INTRODUCTION

A Visual Grammar of Citizenship

US citizens are accustomed to the ironic Fourth of July cartoon that calls attention to tensions between what the nation ostensibly stands for and contradictions in its practices. In his 2007 contribution to the Independence Day cartoon tradition, African American cartoonist Kyle Baker depicts a man dressed in eighteenth-century wig and garb writing in his study, immediately recognizable as a caricature of Thomas Jefferson through his speech (Figure I.1). A small figure peers in through the panes behind him, a black inkblot-shaped character with white dots for eyes, white lips, and hair often used on the “pickaninny” figure in racist caricatures. While this grotesque representation has no relationship to real phenotype, readers’ knowledge of whom the child references doubtlessly emphasizes the phantasmagoric nature of stereotype. Jefferson had multiple children with enslaved woman Sally Hemings, the half sister of his deceased wife, and this black figure nonetheless evokes their very light-skinned children. The child says, “Daddy, I’m cold,” with a silhouetted backdrop of what appears to be an overseer riding a horse and casting his whip toward a slave woman with her arms in the air (the gender signified by the faint hint of the scarf on her head). Black people are outsiders of the Framer’s frame, literally and figuratively.

I posted this cartoon on Facebook, and a brilliant African American scholar asked me why I was circulating such an ugly, racist image. She understood why I shared the cartoon after I explained who the creator was and my interpretation. But an image needing explanation even for discerning readers demonstrates the perils of using such representations. Nevertheless it is the grotesque caricature that makes the joke of the editorial cartoon work. The dark humor of the cartoon (pun intended) depends on the black child in the window. Andrew Kunka sees the paneled windows as structuring the cartoon’s meaning, leading
the reader, “regardless” of race, to be “positioned inside the house with Jefferson, looking out, thus aligning the reader with the beneficiaries of the freedoms associated with the Declaration of Independence.” He also imagines the readers as “aligned with the perspective of the slave owner in that the real violence happens far off in the distance, away from our realm of experience, and in a shadowy silhouette.” Nevertheless, the racist caricature upsets identification with the idealized caricature of Jefferson. Because the caricature is the most visceral representation in the image, it disrupts the framing (in all senses of the word), foregrounding black injury in the nation’s founding.

I begin this book with what may seem like interpretative minutiae to call attention to the occasionally disruptive critical work of racist caricature. Intuitively, we may always imagine racist representations as aligning with racist gazes. However, in this case the black figure makes identification with Jefferson and slave owners challenging, as the meanness of the caricature is a jarring reminder of the representations constructed in the past that haunt the present and still have the capacity to wound. While many of us may want to lock away the grotesque images in this cartoon and never see them again, Baker demonstrates how these images might also be generative in exploring ways to confront the treatment of African Americans in citizenship discourse.

Progressive and reflexive uses of “negative” representations like Baker’s risk audiences consuming them uncritically or being condemned by very sophisticated readers. African American comedian Dave Chappelle (who has both resisted and somewhat uncritically circulated stereotypes) once poignantly described this problem as the difference between “dancing” and “shuffling.” Comedy and comic art are similar in that they have stereotypes—repetition of a generalized typology—embedded in their foundations, which makes their use of stereotype almost inescapable. But what happens when someone uses the stereotype to challenge the representation? What do we do with a racial caricature that is a mechanism for identification or idealization instead of satire? When is resistance present despite the repetition of the image? Might the focus on positive and negative representations and stereotype as “bad” contribute to an aesthetic flattening out of the work that the denigrating image might do? Perhaps the cartoon speaks to the intransigence of the black grotesque as a nightmare African Americans cannot escape in national discourse, a visual grammar that always haunts attempts at full enfranchisement?

The Content of Our Caricature answers these questions by examining how black cartoonists criticize constructions of ideal citizenship
in the United States and black alienation from such fantasies. African Americans are often rendered as noncitizens or nonrepresentative in relationship to romanticized typologies such as the kind of revolutionary Jefferson models, the soldier, or infantile citizen. Rather than treat cartoon and comic art as obscure ephemera, this book invites readers to recognize the wide circulation of comic and cartoon art in contributing to a common language of national belonging and exclusion in the United States. Editorial cartoons (typically excluded from scholarship about comics because they are usually single panel) often indict bad citizens. The funnies have given us iconographic children to symbolize innocence, a status shored up by the heavy commodification of characters such as Charlie Brown and Little Orphan Annie. Superhero comics sell the ideal citizen soldier, and underground comics interpellate countercultural citizens. These citizenship genres are often masculine categories of representation that the state’s subjects are interpellated to inhabit. White caricatures are often made a virtue in representations of American identity. In contrast, black caricatures have traditionally shut out African Americans from the kind of idealized excesses that are embraced in discourses of American exceptionalism.

My inclusive understanding of citizenship recognizes the ways in which the “good citizen” is a figure mobilized in a variety of spaces beyond ones attached to legal rights. We are invited to be “good citizens” in school, at work, in our local communities, and in imagining ourselves as part of a national community. My idea of citizenship is drawn from literature that sees it as both full membership in a political community and the “extent and quality of one’s citizenship” in particular communities. Richard Bellamy has cautioned people against constructing too broad an understanding of citizenship that includes all kinds of belonging, a narrow definition that ignores the expansive ways in which the word “citizen” is used and the concept is experienced. Seeing voting, as he suggests, as the central prong of citizenship misses how voting rights (although often denied and still quite precarious) have not produced full legal, political, or social equality. Moreover, political discourse, news media, and popular culture are constantly filled with visual representations of who should and should not be included in the category of citizenship. We should thus examine the role visual culture plays in selling, disavowing, and romanticizing national belonging. Laurence Bobo argues that the “ongoing conundrum” of black life is the question of whether or not “African Americans will ever achieve full, true ‘unmarked’ citizenship,” and I take seriously
the idea of black citizenship as perpetually and visually marked. Caricature is a way of excessively marking difference, and these excesses are a means of describing how people are seen and the caricatured subjects’ relationship to the communities they inhabit.

Comic art evolves from the tradition of caricature: exaggerated representations of the human face and form. Exaggerated, grotesque representations emerged in sixteenth-century Italian art, but neither the term nor the practice of representation came of age until eighteenth-century Britain. Not necessarily recognizable likenesses of people, caricatures were not only exaggerated faces or body types, but also fantastic depictions of inanimate objects or humans. The latter clearly were a precursor to anthropomorphic characters in many popular comics. Like many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists, father of the modern comic strip Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) explored the aesthetic possibilities of the “doodle,” communicated excess with streamlined forms, told visual stories in sequential panels, and moved away from realism in exploring how moral character might be written on the face. It is not an accident that caricature and scientific racism emerged in roughly the same period. The enlightenment brought travel literature, phrenology, and many popular systems of classification that argued clear moral and intellectual differences could be discerned from the face and body. Caricaturing racial bodies became an instrument of what I term visual imperialism—the production and circulation of racist images that are tools in justifying colonialism and other state-based discrimination.

African Americans often long for more complex or “authentic” representations—as elusive or impossible as the latter may be. But if we recognize that representational struggles often occur not in attempts at the realistic but in fantastic representations of “real Americanness” in history, film, and news media, then caricature becomes a language used to demonstrate a citizen’s value. Baker’s cartoon employs this language to push his audience to think about the relationship between the ideal and grotesque representation. By placing a possible black perspective at the center of our reading practice—applying what I call an identity hermeneutic in reading the caricature—we can explore the ways in which some images respond to black degradation and not only replicate it. These representations are part of an expansive visual grammar about citizenship that is deployed frequently in the United States, and Baker and other cartoonists have taken on these injurious images of blackness to deepen our understanding of idealized and undesirable citizenship typologies.
Because caricature is the art of reducing people to real and imagined excesses in order to represent something understood as essential about their character, its work in political cartooning has often been to frame ridiculed subjects as outside the bounds of good citizenship in the nation. At the same time, some caricatures, like that of Jefferson in other contexts, are idealized representations. Caricatures can be about individuals and thus are not the exact same as stereotypes, even as they can also circulate ideas about groups through stereotyping—the reproduction of a generalization about a group over and over again.¹²

I move back and forth somewhat liberally between the use of the words "stereotype" and "caricature," seeing stereotyping as a subset of caricature. Stereotyping is about generalization, a reference to what all of a group is like. Nothing about the stereotype inherently connotes excess. At its root meaning, it simplifies. In my use of "stereotype" I return to and play with the original technological meaning of the word in printmaking, as a repetition of a type, which is characteristic of much of comic art, even if it is not caricature. The multigenerational pleasure in the comics medium has come not only from consumption of the art in itself, but from the expansive visual grammar about identity it gives the audience through this representation of a type of character. This grammar, deployed frequently in the United States, uses racialized caricature as a mechanism for constructing both ideal and undesirable types of citizens.

Scholars frequently discuss the role of racial representations in literature, film, photography, and television in the construction of and resistance to discourses about black identity. But comic and cartoon art have traditionally had a very small role in histories of black representation.¹³ Ignoring this tradition means neglecting a visual and political grammar of idealized and ugly typologies explicated in American comic and cartoon art. Baker’s caricature compels and repels here, but he is not alone doing that work in the African American tradition of cartooning.

Unfortunately, few people would be aware of this tradition because many works of black comic art are not well known. Scholars working in black comics studies (a field that is larger than some people in the early twenty-first century might imagine) certainly know it, as evidenced by the number of edited collections and monographs dealing with African American comics. Sheena Howard and Ronald L. Jackson’s Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation; Frances Gateward and John Jennings’s The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art; Deborah Elizabeth Whaley’s Black Women
in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime; and work by leading black comics scholars such as Michael Chaney, Jonathan W. Gray, and Qiana Whitted have shaped black comics studies into a robust field. And yet many of these works focus on cultural histories or pay little attention to aesthetics.

Furthermore, the reputation of comics as “for kids” and unsophisticated has doubtlessly impacted the treatment of cartoonists in overviews of black visual culture histories. Even with its growth in the book industry and status as source material for other media, comics are still often seen as infantile. The proclamation that “comics aren’t just for kids anymore” appears routinely in the mainstream press and ignores the long history of multigenerational or adult audiences. Scholars may also avoid discussions of black cartoonists in overviews of a black arts tradition because of the idea that the aesthetic path to better black representational futures eschews the black grotesque and privileges complexity over reductiveness. And as this book shows, caricature’s language—visual and linguistic, excessive and indeterminate, mean and stereotyping—has been an indelible part of how citizenship discourses have circulated.

A number of scholars have made a case for the ways in which comics circulate ideology. But comics scholars and a more general audience are often inattentive to caricature as a language of citizenship and site for conflict, despite the occasional high-profile debate over a caricature’s political meaning. These genres of citizenship—the child, the soldier, the revolutionary leader, the countercultural subject—can be so naturalized that they mask the racialized ideological work of these typologies. An examination of the history of black representation and its absence in that tradition highlights this investment in racial logics on the part of many comic producers and helps us think through how identity can impact the hermeneutics we use to read not only US comics, but popular narratives about what it means to be American.

**COMICS PLAYING IN THE DARK**

The relationship between race and citizenship discourse is apparent very early in the history of American cartoon art. Cartoon and comic art began to come of age in the United States in the lead-up to the Civil War and during the conflict. The first prominent cartoonist in the United States was inarguably Thomas Nast, who began working for *Harper’s Weekly* in 1862. *Harper’s* was the most widely read journal during the war, and not a
cultural outlier in circulating representations of heroic citizenship ideals. Racial and ethnic caricatures were prominent features of Nast’s work as the “father of the American political cartoon.”\(^{37}\) He depicted noble white Union soldiers during the war and sympathetic, suffering slaves with realistic phenotypes. But after the war, he often depicted the Irish (before they became white) and black people using racist caricature when showing their participation in government. They were a grotesque contrast to white rule. Racist caricature was thus not a side note to US cartooning’s emergence. It was central to it.

Editorial cartoons like those Nast produced sometimes had elaborate compositions depicting urban or wartime conflict and would influence the first newspaper comic strips. Advances in printing technology over the course of the nineteenth century would also make it feasible to print cartoons cheaply in newspapers. Richard Outcault’s *Hogan’s Alley* (1895–1898) is usually (and somewhat controversially) identified as the first successful comic strip with a recurring character in the United States.\(^{18}\) Outcault had a background in editorial cartooning, and his strips painted gleeful pictures of urban melee, disorder precipitated by the games and squabbles of city children in “Hogan’s Alley,” or “McFadden’s Row of Flats,” descending into chaos.\(^{19}\) Such comics were consistent with European comic strips that were, as David Kunzle explains, “unsentimental, irreverent, and arguably immoral,” and that violated the adult bourgeois order in which “good will triumph[s]” and “obedience will be rewarded.”\(^{20}\) There were thus transnational connections between the United States and the European continent, even as American comics would come to dominate the genre and have their own unique comic and graphic style.\(^{21}\) The strip often depicted an ethnically heterogeneous world, and as Christina Meyer notes, immigrants with “sufficient visual literacy” could enjoy the visual representations without knowing English.\(^{22}\) The key to *Hogan’s Alley’s* success was the Yellow Kid, the first continuing character in newspaper comics, and the diverse world he inhabited.

The Yellow Kid is one of the first examples of the idealized child citizen in comics.\(^{23}\) Given the fact that he often seemed to create chaos and was often surrounded by it, it may seem incongruous to see Mickey as “ideal.” But one of the characteristics of the newspaper comic strip is the precocious, disorderly child, a beloved archetype that circulates across media. The violence and chaos perpetuated by the white child overlays a mask of innocence on top of racial violence. While sometimes seen as Chinese, Mickey was a white character, and a particularly racialized
FIGURE I.2.
example of Mickey functioning as a site of white identification is in one of the more racist strips, “The Yellow Kid’s Great Fight” (Figure I.2). In the strip Mickey boxes a young black boy who has the white mouth typically seen on minstrels, as well as simian features. The poem underneath the images of the six-panel strip tells the story of the two having a fight. Other people have names, including the unseen referee, but the featherweight with whom Mickey spars is referred to only as a “nigger” and “coon.” The black boxer lands one punch in the second frame, and after that a goat comes into the ring to help Mickey with the fight. The goat eats the “wool” of the black boxer’s hair and kicks him through the ropes. Mickey’s shirt tells the audience in the last frame, “Dat goat took my part cause I’m a kid.”

While the kid and the black boxer are approximately the same size, Mickey’s statement suggests that his opponent is not a child, illustrative of the ways in which black children were consistently denied child status or innocence in American visual culture and narratives. A faithful reader of the Yellow Kid’s exploits would know that he often perpetuates or is surrounded by violence that he seems to take pleasure in, but it is an urban anarchy that invites the reader’s pleasure as opposed to condemnation. The kinds of urban chaotic scenes that the Yellow Kid is at the center of would be neither cathartic nor points of identification for a white audience if the comic had a predominantly black cast of characters. One or two black characters are included in Outcault’s urban scenes, but they never seem to cause the chaos. While in other comic strips African Americans were often a source of comical disruption, African Americans causing chaos in the urban landscape of Hogan’s Alley might be cause for anxiety (even though riots in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were overwhelmingly started by whites). Depictions of the (white) child in comics and other forms of popular culture often represented an endearing unruliness. But at the same time these representations were circulating of white children, black children were constantly being eaten by crocodiles or experiencing other kinds of violence in US visual culture. The violability of black children’s bodies was a major characteristic of popular representations, while the audience was assured that white children in peril would consistently emerge unscathed.

The cartoon also gestures toward the importance of boxing as a mode of demonstrating ethnic and racial pride, a discourse that played out frequently in the popular genre of sports cartoons in the nineteenth century. The sports cartoon was an offshoot of the editorial cartoon,
and boxing cartoons were sometimes not only commentaries on sports events, but meditations on masculine citizenship models, so much so that political candidates were often pictured as boxers in allegorical representations of political bouts. We would see this discourse racialized most profoundly when Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion, would come to dominate the ring in the early twentieth century and flout his wealth and sexual relationships with white women. Many whites saw him as a threat to white civilization.

We see the transnational circulation of Johnson as a threat to whiteness in this G. H. Dancey cartoon from *Melbourne Punch* (Figure I.3). Black and white races are depicted as individuals looking down at the downed James J. Jeffries, with globes for heads. The white race is formally dressed in a suit and hat, looking down sorrowfully, while the black race is shoeless, laughing, and dancing. Johnson’s head is only a shadow at the bottom of the frame, with Jeffries’s beaten body at the center. The caption, “Knocked Out! Two Ways of Looking at It,” might suggest an ambivalence about the racial stakes of the fight, but the minstrel-like look of the “Black World” crafts a representation of black dominance over whiteness as a loss for civilization and dangerous. The shoeless, dancing figure with the toothy grin and arched brows looks vaguely menacing.

The distinction between the sports cartoon and the editorial cartoon could be quite fine, which was particularly apparent when race was an aspect of the reporting. Louis N. Hoggatt, the *Chicago Defender*’s first editorial cartoonist, would perform one of the primary jobs of the black press—counter the discourse in white newspapers—in his more realist depiction of Johnson (Figure I.4). In his depiction of the fight, the African American boxer stands in contrast to Jim Jeffries who is shown to represent not only himself but the work of white supremacy: “prejudice,” “race-hatred,” and “negro persecution.” Jeffries becomes more of a panicked shadow as he bears the weight of racial hatred—despite being surrounded by the “public sentiment” of a white nation. A caricature of a devilish-looking Uncle Sam stands behind the great white hope, smoking a cigarette and representing white supremacist public sentiment.

The boxing cartoons were thus about more than narrating a sporting event—they were spaces in which national anxieties and desires about power and citizenship were articulated.

These early comics and cartoons illustrate what Toni Morrison has described as “playing in the dark”—an Africanist presence in the canon of American literature—but in comics contexts. In many comics and
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cartoons, blackness is the villainous threat to the state, but in a large number of other early important comics, the Africanist presence facilitates white adventure. The characters in *The Katzenjammer Kids* interacted with the fictional King of Bongo and blacks in a foreign land. The protagonist in Winsor McCay’s gorgeously drawn *Little Nemo in Slumberland* has an African imp companion on many of his adventures. Such caricatures demonstrated the view of black people as less human.

than white citizens while also functioning as a consistent means of pleasure.

Racial stereotypes were thus common in the early days of the newspaper comics page, which would become the most popular section in American newspapers. The Yellow Kid was the first in a long line of comic strip characters that would have commercial afterlife beyond the comics page or be recognizable references for types of people—Dick Tracy, Brenda Starr, Little Orphan Annie, Hägar the Horrible, Dennis the Menace, Charlie Brown, and Dilbert are a few of the more prominent examples. But many of these characters became well known at the same time that African Americans largely disappeared from the comics pages of the mainstream press after World War II. Eventually the civil rights movement would affect the demographics of comic strips, particularly with the national syndication of Morrie Turner’s integrated strip Wee Pals in 1968.

Integration often took one of two forms in mainstream comics—either black characters who showed little difference from white
characters, or black characters who still referenced some essentialist understanding of black people. The race-neutral characters speak to a desire to avoid such stereotypes, but their depiction also denied black characters the individuality of their white counterparts. Part of what caricatures provide is the pleasure of idiosyncrasy that nevertheless functions as a site of recognition.

The excesses shape the character into a caricature. But blackness complicates excess given the hypervisibility of racism in black representational histories. In many integrated casts of characters, if we tried to imagine black people as having similar excesses that make the character humorous, those same characters would be read as racist stereotypes. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the creation of Franklin in Charles Schulz’s Peanuts in 1968. Asked by a white school teacher, Harriet Glickman, to introduce a black character into the group to help address the “vast sea of misunderstanding, hate, and violence,” Schulz was hesitant because he and other cartoonists did not want to be “patronizing to our Negro friends.” But later that year he would introduce Franklin, who often served to observe the idiosyncrasies of the other characters.

Franklin, however, never developed any “character flaws” that would make him a standout character in the strip. As African American newspaper columnist Clarence Page lamented when Schulz ended Peanuts, Franklin’s “perfections hampered [his] character development. The humor in Peanuts is derived precisely from those qualities Franklin did not have. Anxieties, longings, hang-ups and obsessions gave other characters a wholeness of life and an ability to engage and surprise us. Their imperfections reminded us that we all fall short of perfection and touched us in ways that enabled us to identify easily with them.” Page acknowledges that Schulz may have been nervous about giving a black character the same kinds of excesses he gave white characters because of a justifiable fear of criticism. If Franklin was a “walking dust storm like Pigpen” or “dancer and dreamer like Snoopy,” the “self-declared image police would call for a boycott. If Schulz’s instincts told him his audience was not ready for the same complications his other characters endured, he probably was right.”

What Page calls attention to is contrary to commonsense narratives about representation by suggesting that being portrayed as a caricature can be a sign of your humanity. Being a caricature is not always a bad thing. The caricature conundrum is that in the comic strip, excesses and character failures make them human, so black heroism and ideality can
be another mechanism for limiting representations of black humanity. And indeed a black Charlie Brown would have been both unimaginable and problematic for a number of conceptual reasons for those concerned with progress in racial representation. What made Brown revolutionary for the funnies was his melancholy and inevitable failure. Readers can identify with his lack of success and anxiety. A black Charlie Brown could confirm stereotypes about black failure in an era when black people were constantly working to demonstrate their equal ability.

And yet there is another aspect of Schulz’s decision not to craft a more complex black character that is indicative of the ways in which black subjects often fail to be sites of recognition in the white imagination. In an interview with Michael Barrier, Schulz explains,

“I’ve never done much with Franklin, because I don’t do race things. I’m not an expert on race, I don’t know what it’s like to grow up as a little black boy, and I don’t think you should draw things unless you really understand them, unless you’re just out to stir things up or try to teach people different things. I’m not in this business to instruct; I’m just in it to be funny. Now and then I may instruct a few things, but I’m not out to grind a lot of axes. Let somebody else do it who’s an expert on that, not me.”

But Schulz almost immediately contradicts himself. While he expresses disdain for comic strips that explore “social issues,” he paradoxically says that the social issues he deals with are “much more long lasting and more important than losing the White House.” Moreover, his claim of required knowledge in character development is striking given the well-known girl characters in his comic strip. We are to understand from this argument that he does know or can imagine what it is like to grow up as a little white girl. For Schulz, gender is apparently less of an obstacle to identification than is race. He also implies that a topical strip about urgent political issues of the day must be “grinding axes.” Ironically, the creator of the comic strip who arguably best crafted the conditions to imagine childhood melancholy on the funny pages provides little room for a comic that addresses the material conditions that could shape a child’s pain.

While mainstream comic strips by white creators would handle integration by producing children who did not traffic in excesses that would be marked as particularly raced, superhero comics initially highlighted the characters’ racial identities, often to troubling effects. Marvel’s Black
Panther (1966) would be an idealized black hero from a mythical land in Africa that was both part of a decolonial moment and outside of real historical time. Marvel’s Luke Cage (1972) would embody a number of inner-city urban stereotypes, even as the comic book criticized white supremacy. If Schulz’s Franklin demonstrates the perils of not allowing a black character to occupy the same representational economy of the comic strip characters whose value lies in their foibles and excesses, the superhero comic may demonstrate the perils of occupying the same structures. While these comic books were not color-blind, a foundational principle of the traditional superhero is excessive masculinity and strength as a mark of his ideal citizen-soldier status. Given the history of representing black men with brute strength, it can be challenging to see something politically transgressive about mapping blackness onto the hypermasculinity of the superhero. Comic producers would, however, constantly play with and challenge that stereotype over the decades.

Part of the story of racial integration in superhero comics has continued to be the idea that nonwhite characters challenged identification and marketability. The black experience calls attention not only to what the superhero serves, but to how racially marked their identities really are. If Charlie Brown couldn’t be black, and if the logic of caricature in the strip would make a black character politically challenging, the blackening of heroes most identifiable with the superhero comic is illustrative of how superheroes as caricatures of ideals do not carry the same meaning when they are people of color. A number of mainstream superheroes have had black versions—the Green Lantern, Batman, Wonder Woman, Superman, Captain America, and Spiderman. However, some of these versions are in alternative universes, and when they have taken over for canonical white characters, the change has caused controversy.41

In 2015 Umapagan Ampikaipakan summed up the resistance to people of color as superheroes in an instantly infamous New York Times op-ed in which he explained why he, as an Asian American, felt no need for diverse superheroes: “The current push to draw diversity into comics and add variety to the canon is meant to reinforce the notion that anyone can be a superhero. But that only risks undercutting the genre’s universal appeal.” He suggests that Asians have too much “cultural baggage” to embody the ethos of the superhero. “By definition,” he claims, “the American dream must be accessible to all. However monochromatic its characters, the superhero’s message has always seemed universal.”42
Whiteness functions as the universal in his logic, while other racial identities can be disruptive and distracting, calling attention to history and cultural contexts. Ironically, superheroes of color who are inattentive to their culture or the struggle of their people would be considered unrealistic. But the sleight of hand of the superhero narrative has been the ways in which making the superhero representative of the outsider displaces other outsider narratives that resist the seductive and often deceptive promises of the American Dream. In other words, if part of what the inclusion of nonwhite characters accomplishes in popular genres is challenging universalist narratives about US citizenship and creating new models, the white superhero has often stood in allegorically for people of color and ironically furthered universalist fantasies about national belonging.

The obfuscation of the racialized challenges facing outsiders in the United States is well on display in issue 106 of Superman’s Girl Friend, Lois Lane: “I am Curious (Black)!” Lois decides she is going to get the “inside story of Metropolis’s Little Africa,” but when she goes she discovers that none of the black residents want to talk to her. Superman allows her to use his “Plastimold” machine and become black for a day so that she can “get inside” the community. She changes into “Afro attire,” and when she returns she discovers she cannot get a cab and feels “conspicuous” because she is on the receiving end of a white gaze on the subway. She learns about the poor housing standards in the ghetto and sees a community activist get shot when he tries to keep white men from peddling drugs to black teenagers. Superman is conveniently on hand to keep Lois from getting hurt and takes the activist to a hospital—salvation that likely would not have happened without Lois’s presence. She gives the activist a blood transfusion. He rejected her when he met her as a white woman, but once he learns that the black woman he just met who saved him with the transfusion is Lois, he is shocked but clasps her hand at the end of the comic—the universal, midcentury sign of interracial reconciliation.

The splash page at the beginning of the comic book, however, focuses not on her going into the black community but on whether or not Superman can still desire her as a black woman. Of course this question is the kind of odd logic ascribed to irrational women, as it is clearly a test. She will be black for less than a day, so it is not really an issue. The root of the question is if his love for her is more than “skin deep,” and of course Superman expresses that he loves her, but in a way that is less about who she is than who he is. He asks, “Lois—how could
you ask such a question of Me? Me?" In case she (or the readers) might miss why he finds the question shocking, he elaborates, "You ask that of me . . . Superman? An alien from Krypton . . . Another planet? A Universal outsider? I don’t even have human skin! It’s tougher than steel!" She protests, "But your skin is the right color!"

This comic book explicitly represents Superman’s status as the ideal, “universal outsider” while also suggesting that even as an alien he is not as alien as black people. Superman is a caricature of ideal citizenship that people reference in a variety of contexts, and a number of creators in various media have responded to the representation by showing how dissonant other identity categories—blackness, queerness, communist—can be when they try to perform the ideal. Even as an alien, his whiteness is an indelible part of who he is. This issue makes white characters the center of racial narratives because they are the ones who can best represent what it means to be an outsider, understand an outsider, and save an outsider. Here, as in many other contexts, black people are often displaced in narratives about discrimination, while also being foundational to the history and narrative framing of prejudice in the United States. White excessive types function as citizen ideals, but black subjects are their shadows.

**BEYOND INJURY**

This journey through the history of black representation in mainstream comic art may seem like much ado about comics and cartoons, as a considerable amount of cartoon and comic art has been ephemeral. Cartoons and comics also rarely generate headlines. Their status is typically peripheral, about something it references and not about the representation itself. On the rare occasion when the cartoon itself is an object, it is almost always because of an offense. In 1903, the Pennsylvania legislature passed the short-lived Salus-Grady libel law, prohibiting caricatures of political figures. In 1954, the Comics Code was a reaction to representations of violence, sex, and alleged and actual queer subtexts in comic books that children read. In the late twenty-first century, the news media occasionally discussed comics events that were transgressive in some way—a cartoonist who has violated norms or the treatment of an iconic comic book character who marries, dies, or changes race or sexual orientation. And perhaps most infamously in the twenty-first century, gunmen, objecting to the portrayal of Muhammad in the satirical periodical *Charlie Hebdo*, murdered a
number of cartoonists and staff. In the aftermath, heated transnational debates took place about the representation of race and religion in the leftist magazine. Hermeneutical conflict reigned, with leftist allies all condemning the murders but divided on interpretation. In both scholarly and popular circles, people argued over how to read a cartoon. Moreover, how you read the cartoons became a conflict over antiracist politics and progressive commitments.

While less violent and prominent than the Hebdo controversy, in 2008 an editorial cartoon in the United States produced similar debates and demonstrated caricature’s enduring ability to capture conflicts in citizenship discourse. Caricaturist Barry Blitt depicted the Obamas as seditious citizens in a controversial cover of the *New Yorker* (Figure I.5). Erstwhile presidential candidate Barack Obama stands in the Oval Office with a picture of Osama bin Laden hanging on the wall and a flag burning in the fireplace. Obama wears a turban as he looks shiftily toward the viewer. He bumps fists with Michelle, a gesture the couple made after Obama accepted the nomination as a democratic nominee for president. A common form of intimacy in the African American community also present in athletic spaces and youth culture, the gesture nonetheless inspired some conspiracy-minded conservatives to see terrorism in a movement. Blitt plays with Republican claims that Michelle is a dangerous black radical, transforming her relaxed hair into an Afro, the radicalism of her natural hair accessorized by a machine gun, camouflage pants, and combat boots.

Some people immediately took issue with the image. While the *New Yorker* claimed that Blitt “satirizes the use of scare tactics and misinformation in the Presidential election to derail Barack Obama’s campaign,” columnists like Rachel Sklar said it was the equivalent to “repeating a rumor”:

> Presumably the *New Yorker* readership is sophisticated enough to get a joke, but still: this is going to upset a lot of people, probably for the same reason it’s going to delight a lot of other people, namely those on the right: Because it’s got all the scare tactics and misinformation that has so far been used to derail Barack Obama’s campaign—all in one handy illustration. Anyone who’s tried to paint him as a Muslim, anyone who’s tried to portray Michelle as angry or a secret revolutionary out to get Whitey, anyone who has questioned their patriotism—well, here’s your image.
Sklar calls the cover an illustration, while others called it a cartoon. This distinction is not insignificant. Medium and genre are incredibly important in terms of making the meaning of the image transparent. If it had been accompanied by Blitt’s title/caption, “Fistbump: The Politics of Fear,” which was inside the cover page, the tension between the image of the Obamas and the narratives that circulate about them would have been explicit. What I term the triangulated interpretive structure of many editorial cartoons would be in place. Cartoons using a triangulated structure depict a subjected person or event of interest, and also show someone else’s reaction to that person or thing. Some other referent in the cartoon then positions the reader to make the commentator the true object of the satire. Editorial cartoons often use this structure to criticize power relationships, indicting the perspective of the powerful and aligning the viewer with a different gaze. Language often provides the irony that contextualizes the image.

Of course, not all cartoons have words, and transparency should not be an expectation of art. However, the job of illustration is to help the viewer visualize an idea or narrative, while the editorial cartoon often depends upon satire and works with the tension between image and text. Irony is important to the genre. *New Yorker* editors may have believed that since their magazine was known for progressive politics and readership, the title of the magazine provided the appropriate progressive framing for interpreting the image. People still might have condemned the image itself without the cartoon’s title/caption, and conservatives could have taken it up, but that would have required ignoring the clear indictment in the line “the politics of fear.” In other words, people who wished to condemn Blitt for having a racist intent and the cartoon as perpetuating stereotypes would thus be narrowing the representational possibilities for attacking racist depictions, suggesting that the replication of the stereotype is always racist.

The controversy provides an opportunity to think about the difference medium and genre make in racial representations. Our interpretation of what “The Politics of Fear” does might vary depending on whether we understand it as an illustration or an editorial cartoon. Illustrations and editorial cartoons may do very different things; being attentive to the techniques and semiotics of cartoon art is important to understanding the work the medium does. But as the pillorying of well-known liberal Blitt illustrates, it can be difficult, even when a creator has the best intentions, to avoid producing pain when depicting black bodies given the long history of visual imperialism that constructs black
bodies as lesser human beings and citizens. And it is this problem that Blitt and many other creators working in a medium that makes use of caricature constantly confront—how do you avoid replicating racist representations or the accusation that you are?

I am ending my jaunt through the history of representation of African Americans in American comic art with the controversy over how to read this *New Yorker* cartoon because this subtle difference in seeing it as an editorial cartoon instead of illustration demonstrates the difference medium can make in reading practices. Like all media, the form does not guarantee the content—and cartoon and comic art have frequently been sites of injurious representation. But the aesthetic tradition of caricature in cartoon art may inherently challenge political commitments of artists who want to contest the history of representation that consistently reduces the complexity of black subjectivity through stereotyping.

Complex subjectivity is what the caricature eschews, which might make comics and cartoon art a particularly messy medium for representing blackness. A surface reading may always mean that any use of stereotype may be, on some level, racist. I mean surface reading in the most rigorous sense, that it is, as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus explain, “what insists on being looked at rather than what we can train ourselves to see through.” Michelle Obama gestured toward this idea when she discussed the *New Yorker* cover years later. In a speech in 2015, she described her struggle to deal with public discourse around her identity: “Then there was the first time I was on a magazine cover. It was a cartoon drawing of me with a huge Afro and machine gun. Now, yeah, it was satire, but if I’m being really honest, it knocked me back a bit. It made me wonder ‘just how are people seeing me.’” When she states “it was satire,” is she acknowledging the triangular structure of the cartoon and the critique of the right-wing narrative about her, or stating that she is the object of the satire? Perhaps no substantive difference exists between Blitt’s intent and her reaction to the caricature. The problem is that the representation still wounded, a reminder that she was seen that way. She was thus “knocked back” affectively, just as that way of seeing her was meant to knock her back politically. Racist caricature can defy context and narrative because it can require people to work against the initial cognitive response of recognition.

While the process of getting the joke can be almost instantaneous in the reader’s comprehension (if the triangular structure and cultural knowledge of the reader are present), the representation does
not become something else, even if it is a tool to indict racist gazes or action. The past is always present in the figure, but it is also outside of time, able to travel and adapt. How should black people respond to the resistance to black progress embedded in so many visual representations of blackness? Most African American artists have responded with positive representations; thus, caricature would seem like a practice that black producers would not engage in if they make black bodies their referent.

And yet many black artists and writers have responded to a popular resistance to the burdens of history by using stereotypical representations to explore the relationship between painful black pasts, presents, and precarious futures. Blitt was accused of producing a “tasteless and insensitive cartoon,” and I sometimes wonder if the conversation would have been different if the cartoonist had been African American. Perhaps not; as we see with Baker, black cultural producers certainly have created stereotypical images. They have sometimes been described—as Blitt and the New Yorker were—as participating in a racist aesthetic tradition. But what happens if we understand some African American producers, and specifically black cartoonists, as crafting a complex, aesthetic reaction to visual attacks on black citizenship through participation in a tradition of racial caricature? The fantastic, as Richard Iton has argued, unsettles the “governmentalities and the conventional notions of the political, the public sphere, and civil society that depend on the exclusion of black and other nonwhites from meaningful participation.” By “pushing to the surface exactly those tensions and possibilities” that are “suppressed and denied in the standard respectability discourses,” a black fantastic engages in the nexus of the political and popular that is intrinsic to public life.93

Not all caricatures, of course, take the form of the fantastic or transparently monstrous. One of the troubling outcomes of the unrelenting history of derogatory black representations is that representations that are “real” can also be seen as stereotypical representations. Depicting a black person as a woman on welfare, an impoverished child in the city, in a crime being committed, a well-endowed man, or even a slave can be characterized as negative caricature because of the idea that these are the predominant representations of blackness. The tyranny of a racist visual imperialism can make everyday lived experience a racial grotesque.

It is this history of the ideal, demonized, and situational grotesque that sets the stage for black comics creators’ interventions into this
representational legacy and provides a gateway to the everyday visual vocabulary of citizenship. As I have argued, the oxymoronic nature of the caricature reduces the complexity of a subject to real or imagined excesses. And the capacity of the caricature to resist temporal fixity—they are not easily placed in the past—makes the depictions of blackness in US comic art profoundly melancholic. Wounded subjects may still hold an attachment to that which wounds. African Americans may still hold some attachments to representations of ideal citizenship as love objects that black subjects cannot fully embody or make their own. Baker’s cartoon exemplifies this critique of citizenship aesthetics. Jefferson is the visual stereotype of the Founding Father, an ubiquitous, romantic representation contrasted with the black child that is his product and his shadow. The child is tied to him, unseen. And the figure cannot help but evoke repugnance for the reader sensitized to the cruelty of the caricature. The figure is simultaneously that which is ignored by the people who created him, an image that ideally would make the father—or the state—really see the pathological monstrosity that the state has crafted through a founding document that dehumanizes through the fractal framing of black people as less than whole. The black caricature stands in place of real black citizenship, with the ideal figuratively but not realistically in reach. Some nonblack creators have also explored this issue, but it is worth tracing the response of black artists to both ideal and racist caricature as part of a black art tradition.

COMICS GENRES AS CITIZENSHIP GENRES

With my emphasis on caricature, I tweak the focus on sequence in comics studies. I am not attempting to radically redefine commonly used definitions of comics, such as Scott McCloud’s most frequently cited (and often challenged) definition of the medium as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” Instead, I explore how comic art is a medium in which the use of caricature and other aesthetic techniques to stereotype bodies is essential to constructing meaning. Caricatures work with the various other aspects of cartoon and comic art such as the panel, the gutter, and closure to produce meaning in narrative sequence. I am not abandoning sequence as essential to the definition of comics, just foregrounding caricature as an essential part of the form. Given the importance of many single-panel cartoons in the history of the field (such as Hogan’s Alley) and the
fact that many cartoonists have moved back and forth between editorial cartoons and the multipaneled strip, leaving editorial cartoons out of comics studies is a fairly recent disciplinary move. By focusing on caricature, I place editorial cartoons back in conversation with multipaneled comic art.

Caricature traditionally addresses specificity, sometimes of an individual, but above all it is about excess. Some of the artists I discuss play with the dichotomy between idealized white citizens and alienated black subjects. Other artists construct a situational grotesque and demonstrate how it acts on black bodies, moving the grotesque away from the face. In other cases, the artist fully embraces the representation of a black grotesque or other kinds of caricatured excess to comment on the white pathologizing gaze. Many cartoonists address this structural challenge—how do you construct a picture of abject or pathological blackness to illustrate a white grotesque, instead of perpetuating the injurious image? In many cases you cannot, and the artists explore the representations that perhaps can never be vanquished. But it is in holding up what the white gaze shaped—how Jefferson crafted blackness into monstrosity—that the “object” reveals the monstrosity of its alleged opposite.

The abject opposite of the idealized white citizen in African American comics is, in most cases, black men. One of the surprises of the archival research for this book (which, in hindsight, should not have been a surprise) is that many idealized constructions of citizenship types in the United States are male, and as such the vast majority of the black artists who take up the concerns that are the narrative and aesthetic focus of my book are African American men. This book covers a century of cartooning, but Jackie Ormes (1911–1985) was the first African American woman cartoonist and one of a very small group. Barbara Brandon-Croft (1958–) was the first African American woman cartoonist to be nationally syndicated in the nonblack press. The twenty-first century has seen a substantial rise in African American women cartooning, with artists such as C. Spike Troutman and Afua Richardson gaining higher profiles. Interestingly enough, African American women cartoonists have been less likely to employ the kinds of aesthetic practices of abjection or the grotesque that I explore here. The historical limits of an archive focused on African American producers—in the medium and not just black characters—mean that Jennifer Cruté is the only black woman cartoonist I discuss at length in this book. My considerations of the hero, soldier, and counterculture citizenship address
predominately African American treatments of white masculine typologies, while the chapters on the general discourse of noncitizenship and the black child also explore black women and gender-fluid subjects. But while this book is unquestionably focused on citizenship categories and aesthetic practices that African American male cartoonists engage, I explore how the visual grammar of citizenship highlights how racialized and gendered this grammar is.

My first chapter, “‘Impussanations,’ Coons, and Civic Ideals: A Black Comics Aesthetic,” explores how artists such as celebrated Krazy Kat creator George Herriman, Pittsburgh Courier editorial cartoonist Sam Milai, and contemporary artists Jeremy Love and Valentin De Landro utilize caricature in broad-ranging articulations of how African Americans are marked by noncitizenship status, and explorations of how black subjects negotiate—but perhaps not escape—such discursively shaped bodies. By trying to imagine what a black perspective in the creation of racialized caricature might accomplish, these cartoonists reorient a reading practice that focuses on the injury of the images and turn to the legacy of racism and black reworkings of these representations. In other words, what happens if we look at a racist representation and imagine that the image might be inviting us to think about black liberation instead of dehumanization? Can the racist caricature be used in aesthetic practices of freedom?

While my first chapter focuses almost exclusively on a racial grotesque, the following chapters move between “negative” and “positive” caricatures of blackness, exploring the liminality between such representations in crafting various types of citizens. The foundation of black citizenship is noncitizenship—slave status and later Jim Crow—and “The Revolutionary Body: Nat Turner, King, and Frozen Subjection” explores the lasting legacy of black subjection in archetypes of black heroism in the white popular imagination. Slaves and, later, the emancipated were typically portrayed as indistinguishable patient suppliants or apes unready for citizenship. The supplicant representation would be the other half of the dehumanizing image, and this caricature of the ideal black aspirant citizen would be present through the civil rights era and, arguably, up to today. The editorial cartoon archive, produced by influential cartoonists like Thomas Nast, aided in this representation of a frozen, noble black subject, whose actions are not radical and who sublimests rage. Two black comic biographies, Kyle Baker’s Nat Turner and Ho Che Anderson’s King, are responses to an idealized frozen aesthetic of black subjectivity. This chapter explores how these
cartoonists speak to the limited representation of the ideal black revolutionary citizen, representations that, while not always grotesque, are similarly limiting in positing black complexity or agency.

I continue my discussion of Baker’s work in my third chapter, as he is one of the most proficient practitioners of destabilizing our common understandings of black caricature. Written by Robert Morales and drawn by Baker, the 2003 comic book miniseries *Truth: Red, White & Black* is the story of an African American Captain America who takes on the origin story of the legendary character, a scrawny white kid from New York who volunteered to take the army’s experimental serum and become a super soldier. Inspired by the Tuskegee experiment, an editor at Marvel imagined that the military would have experimented on black soldiers first, and *Truth* was born. Much of the scholarship about African Americans in comics discusses African American superheroes, and I do not retread that work in here. Instead, “Wearing Hero-Face: Melancholic Patriotism in *Truth: Red, White & Black*” places the black Captain America in conversation with the discourse surrounding the African American soldier during World War II to explore a kind of melancholic citizenship aesthetic in African American comic art. In this chapter I take a turn toward thinking about the melancholic black subject as a kind of racialized caricature, exploring the ways in which melancholia indicts idealized white citizenship.

The next chapter continues to look at black caricatures as indictments of white caricatured ideals. While optimistic child characters like Little Orphan Annie serve a narrative of infantile citizenship that offers a better future through their representation of innocence, black children across comic genres place pressure on the futurity of the nation given the nation’s treatment of children it has abandoned. My fourth chapter, “‘The Only Thing Unamerican about Me Is the Treatment I Get!’ Infantile Citizenship and the Situational Grotesque,” explores how Ollie Harrington, Dwayne McDuffie, M. D. Bright, Brumsic Brandon Jr., Aaron McGruder, and Jennifer Cruté use caricatured representations of black youth to represent the far-from-ideal lives of many children dealing with structural oppression.

While my fourth chapter is about representations that should invite sympathy—the vulnerable child—but do not, my final chapter is about caricatures that abjure fellow feeling. The black riff on unsympathetic, abject comic protagonists engages with a countercultural citizenship model. Some of the leftist comix that emerged in the wake of the Comics Code of 1954 and multiple social movements would embrace both abject
and “equal opportunity offender” protagonists—archetypically modeled by cartoonists like Robert Crumb—and racist caricature with the expectation that the cartoonists were all “in on the joke” of racism and sexism. This early form of equal opportunity offensive humor defines a kind of post–civil rights era liberal, white subjectivity. “Rape and Race in the Gutter: Equal Opportunity Humor Aesthetics and Underground Comix” looks at black underground cartoonists Richard “Grass” Green and Larry Fuller, who were early critics—albeit not explicitly—of the notion of the “post-race” politics of allegedly liberal white citizens. In many ways this chapter speaks to the soul of my book as an intervention in the practice of discarding offensive representations too quickly.

While many of the caricatures I explore in the preceding chapters utilize excess to prompt a sympathetic look at vulnerable black bodies, in my final chapter I look at black cartoonists who largely eschew sympathy and identification by producing caricatures that invite readers to direct the gaze at not only society more broadly, but producers and consumers of racist caricature specifically. And finally, in my coda I turn toward Black Panther comics and the successful film adaptation as an example of the ongoing investment in revision—and not abandonment—of racial caricature and stereotype by black cultural producers.

READING RACIST CARICATURE—IN SEQUENCE

I was once jokingly told, “You are a caricature of yourself.” In other words, the commentator was making a humorous observation that the excesses of my performance one day were tied to the identity that people already imagined of me. Most of the time, however, I feel as if caricature is waiting around the corner, the thing that I may move into or that may overtake me. Sometimes it is an identity that I willfully move into—righteously, vengefully—often because I have become undone by microaggressions. The quotidian nature of invisible injury invites excess. Embodying caricature can, for the racial other, become a way of being seen.

African American cartoonist Tom Floyd played with this idea in his 1969 comic Integration Is a Bitch! He uses his experiences as a “black white-collar worker” integrating a company to depict a series of moments that, in the twenty-first century, would be categorized as racist microaggressions (and many are transparently macroaggressions). The form of the comic lends itself to understanding the cumulative effect of the offenses. Each page is a self-contained gag cartoon, but
when read in sequence, the fragmentary moments give a whole picture of daily assaults on his sense of self. Initially, black white-collar worker George is smiling when he is “welcomed to industry,” and then he settles into perplexed grimaces when he sees that the white man in the dashiki has a “Welcome Soul Brother” placard on his desk, is constantly asked about (or accused of knowing something about) crime, is treated as a token, and is avoided by his colleagues. His face settles into a frown when he is put in the front window so white passersby can see him, is introduced as “our Negro,” or is asked constantly about watermelon. The white woman in the office is afraid of him. No one believes he knows anything about his field.

I read Floyd’s comic as a response to citizenship projects and interpellations. In the twenty-first century, people are familiar with the language of “corporate citizenship,” which involves not only their participation in the community but allegedly better practices of inclusion in the workplace. We are often asked to be “good citizens” at work. Civility is a prong of that citizenship discourse in the workforce, with African Americans often seen as violating civility when we call attention to discrimination. Floyd’s work highlights the ways in which the demanded civility can break down in the face of injuries that dismantle the public face of the injured subject.

After seventy-nine pages of incidents, George snaps. He sticks his tongue out at his colleagues. He happily claps at the movies when the black native moves in to kill the white man. He starts asking his white colleagues if they know white criminals. He hails his coworkers as “Bigots . . . Extremists . . . and White Racists. . . .” He intentionally scares the woman who always acts as if he is poised to rape her (Figure I.6). And he punches a colleague.

By the time he stands angrily on the table with clenched fists and yells “Black Power,” the reader understands exactly what produced his affect (Figure I.7). But varied readers might respond differently to the single frame in isolation—many people would still read it as having context, while others would need the sequence. Even in sequence, he might seem like an unfathomable caricature of black masculinity or a representation that is disruptive to attempts at integration. George acknowledges this, stating that he probably set integration back a hundred years as he stalks angrily out of an office where he apparently laid his boss out flat.

The last frame is the empty office, paper floating in the air after the force of his departure, white colleagues left behind, puzzled at his rage.

The temporality of caricatures is multitudinous—the ones that will not depart, the ones that we may move into, the ones that evoke the old to create the new. Few people would state that embodying the angry black man in the workplace is a “positive” representation of black masculinity, but here it is, and embracing it provided the first step toward his freedom. I am not suggesting in this book that every racist caricature or stereotype should be embraced by African Americans. But what is clear is that African American cartoonists have made endless use of the wide visual vocabulary of black racial caricature to help us imagine what freedom looks like in its presence.

Many of the racial caricatures I deal with in the book look like this, real black bodies associated with caricatures, but others are real monstrosities. A truism of representing suffering is that recognition is most possible when people are presented with the jarring evidence of the real—real bodies, real people, and real events. But as Phillip Brian Harper argues, there are good reasons for the focus on realist aesthetics in black arts and culture, “but to the extent that this positivist ethic restricts the scope of artistic practice, the realism that underwrites it emerges as a central problem within African American aesthetics.” I, too, wish to replace the privileging of the realist aesthetic, but I do so to explore how the fantastic and excessive is a means of approaching real experience and affect. One of our challenges in the project of recognition is the conceptual framing that the “real” can resist. It resists it because so much of what shapes real events are phantasms of hatred and fictions that we must find ways of representing as well. Every day we live with the injuries of the past, constructing our material presents, while we fight to reconceptualize the future. The artists and writers I engage in this book suggest that the complexity of the real requires the fantastic, because the foundation of a history of race relations is clearly nightmares made real.