

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 42
Issue 1 *A Planetary Republic of Comic Book
Letters: Drawing Expansive Narrative
Boundaries*

Article 28

9-20-2017

Frances Gateward and John Jennings. *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*. Rutgers UP, 2015.

Evan B. Thomas
Ohio State University - Main Campus, evanbthomas@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Evan B. (2017) "Frances Gateward and John Jennings. *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*. Rutgers UP, 2015.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 1, Article 28. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1968>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cad@k-state.edu.

Frances Gateward and John Jennings. *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*. Rutgers UP, 2015.

Abstract

Review of Frances Gateward and John Jennings. *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*. Rutgers UP, 2015.

Keywords

comics, comic books, graphic novels, race, identity

Frances Gateward and John Jennings. *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*. Rutgers UP, 2015. 356 pp.

Frances Gateward and John Jennings' *The Blacker the Ink* responds to two problems in comics studies: first, the historiographical oversight of black comics from comics scholarship; and second, the proliferation of black stereotypes within the comics canon. The resulting collection is organized in sections named "panels," a play on both the frames used in comics and the academic convention for organizing conferences.

Panel one, "Black is a Dangerous Color," confronts several of the flashpoints. "No Sweat!" by Daniel F. Yezbick provides a thorough account of a crucial struggle within the publishing house EC Comics to depict a single panel of a sweating black astronaut who happens to be an enlightened observer of prejudice. "Sex in Yop City" by Sally McWilliams explores the fragile side of masculinity within a feminist Ivorian comic featuring "good-time girls." "A Postcolony in Pieces" by Patrick F. Walter provides a postcolonial critique of Western capitalist discourse in response to *Unknown Soldier*.

Panel two, "Black in Black-and-White and Color," deals with black comics in newspaper strips, old and new. "Fashion in the Funny Papers" by Nancy Goldstein recovers Jackie Ormes' high-fashion cartooning (and sometimes buxom pinups) as potent symbols of an ascendant black and female consumer class. "Graphic Remix" by Robin R Means Coleman and William Lafi Youmans depicts Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* as "lateral appropriation" from hip-hop culture to comment on the contemporary condition of black liberation.

Panel three, "Black Tights," represents this collection's extended engagement with superhero comics. "American Truths" by Consuela Francis confronts the double-revisionism of the Marvel series *Truth*, which both de-marginalized and re-marginalized the black precursors to Steve Rogers. "Drawn into Dialogue" by Andre Carrington impresses the importance of the serial form—and concurrent commentary—for the resonance that *Icon* found within 1990s popular culture. "Critical Afrofuturism" by Reynaldo Anderson explicates *Ramzees* as part of a critical response to Euro-centric futurism. "Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros" by Blair Davis unpacks the connotations surrounding many black superheroes' visual representations, from Luke Cage's chains to the trope of exposed, fetishized skin on male and female characters.

Panel four, "Graphic Blackness," confronts the graphical problems surrounding the remediation of black bodies as well as "black depths," places, and lineages that can come with those images. The chapter "Daddy Cool" by Kinohi Nishikawa scrutinizes the ways that blaxploitation stereotypes of hyper-masculinity and skewed femininity provided tropological scaffolding for both "black surface"

and “black depth” in *Daddy Cool*, the first graphic novel to appear under the name of an African-American. “The Blues Tragicomic” by Qiana Whitted offers insight into the blues roots of the black folk subject of *Stagger Lee*, whose narrative can only be re-read in a transformative fashion that reveals the dynamic nature of history. “Provocation through Polyphony” by Craig Fischer links Kyle Baker’s background in indie and comedic works with *Nat Turner*’s “gearshift” between sympathetic and unsettling aesthetics. “Performance Geography” by Hershini Bhana Young reveals a haunting connection between Jeremy Love’s *Bayou* and Henry “Box” Brown’s *Mirror of Slavery*, a performative text that evokes identity and place through the non-linear performance of time. James J. Ziegler’s “A Secret History of Miscegenation” re-interprets the extensive exposition sequences in Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* in order to reveal the central problem—for both Jimmy and the United States—of the panic over “miscegenation” (a term that this reviewer was surprised to learn was coined in order to combat Lincoln’s re-election). Lastly, Rebecca Wanzo’s “It’s a Hero?” draws together earlier conversations on *Icon* and *The Boondocks* to comment on the condition of black bodies’ representations in comics; the comedy derived by a capable artist from the representation of a black body can in some cases be an effective tool for correcting the erasure of black bodies from citizenship discourses.

Throughout, *The Blacker the Ink* features an emerging methodology that may be characteristic of, and useful for, the continued development of black comics studies. The work of Jeffrey A. Brown grounds multiple essays due to Brown’s foundational work on the black superhero. Likewise, Yezbick, McWilliams, and Fischer each make special use of Thierry Groensteen’s concept of “braiding” (*tressage* in the original French). Braiding is the method by which an arrangement of panels can resemble, recall, or even reverse other arrangements of panels: this technique can connect dis/similar elements or expose contrasts within the comic text. Analogously, Qiana Whitted refers to a “call-and-response” sequencing (236), which grounds some of the techniques of “braiding” in the “participatory musical aesthetic” surrounding Stagger Lee and other folk traditions. It seems that this collection suggests a comparison between “braiding” and “call-and-response” sequencing, which has two discernable payoffs: first, each formal insight provides independent verification of the other; second, the otherwise abstract and obscure “braiding” technique receives a more present, realized grounding through the “call-and-response” tradition.

The intersectional essays within this collection merit special praise. Each of these essays—especially those by McWilliams, Goldstein, and Nishikawa—recovers some of the contributions of black women in comics, and each also brings with it a combination of theoretical elegance and readerly insight. They are also timely and necessary for the construction an anti-racist comics pedagogy, at a time

when comics pedagogy appears heavily reliant on Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

Lastly, the historiographical recovery projects within this collection speak to a continuing need for a historical account of race-formation in comics. Perhaps the field of comics studies is ready to dive deeper into the nineteenth century, and possibly even earlier, for a complete account of blackness in comics.

Evan B. Thomas
The Ohio State University