages project as they offer self-curated representations of the black futuristic body. *Cyborged* as a methodology speaks to both of the movements exerted by Mutu the artist as she slices and carves out new bodies as well as the theoretical collaging needed for a different viewing: a viewing that allows for the possibility of a self-curated blackness in the future.

¹⁰ Both Butler's short story "Bloodchild", and her Xenogenesis trilogy.

¹¹ For further reading on femininism and collage, refer to Gwen Raaverg's "Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts"; Thomas P. Brockelman's *The Fame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*; as well as Miriam Schapiro's "Femmage."

Feminists discourses of the “grotesque”¹² are *cyborged* into black grotesquerie. Mutu’s collages of animal parts, machinery, and cancerous multi-colored patches of color reveal a disabled composite body that through its admission into museums, galleries, and private collections is legitimized as beautiful. Similarly, ecofeminism and its discourses on nature, home, and landscape is *cyborged* into *abducted alienation*. *Abducted alienation* is the inhabitation of nature as a contested site. In it, Mutu’s subjects can be at home but not feel like home at the same time. *Abducted alienation* becomes a method in which to collage scientific tropes of white supremacy and its denial of blackness in the future as well as a black body seeking a historical and cultural home. By reading Mutu in the context of disability theory, black grotesquerie, and *abducted alienation*, I show the potential problems of white ideals of beauty, the absence of a self-curated black body of the future, and the “homelessness” that haunts the historical black body.

SECTION DESCRIPTIONS

Both of the two main sections in this thesis deal with a close reading of each of the three collages. In the first section, “Call us By Our Names,” the collaged bodies will be read through the lens of black grotesquerie. *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* establishes how to view a self-curated black female beauty; *Where My Strength Lies* complicates that black beauty by introducing the relationship between what is natural versus what is constructed beauty; and lastly, *Homeward Bound* offers an integration through *problematica*. The second section,

¹² Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* hypothesizes that there is a feminist benefit in locating the vulgar and unaesthetic in the politics of women. Russo shifts our viewing of the subjugated female body into a viewing of their “illness, aging, reproduction, nonreproduction, secretions, lumps, bloating, wigs, scars, make-up, and prostheses” (14).

“Daughters from Another Planet,” will analyze Mutu’s backdrops through the lens of Afrofuturistic alienation. In *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)*, the metropolitan skyline introduces alienation as a virtualistic homelessness whereas *Where My Strength Lies* acknowledges that historical implication of that homelessness. Finally, *Homeward Bound* offers a reconciliation of homelessness through what I am calling *abducted alienation*.

II. *Call Us by Our Names*¹³
Black and the Grotesque

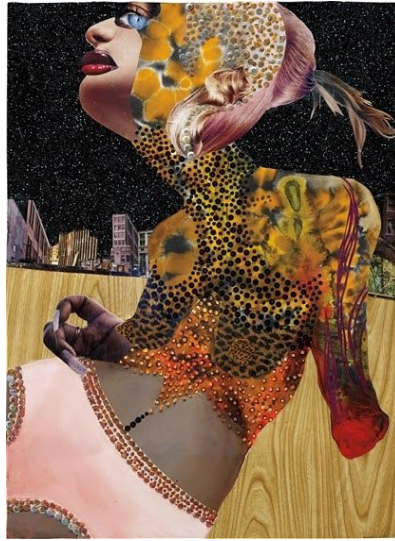
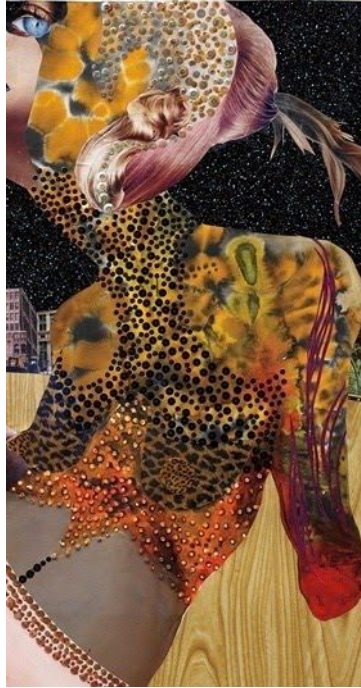


Fig. 4. *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* 2010
ink, acrylic, watercolour, glitter, sequins, contact paper, collage on paper
76.2 x 55.7 cm
Phillips Gallery, New York

More so than the other collages, the leisure quality to the *Leopard woman*'s pose (Fig.4), her attire of pink panties and "cancerous" looking top revealing a mid-drift, is indicative of the catalogue magazines Mutu uses for her collages. She mimics bathing suit poses found in the advertisements of mail order catalogs. The *Leopard woman* depicts a figure assembled out of animal fur, multi-racial body parts, and cancerous-looking kaleidoscopic patches of colors. "There is nothing more insanely visually and repulsive than a body infected with tropic disease," says Mutu when referring to the "cancerous" spots prolific in her collages, "diseases that grow and fester and become larger than the being that they have infected," (Mutu, interview *ArtNet*). This distortion prevents the *Leopard woman* from being the cyborg of shiny newness promised

¹³ Lyrics from *On and On*, by Erykah Badu. Though the term Afrofuturism has been retroactively attributed to art made before Mark Dery's coinage in 1990, there were specific artists working during that time, notably Erykah Badu, that embodied the proleptic and retrospective essences of imagined black futures.

by science fiction. She is a black body maimed, diseased and assembled discordantly: a black body with a white face, missing an arm, and leaning leisurely under a starry sky. We notice the editorially curated body parts beauty: the lips, the eye, the proportions. It is upon a black globules on her neck shaping her breast and the this case, the reference to advertisements, and product to which bodies are in our visual culture. Mutu elongated and angled askew, that still signal glossy page pin-up straw-colored hair, her petite closer viewing that we notice the and chest, and the leopard fur feline hair shaping her nipples. In fashion magazines, placement functions as a critique portrayed, consumed, and lauded placed the *Leopard woman*, towards a direction outside of the frame, yet still with her blue eye directed, hypnotized, towards the viewer.



Though my analysis will offer a supplementary reading of the wood paneling in the following section, we must momentarily acknowledge the domestic site that is signaled by such a use of this architectural feature in *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)*. It alludes to 1970s paneling of living rooms and dens, the subject “at home” without ignoring that the domestic and work space historically have been racialized and gendered (Carrington 77). *Leopard woman*’s body is connected to a specific domestic site housing body parts ranging in colors from the skin tone of a white face, an artistically colored darker midriff, a right hand visibly black, and a blue eye. In this domestic site, the *Leopard woman* dons a contested femininity of adornment: the Sheneneh nails, the little sequins lining her panties, the rouge lips. In the L issue of

beautiful/decay, Mutu describes her use of femininity as “an elaboration and exaggeration of something far more complex about human nature.” She emphasizes the problems in “the impulsive to associate [the]feminine as natural and bring out what is fictional and constructed about it.” (64-65) In other words, by allowing viewers to witness a black female body adorned and not as adornment, Mutu

“tradition of Black women’s
What is beauty when it is
accoutrements donned by
constructed femininity. The
embodies a femininity that
labor, as it makes her one
The little sequins along the
like an applique, added to



catapults into the future the
self-fashioning.” (Carrington, 76)
not naturally endowed? All the
the *Leopard woman*’s reveals a
choice of Sheneneh nails
excludes her black body from
hand useless in manual tasks.
edges of her pink panties seem
further adorn the garment with

signs of curated opulence. For a body that is not seen as beautiful, beauty must be applied, constructed. Natural beauty is not attributed to the disabled black body, so instead it takes it upon herself. Even the white skin, the brown midriff, the black hand are attempts by Mutu at a feminization against colorism and racism.

Like the sequins and the nails, skin color is also an adornment of political gravity and historical trauma. The co-opting of black bodies and styles by white women is juxtaposed by the beauty suggestions of bleaching the skin and lightening the hair for their black counterparts. Lorraine Morales Cox’s interprets what Anlin Cheng described in her book, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, as “Mutu’s bandaged, burned and

disjointing bodies metaphorically reference psychological trauma along with the actual bodily violence by those who are negatively judged and victimized because of their physical marks of different bodily imperfections.” (72) *Leopard woman reclining* does not hide the historical and cultural signifiers that make up her body. Solely in her grotesque depiction of various races and genus, she refutes Haraway’s assertion that the cyborg of the future is absent of “natural identification.” (296) *Leopard woman* is in the future, representing a *holistic* cultural and historical embodiment of the black body and the legacy of the diaspora. The historical body is not present in Haraway’s cyborg but it is strategically collaged into the creatures created by Mutu, especially in the following collage *Where My Strength Lies*.



Fig. 5. *My Strength Lies* 2006
Ink, acrylic, photo collage, contact paper, on Mylar
228.6 x 137.2 cm
Saatchi Gallery, New York

Mutu does not entirely replace the historical body with her constructed creatures of the future. She does not succumb to the science fiction trope of the unhistorical body as the new futurist natural body: a body both unbothered by history and divorced from cultural trauma. Instead, her Afrofuturistic tendencies anchor the body as belonging to a future that cannot be disassociated from its corporeal past. In *My Strength Lies* (Fig. 6), two bodies are depicted in a diptych: on the right, a small woman, dark haired, brown skin, wearing a long skirt, and on the left, a gigantic collaged figure seemingly taking its first steps: a toddler learning to walk. The separation of the two canvases is like an open wound between the two figures, and depicted across them a wooden scaffolding traverses both works like splintered sutures. Though they visually form a cohesive *mise en scene*, we must not forget that it is two different canvases

encouraged to be in relation. To what is this juxtaposition alluding? What is the presence of a more “natural” black body, diminutive in comparison, when seen as aiding in the construction of a new museum scale “unnatural” blackness? How is the grotesque utilized by Mutu across the two canvases that are each eight feet tall? My reading suggests that the gap and the sutures in *My Strength Lies* not only reflect the denial of a cohesive future for black female bodies, but also depict the labor of those who constantly stitch a holistic life.

Though *My Strength Lies* juxtaposes the somewhat natural body of the diminutive woman against the fully constructed black body of the alien creature, both figures have been manipulated through collage. The diptych attempts to fool the viewer by creating simultaneously one art work with seemingly two different worlds: that of the naturalness of the woman on the



right and that of the artificiality of the constructed figure on the left. We are compelled to view one as more natural in its humanoid depiction and the other as more alien. But upon closer look, we see the cyborg aspects of the old woman, as one of her legs includes metallic features, and the humanoid mouth, teeth, and black skin of the alien figure. There is an artificiality, a construction, in both of the bodies presented in *My Strength Lies*.



Black grotesquerie, the insertion of a disabled black body into the cultural museum worship of beauty, complicates the myths of there ever existing

a natural black body apart from the diasporic aesthetic imagination. Curators at the Metropolitan

Museum of Art insist on emphasizing the vestiges of a “a violent struggle, possibly an act of genocide, colonial incursion, or an alien invasion” to the figure under construction, yet what is to be said about the subtle artificiality of the humanoid woman? There is not two worlds divided in two, compartmentalized between the “white folks” sector’ and the “sector of niggers,” between natural-perceived African black beauty and the beauty manufactured through the the Transatlantic slave trade (Gillespie 100). Rather, there is a considered effort through *black grotesquerie* to not only deconstruct civil society (civil society in this case embodied by cultural institutions of beauty) but to destroy it. In this collage, forces of construction and destruction allude to the perpetual construction and destruction of the black female body in visual culture. What hands have crafted for what eyes the construction of what is woman, what is black, and what is African? Depictions of the black body have rarely been under construction in the hands of artists like Mutu.

The construction of black beauty in *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)*, *Homeward Bound*, and *My Strength Lies* transform the black futuristic body into a palaeontological *problematica* site of desire and spectatorship. The figure in *Leopard woman* is white, black, and part animal; the figures in *My Strength Lies* are both natural and artificial; the figure in *Homeward Bound* is beast and part machine: all showcasing a paleontological *problematica* of unclassified social constructs. *Problematica*, a scientific term used to describe fossils that are unable to be classified into any particular known life form, becomes a useful way to understand what is at work in these collages. Contrary to Haraway, that the future body will represent unity through identification, Mutu posits a way to read these separate biological components as a unitary self while at the same time reclaiming dispersion. For in the same way multiple

biological signifiers, racial and animalistic, unite without ceasing to be separate, so do multiple corporeal histories unite in a multiplicity of agency and consent. Mutu's black body of the future code-switches between presenting a utopian dispersion of all signifiers, and a united figure collaged with all of them.



Fig. 6. *Homeward Bound* 2010

Archival pigment print with silkscreen on archival paper, printed by Jacob Samuel
61 x 46.3 cm Private Collection. image retrieved:

<https://artinprint.org/article/international-geographic-wangechi-mutu-on-paper-print-and-printmaking/>

In *Homeward Bound*, *problematica* and black grotesquerie are showcased in the collaging of social documentary photography and 18th century oil portraits (Fig. 6). The figure is framed in a traditional portrait ratio with no discernible background. Responding to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and her own inability to travel due to visa restrictions, Mutu set out to figuratively photograph the residents of post-Katrina New Orleans to explore ideas of

home and displacement. This section will focus on reading the collage as a portrait of a grotesque disabled resident: a future survivor of systematic oppression and climate devastation. The disproportionate effect Hurricane Katrina had on the Black¹⁴ residents of New Orleans revealed to Mutu the city's "deep-seated political and sociohistorical contexts...tied to a much deeper plantation culture and the dirty business of Big Oil." (Mutu, *Art in Print* interview) Like the paintings inside the Met museum that feature the black body one-dimensionally, so did the political system fail to promote a self-curated futuristic body. Denying care to the black body politically impeded its theoretical futurity.

By constructing the cyborg in *Homeward Bound*, Mutu drags the present black body into



the post-apocalyptic future. "The BP oil spill had happened... The levees weren't maintained just as the BP rig hadn't been maintained," says Mutu when explaining this collage. She refers to the death of wildlife caused by the spill and deforestation caused

by Hurricane Katrina. She catapults us to a vision of the future where the BP oil spill is still present in the bodies most affected. Trauma suffered disproportionately by the black bodies of New Orleans is quilted into their future beings. She collages clippings of car radiators and engine parts alongside organic material like an ear, lips, a cheetah, and a pecking bird. She

¹⁴ I am choosing to capitalize black in this sentence as Black here refers politically to Black Americans and not the black diaspora of my research.

refuses to sanitize the cyborg into a body of new beginnings. In order to see Mutu's black body of the future, viewers must withstand a performance so twisted that the subject must contort herself enough for one to see the crown of her head.

The figure in *Homeward Bound* is not looking straight at the viewer, its body contorted in a virtuosic *epaulement*¹⁵. Historically, this "shouldering" in ballet was (and still is) a vital technique in displaying the performing body from all angles to the royal audience that commissioned the work: be they kings and oligarchs of yesteryears, or the current art foundations and governmental subsidies of today. The viewer and the dancer play their own

striptease of peek-a-boo as certain angles presented and obscured by crisscrossed shoulders in the figure in *Homeward* but the grotesque body refuses to fully In fact, all of its body parts are facing no concern of satisfying the audience's contorted head becomes a disabled the grotesque. Whereas the grotesque



of the body are facings. Both *Bound* are visible face the viewer. elsewhere with expectation: its *epaulement* of body positions

itself as permeating culture and signifying what Lennard J. Davis calls a "common humanity, the disabled body, a later concept, was formulated as by definition excluded from culture, society, [and] the norm." (4) Disability has no home; disability has no body. This particular contortion of the body echoes Mutu's own physical performance as she labors in constructing these future beings as well as her bureaucratic choreography in procuring a visa. She collages herself with the

¹⁵ *Epaulement* is a classical ballet term meaning "shouldering" where a dancer slightly twists her shoulder from the waist up, positioning a shoulder slightly forward and the other slightly back. Suggested viewing of Larissa Lezhnina in [Grand Pas de Paquita](#), The Kirov Ballet, 1991.

residents of New Orleans and the future diaspora, fusing strips of paper and loose social identifiers, to bestow upon the spectacularized body, hers and theirs, an agency of self-representation.

Black grotesquerie allows for “African diaspora cultural producers to imagine new sociopolitical and racial arrangements” through “contortion, substitution, inversion,” and “corruption.” (Eshun 289) I find this movement imperative in Mutu’s cultural production. In *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)*, *My Strength Lies*, and *Homeward Bound*, Mutu acts as surgeon and butcher to the materiality of magazines and printed matter while simultaneously acting as creator of newly invented bodies that find agency in embodied identity. Eliding current and historical tropes of science fiction, Mutu’s relationship with Afrofuturism allows her to project images of black disabled bodies into the future. This futurity combines and collages itself with technology and Earth social constructs of race and gender.

III. *Daughters from Another Planet*¹⁶ Afrofuturist Alienation and the Abducted

The three collages place their subjects against very dissimilar backgrounds: *Untitled* (*Leopard woman reclining*) in the forefront of a skyline, *My Strength lies* on top of a cancerous terrain, and *Homeward Bound* in an abstract background of shapeless colors. Considering “the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees, [that] “inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements,” Mutu’s futuristic black disabled body is read as both an alien trapped in a new world and a native yearning to go back home (Dery, 180). The futuristic black body inhabits an Afrofuturistic alienation through its contentious colonial relationship between land, body, and home (Dery 180). What is “homeland” when is both a place to dream about and a place to dread? Similarly to the construction of her collaged mutilated bodies, the backdrops are materially and theoretically collaged as well. They are *cyborged* into *abducted alienation* through an Afrofuturistic alienation. These *cyborged* backdrops of *abducted alienation* emphasize the geographical lostness of the historical black body—its homelessness—while simultaneously freeing the future black body from its post-colonial discourses with ecology.

¹⁶ A reference to John Sayles “Brother from Another Planet”, a 1984 science fiction movie where Joe Morton, the “brother,” is an alien slave that escapes to Earth and hides in Harlem.

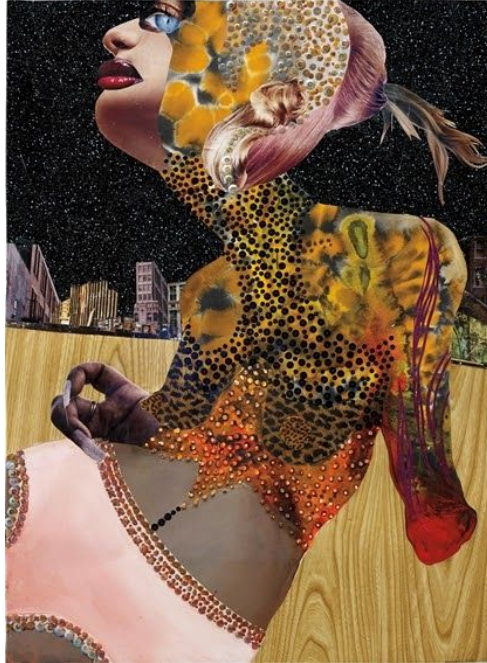


Fig. 7. *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* 2010
ink, acrylic, watercolour, glitter, sequins, contact paper, collage on paper
76.2 x 55.7 cm
Phillips Gallery, New York

In *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* (Fig.7) the metropolitan skyline introduces alienation as a perceived homelessness. *Leopard woman* is in the foreground of a metropolitan skyline as if lounging on a sandy beach. The painting creates a tilted horizon where the black hue of the sky meets the sandy-colored wood paneling of the bottom half. It gives the illusion of yellow sand meeting dark water, of the shore meeting the expanse of the ocean in the same way the Earth meets the expanse of outer space. An illusion is created where the tilted horizon serves as both the offing between the shore and the sea as well as the visible horizon between Earth and space. The site where the figure is placed and the night sky are given equal value of representation in this work: outer space and Earth become interchangeable with the sea and the

shore, symbolically merging the two sets with migratory hopes of interspace travel and the dark history of black bodies and the Middle Passage. Afrofuturism highlights,

the condition of alienation that comes from being a black subject in American society parallels the kind of alienation that science fiction writers try to explore through various genres devices-transporting someone from the past into the future, thrusting someone into an alien culture, on another planet, where he has to confront alien ways of being. All of these devices reiterate the condition of being black in American culture. Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine (Tate 213).

What is compromised by Mutu placing the *Leopard woman* in such a literal backdrop as a city? Is the *Leopard woman* an alien vacationing from outer space in our own urban myths of home; or is she a black native, dreaming of travel and escape while simultaneously reminded of historical wounds of Transatlantic voyages and kidnap? In *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)*, *abducted alienation* is found in the redefinition of “homelessness.” Material and theoretical frameworks collage into a singular site of habitation: the beach, outer space, and the city merge with discourses of leisure, industry, and finance. In that constructed site of habitation, *abducted alienation* establishes her as both a foreigner that has just landed, and a citizen that has always belonged. She is an alien and a native compounded into a single body.

The skyline and the figure of the Leopard woman are *cyborged* into a self-curated relationship between the urban landscape and the future black body. This relationship transforms the urban skyline into a site of *abducted alienation* by first resisting the trend in white science fiction to romanticize urban decay. In post-apocalyptic futures, “urban decay” is used like “a backdrop [of] fashion shoots and MTV videos” while at the same time depicting black

populations stuck and surviving in crumbling urban centers (Dery 198). Urban centers are usually depicted as aesthetic playgrounds where white cyberpunks enact aesthetic fantasies of survival and deterioration. The black body is read as yet another symbol of abject and futurelessness in these depictions, the same way destroyed skyscrapers and burnt out cars signal a dying city. Though this is becoming less pervasive, the black body in science fiction is still denied representation in the humanity-saving worlds of floating oases and underwater paradises¹⁷. In *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)*, the city is not the site the figure finds herself inhabiting. The perspective of the painting distances the figure from the urban landscape; the effect is her being “seen.”

Secondly, *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* connects the urban skyline and the self-curated black body through Industry. The only realistic landscapes exist in the depiction of the city and the night sky: one portraying the industry of old, and the other the “New Economy” of innovation and space commodification, respectively. Mutu highlights the relationship that haunts the black body and Industry, i.e the city, by placing the metropolis on the background of the figure. The perspective makes the metropolis distantly present. Historically, this relationship has yielded a global acquisition of wealth through both the profits of Transatlantic slave trade and our global modernization through that slave labor, especially through the black female body. As Katherine McKittrick points out, “Because female slave bodies [were] transformed into profitable sexual and reproductive technologies, they [came] to represent ‘New World’ inventions and are consequently rendered an axiomatic object.” (X) Afrofuturism does not allow

¹⁷ The current Netflix show *3%* is a prime example. Filmed and created in Brazil, the show’s premise is that only 3% of the population is granted access to “Alta Mar”, the exclusive world created in response to the crumbling inner-city. The show engages in colorism by depicting which bodies are left behind in the post-apocalyptic urban landscape.

the ubiquitous tropes of space commodification and interstellar “manifest destiny” to infect the ‘New Worlds’ of the future by positing the colonization of future aliens as similar to the colonization of Africans by white colonizers. How does *Leopard woman* reclaim the landscape that haunts its history of labor, land, and the body?

Industry and labor surface from the tangible process enacted by Mutu, as she pastes a sky and pasted a city; yet a critique of labor emerges when she magically collaged a beach. That is only possible, the depiction of a nature-less black future body and a self-imposed un-functioning disabled body, by Mutu kinetically tearing, pasting, and cutting clippings, to collage a site of rest for the body. Mutu creates an artificial site, not by using an actual magazine clipping of a beach or sand (as she does with the city and the sky), but by using a sandy-colored patch of a picture of wood. *Untitled (Leopard woman reclining)* enacts a self-curated black body through the positioning of the woman: a posturing of a disabled woman at rest, on a beach. She leans back as if suspended by her hacked phantom arm, her blond ponytail flapping in the wind. Her head cocked to one side, with a sly blue eye penetrating the hierarchy who gets to rest and who gets to work. She is a grotesque pin-up girl lounging on a beach and a grotesque body modeling a bathing suit. Her right hand, sporting long acrylic nails and a gold ring, also reveals that she is not physically equipped to perform labor. She is, in fact, engaging in a form of self-disability as self-fashioning.



Fig.8 . *My Strength Lies* 2006
Ink, acrylic, photo collage, contact paper, on Mylar
228.6 x 137.2 cm
Saatchi Gallery, New York

Unlike *Leopard Woman* and a handful of other collages, most of Mutu's collages lack a realistic depiction of a landscape. There is color and shape in terms of flora but hardly any realist depiction of space. Instead, Mutu's most prevalent landscapes are apocalyptic aftermaths of diseased lands and noxious clouds. Her fascination with tropical diseases and cancerous growths in the body is restaged in the depiction of the land *like* the body. The terrain in *My Strength Lies* (Fig.8) is a bulbous hill of patchy pinks and browns against a smoke-filled sky spread across a diptych. It is as if the nuclear apocalypse has already occurred, the city has crumbled, and nature has been polluted. Both the alien figure and the hill are rendered as reflections of each other: one questioning perceived beauty, the other questioning body and land. Both the body and the land are "geographical spaces marked by ecological abuse (poisonous spores, pustules, desert landscapes), displacement (discarded objects), and violence (human limbs) to negotiate the

symbolic and material “marking” of black female bodies” (Rico 88). The landscape in *My Strength Lies* disrupts the perceived beauty of pastoral naturalness by highlighting the brutal colonial history between the black female body and its “homeland.” I claim that this collage offers a new cyborged connection of land and body where one can read nature as a site of abducted alienation. By examining the relationship between the hill, the old woman, and the alien figure, Afrofuturistic alienation is transformed into abducted alienation -- a virtuosic act of reclamation of homelessness by a future black body.

The hill in *My Strength Lies* is more of a body mass, an overgrown tumor, than a mound of dirt. It slopes towards the left of the frame, allowing the alien figure easy access to take its first steps (as if on a conveyor belt). It has no vegetation and on top it appears to be an enlarged slug. The old woman is bending over as if to fix the collapsing wooden structure. There’s a tenderness to this minuscule detail amidst all the chaos around her. Amidst the largeness of the alien figure and the hill, she is both distant and private. Her gaze is to the ground; her focus is on her task. It is a similar position farmers take when tilling land, for in a sense, she is a farmer of the future. “The people that I hail from are crop cultivators and landowners,” says Mutu, “We’re farmer people.” (Schoonmaker, 91) Instead of cultivating crops, the old woman cultivates the construction of the alien figure. She is, in a sense, farming a cancerous hill.

Viewers encounter this collage, each diptych eight feet tall, as if encountering a new land with new inhabitants. The massive scale is at a disadvantage in that it offers viewers an opportunity to focus on only one side of the diptych at a time. Viewers might be tempted to consider each panel as two separate environments. This viewing underestimates the importance of the cancerous hill spreading across the entire diptych. If one is to read the diptych as separate

works, the old woman and the hill are relegated to performing “the beautiful connection that black women have [had] with the earth,” (Harris 6). Though beautiful, it is still a connection that anchors her to the land and nurture in historically problematic ways. That “connection,” if left unthwarted by the other half of the collage, places the old woman in the Africa of the white imagination. Her landscape of the cancerous hill becomes the Africa constructed through “disability,” lack, and poverty. Mutu herself has criticized the anthropological and fine art representations of Africa as a region depicted as “hellish” with “severe conditions” and “biological and cultural extremity.” (Frazier, 67) Alone with her cancerous hill, the old woman’s body and the land are barren, since her “crop” (the alien figure) is in the other half of the diptych and no vegetation grows on her side of the hill. This “beautiful connection” too comfortably re-shackles the black female body of the future to its historical connection to labor, land, and the body (to be cultivated, reaped, sowed, sold, traded, exhausted). It also too comfortably accepts current ecofeminist discourses of the black female body (as well as other marginalized bodies) as the symbol of the “exploitation and degradation of the environment.” (Sturgeon 260) The alien figure complicates this narrative by offering a “crop” that, though diseased, thrives in its depiction. The alien figure is a “product” that stems from the labor performed by the old woman.

Afrofuturistic alienation not only “projects black bodies and subjectivities into ‘futuristic’ geographies,... [it also] reimagines and works through historical memory.” (Rico 84) The alien figure becomes the representation of that imagined futuristic geographies as well as the old woman’s historical memory of homelessness. It collages itself into the present, the future, the here, and the far away. By inhabiting a cancerous hill that still produces a body into the future,

the old woman anachronistically reclaims her own blackness and alienation. In *My Strength Lies*, alienated abduction is a home where the historical does not prevent futurity. Alienated abduction allows for the old woman to claim a home built against the perceived homelessness of the Transatlantic slave trade and into a “machine” that produces new bodies for the future. It allows for a self-curated black body to define home and land through incorporating technological possibilities. With her metallic leg, the old woman is both a reminder of the black female body as a method of labor for others, and a harbinger of the labor of the future. Both the alien figure and the hill are depicted with malignant pustules. The landscape does not attempt to situate the black futuristic body in an amicable relationship with its environment, as if somehow in the future, the black body will find the home it lost centuries ago, apart from its colonial history. Instead, the futuristic black body still harbors its connection to the land, displaying its cancerous origin. The alien *is* a reflection of where it came from.



Fig. 9. *Homeward Bound* 2010
Archival pigment print with silkscreen on archival paper, printed by Jacob Samuel
61 x 46.3 cm Private Collection. image retrieved:
<https://artinprint.org/article/international-geographic-wangechi-mutu-on-paper-print-and-printmaking/>

The alien body is the only landscape in *Homeward Bound* (Fig.9). In this collage, land or any geographical markers are obliterated. There is no skyline or cancerous hill, just smudges of rose, white, and black framing the black female body of the future. Considering Mutu's initial interest in creating this collage, *Homeward Bound* is the culmination of a self-curated virtuosic homelessness, as it only utilizes the body as its sense of home.

Homeward Bound was commissioned by "Prospect 1. New Orleans," an exhibition in the style of the Venice Biennale, to raise funds and awareness for Sarah Lastie, a victim of Hurricane Katrina. Mutu initially thought the collage would reflect the disproportionate impact of Hurricane Katrina on Black residents like Sarah Lastie but upon further research, she quickly deduced that the government's tepid response correlated to New Orleans's history of slavery and

plantation culture. In other words, the disenfranchised body she sought to capture was reflected in the disenfranchised land they inhabited. She realized that even though New Orleans was “devastated by the hurricane, of course,”... “[it] had long been neglected and raped...there were no longer the natural water forests and mangrove-type swamps that once provided natural protection against extreme weather” (Dana). I claim that this is an explanation on why there is no landscape behind the alien figure. The collage does not offer a backdrop to “photograph” the survivors of Hurricane Katrina, the survivors of homelessness as a “disability,” because the body now incorporates the land that produced it. Willingly, since it was created by a black artist through Afrofuturistic means and legitimately by the approval of Western art circles.

The figure complicates the classification of land and body. It disrupts the “knowing of others” and “knowing our space” that is at the heart of ecocriticism’s essentialist perspective (Frazier, 65). Instead, the figure participates in its own collaging by incorporating land as parts of its limbs. Mutu—the artist, her body—fuses with this figure to construct a new body of the future. The new citizens of New Orleans are not from New Orleans; they *are* New Orleans. There is no world where these figures could exist besides the space their body occupies.

In this American post-apocalyptic reality, Mutu imagines a future black body where all colonial scarification, environmental disenfranchisement, and race/body subjugation fuse to allow the body to present itself as a self-curated land/body. It can not imagine what realist landscape is now capable of providing the black body with *abducted alienation*, a sense of home in homelessness. The figure in *Homeward Bound*, therefore, inhabits a site of nothing-ness. The body is not projected into a post-Katrina landscape because both the material and the theoretical have failed it. The political inaction towards protecting vulnerable communities, compounded by

the climate precarity of New Orleans the city, prevents any futurity for the black body inhabiting a backdrop. *Abducted alienation* constructs a self-curated black body by reclaiming the body as the only home. Traditionally artistic, *Homeward Bound* is both a conventional portrait of the grotesque body and a landscape collage of homelessness.

IV. *Why It Gotta be Black?* Black Corporeality

CONCLUSION

Mutu's *cyborged* body is the genesis of a new cultural production. Her labor of cutting and pasting strips of paper, her femaleness, and her blackness all fuse to construct a futuristic black body. It accomplishes what science fiction is always at risk of failing: give birth to black corporeality, in the future. Not the black body as a symbol of decay, resourcefulness or painful reminders of the past, but the black collaged cyborg as a thriving "disability" of self-curated representation. Donna Harraway declared that "though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess." (316) Harraway implies a difference in freedom between the cyborg and the goddess. The cyborg promises a new birth with no connection to the past whereas the goddess is condemned to enact a cultural performance, ad nauseum. In Harraway's future, the cyborg is a merging into unity, where Mutu's collaged body is a merging into *disunity*. By the actions of Mutu's body, this *disunity* emerges as a celebration of the black (disabled) body. Mutu creates goddesses in forms of cyborgs that encompass traumatic history, who beautifully exist in endless futurity.

Afrofuturism extends the history and aesthetics of the black body as far back as the ancient Egyptians and their mysticism surrounding death and the unimaginable future (Tate 210). Proleptic and retrospectively, these kings and queens undertook their own version of an interstellar voyage into another world, traveling away as revered gods and goddesses. What is a deity if not the perfection in *our* representation? Yet, the black body has been severed from this historical and future representation of an aesthetic agency; most notably, its erasure by the

Transatlantic slave trade, and by its absence in science fiction. Mutu's collaged bodies, therefore, seek beauty as an act of *being*.

On June 8, 2020, Mutu's *The Newones, will free us*, will cease to inhabit the facade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Once again, but surely not for as long, the four niches will be empty, like limestone crop circles left behind. Or rather, empty like stone incubators awaiting the next body shape to fill it. Who will be their next occupants? Will they be invaders? Disruptors? Occupiers? Enablers? of the historical cultural production? Will they take the shape of neoclassical statues, or one-dimensional tokenisms of cultural otherness? Has the museum not been perpetually altered by welcoming these aliens as natives to its facade? What is then this site of habitation, politically and artistically, when Mutu's composite bodies have imbued it as African and alien, forever? No matter what, the museum has been infiltrated with these original inhabitants, shifting the future aesthetic history of an international institution and its reconciliation with its past.

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