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Black boys and black girls in comics: an affective and historical mapping of intertwined stereotypes

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Abstract

This chapter examines the representation of black boys and black girls in comics, with a strong focus on early comics from the late nineteenth century. It combines the study of gender with the study of racist representations. Weaving connections with related cultural products such as animation and children's literature, the chapter shows how racist stereotypes permeate representations of black children regardless of gender. Performative and persistent racist stereotypes such as the pickaninny transcend genders and coalesce the bodies of both black boys and black girls. Although black boys outnumber black girls in comics, they channel stereotypes that can be traced back to the visualization of Topsy, the slave girl in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This chapter proposes the concept of soft hate in order to explain how denigrating imagery persists and serves as a conduit of racist sentiment even in contexts that would otherwise condemn such feelings.

We are only too painfully familiar with racialized imagery in comics, cartoons and other media, especially those relying on caricatural styles. We are also all too familiar with the argument that such representations were inevitable for their times: the artists didn't know better; the exaggerated idiom of caricature was the only way othered (non-white) people were recognizable; caricature spares no one and deforms in the service of humor; etc. In this chapter, I unpack stereotypes of black boys and black girls that traveled between popular imagery (especially advertisements and prints) and popular entertainment (minstrelsy and vaudeville), illustrated children's literature, dolls and comics to interrogate the rigidity of derogatory stereotypes of black children and their persistence in the face of more conciliatory representations. I begin with the rise of derogatory stereotypes of African Americans in mid to late nineteenth-century American culture (Bernstein, "Signposts" 99–100; Black), which was also a period

when the illustrated press boomed. I then discuss racial stereotypes in early British and American comics. The chapter closes with a discussion of a contemporary comic, *Boondocks*, that subverts and criticizes those stereotypes.

In the case of black comic strip characters, prominent girl comics characters seem to be by and large absent. Notably even the few relatively famous boy characters – such as Richard Outcault's *Poor Lil Mose* and Peanut in *Beano* – were short-lived because they did not attract many readers and their place as central characters was not considered legitimate even in the context of comics which has been home to several outcast protagonists. This highlights the extent to which racial prejudice is taken for granted. The persistence and acceptability of harmful stereotypes can be better understood by turning to Sara Ahmed's concept of stickiness and focusing on the emotions potentially evoked in (non-black) readers and viewers of such stereotypes. In dialoguing between past and present representations and the kinds of affects and emotions they channel and evoke, I trace the contours of what seems to be a carefully constructed architecture of soft hate.

The political scientist Joseph Nye famously described soft power as the exercise of control through economic and cultural forces. Soft hate simultaneously relies on these forces and is channeled through popular images. Nye's simple dictionary definition of power is worth recalling: "power means an ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not do" (Nye 1990, 154). Soft hate wields a similar kind of power: it is hatred that sneaks through nooks and crannies of images that have some offensive elements but have become acceptable because of their good-natured sheen which, in the case of comics, is reinforced by their intention to entertain and provoke laughter. Soft hate is at work in very ordinary means of figuring hate and includes images that are just assumed to be part of comics vocabulary. A mechanism of hate is anchored in the tools of visual representation, especially in the reliance on stereotypes. That derogatory stereotypes of black people, which usually incorporated grotesquely exaggerated childish elements, became a standard means of representation was by no means simply an entertaining twist of caricature. Soft hate captures the hating impulse hidden in images that are otherwise seen as cute and harmless and are used in the service of consumer culture, including children's culture.

Stereotypes for all their flatness and unoriginality are layered with history that remains buried or ignored and complacency that is, against all odds, persistent (cf. Rosello 22–25). And since stereotypes are sneaky, sometimes it takes a lot of digging in order to realize just how pernicious they can be, even, and perhaps especially when they look like seemingly harmless images, serving to entertain. Such images call for a constant revisiting. This back-and-forth movement runs parallel to what Sara Ahmed describes as the "'rippling' effect of emotions", which "move sideways (through 'sticky' associations between signs,

figures and objects) as well as forwards and backwards". "Repression", Ahmed adds, "always leaves its trace in the present – hence 'what sticks' is bound 'presence' of historicity" (45). It is therefore important to look back and to look underneath stereotypes.

Minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Pickaninny

Both Jim Crow and Zip Coon were familiar characters in minstrel shows which relied on blackface to enact a fantasy of "Africanness". They began around the 1830s, became popular in the mid-nineteenth century and disappeared in the 1930s, when they were widely perceived as inappropriate (Rehin 682). The 1930s saw the rise of the animated, and eventually cartoony, funny animal, which is where blackface and other minstrel practices found a new, acceptable home (Sammond; Nel). This is only one example of how the relationship between comics and racist imagery is deeply entangled with other popular practices and entrenched in layers of repressive history.

Jim Crow was the mock happy, intensely performative slave of the rural south. According to sociologist George F. Rehin, Jim Crow draws connections between the clownish servant "type" (the zanni in commedia dell arte acts) and what became the "harlequin jim crow" or blackface clown in nineteenth-century America and Britain. Unlike Jim Crow, Zip Coon is a free black person from the urban north, with dandyish airs, who aspires to achieve white standards of propriety, but always fails. He undoes the freedom that was gradually granted to slaves throughout the United States in the mid-1800s, a period which, significantly enough, coincided with the rise of the minstrel show. Both types incarnate repression, ranging from the open repression of the slave or former slave to the mockery of the freed man. The main female stereotype is that of the black nanny or "mammy", expected to take care of white children and ignore her own (Wallace-Sanders). In children's culture and comics and later films, stereotypes of black children seem to combine elements from both Jim Crow and Zip Coon. These children were referred to as small coons or pickaninnies. Like Jim Crow and Zip Coon, they were flattened out, intensely performative characters, who were ambiguous at best and usually just unlikeable. More crucially, these characters were also denied humanity.

Robin Bernstein describes the pickaninny as a stereotype whose "juvenile status, dark skin, and, crucially, the state of being comically impervious to pain" coexisted with that of the "white, tender, vulnerable angel-child" (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 20). The cheekily smiling, harmless pickaninny is both a product and vehicle of soft hate. Bernstein reminds us that since "childhood was defined as tender innocence, as vulnerability, and as the pickaninny was defined by the inability to feel or to suffer, then the pickaninny—and the black juvenile it purported to represent—was defined out of childhood" (20). This

follows an emotional trajectory described by Ahmed, according to which hate "works to unmake the world of the other through pain" (58) – it turns bodies into objects and renders them vulnerable to the hate they are exposed to. Such hate can smear itself on the identity of an entire group of people. The stereotype of the black child which is used to cancel all positive elements associated with childhood can be traced back to the portrayal of Topsy, the slave girl in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel and the illustrations accompanying it facilitated the transatlantic transfer of racist, minstrelsy imagery (cf. Bernstein, "Signposts"). Blackface performances however also have a history in Britain that goes as far back as the nineteenth century (Rehin 686).

Originally subtitled, "The Man That Was a Thing" (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 17), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was serialized in the abolitionist *National Era* from 1851 onward. It is then bitterly ironic that we find the stereotype of the pickaninny here. On first seeing the "project" her cousin imposes on her, Miss Ophelia exclaims, "She's dreadfully dirty, and half naked". The first thing to do is, of course, to clean and clothe Topsy. The paragraph introducing Topsy describes her as the "blackest of her race", her hair is "wooly" and "sticks out in every direction", her expression "is an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity" (Stowe 155). The word "odd" appears twice in this description, reinforcing a sense of doubt and mistrust. She wears a "single filthy garment made of bagging" and, to sum up, there is "something odd and goblin-like about her" (155–156). Topsy also seems to lack basic ("civilized", Christian) morals: during her first encounter with Ophelia she is caught stealing ribbons, denies the theft and fails to see the wrongfulness of her acts.

Topsy brings together all the characteristics – dirtiness, unreliability and ambiguity, laziness – that have become stuck to caricatures of black people. These characteristics evoke affects of disgust, distrust and fear on one side and pain and shame on the other. Perhaps this is where Sara Ahmed's notion of the sideways movement of affect is important: "hate slides sideways between figures, as well as backwards, by reopening past associations, which allows some bodies to be read as being the cause of 'our hate'" (45). Topsy becomes the node where negative attributes associated with African Americans coalesce and stick. These attributes seep through her skin to inhabit her body and by extension all black bodies for decades to come. Such connotations are impossible to shake off as Ahmed points out:

> When the body of another becomes an object of disgust, then the body *becomes* sticky. Such bodies become 'blockages' in the economy of disgust: they slow down or 'clog up' the movement between objects, as other objects and signs stick to them. This is how bodies become fetish objects. (92)

This fetishization and denigration of the entertaining black body is foreshadowed by the first task Topsy performed for Ophelia and Augustine: she danced, her "black glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery" to "an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race" (156). The prototype of the pickaninny established through Topsy very quickly became a "staple of U.S. popular culture" (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 16). It was ubiquitous, appearing in advertisements, books, films, toys, etc. Unsurprisingly the stereotype does not end with Topsy alone. It is reinforced by the stark contrast between Topsy and the white child protagonist of the novel, Eva, who incorporates all the elements of childhood alienated from Topsy, such as innocence and goodness.

This contrast marks cultural derivations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* such as the Duncan sisters, Rosetta and Vivian's vaudeville act from the 1920s, with Rosetta, thought to be less pretty than her sister, appearing in the grotesque blackface that had become the trademark of minstrel shows. In comics the black "visual alien" is often constructed as a contrast to white characters, as in Will Eisner's Spirit and his grotesquely visualized sidekick Ebony White (cf. Heer). The contrast between Topsy and Eva acquired an earlier, more tangible form in topsy-turvy dolls, although their origin and direct connection to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains unclear (Wallace-Sanders 34–35). This doll had two heads and two corresponding dresses. One head was black and the other white, with the white doll being often more desirable than the black one. Wallace-Sanders suggests that the dolls could have been created by black slaves to teach their own children about simultaneously caring for their own child and the white one of their masters or employers (37). Bernstein foregrounds the role played by dolls and by extension girls and girlhood in racial projects: "children's culture has a special ability to preserve (even as it distorts) and transmit (even as it fragments) the blackface mask and styles of movement, which persist not only in Raggedy Ann and the Scarecrow but also in the faces and gloved hands of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny" (*Racial Innocence* 19).

Ironincally then the anti-slavery *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the source of racist tropes that quickly became a staple of American entertainment: the obliging, downtrodden but good old black man and the young, impish girl and, by extension, children and even grownups.

Seemingly 'timeless' tropes: watermelon eating and whitening

I am now going to consider another bundle of characteristics already mentioned above to try and unpeel what lies behind the stereotype of the black child or pickaninny, focusing on the pickaninny eating the

watermelon and hence performing the lack of control, the inability to resist basic desires that has become stuck to blackness.

The image of the pickaninny – and other black children – eating, and eating watermelons in particular, is a recurrent one. It was used for advertisements, postcards and other printed matter. Although the precise origins of the stereotype remain unclear, it is likely to go back as far as a print published around 1869 in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* that shows a group of boys eating watermelons on the pavement. In unwrapping the sources and workings of this image, historian William Black points out that the image was far from a casual juxtaposition of a derogatory stereotype with exotic fruit. Emancipation from slavery only took place in the wake of the Civil War and the newly freed blacks often grew watermelons for their own consumption and for selling. "Southern whites", writes Black, were

> threatened by blacks' newfound freedom [and] responded by making the fruit a symbol of black people's perceived uncleanliness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence. This racist trope then exploded in American popular culture, becoming so pervasive that its historical origin became obscure. Few Americans in 1900 would've guessed the stereotype was less than half a century old.

Using the stereotype in all kinds of entertainment was also a means of controlling blacks, as in the Yellow Kid comic from May 1, 1898 (*New York Journal*) about his dime museum. Here the "Wild Man of Bornegro", a white child in blackface, is being kicked in the face. While the *Yellow Kid*, Richard Outcault's short-lived, intensely popular strip from the end of the nineteenth century discussed further below, can be said to have a social agenda in favor of the children growing up in New York's infamous tenements, black children are often – although not always – treated differently. This is also evident in a small postcard from Outcault portraying a black boy dressed in the clothes of a farm worker gleefully eating a watermelon (dated 1909, a copy of which is conserved at the National Museum of African American History and Culture). Was Outcault simply recycling a popular trope of his time or was he actively participating in a racist agenda? The actual answer is probably somewhere in between. As Robin Bernstein has shown, non-racist representations of blacks did exist – but they often functioned as singular "artifacts of outlier ideology" (Bernstein "Signposts" 99). In reproducing seemingly harmless popular images that were part of a larger project of repressing and denigrating a population, Outcault was participating in soft hate.

William Black has elaborated on how each derogatory attribute of the stereotype is neatly, perniciously tied to the acts of growing and eating watermelons: uncleanliness came from the messiness of eating watermelons; laziness from the act of growing watermelons, which was relatively easy; and childishness

from the bright color of the fruit and its sweetness. In the cases discussed here, childishness itself is operationalized in the service of buttressing a persistent politics of hate, helping to normalize racial hatred and inequality.

Educational material was not exempt from such practices of soft hate, as in the case of *Ten Little Pickaninnies*, a counting book published by Faultless Starch around 1910. This was one of the many primers the company distributed freely with its starch between 1890 and 1930 in areas where these books were sometimes the only accessible educational materials. As with other pickaninnies, the girls here remain indistinguishable, anonymized and disposable and recurrent (cf. Michelle Martin's discussion of the longevity of the *Ten Little Niggers* books: 21–27). One by one the girls are eliminated from the group and the transition from 1 to 0 is particularly noteworthy:

> One pickaninny when with Faultless Starch she's done
>
> Finds she's turned all over white, and so there are none.
>
> 1–1=0. (12)

The pickaninny, the primer suggests, can never exist alone and claim individuality. For this she must become white. As the name of the starch "faultless" reaffirms, both black and white are heavily coded. Evil and dirt are frequently associated with blackness, so as to make the connection seem natural, when in fact the transposition of abstract notions to skin color is anything but natural: it is the result of reiterations and reinforcing the sticky elements attached to black bodies, both young and old.

Lara Saguisag examines the recurrent gag where white children trade places with black ones, horrifying their mothers who cannot make the black come off. This occurs, for instance, in *Buster Brown* and *The Katzenjammer Kids*. In Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter* from 1845, this gag provides a seemingly more tolerant perspective. The boys are punished but their punishment involves becoming even blacker than the "Moor" they were making fun of. Blackness is clearly undesirable; in the words of Michelle Martin, "the story's implicit racist ideology completely undermines and contradicts its explicitly antiracist message" (xx–xxi). This is how soft hate works: it thrives through perpetuating painful and hateful images in contexts that are supposed to be unharmful, claiming to only entertain or instruct. Children's culture, as Robin Bernstein and Philip Nel have suggested, seems to be ideal ground for perpetuating racist imagery that, I would like to add, hates intensely but softly, in a partially veiled manner. Martin has elaborated on the lasting influence of Hoffmann's story and illustrations, most notably in Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* from 1899 (Martin 3–17). More than 150 years later, a modernized version of this *Struwwelpeter* story seems to have missed the point: the boy still does not

have a name and being black is still the punishment meted out to the three (named) boys (Hoffmann and Teich).

The Yellow Kid and Pickaninnies

Black children were not the only children who were mobilized in the service of consumption, but they were probably the only children to be openly conflated with food. Children were often mascots of consumption since the early days of consumer culture. One such child was the so-called "Me Worry" Kid whose origins remain mysterious and who continued to live on in the mascot of the satirical *MAD magazine*. Notably, the Me Worry Kid appeared in advertisements mainly targeting grownups, such as dentist ads in which he gleefully claims, with a tooth missing in his smile, that it didn't hurt a bit. Besides Alfred E. Neuman, the Me Worry Kid shares similarities with the Yellow Kid, who also adorned many advertisements in his time. These children's youthfulness and cuteness were undercurrents endorsing various kinds of products. Here we can discern a different kind of stickiness stemming from the positive characteristics associated with children.

The Yellow Kid was a weekly newspaper strip geared to bring quick laughs within a limited number of panels and often through relying on a few time-tested formulas. The Yellow Kid's success led to the famous New Yorker newspaper wars (between the Hearst and Pulitzer publications) and Outcault eventually switched from *The New York World* to *The New York Journal*. Rapidly recognizable stereotypes contribute to the smooth and quick functioning of humor. Moreover, Jared Gardner suggests that the sequentiality of the comic strip through which characters are not bound by a single frame but accompany the reader across several panels and episodes allows for moving away from stereotyping to what he calls "graphic alterity". Graphic alterity could mitigate, at least to some extent, the harshness and immutability of disparaging stereotypes. This, however, does not seem to hold for the *Yellow Kid* panels where black children are recurrent characters that usually remain relegated to the sidelines. Like most of the other kids in the Yellow Kid's entourage, they have no individuality and they speak in an oral English common for the strip's inhabitants. Their blackness however highlights a persistent streak of soft hate (Figure 2.1).

In the episode recounting the Yellow Kid's journey to Ireland, hectic activity characteristic for the rules the page (February 14, 1897). Only two black children are seen, perched on a board and excluded from the action. They are dressed in fancy, minstrelsy costumes.

"Wait till we git to Africa" the boy says.

"Dats ain't no place fer us" replies the girl.

This might be a small joke and it could also refer to the children's partial assimilation in American culture, as suggested by their clothes, and consequent cultural distance from Africa. It is simultaneously a cruel observation that these children do not belong anywhere – that they will never have the same status as white children.

Sara Ahmed's affective economy emphasizes how emotions do not inhabit anyone or anything. Instead they are products of contact and movement:

> emotions circulate through objects: emotions are not a positive form of dwelling, but produce the effect of surfaces and boundaries of bodies […] It is not simply that the subject feels hate, or feels fear, and nor is it the case that the object is simply hateful or is fearsome: the emotions of hate and fear are shaped by the 'contact zone' in which others impress upon us, as well as leave their impressions. (196)

If this panel functions as a contact zone, and as the product of many earlier moments of contacts and molding of stereotypes, the black children remain not only trapped in performative types but are also placed at the fringes, outside of the zone of action and interaction.

A slightly earlier Yellow Kid strip channels hate more explicitly. Titled "The Great Fight" from December 20, 1896 (*New York Journal*), this strip shows a boxing match between the Yellow Kid and a black boy. Although the boy is granted one successful punch, the Kid proceeds to beat him up across two images and eventually lets his goat do the rest. By the end of it, the boy is unable to stand up and disappears as the final image focuses on the victorious Kid and his goat. While the images already capture the violence, the words are virulent. Alternatively calling the boy nigger and coon the text elaborates on the injuries meted out the boy in considerable graphic detail: the goat joins to "turn dat nigga blue", dislocates his jaws and at the end pulls out his "woolly" hair and throws his possibly lifeless body out of the arena.

Unfolding in a playful comics form, soft hate makes room for such violence, although it is rarely as blatantly physical as in the above boxing match. Black girls, for instance, are never made to face such extreme physical violence but they often face the hatred expressed through segregation in many *Yellow Kid* strips. Represented in a minstrelsy mode, an overdressed black girl is shooed away by a "stage manager" during an opera performance starring the Kid at Ryan's Arcade (November 28, 1897, *New York Journal*). In the only word balloon in the comic, the manager says: "Git out of here. Dis aint vaudeville". These words explicitly connect the girl's exaggerated appearance with one of the sources of racist

imagery. They also mock the girl's efforts to transcend, just like the other tenement children in the comic, her social reality: instead of gloves, she wears oven mittens and her elaborate headpiece rivals that of the Mephisto costume worn by the Kid. Only her clothes and accessories mark her gender, which has otherwise been wiped out by her grotesque features.

Pore Lil Mose

The Kid eventually became a victim of his popularity and Outcault stopped drawing him when he realized that he could not copyright the character. He did not however stop drawing children. Appearing in December 1900, Outcault's *Pore Lil Mose* filled, at least in part, the gap left by *The Yellow Kid*, who had not appeared since 1898 (Saguisag 73). Most of his strips took the form of letters he wrote to his mother and family in the fictional Southern town of Cottonville while he explored urban life in New York. Lara Saguisag suggests that Mose was most likely the prototype of the immensely successful (and white and middle class) Buster Brown (82). Buster eventually became a phenomenal commercial success known, for instance, for Buster Brown Shoes, a popular company for children's shoes. In contrast, the *Mose* strips were short-lived, most likely because the young protagonist's blackness did not speak to most of the readers.

For Saguisag, Mose incorporates aspects associated with normalized white childhood that are often denied (in real and fictional worlds) to children of other ethnic backgrounds; he nuances and complicates the image of black boys (79). In the light of the stereotypes outlined above, I do agree that Mose is sometimes portrayed in a sympathetic light and that he is allowed a degree of individuality that we rarely encounter in black characters. He nevertheless remains a racist caricature. In the image below, for instance, he takes part in the watermelon growing trope (Figure 2.2). We see Mose writing his mother in an insert in which he wears a bow tie (that could have been worn by either Buster Brown or a minstrel dandy). Most of the image shows Mose working in the garden wearing the ill-fitting overalls of a farmworker. Most notably, he is helped in his endeavor to grow watermelons by animals, many of which are wild and not domestic, unlike those accompanying the Yellow Kid.

But perhaps the most blatant comments on the effect of skin color are the two contrasting outcomes Outcault reserves for Mose and the Yellow Kid in a similar situation: a scuffle in a paint shop. This leaves Mose and his entourage "yellow, red and blue" or thoroughly beaten up (cf. Outcault). While the Yellow Kid is also doused in paint, he emerges victorious in the strip from January 9, 1898. Hence, despite, and most likely through, the ambiguity in some of the *Mose* stories, Mose remains informed by soft hate. The child may be a friendly, likeable character but he is also a vehicle for perpetuating harmful stereotypes. I

will now briefly turn to two examples of black children in British comics where racism remains blatant, even though the harshness of the images is sometimes undone by some individual features and agency accorded to the characters. Softness is once again reinforced through the connection to children's culture and comics.

Blackface in British comics: Peanut in the *Beano* and the 'coons' in *Rupert Bear*

Although the *Beano* is now associated with its mascot from the 1950s, the black-haired, extremely naughty British Dennis the Menace, the early issues of the magazine, which started in 1938, bear the figure of Peanut on their front pages (Figure 2.3). Here again the name and the actions of a black boy are conflated with food. Peanut is a barefoot black boy in patched-up overalls, often eating a banana, while a bunch of other bananas stick out from his pocket. Affirming the persistence of racist stereotyping, Peanut is a pickaninny and wears the ragged clothes of a farmworker. The bananas echo racist imagery that associates black people with monkeys and uncontrollable impulses. Peanut is by and large the only black character in the early *Beano* comics.

Writing about E. W. Kemble's *Blackberries* children's books from the late nineteenth century, Saguisag points out that giving fruit names to children

> was a way of commodifying African American children; their bodies were implicitly transformed into food that was easy to digest and pleasurable to consume. […] These metaphors were expressive of white ambivalence over black children: white readers were encouraged to imagine enacting aggression toward young African Americans (as in the act of biting) while also viewing these 'edible' children as appetizing rather than toxic or indigestible. (59)

Black children, incarnating the laziness, dirtiness, barbarity and hypersexuality associated with blackness, were portrayed "as easy and delightful to consume" (63). They existed to entertain and to further reinforce the sticky connections between skin color and negative stereotypes. While reinforcing stereotypes attached to black people, Peanut also succeeds in subverting them on the few occasions when he gets his own comic strip. It is perhaps here that Jared Gardner's graphic alterity works best because readers are presented a character that is humanly fleshed out despite the stereotype.

The Jokes section is headed by Peanut's smiling face, holding a large curved object that has been bitten into. The rhyming slogans championing the page change each week but regularly promise hilarious, distracting jokes. "Peanut is black as jet—his page is a winner you can bet!" reads the slogan from

December 31, 1938. Like the toys incarnating racism – the topsy-turvy doll and the golliwog – Peanut softens racist imagery, without really doing so, and renders it acceptable, by catering to children.

However, the short-lived, irregularly published *Peanut* strips between August 12, 1939 and September 30, 1939 complicate the image of blatant racism suggested by the representation of Peanut on the *Jokes* page. While Peanut remains visually fixed in the Jim Crow mold, he, like many other children of the *Beano*, confronts and punishes bullies, often in smart, innovative ways. While in the strip of August 12, 1939, he teams up with two other white children as they are all persecuted by bullies, the idea of converting discarded pans into head armor is all his. In the strip from July 29, 1939, a white boy shoves Peanut away from a slide's ladder with the taunt, "Funny Face!". "Funny Face, eh?" Peanut says to himself and to his readers. "Wait till he comes down that chute!", he adds as he places a small trolley that throws the sliding boy into a water trough for horses (Figure 2.4). In his short-lived strips, Peanut successfully counters the racism imbuing his form and the more direct attacks and exclusion by other children and adults.

Although the stereotype was occasionally undone or partially declined, to use Mireille Rossello's term, through the "Peanut" strips (which were eventually renamed "Pranks of Peanut"), the "Rupert and the Castaway" story from 1954 shows how crude stereotypes of black people persisted decades later. Not reprinted because of its deeply problematic content, this *Rupert Bear* story has become a collector's item with an increased price tag, much like the now banned golliwogs. Soft hate is at work again: in inhabiting a famous childhood and national memory, the offensive, hateful content remains permissible beyond the official ban because it is clothed in nostalgia.

"Rupert and the Castaway" recycles picaninny imagery and flattens it even further: the inhabitants of Coon Island not only resemble each other but, in wearing colored nightshirts and spiky hair, the "coons" seem to be without a gender and uniformly infantile. Koko the inhabitant who Rupert "befriends" and who eventually leads Rupert to the British castaway waiting to be rescued cannot communicate with Rupert through words. "Whatever is he doing there, that creature with the spiky hair?", Rupert wonders, surprised at this unexpected sight during his holiday at the beach (Bestall 47). Although Rupert cannot understand the creature's "queer language", he soon realizes that he is Koko from Coon Island. He ends up inviting him to tea and lending him his bed. The next day, Koko takes him to his island where Rupert receives an enthusiastic welcome from the island's inhabitants, all of whom can only communicate through gestures. Rupert is eventually led to the castaway and, with Koko and the islanders' help, brings him back to his family. Koko and his community's role is nonetheless downplayed, and it is Rupert who is hailed as the ultimate hero.

While comics were familiar to the comedic and carnivalesque trope of inversion in many matters including children becoming almost as autonomous as adults, girls acting as boys (far fewer boys acting as girls) and white boys wearing blackface, the racialized image of blacks remains disturbingly uniform. As Jeet Heer reminds us: although the negative stereotype of the "Asian" eventually gave way to other stereotypes such as the "exotically eroticized" Asian woman, comics have historically known only a few images of beautiful black men and women. Heer mentions Ebony White and Rosie Lee on the first page of "The Heart of Rosie Lee" from *The Spirit* (October 13, 1948) as an exception. Stronger examples are to be found in Jackie Orme's work which, from the late 1930s through the mid-1950s, introduced black female protagonists such as Torchy Brown and Patty Jo who broke away from the Topsy stereotype. In contrast, the *Spirit* cover highlights the discrepancy between Rosie and Ebony. While Rosie is indeed beautiful, Ebony resembles a monkey with exaggerated features. While it would be wrong to say that Eisner was openly racist, quite the contrary (cf. Benson and Eisner), his visualization of Ebony White tells a different story. This contrast suggests that caricatural, cartoonish images give in to a blatant degree of racism that is condoned and all too easily overlooked.

Moving beyond without forgetting

I think Aaron McGruder's *Boondocks* strips succeed in bypassing years of stereotyping and offering a new way of representing, and by extension looking, at black characters. Drawn in a manga-like style, the characters here bear none of the exaggerated features we have seen above. In this strip from April 23, 1999 (Figure 2.5), Huey, the angry young man, recites a speech against the oppressors of blacks. Halfway through, he is interrupted by an old white lady smiling at him adoringly, stroking his hair and marveling at how cute he is. While this strip is funny at face value, the woman's fetishization and exoticization of black hair is disturbing. Moreover, her insistence on Huey's cuteness puts an end to his freedom speech. Cuteness with its links to childness has a disempowering effect: it cancels threats and renders the cute object consumable. Soft hate is once again at work here.

When, in the following strip (April 24, 1999), the lady declares that she would like to take Huey home with her, the boy is enraged: "Am I supposed to use cute little slang and be your little stuffed black doll?" he asks. Once again Huey seems to be evoking an entire history of subjugating blacks through boxing them in stereotypes used for entertainment and comfort. It is not surprising that his tirade falls on deaf years: the woman is not in a position to understand Huey or why he is so angry.

Soft hate works surreptitiously; it sneaks in through sheens of goodness and good will. It channels emotions that are positive and happy but which also support a structure of oppression. Most importantly,

it adjusts itself according to historical and cultural contexts. With the exception of works like *Boondocks* and previous comics and illustrations produced by African Americans (most notably Jackie Ormes) and "outlier" artists who rejected mainstreamed ways of representation (cf. Bernstein, "Signposts"; Martin), the essence of being a child is often denied to black children. Childishness, in contrast, is a feature blacks remain framed in – a childishness that is programmatically different from that of white children. *Boondocks* successfully rejects the visual stereotypes stuck to blacks for centuries, but Huey is painfully conscious of the workings of both soft and more blatant hate.

"Emotions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very 'flesh' of time", writes Sara Ahmed, "Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies. Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present" (202). Tracing back visual representations of black children through the years reveals visualizations of softened hate that is stamped on the bodies, expressions and actions of children in comics and other popular culture artifacts. Such representations are often qualified as being just part of comics vocabulary and caricatural conventions that aim to entertain but are not inherently racist. Perhaps in order to answer the question regarding whether something is just caricatural or racist, we need to unpack the emotions and affects that are ensconced in the history of every representation. This would help bring out the harm engendered by seemingly innocuous images populating children's culture. More importantly, it could eventually help us think of ways to move beyond such images of hate.

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