Afrofuturism and women's merit: Wangechi Mutu's artwork

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Women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to the whims of changing movements, governments, and social norms. They're the sensitive charts that indicate how a society feels about itself. It's also disturbing how women attack themselves in search of a perfect image, and to assuage the imperfections that surround them. – Wangechi Mutu

Introduction

Although clearly an activist for women's rights and sexual equality, Wangechi Mutu is better known for her daring visual works involving a variety of media such as collage, video, performance and sculpture. Her artwork features cyborg bodies and technological environments dominated by movement and inspired by machinery. References to achievement discourses particularly on what concerns gender in African communities are present in these works, as the artist favours a feminist, Afrofuturist angle in the examination of women's cultural status in this part of the world. Mutu employs Afrofuturist imagery in order to challenge the idea of technological achievement as being reserved to the Western world. Moreover, she uses a feminist lens in order to point out a possible achievement gap *within* an Afrofuturist canon that until recently used to associate black male bodies with the idea of technological prowess.

Afrofuturism's narratives of achievement

As defined by Mark Dery in a 1993 interview of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Afrofuturism suggests alternative narratives for the experience of the black diaspora in Western society (180). Initially popularized by speculative fiction and later spread to other artistic fields, these re-worked colonial time-lines focus on the role and worth of black communities in the emergence of a common, global future. Moreover, they do away with stereotypical convictions concerning the interaction of black communities with the techno-culture of the 20th century (Anderson 2016, 230). According to such views, a digital divide affects blacks across the American and the African continents, their only hope being the attempt to "assimilate into the white western technology elite" (Chandler 2002).

Afrofuturist artefacts aim to change the image of black individuals as subordinate to white communities in terms of access to technology by coupling renderings of

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the slave with those of the cyborg. The machine is constructed from elements regarded as stemming from outside the human body. In a similar manner, the slave occupies in the colonial vision a place outside the allegedly 'more deserving' human communities (Eshun 1998). Wangechi Mutu draws attention to this analogy in paintings that hint at aesthetic primitivism while overlapping fragments of machines through collage techniques. "Forbidden Fruit Picker" (2015), for instance, portrays a biblical Eve in the act of picking the apple from the tree of knowledge, but does not feature any of the humble demeanour of characters from classical art. Instead, the work emphasizes elements such as female sensuality though technological imagery that fragments the body. The cyborg traits allow a mixture of the machine, animal and human to co-exist in the female silhouette. Rather than alienating these foreign features, it gathers them in its claim of a comprehensive depiction of the female nature.

Gendered scripts

Beyond the conceptual level of Afrofuturism as pointing out an unjust framework for making distinctions between those of African descent and Westerners, a secondary level also exists in Mutu's artwork. The artist's depictions of women look inward to the African continent, namely to the achievement gap between women and men. The works tackle the ways in which pre-colonial and colonial gender patterns affect women by either idealizing or demonizing ideas of womanhood e.g. in the figure of the struggling household leader, the prostitute, the unruly woman and the Victorian model mother (Lovett 1989; Allman 1994). Colonial rule seems to have generated gendered relationships where women's roles in African communities were minimized while men distinguished themselves in areas such as social mobility, political power and access to technological means.

Considering this historical background, Afrofuturism allows Mutu to criticize such simplistic representations of women, linking the idea of technological mastery to that of the female body and thus reversing colonial meritocratic stereotypes. The artist portrays women in dominant, either performing or defiant poses, almost always at the centre of the image. Although it is clear that the themes of her works resonate with Western concepts, e.g. the objectification of women, feminist discourses and achievement principles such as performance and mastery, the artist emphasizes the fact that she does not come from a Western understanding of such notions (Willis 2014). Mutu highlights this sense of double consciousness by allowing African women to simultaneously occupy the position of cyborg, prostitute and queen, for instance in the collage works "You Are My Sunshine" (2015) and "A Shady Promise" (2008).

Different routes

While Mutu's artwork points out achievement gaps occurring both within African commu-

nities and outside them, it also underlines a potential flaw in the development of 20th century Afrofuturism. In order to identify possible reasons for the historical classification of human beings based on race and gender, the artist examines the techniques and imagery associated with Afrofuturism itself. She thus criticizes futurist and Afrofuturist artistic accounts which allow the male body to be aligned with the notion of technological prowess.

Artistic futurist accounts generally articulate two main strands of argument. One concerns the reconceptualization of the relationship between technology and less privileged communities worldwide. The other posits that "present-day futurisms are not triumphalist" and therefore should not be regarded as entirely optimistic or utopian (Teixeira Pinto 2017, 167). The paradox within Afrofuturist imagery lies, more specifically, in the representation of a superbody that is connected to a certain notion of prowess as masculinity rather than femininity. From this angle, Afrofuturist accounts of black male superbodies continuously revert to a notion of "an indestructible, hyper-muscular body that was already in existence in the colonial imaginary" (167).

Refusing to perpetuate this notion, Mutu's works display women at the centre of a conceptual image that implies the same need for the future to be reclaimed as it did in the 20th century. However, her works also argue for the inclusion of the female body in the aforementioned Afrofuturist universe. As the artist herself remarks: "Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body" (quoted in Kerr 2004). Undoubtedly, Afrofuturist representations are able to respond critically to discourses of achievement pertaining to both white and black communities across the Atlantic. Wangechi Mutu favors Afrofuturist tropes in her works in order to develop a critical language that can interrogate achievement both on the societal level as well as on the level of canonized artistic and cultural movements.

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