"We're all caught up in it one way or another": African American Comics, Civil Rights, and
Political Personhood

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INTRODUCTION

One of the main goals of Jim Crow segregation laws—apart from demarcating a clear societal boundary between the races—was to exclude African Americans from the benefits, promises and ideals of American nationhood and citizenship. Although various forms of media were complicit in this act of exclusion, comics in particular played a unique role because of their combined visual, textual, ideological and cultural currency. As a visual and textual medium, comics employed racist stereotypes that depicted African Americans as clownish, lazy and semiliterate figures content with their subjection. The effectiveness of these racist images and narratives thus helped to secure ideological notions of white superiority, which then diffused throughout society and formed an integral part of American culture. The ingraining of stereotypes in the national psyche reinforced the notion that citizenship and nationhood were out of reach for blacks. However, black cartoonists who were aware of comics' power to preserve hegemonic structures knew that the same medium could help to tear down those barriers.

This thesis seeks to advance the critical study of black comics by focusing on the role that black cartoonists, comic books and comic strips played not only in advancing civil rights—which most black comics discourses focus on—but also in the advancement of what I call "political personhood." I argue that through their visuality and narrative, African American comic books and comic strips were instrumental in constructing and mobilizing a community, both physical and conceptual, that connected black people to one another and to a wider concept of American nationhood and citizenship. The texts of particular interest to my discussion are *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story,* a 1957 comic book produced by the humanitarian organization Fellowship of Reconciliation; and the comic strips "Torchy Brown in 'Dixie to Harlem'" and "Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger" by cartoonist Jackie Ormes. As part of my conceptual framework for

understanding black comics' investment in the construction of citizens and community, I draw

upon a constellation of theories about the aesthetics and politics of comics, ranging from Will

Eisner's theorizations of stereotypes to theories of comics as tools of nation-building from

Redrawing the Nation by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete.

In a sense, the term "personhood" seems straightforward: the Oxford English Dictionary

defines it as "The quality or condition of being a person…. personal identity" ("personhood").

But as recent American political and legal debates have revealed, the underlying implications of

personhood are anything but clear-cut. The 2010 *Citizens United v. FEC* Supreme Court

decision[1], fiery debates surrounding abortion and the status of unborn children[2], and Republican

presidential candidate Mitt Romney's famous 2011 remark that "corporations are people, my

friend"[3] are examples of personhood's volatile and liminal position within American political

discourse. Considering the various iterations of personhood within the American political, legal

and cultural lexicon, how can the concept be defined in relation to comics and citizenship?

For the purposes of this paper, I define political personhood as one's identity within the

context of the nation. Political personhood is validated by the state through the endowment of

rights, protections and freedoms via the law. The right to vote, to espouse one's political views

without fear of retaliation or retribution, to receive a quality education and healthcare are all

examples of the features of political personhood. This form of personhood also signifies one's

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[1] *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* was a constitutional law case concerning the regulation of campaign spending by organizations. In January 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court held 5-4 that government could not restrict independent political expenditures made by individuals and nonprofit corporations, thus opening the floodgates for a burgeoning in American campaign spending. For more on the case, see Adam Liptak. "Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit." *New York Times*. New York Times Co, 21 Jan. 2010. Web.
[2] The debate concerning whether human life, and consequently, personhood, begins at birth or at conception has long roiled American politics. For further reading, see Eds. Jay L. Garfield and Patricia Hennessey. *Abortion: Moral and Legal Perspectives.* Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1984. Print.
[3] Ashley Parker. "'Corporations Are People,' Romney Tells Iowa Hecklers Angry Over His Tax Policy." *New York Times*. New York Times Co, 11 Aug. 2011. Web.

political agency, or freedom to be a political actor. When a person is denied any or all of these rights, political personhood is lost. This concept also serves as a framework for understanding the rightful place in the nation's political and social landscape that African Americans have long sought. Challenges to unjust laws such as the casting of ballots in the face of white hostility and violence or the founding of historically black colleges and universities are examples of assertions of black political personhood.

COMICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CITIZEN

As an art form that is ubiquitous in American cultural life and highly dependent on intuitive extrapolations and interpretations, comics were once instrumental tools for obstructing black political personhood. Communications theorist Marshall McLuhan explains in *Understanding Media* the extent to which humans play an active role in co-constructing narratives while consuming media. For example, he uses the term "hot" to describe forms of media such as film and television, because they are so data-rich that they do not require the viewer to intuit any part of the viewing experience. Every image, speech act and audible sound is ready-made for the viewer's consumption.

In contrast, "cool" media requires a significant amount of consumer participation because of a lack of already-present sensory information (179). Comics are an example of "cool" media because of their use of images to evoke targeted reader responses. An image of a tall man in a fedora and trench coat might spur the reader to immediately think "detective" or "private eye" even before the character's occupation is specified. Similarly, a visually beautiful character might lead the reader to infer "goodness" while a more sinister, less attractive character suggests "evil." Although readers of comics participate in the reading experience by forming these kinds of interpretations, their interpretations are still informed by socially conditioned stereotypes.

Examples of stereotypes in early American media are ubiquitous, from the large-lipped, coal-skinned protagonist of the "Little Black Sambo" children's books to the acquiescent and intellectually devoid Congolese natives that populate Herge's 1930 graphic novel *Tintin in the Congo.* Visual representations of blacks in this manner not only served to humiliate black readers and objectify the black body, but also were engaged in something much subtler, what gender studies theorist Teresa de Lauretis calls a "rhetoric of violence." They formed a set of discursive practices that reduced African Americans to icons lacking the dimensionality and heterogeneity of the human experience.

Racial and cultural stereotypes exploit the reader-response impulse through shorthand communication and manipulation of physiognomic iconography. Although comics can be used to foster nationalism and common identification with the state, they also have the potential to act as a distinctly transnational and cross-linguistic form of communication. Certain characters (for example, Mickey Mouse and Charlie Brown) evoke specific feelings of self-identification among various groups of people; however, different forms of comics employ this form shorthand communication in slightly different ways. Newspaper comics are spatially limited, only able to fit a certain number of images and words on the surface of a single, flat two-dimensional page or within a portion of a computer screen. Thus, the necessity to communicate swiftly and unambiguously through powerful images is heightened. Will Eisner argues that "in film, there is plenty of time to develop a character within an occupation. In comics, there is little time or space. The image or caricature must settle the matter instantly" (12). Other comics, particularly narrative comics, exploit socially conditioned perceptions of the ethnic "other" in propagating racial stereotypes. Another there is room within narrative comics to establish a character fully,

representing a character's "true" self might not necessarily be the work that the narrative is setting out to do; hence the portrayal of Africans in *Tintin in the Congo.*

Comics also enable racial stereotypes to travel widely and quickly. They are an extremely mobile art form with immense cultural utility. Films and television programs are beset by technical issues such as distribution and syndication that govern their movement across regional and national borders; comics are more nimble, often printed in multiple publications simultaneously. They can also be photocopied or passed between friends. They are more inexpensive than movie tickets or boxed DVD sets. Within the context of a capitalist society, comics are also convenient vehicles for marketing products. Whereas an actor might expect financial compensation and legal safeguards for licensing his or her image, comic characters are fictional, and only require the consent of the cartoonist. Comics are also easily recognizable to children because their use of intuition and socially conditioned values to create meaning. These qualities thereby increase comics' appeal and potential customer base. Through these means of dissemination and circulation, stereotypes and racist hegemonic ideologies gain traction and become ingrained in the societal psyche.

During the "Golden Age" of American comics, the idea that comics could be enlisted in the national project of racial discrimination and debasement might have seemed odd or counterintuitive. At the time, comics were long derided as "kiddie fare" or lowbrow popular culture at best, and have only recently emerged as an area of serious critical inquiry. Comics might also have seemed odd for other reasons: how could an art form that was mostly associated with children and semiliterate readers be used to propagate such powerful notions of race and citizenship? Ironically, the same qualities that seem to detract from comics actually make it a distinct and highly effective venue for such a project. Not coincidentally, the white supremacist

discursive practices that emerged from comics were critical tools in maintaining and reinforcing particular formations of the nation and the state. One such formation is the concept of what entails citizenship and who exactly qualifies for citizenship.[4] In their book *Redrawing the Nation,* Latin American comics scholars Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete state that comics have historically provided Latin American readers with "codes, plots and strategies" necessary for visualizing and situating themselves within the process of national modernization (L'Hoeste, Poblete 3); this conceptualization can be extended to explain how comics have helped white Americans to define citizenship and determine their own relationship to the American national project. During the "Golden Age of Comic Books," which is placed roughly between the late 1930s and the early 1950s by comics historians, citizenship was almost exclusively synonymous with American whiteness. This is particularly true for the superhero genre and the many characters who fall within it, such as Superman, Batman, and perhaps most obviously, Captain America. These superheroes exemplify both the extraordinary and the ordinary, the exceptional man and the common man, therefore allowing the reader (and particularly white boys) to self-identify with both character types. Such comic books create a dichotomy between good and evil by imperiling the lives of honest, decent, hard-working people by nefarious villains. Also, because superhero comics were so popular, they were vital in instilling such notions of good and evil, patriotism and nationalism in children—notions which would reproduce themselves over generations. By upholding moral values that characterize just societies, the superhero also upholds the rights of the citizen and assumes the duties of his citizenship.

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[4] The definition of citizenship is already a subject of considerable debate that extends back to philosophers such as Aristotle, Tacitus, Cicero, Machiavelli, Harrington, Rousseau, and Marx, among others. However, if we settle on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's definition—"a member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership," we can begin to understand how comics frame white and black subjects.

The superhero's heroic deeds are also an understated (or, in the case of Captain America, not so understated) outgrowth of his patriotic loyalty to the state, in this case, to the United States government and the principles of liberal democracy. Captain America is wholly devoted to stamping out injustice and upholding the ideals of the American Constitution; however, his actions are restricted within the bounds of the law and without undue force. This mode of interpreting the duties of the American citizen were particularly meaningful to cartoonists during World War II, when children were taught that any form of support to the war effort not only served their interests but the collective interests of the nation.

Newspaper comics also played a crucial role in disseminating ideas about the white American citizen. If the superhero comic book casted the citizen within the context of the fantastic, then the newspaper comic strip reflected back the mundane realities of white America. Strips such as "Hi and Lois," "The Family Circus," and "Gasoline Alley" portrayed working-class and middle class white Americans living their lives, going to work, and raising their families. Most of these strips were set in racially and culturally homogeneous small towns and promoted ideas such as family values and community stakeholdership. The focus on the American "everyman" is apparent from the description of the father Hi from the comic strip "Hi and Lois":

> Hiram Flagston is the happy husband of a beautiful wife and the proud father of four lovely children. He works as the district sales manager for Foofram Industries, pays his taxes, mows his lawn and loves to play golf. He is a decent and likable guy who anyone would be glad to call a friend. ("The Family")

Such characters and comic strips provided white readers with a mirror and affirmed the importance of family, community and country in the midst of unsettling political dramas such as World War II, the Cold War, the Communist Red Scare and the rising Civil Rights Movement.

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However, while comics normalized and validated the everyday experiences of the white American citizen, they also had a reverse effect: they purposely isolated and dehumanized the black subject, in turn denying black people's right to citizenship. This trend was not only confined to comics, but was a transmedia phenomenon, occurring in radio programs (*The Fibber McGee and Molly Show*, *Beulah*), television shows (*Amos and Andy*, *The Little Rascals* and cartoons such as *Tom and Jerry*), films (*Gone With the Wind*, *Tarzan*) and music (various state anthems romanticizing slavery and plantation life, minstrel showtunes), among other media.

Often these cultural texts employed visual and conceptual stereotypes about African Americans that had origins in white social spaces. Rooted in racist ideas about black physicality and skin complexion, many comics equated certain physical features with abnormality, grotesqueness, poverty and lack of education. Visually, these comics portrayed black subjects as having skin as dark as tar or coal, which marked dark skin as a signifier for physical unattractiveness. Eyes were either bulging and crazed or lazy and lethargic; lips were enlarged; the body was also proportionally exaggerated—the men having long arms and legs and women having overly enlarged breasts or behinds. Speech was also heavily exaggerated, mimicking plantation speech reminiscent of the slavery era (Figure 1). Examples of such stereotypical impressions include the overweight, stern and unquestioning maid Rachel in the comic strip "Gasoline Alley," as well as the dim-witted, happy-go-lucky black slapstick character in Dick Tracy. Within the discursive practices engendered by these comics, black intellect was practically nonexistent, replaced with an ingratiating willingness to please or impress whites.
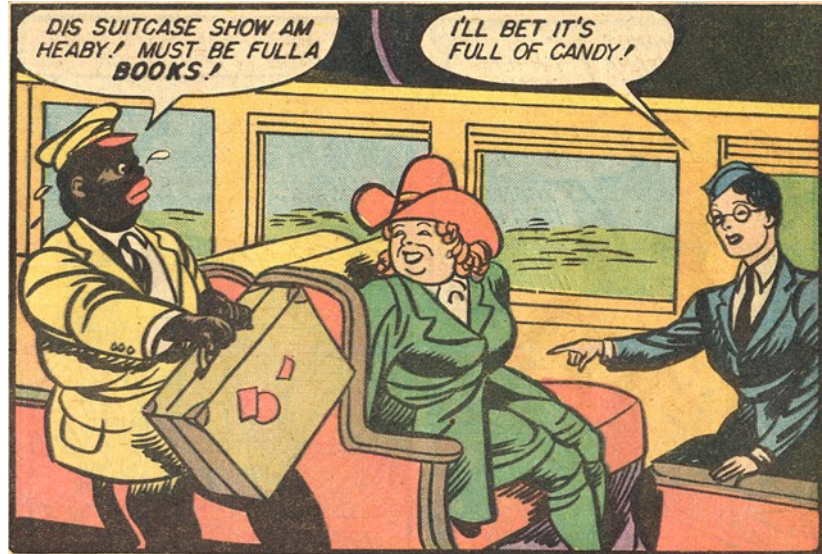
Figure 1. An example of a stereotypical black train porter in a 1940s *Wonder Woman* comic. (Courtesy Tim Hanley, thanley.wordpress.com)

By constructing black identity in this manner, comics worked to exclude black readers from the idea of national stakeholdership. Furthermore, this act of exclusion elevated white readers by making whiteness what blackness was not. Blackness became a measuring stick for the white national identity. Whiteness signified content, while blackness signified lack, either through the visual stereotyping of black characters or through their complete absence from the comics pages. Thus, comics became an extension of legal and cultural discriminatory practices.

MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE MONTGOMERY STORY

Because comics are so adept at developing citizens' political consciousness through the power of stereotypes and racist ideologies, the medium can also work in the reverse. The same technologies of power that participate in the perpetuation of systemic racism and misguided stereotypes can also tear those same structures apart. Black comics creators recognized this duality unique to comics and used it to create comics that countered the Anglocentric and xenophobic worldviews that pervaded the comics pages. In short, their project was the formation of black political personhood, similar to the concept of citizenship engendered by superhero and

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newspaper comics but with particular nuances informed by the experiences of black people in the United States.

One such comic that participated in this project was *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story,* produced in 1957 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a humanitarian organization dedicated to peacemaking and improved human relations.[5] In 1958, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was then an emerging young minister at the forefront of the successful Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott[6], formed an alliance with the organization. Although FOR was not the main organizational mechanism through which Dr. King did his work, he often described the similarity between FOR's objectives and the philosophical underpinnings of his work.

As a way of amassing support for the Civil Rights Movement and touting the effectiveness of nonviolent protest, FOR commissioned the creation of a comic book about the success of the Montgomery bus boycott. The decision to create a mini-comic book about civil rights was novel at the time, considering the political tension that gripped the nation. The Cold War was in full gear, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's Communist witch hunt paralyzed the

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[5] Organized in 1914 in Germany by a group of religious leaders and war objectors, FOR's mission has been to "spread the Kingdom of Heaven, the Rule of God…. To stop war, to purify the world, to get it saved from poverty *and* riches, to make people like each other, to heal the sick, and comfort the sad… to find God in everything and in everyone" (Dekar 18). Originally, the organization was founded to brainstorm solutions to stave off the outbreak of World War I, but failed in that regard—the war began as the founders convened the inaugural meeting. For further reading on FOR, see Paul R. Dekar, *Creating the Beloved Community: A Journey with the Fellowship of Reconciliation.* Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2005. Print.

[6] Although the American Civil Rights Movement had been an ongoing social movement that began practically after the end of slavery and reemerged in various waves, the 1955-1957 Montgomery bus boycott was the pivotal event that set the famous 1950s/1960s wave in motion. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a black seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, wearily boarded a bus at the close of a particularly tiring work day. When the bus began to fill and more white passengers demanded seating, the driver ordered her to surrender her seat. Parks quietly refused, and her arrest spurred civil rights leaders such as Dr. King, E.D. Nixon and others to mobilize Montgomery's black community in a successful year-long boycott of the transit system. For more on the bus boycott, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963.* New York: Random House, 1987. Print.

United States Congress and the country with fear. As a measure of safeguarding the nation's

children and ensuring their patriotism, forms of media that appealed to young people were

closely policed. Comics did not escape this surveillance. Many popular comics had taken a dark

turn in genre, focusing heavily on gratuitous violence and horror and themes of lust and sexual

suggestiveness. The New York-based psychiatrist Frederic Wertham[7] (Figure 3), a notable critic

of comics and their perceived dangers to the child psyche, testified before Congress about the

perversity of the art form in 1954, showing visual excerpts of particularly gruesome and

pathological comic books aimed at children as young as seven. One excerpt that Wertham

displayed was from the then-popular serialized comic series *Tales From the Crypt,* in which a

group of baseball players are using a man's severed head as the baseball and the man's strung-

out intestines as the bases. Surprisingly, newspaper comics did not experience the same public

relations crisis—in fact, strips such as "Peanuts," "Gasoline Alley" and others maintained solid

readerships, mostly because of their emphasis on wholesomeness, national cooperation and the

(white) everyman. Comic books, in contrast, were seen as tools of juvenile delinquency and

moral decay. White parents' anxieties about comics and compromised national loyalties were

compounded by the rise of the Civil Rights Movement.

No particular artist or writer was given credit for the artwork or writing of the book;

however, comics scholar Andrew Aydin[8] notes that Alfred Hassler, who was then FOR's

Director of Communications, was the originator of the concept for the book. Hassler collaborated

with Benton Resnik, a publishing associate with connections in the comic book industry (which

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[7] During the Communist scare of the 1950s, Wertham was the nation's leading anti-comics voice. His famous 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* informed Congress's implementation of the Comics Code, a parental advisory-style ratings system that regulated comic books. For more on Wertham, see Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent.* New York, 1954. Print.

[8] For more on Aydin's research on *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story,* see Andrew Aydin, "The comic book that changed the world." *Creative Loafing,* 1 Aug. 2013. Web.

had began to crumble under the weight of political pressure and negative public opinion towards

comic books), and FOR eventually received funding to create a draft that was sent to Dr. King to

ensure historical, philosophical and cultural accuracy. Aydin provides a glimpse into the close

visual and textual reading that King did of the graphic manuscript; in a letter to Hassler, King

points out:

> On page 16, box 1 you state that [E.D.] Nixon was the first person to be indicted. I don't think this is actually the case. The Grand Jury indicted everybody simultaneously. Neither was Nixon the first to be arrested. Ralph Abernathy was the first to be arrested. On page 20, box 5 you quote the Negro woman who was slapped: "I could really wallop her—she is smaller than me." Actually, there was a white man who slapped the Negro woman. In order to be more in line with the facts it would be better to say: "I could really wallop him—he's smaller than me!" (Aydin)

As King's letter suggests, the making of *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* was a

highly deliberate and intentional process. Mindful of the fact that comic books were not highly

regarded within the mainstream public sphere, FOR and Dr. King tailored the text to appeal to

particularized audiences, two of whom included semiliterate African Americans and people who

strongly supported the Civil Rights Movement. A close reading of the visuality and narrative of

the book reveals a deeply concerted effort by FOR to engage these publics, as well as promote

ideas such as social justice and equality. More subtly, the text also raises up King as an emerging

leader: the title of the book bears his name, and his illustrated image is displayed prominently at

the top of the cover (Figure 2). Below him are images evocative of the boycott. An African

American woman, poised and fashionably dressed, flags a passing car—perhaps it is a taxi, or a

friend—and reaches for the door handle, about to enter. Underneath her is the caption:

"DECEMBER 5, 1955"—the day the boycott was born—"WALK TO FREEDOM." Juxtaposed

next to the boycott scene is another scene in which African Americans are boarding a bus.

Underneath that image is another caption: "DECEMBER 21, 1956: VICTORY FOR JUSTICE," alluding to the success of the boycott and the newly democratized transit system.

Figure 2. *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. (Courtesy Amazon.com)

The book is also mindful of situating the black reader as the "everyday" American citizen, just as newspaper comics were focused on upholding white Americana as a cultural exemplar. Although the title of the book bears Martin Luther King's name, the character at the heart of the story is actually a working-class African American man in Montgomery. Echoing the famous opening line of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick,* the man instructs the reader to "Call me Jones. My name doesn't matter. But my story's important for you as well as me. We're all caught up in it one way or another!" (2). From Jones's very first lines, the formation of black political personhood begins to take shape. As seen in Figure 3, the phrase "Call me Jones"

underscores both Jones's "everyman" quality (particularly striking since most "everyman" characters in comics of this period are white males) and his effectiveness in reclaiming a famous phrase from the American literary canon. Visually, his body language also highlights his presence. He leans forward within his panel, making direct eye contact with the reader and signaling his investment in connecting with us.

Figure 3. Jones is the quintessential "everyman," symbolizing the ambitions and dreams of a broad swath of readers while also particularizing the African American experience. (Courtesy Ethan Persoff, http://www.ep.tc/mlk/)

Many aspects of Jones's professional and personal life would resonate with black readers of the time, and particularly with working-class black men. He resents segregation and the cultural/legal demotion of black citizenship; we see him drying cars at a car wash and being told by an impatient white businessman, "Snap it up, boy. I want that car in a hurry" (2). Jones tells us that the Jim Crow order of the South has him nervous, as it does many other black people. He keeps a gun locked away in a desk in his house, and wrestles with himself internally on whether or not he could ever bring himself to use it if necessary. "I'm a peaceful man," he says, "but I have a gun. For a long time I thought I might have to use it someday. Now I don't know" (2). To further complicate matters, he has a wife and baby son, and worries about whether he'd ever

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have to use his gun to defend his family. Not only does Jones enable black readers to self-identify with a black character, but he also embodies the moral and philosophical complexities posed by segregation. These complexities are wrapped within internal conflicts regarding peacefulness versus violence and the significance of courage within manhood, marriage and fatherhood.

As a way of grappling with his frustrations, Jones decides to take action. He gathers together some of his closest friends and suggests they protest Montgomery's segregated mass transit by boycotting the buses. The men mimeograph a flyer lamenting Rosa Parks's recent arrest for not giving up her seat to white passengers; they then circulate the flyers around Montgomery's black professional community, and the announcement eventually reaches the local newspaper. As the word spreads, more black people feel empowered to participate in the bus boycott, and Jones finds himself more politically active, eventually joining the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)[9] and electing Martin Luther King as the group's president. Through Jones's political transformation, the reader becomes politically transformed as well, and the process of creating political personhood is set in motion. By portraying ordinary African Americans engaged in the visual representations of political activism—mimeographing sheets, attending public meetings, strategizing in groups—the text enables the reader to see him or herself as a political actor with the power to change unjust laws and even the course of history. Just as the ordinary black men and women of Montgomery are empowered to correct the inequalities instigated by segregation, the reader is instructed to envision themselves as equally deserving individuals whose duty is to demand full equality from the state. The text even acts as

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[9] The Montgomery Improvement Association was a civic organization founded by Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and other black ministers and community leaders in Montgomery to coordinate the 1955 bus boycott. For further reading on the MIA, see Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom.* New York: Harper, 1958. Print.

a literal mobilizer and rallying cry for readers through the depiction of a preacher warming up his congregation, a familiar sight to many black readers. He stands at the lectern during an MIA meeting as if he is presiding over a congregation in a church; he also engages in some verbal call-and-response with the citizens gathered:

PREACHER: Are we going to ride those buses?
CONGREGATION: NO!
PREACHER: Are we going to walk with the feet God gave us?
CONGREGATION: YES!
PREACHER: Yes! Better to walk with dignity…than ride in humiliation! (5)

In spite of bitter and sometimes violent resistance from racist whites in Montgomery, Jones and the MIA successfully convince the city to desegregate the public transit system. Surprisingly, *The Montgomery Story* does not end with blacks riding the buses. At the end of the book is an educational and instructional addendum showing readers how to put into practice the principles of nonviolent resistance in order to make actionable social change in their own lives. Although unusual for a comic book, this section brings the book's investment in political personhood full circle. Narrated by the cartoon version of Martin Luther King, the section explains how social leader Mahatma Gandhi incorporated nonviolence into his campaign against British imperialism in India in 1919.

After making clear the costs of nonviolence—including the loss of some human lives—King demonstrates how to put nonviolence to work in an American context. In a subsection headlined "How the Montgomery Method Works," King runs through a series of pointers grounded in Christian theology: "Remember that *you* can do something about [your] situation. God says *you* are important…. God loves your enemy, too, and that makes *him* important to you…. You have to stop seeing him as your enemy" (12). Beside the narrated text, the illustrations show an African American man looking into a mirror and seeing a white man

reflected back, underscoring the human interconnectedness that King references. The pairing of

King's instructions with the visual applications crystallizes for the reader what the realization of

black political personhood looks like: not only is it the attainment of political rights and

privileges, but also a fundamental understanding of how citizens should matter to one another.

Just as Martin Luther King believed that the Civil Rights Movement presented a "glorious

opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization," this comic book

injects a new dimension of political awareness and racial consciousness into the reader.

JACKIE ORMES, BLACK WOMEN AND POLITICAL PERSONHOOD

Racist comics not only worked to obstruct black political personhood, but also to

reinforce racially particularized gender roles. Although stereotypical comics disparaged both

black men and women, some comics were responsible for acts of racial violence that singled out

black women in particular. These stereotypes swung between extremes, depicting African

American women as either overtly sexualized figures or large, unattractive and sexless, and thus

reinforced notions that black women were either sexually out of control or subservient figures

lacking personal or political agency.

In response to such characterizations, the work of Jackie Ormes[10] (Figure 4)—who was

the first African American woman to have a cartooning career—played a specific role within the

project of building black political personhood. Not only did her comics mobilize political

consciousness among black readers and engage them in the issues of the day, but they also

normalized the image of the black female as a self-confident, independent and racially conscious

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[10] Ormes was comfortable as a cartoonist and as a businesswoman—in 1947 she launched a line of dolls based on her precocious five-year-old heroine Patty-Jo. After her death in 1985, Ormes's work lapsed into obscurity until the publication of comics scholar Nancy Goldstein's book *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist*, which is the most definitive (and currently only) monograph about Ormes's life and work. For more on Ormes's biography, see Nancy Goldstein. *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008. Print.

citizen at a time when black women were virtually nonexistent in mainstream comics (except for stereotypical portrayals of them as maids and mammies).

Figure 4. Jackie Ormes at work. (Courtesy baladycreatives.com)

Born Zelda Mavin Jackson in 1911, Ormes grew up in Pittsburgh and displayed artistic talent at a young age. She was also deeply engrossed in the social and political issues that consumed African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century; shortly after high school, she worked as a journalist covering stories for the Pittsburgh *Courier,* an African American-owned newspaper. Over the course of two decades, the *Courier* would serve as the showcase and platform for three of Ormes's most memorable characters: Torchy Brown, a Mississippi farm girl who dreams of life in New York City; and Patti-Jo and Ginger, two sisters at the center of a series of witty, politically conscious gag strips. An examination of the rhetoric and visuality of these characters reveals Ormes's deep investment in mobilizing political personhood in black and female readers, as well as the critical space that black newspapers provided for comics.

Torchy Brown, the star of two strips—"Torchy Brown in 'Dixie to Harlem'" and "Torchy in Heartbeats"—is an early example of the fully realized black individual in Ormes's comics. "Dixie in Harlem," which debuted in the pages of the *Courier* in 1937, introduces us to Torchy when she's a young woman tending her Aunt Clemmie and Uncle Jeff's Mississippi farm. Torchy is bored with the South and dreams of a more glamorous life in New York City, where her mother (described as a "gay [lively] divorcee") relocated after mysteriously leaving the family. A friend of Torchy's, a farm girl known as Bones, receives a visit one day from Dinah Dazzle, an affluent and fashionable older cousin from New York. Dinah's charm, poise and style inspire Torchy, who gets an idea. Torchy decides to auction her farm animals in order to pull together enough funds to purchase a train ticket to New York. Uprooting becomes an explicit assertion of her personal and political agency. Her escape to the Big Apple is reminiscent of the mass northward migration of millions of African Americans between 1900 and 1972. Through the narrative trope of movement as a means of improving one's circumstances—which also emerges in several novels, most notably Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*—Torchy's personal story would have resonated with black readers of the Pittsburgh *Courier* who themselves might have relocated from various Southern locales.

But not only does Torchy take a gamble by deciding to move north, she also formulates strategies for dealing with the same old racial codes that plagued her in the South. Rather than responding to these segregation laws with fear or confusion, she decides to make a bold but risky move: in one comic strip dated September 4, 1937, Torchy boards a segregated train car and sees two signs: one labeled "Colored" pointing in one direction, and another labeled "White" pointing in the opposite direction. "I'll jus' pretend I can't read very well," she tells herself. She sits in the

White section and starts reading a newspaper. An Italian man sitting beside her notices that she's catching up on the latest news about the black boxer Joe Louis, and the two bond over the article. When the conductor passes by and nearly evicts Torchy from the train car, the Italian man vouches for her, saying, "Dees little lady iss my very good fran'. I insist you mus' run along now, meester conductor, I got lots of readink to do!" (Figure 5) Obviously, what Torchy has done is extremely bold for an African American, let alone a black woman, to attempt in the 1930s.

Figure 5. Torchy challenges segregation by pretending she "can't read very well." (Courtesy jackieormes.com)

Through this act of intention defiance of an unjust law, Torchy personifies black political personhood in a way that is instantly recognizable to the reader. Ormes also demonstrates through this strip how arbitrary and nonsensical segregation is by demonstrating a personal connection across racial and cultural lines (Goldstein 73). Because Torchy and the Italian share a love for Joe Louis—a quintessentially American cultural icon at the time—they are able to trespass racially coded boundary lines and affirm each other as human beings and fellow citizens.

Another form of agency and citizenship that emerges throughout "Dixie to Harlem" can be seen in the characters' physiognomic appearances and fashion statements. All of Ormes's adult and teenaged characters are tall and physically beautiful black women. Beauty standards of the day, including finely styled hair and bold fashions, as well as physical features such as long

legs and slim figures, epitomize the women of Ormes's comics. Just as racial stereotypes reinforce racist attitudes in readers through their reliance on visually inspired reader-response intuitions, the characters Torchy, Bones and Dinah Dazzle force the reader to reconsider what the standard of beauty is. All of the black women depicted exemplify aesthetic symmetry and desirability, thus creating a new visual and conceptual framework for beauty that is not contingent on whiteness. The black women illustrated in these comics expand the bounds of what it means to be all-American.

Just as Torchy redefined standards of American beauty, the characters Patty-Jo and Ginger helped to carve out a space for black women and girls within the world of American social and political commentary. The single-panel comic "Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger," which ran from 1945 to 1956, focuses on two sisters: Patty-Jo, a pint-sized five-year-old with a penchant for wry cultural and political commentary, and Ginger, a stylish teenager who is often held hostage as a sounding board for her younger sister's musings and wisecracks. The girls' parents are mentioned occasionally but largely out of the picture (with the exception of their father making two appearances), and the family enjoys a level of affluence rarely represented in black cartoon characters at the time. Patty-Jo displays many contradictions: although she is young in age and small in size, she has a sharp wit and a highly observant ear, often commenting on developments in race relations or public affairs. Her speech reflects the awkwardness of a child trying on ideas that are too big for her, and serves as a prime example of the early budding stages of black political personhood. Patty-Jo's politically wit also sends a message to the dual readership of the strip, consisting of children and their parents: she shows child readers that issues of politics and citizenship are not out of their reach, and she also signals to political consciousness in children is an important way of working towards racial equality. Ormes makes an effort of formulating a

unique idiom for Patty-Jo that combines elevated concepts with childish understanding

(Goldstein 85). For example, Figure 6 illustrates a panel dated October 8, 1955, in which Patty-

Jo, having just heard about the murder of Emmett Till, tells Ginger, "I don't want to seem touchy

on the subject… but, that new little white tea-kettle just whistled at me!" (Goldstein 128). The

"whistling" refers to the fact that Till was murdered for whistling at a white woman.

"I don't want to seem touchy on the subject . . . but, that new little white tea-kettle just whistled at me!"

Figure 6. Although Patty-Jo lacks the context or the maturity to adequately understand the politics surrounding
Emmett Till's death, she still constructs her own political personhood through her racial consciousness.

Patty-Jo, who doesn't have a full grasp of the politics of interracial relations between men

and women, underscores the triviality of a whistle, which unfortunately led to Till losing his life.

Although she obviously lacks the context or the maturity to adequately understand the complex

politics, Patty-Jo still constructs her own political personhood through her racial consciousness.

She displays this odd tension between consciousness and misunderstanding in another panel dated October 16, 1954, in which she is at school, holding an American flag while leading her class in the Pledge of Allegiance. To her classmates' confusion and horror, Patty-Jo misquotes the Pledge, saying, "…One 'Naked Individual,' with Liberty and Justice for all" (128). Not only does she insert this double-entendre ("naked individual" referring to the nakedness of America's racial problems), she keeps her right hand held behind her back, refusing to raise it in salute to the flag. By asserting her right to protest certain states' slow or hostile reactions to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Patty-Jo personifies the phrase "the dissent of the governed" and a child's conception of political personhood.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the decades since *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* and Jackie Ormes's comics were published, African Americans have made significant strides in the attainment of political personhood. The passage of civil rights laws in the 1960s, the growth of the black middle class and the election of the first black President of the United States are testaments of black advancement as well as American advancement. However, the racial, social and political problems that continue to plaque black America in the 2010s serve as grim reminders that black political personhood is still a work in progress. Stories of stubborn poverty rates, the school-to-prison pipeline and recent incidents of police brutality against blacks continue to fill newspapers, online news sites and social media.

Comics have the unique innate ability to speak to these issues because of their dual visual and textual nature. Visually, comics take African Americans out of the realm of the ethnic "other" and place them on a playing field on which they set the terms. Whether the comic in question is Morrie Turner's "Wee Pals," a strip which uses a multicultural cast of children as

mouthpieces for keen social and political commentary, or Barbara Brandon-Croft's strip "Where I'm Coming From," which delves into the lives of ordinary, professional African American women, comics reach into the zones of obscurity and show America as it is, giving visibility to the minority while actively engaging the majority. Textually, comics access the public via social and political messages in a way that a Barack Obama or Jesse Jackson speech might do differently. For example, Aaron McGruder, creator of the comic strip "The Boondocks," uses edgy humor and social satire to illustrate the adventures of two black boys sent from their urban neighborhood to live with their grandfather in the mostly-white suburbs. And recently, essayist and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates has written the latest installment of Marvel Comics' famous Black Panther series, using narrative to reframe old notions of the traditional American superhero comic. Another reason that comics are well-suited to address issues of racial inequality is the way in which comics are able to adapt to the changing nature of America's racial discourse.

The relationship between political personhood and comics is yet to be explored at length in black comics studies. As a generation of black Americans questions whether black lives really do matter within our public and civic sphere, comics have the potential to dramatically reshape how issues of race, citizenship and political personhood are discussed and thought about within the public sphere. As the national racial discourse continues to evolve, comics are adapting at the same pace. For example, McGruder's "Boondocks" have found a large fan base among readers for its timely—yet often controversial—takes on race relations and racism. Through the main characters, Huey and Riley Freeman, the strip highlights the ways that black radicalism and the American mainstream fail to connect, as well as the valuable insights that black radicalism has to offer the nation. The fact that "Boondocks" branched into transmedia collaboration and became a

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popular animated television program underscores how comics can keep pace with our constantly

evolving racial discourse.

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