

Comics an der Grenze



# COMICS AN DER GRENZE

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## Forever People: A Conversation with Black Kirby

**BLACK KIRBY** is a collaborative »entity« that is the creative doppelganger of artists/designers John Jennings and Stacey »Blackstar« Robinson. The manifestation of this avatar is an exhibition and catalog<sup>1</sup> of primarily visual artworks—on—paper that celebrate the groundbreaking work of legendary comics creator Jack Kirby regarding his contributions to the pop culture landscape and his development of some of the conventions of the comics medium.

**BLACK KIRBY** also functions as a highly syncretic mythopoetic framework by appropriating Jack Kirby's bold forms and revolutionary ideas combined with themes centered around AfroFuturism,<sup>2</sup> social justice, Black history, media criticism, science fiction, magical realism, and the utilization of Hip Hop culture as a methodology for creating visual expression. This collection of work also focuses on the digital medium and how its inherent affordances offer much more flexibility in the expression of visual communication and what that means in its production and consumption in the public sphere. In a sense, **BLACK KIRBY** appropriates the gallery as a conceptual »crossroads« to examine identity as a socialized concept and to show the commonalities between Black comics creators and Jewish comics creators and how they both utilize the medium of comics as space of resistance. The duo attempts to re-mediate »Blackness« and other identity contexts as »sublime technologies« that produce experiences that sometime limit human progress and possibility. This paper/presentation will examine some of the themes of this inaugural exhibition of this new artistic team and share the processes involved with the ideation, execution, and installation of the exhibition.

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1 | John Jennings/Stacey Robinson: *Black Kirby: In Search of... the Mother Boxx Connection*. Buffalo, NY, 2013.

2 | *Afrofuturism* is a mode of cultural production that deals with black speculative culture, social justice, and black imaginary spaces that posit a future where people of the African Diaspora are seen as equal. This notion of black people living in the future is a radical notion when you look at the cultural production of sci-fi narratives and you see the erasure of melanated people in general. So, an *Afrofuturism* is simply one that reflects what our world is really like. However, for generations there has been a tendency to do »white-washing« or »symbolic annihilation« of the black subject. Afrofuturism is a resistance to those practices in pop culture. Seminal works include the music of Sun Ra, ParliamentFunkadelic, Ornette Coleman, Janelle Monae, Deltron 3030 and AfrikaBambaataa. Important novels would include: *Kindred*, *Wildseed*, and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, *Nova*, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* by Samuel R. Delany, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, and *Brown Girl In The Ring* by Nalo Hopkinson. Two other great resources are the *Dark Matters* books by Sheri Renee Thomas which collect black speculative writing from black authors from the last more or less 100 years and *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* by Kodwo Eshun which details the use of electronic technology in black music.



Fig. 1 Black Kirby: *FIRST KONTAKT*

What inspired the two of you to want to create a project of this nature?

**Black Kirby (BK)** | The initial idea was sparked by the controversial lawsuit against Disney/Marvel being pursued by the family of the legendary comics creator Jack Kirby regarding remuneration on his many comics creations. This was around the time that the Avengers (2012) had become a huge hit and ended up making around a billion dollars in revenue worldwide. To contextualize, Jack Kirby was one of the most creative, inventive and prolific creators in the comic book medium and helped catapult Marvel Comics into the status that it enjoys today. He co-created Captain America with Joe Simon. However, it was with Stan Lee that he saw his greatest characters come into being. He co-created/designed Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, The Fantastic Four, The X-Men, The Silver Surfer, Galactus, The Inhumans, The Avengers, The Mighty Thor, Groot, the list goes on and on. Suffice it to say that Kirby created large chunks of American popular culture with very little fanfare and with relatively small compensation when you look at what became of his creations. At the time, the courts decided that Kirby's family was not owed any compensation due to their father being under a standard work-for-hire contract. This is a pretty standard contract that pays the artist for their one time service and owns the rights to everything they produce. Little did any of the comics creators know at the time that these cheap throwaway publications would one day become the backbone of the American film industry.

So, you were looking to shed light on this history as some type of propaganda based protest, then?

**BK** | In some ways, yes. The American comics industry was innovated and created primarily by creators of Jewish descent. We are talking about people who had been run out of Europe by the Nazis and had come to our shores in an attempt to start over. However, there was a great deal of anti-Semitic attitudes at the time and Jewish laborers had to take whatever jobs they could find. You saw a lot of them ending up in lower class situations taking the bottom level jobs. At the time this included the vaudeville positions and pulp publications. Comics were considered very seedy and low class; something no one should be proud of making. These men took a medium that no one cared for and turned it into an extremely profitable business. A lot of them changed their names to have a more »American« sound. Eli Katz was known as Gil Kane. Gene Colan's real surname was Cohen. Even Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were really Stanley Lieber and Jacob Kurtzberg respectively. They used the comics industry to literally change their identity. Even the first superhero – Superman – was created by two Jewish teens named Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster. They created characters fueled by the American dream.

But, you are called BLACK Kirby ... not Jewish Kirby. What was the spark that made you want to create this identity and show for yourselves?

**BK** | Well, we started to think about what the Kirby family was going through. That is, not being treated fairly, being taken advantage of to some degree, and totally being disrespected. The law is one thing and justice, sometimes, is another. We just one day came up with the idea that there was this type of corporate »enslavement« happening in this business and that it had been happening for years. There are many instances of comics creators dying in poverty after having created a wildly successful character. A classic example is the little-known co-creator of Batman; Bill Finger. He was the writer who helped develop the Caped Crusader. So, we immediately looked at some aspects of the Jewish experience in America as having some intersections with Black American history. We then started thinking about some of the characters that had these connections to Jewish and Black culture that were happening through the comics. At the time of their creation, the Marvel Comics line was in the middle of some of the most politically charged and tumultuous times in American history; the 60s. Jack Kirby and Stan Lee created The Black Panther; a super-powered African prince from the most technologically advanced country in the world. They created the character four months before the Black Panther party decided to call themselves that. They also created the Uncanny X-men; a perennial metaphor for anyone who has ever felt like an outsider. It seemed that the Marvel Comics were attempting to relate to more readers and actually had some interest in dealing with real issues of the time. I know that as readers, the Marvel Comics related to us a great deal more, and they inspired us as creators. In fact, what is now called the Black Age of Comics was very much inspired by these comics creators. We then started to imagine and question: »What if Jack Kirby were a Black creator?« We became obsessed with figuring out ways to create diegetic prototypes of false covers and posters that promoted Black Kirby; a black comics creator from a parallel universe where the comics characters were inspired by African mythology instead of Greek and Norse. These comics would be fueled by social change, soul music, and Black American culture. So, The Mighty Thor becomes The Mighty Shango. Big Barda becomes Big Sistah. Captain America becomes Major Sankofa. We began to riff on Kirby's work and create politically oriented parodies that not only celebrated Jack Kirby's work but also critiqued it from a racialized perspective. The American comics culture and industry has never been the most diverse space for any creators or characters from non-heteronormative expressions. Ironically, Kirby helped to proliferate the hegemony of the perfect white superhero. On the other hand, Kirby was a remarkably prolific and incredibly diverse in regards to his influences. Black Kirby, as an identity and aesthetic, allowed us to delve into the nostalgia of our childhoods and represent it through an informed visual language that made the experience extremely useful for the type of critical making that supported a lot of our collective pursuits.

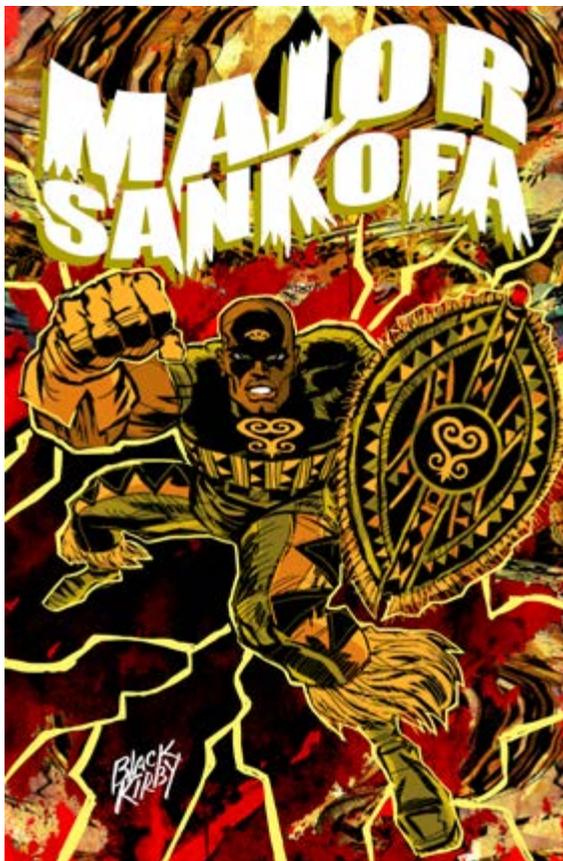


Fig. 2  
Black Kirby:  
*MAJOR SANKOFA*

What's the final goal or outcome of doing this type of work?

BK | The final goal is to put out more work in this vein that continues to challenge the art world, the comics industry, and the academy in regards to racial identity and cultural agency within given capitalist frameworks. We are always looking for new venues for the work and have more things that we want to say through this collective.

How was the process of collaborating on a project such as this?

BK | The process was extremely liberating. Before we began producing work we spent many hours discussing the inspirations of the work and what we wanted to accomplish. Then, we went to our respective workplaces and began, over a two month period, to create and remix our work. When we finished we had over 100 Black Kirby pieces. So, the initial collaboration was a very conceptual framework

in which we could operate. Then, we began to make work, share the work, and expand upon our own visual vocabulary. We used Hip Hop culture as a methodology for making meaning. That is we sampled and remixed each others works, used digital technology to collage work together and then sent the work back and forth to each other like the African American traditions of »call and response«. Stacey would start a drawing, then I would sample pieces of it and send it back. I'd add my own drawings and sample forms from Kirby, color it and then Stacey would do the same. It blurred the lines between authorship, ownership, and made for a very robust mode of collaboration.

How does science fiction and other speculative genres inform the work?

**BK** | Black Kirby is very much informed by science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and afrofuturism. The speculative aspect is very apparent all the way down to the fact that these are artifacts (or »artifictions«) from another universe that is similar to our own. Also, the idea of Black Kirby is an avatar of »double consciousness« theory. We elevate and also lampoon that theory in our slogan »We not just conscious. We double conscious.« So, Black Kirby becomes a vessel or a golem that contains the intersections between two souls. Black Kirby is the prosthetic that allows us both the freedom to perform and say things that we wouldn't have alone. The other aspect of the show, which is called »In Search of... The Mother Boxx Connection«, is the idea of continual travel and exploration through visual culture and other forms of cultural production.

Afrofuturism and other black speculative endeavors embrace the idea of looking back through the past at the future. The character Major Sankofa is the embodiment of that notion. »Sankofa« is the Ghanaian concept based on remembering one's past for empowerment. The term literally means »go back and get it«. So, the show and collaboration itself is centered around researching the past and looking for spaces where black creators and characters should have been and then subsequently placing them there. Even though this positioning is an imaginative one, it does give us a point in time where we can engage openly in discussions about these contentious spaces and hopefully inspire the creations of more speculative pieces that help engage with issues around race and representation even more.

What are some of the other influences on the work outside of the obvious inspirations derived from Jack Kirby?

**BK** | Another huge influence on the work is, of course, Hip Hop. We both are from the »hey day« of Hip Hop culture and it has influenced us both as artists, educators, and designers. The entire show is based on re-appropriations, re-contextualization, inversion, sampling, and remixing. Each piece, despite who the primary maker

Fig. 3 Black Kirby: *Mo'BLACKTUS*



Fig. 4  
Black Kirby:  
*Funky Totem*

was, is signed »Black Kirby« to challenge ideas around mediation and authorship, authenticity, and the nature of how meaning is created in a networked society. The digital medium by which Black Kirby is made and disseminated is very much a part of the discourse and the aesthetic. The work definitely has a verve and rhythm to it that is inspired by Detroit techno, P-Funk, Old Skool Hip Hop, Jazz, and the Blues. Music is a technology and Black Kirby uses that technology to hack into various modes of legibility and meaning.

How have audiences reacted to the work?

**BK** | Overall, the reaction to the work has been quite positive. We have shown the work in over fifteen venues and it still seems to pique the interest of comics scholars and creators around the country. We were very fortunate to garner the attention of the wonderful scholars that saw fit to contribute to our exhibition catalog. The articles are by some of the most notable cultural critics on Hip Hop, technology, art, sociology, media studies, and American studies in general. We were quite honored and surprised that so many people identified with our work and how we were articulating it.

What do you think the future holds for the project?

**BK** | When audiences saw the mock covers and diegetic prototypes in the show, they naturally assumed that the stories were actual comics. So, even though the covers and mock posters weren't real, we gained the attention of a lot of fans who actually wanted to read the satirical characters and scenarios we alluded to in the work. Because of this, we were inspired to create original comics featuring the characters from the show but, also new characters by Black Kirby that were *not* in the original show. We are currently working on new gallery work but also hard at work writing stories and making characters within the aesthetic of this new creator that we constructed together. It's a very busy and exciting time and we are excited for the future. This includes original work like *Night Boy* (in progress) and *Kid Code: Channel Zero*. *Kid Code* is basically a mash-up of Green Lantern, Doctor Who, as seen through the lens of someone like Afrika Bambaataa; one of the forefathers of Hip Hop culture. In the story, Kid Code and his comrades are traveling through time to stop the Power from dominating the universe. They are seeking shards of God's original voice to reset creation to its original positive form. The in progress publications *Night Boy* and the graphic novel *I Am Alfonso Jones* both deal with the recent upswing in our country around police brutality against the black male body in particular.

*Night Boys'* protagonist Jamal Jemison survives being shot by a policeman. His cousin does not. While in the hospital he is visited by two night spirits that give



Fig. 5 Black Kirby: *Magneto X*

him the power to bend darkness and shadow to his whim. His power stems from the potential energy of deferred dreams and dreams unrealized. He protects us from the dark realm that is just outside our door.

Tony Medina's *Alfonso Jones*-book is due to be published by Lee and Low books. The main character is shot by a policeman while buying a suit for his father's release from prison. The story is then told via the perspective of Alfonso's ghost. It acts as a »chorus« through which we can view how this young man's death affects the city of New York and the world.

Of late, there seem to be more obvious intersections between what we call the Black Speculative Arts Movement and Black Lives Matter. It almost seems like a resurgence of the Black Arts Movement and how it interacted and supported the Black Power Movement. Everything moves in cycles and things are coming back around like a cipher; a circle.

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