

Shelley Armitage

Black Looks and Imagining Oneself Richly:

The Cartoons of Jackie Ormes

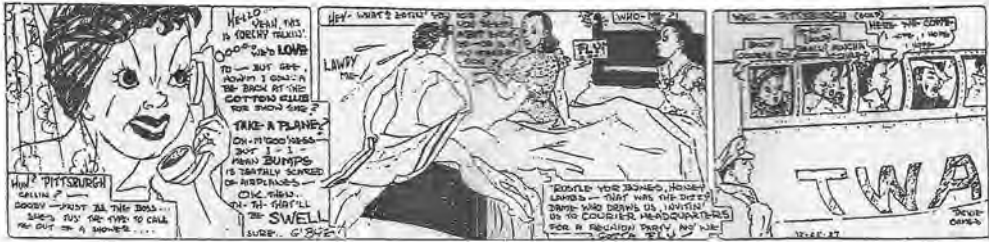
In his “The Damnation of Women” (1920)—some twenty-seven years before Jackie Ormes created Torchy Brown, her plucky cartoon heroine—W. E. B. Du Bois exposed a “world which studiously forgets its darker sisters” (741). “The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion.... The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause” (750). Historically, Du Bois identified the persistent effect of slavery which resulted in negative attitudes about the beauty, virtue, cleanliness, morality of African American women (741). Noting that the world still expects a woman to be “primarily pretty,” as “beauty is its own excuse for being,” he wrote: “the white world objects to black women because it does not consider them beautiful” (741). Yet Du Bois observed that negative or dismissive attitudes about African-American women have a positive side. The decree that no woman is a woman unless by the white standard of beauty, he says, allows black women to escape the expectation of being merely ornamental because they “have girded themselves for work, instead of adorning their bodies only for play” (750). No wonder that in his 1926 review of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, he praised her heroine Helga as a model of the modern African American woman: “There is no happy ending and yet the theme is not defeatist.... [I]n the end [Helga] will be beaten down but never utterly surrender to hypocrisy and convention. [She] is typical of the new, honest young fighting Negro woman on whom ‘race’ sits negligibly and Life is always first” (760).

In many ways, the cartoonist Jackie Ormes’s depiction of black women and culture embodies Du Bois’s ideas. Her earliest creation, “Torchy Brown,” first appeared in the black-owned Pittsburgh *Courier* in 1937 and later in fourteen syndicated newspapers. Possessing no special powers or gadgets, as was typical of many adventure heroines of her day, Torchy drew on her own passion for life and expression of self-worth as the naïve but assertive teenager seized opportunities to make it from “Dixie to Harlem.” Torchy Brown’s battles were personal but historically based, reflecting the Great Migration of black folks from the

South to the North and paralleling Ormes's personal observations of Chicago's growth. The Torchy Brown series, which began with "Torchy Brown from Dixie to Harlem" in the 1930s and ended with "Torchy Brown's Heartbeats" in 1957, bookends Ormes's cartooning career, Torchy's transformations paralleling the spirit of Ormes's experiences as a proactive woman. In one of her last interviews, Ormes remarked of her protagonist, who had many love affairs during the life of the strip: "[She] was no moonstruck crybaby, and she wouldn't perish between heartbreaks. I have never liked dreamy little women who couldn't hold their own" (Goldstein 45). The Torchy character combines beauty and action. By the 1950s, Torchy battled segregation, racism, bigotry, sexism, and environmental racism—topics absent from most other cartoons of the period. Contrary to Larsen's character, who despite her intelligence and will, slides into physical and psychological limbo by novel's end, Torchy and Ormes's other characters, Candy, and Patty-Jo, possess agency and subjectivity. Ormes creates a venue for what belle hooks calls "black looks"—not only the concept of black beauty but the transformation of the way in which a readership views such a concept. And in so doing, she revises Du Bois's stand. Black women are not ornamental beauties but do express, through kinds of physical beauty, activism, truth-seeking, and pride.

The difference in the Harlem writers and the role of their white sponsors and primary white readership and Ormes's black audience is key to Ormes's dynamicism. In a segregated America, including the American press, Ormes's savvy, dynamic, fashionable, yet hard-working heroines played to readers familiar with the predominant negative stereotypes of African-Americans in the white entertainment media. At the time that Ormes first drew "Torchy Brown," the popular comics portrayed African-Americans in gross stereotypes. If blacks appeared at all in non-black authored strips, they were maids, manservants, pickaninnies, and loafers, drawn with exaggerated lips and ears, speaking in a crude dialect which mocked African-American regional speech patterns. Along with other trailblazing black cartoonists whose work spanned the period of the 1930s-1950s—Ollie Harrington ("Bootsie" and "Jive Gray"), Wilbert Holloway ("Sunnyboy Sam"), and Sammy Milai ("Bucky"), and the various artists who drew "Bungleton Green"—Ormes brought dignity and grace to African-American comics and their characters. To do so, she took up the simultaneously stereotyped characters—for example, the maid, the child (or pickanniny)—reconstructing them as savvy, saucy, smart, knowledgeable individuals in the two single panels, "Candy" and "Patty- Jo 'n' Ginger." The importance of such images to how African Americans might view themselves is reiterated by belle hooks: "We mostly see images that reinforce.... the subjugation of black bodies by white bodies.... Our eyes grow

Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem



Dec. 25, 1937



Sept. 4, 1938



Jan. 2, 1938



Feb. 26, 1938

accustomed to images that reflect nothing of ourselves worth seeing close-up.... Given this cultural context, we are often startled, stunned even, by representations of black images that engage and enchant” (96). Working during the heyday of the black press, Ormes accomplished both. In “Torchy Brown from Dixie to Harlem” (1937–1940), “Candy” (mid-1940s), “Patty-Jo ‘n’ Ginger” (1946–55), and “Torchy Brown Heartbeats” (also called “Torchy in Heartbeats,” 1950–1955) each features a female protagonist who provides a link between the domestic scene, individual lives of women and social, political, and cultural issues. Though Dale Messick is lauded as an originator of the adventuresome career woman, Torchy Brown predates Dale Messick’s girl reporter by three years. Unlike Starr, whose entanglements were mostly romantic, Ormes’s characters deal with all manner of real-life stresses and demands. The contemporary cartoonist, Barbara Brandon, who draws “Where I’m Coming From,” echoes hooks as she notes the crucialness of Ormes’s images to not only a black readership but African American artists: “You get so much out of it. It’s visual. It’s verbal. It’s telling us how we talked, how we looked, what concerned us” (Goldstein 67).

If we were only talking about the cartoon work itself, Brandon’s remark is significant enough. But when we consider Jackie Ormes’s own life, her on-the-job training as a journalist, her activist work in the NAACP, Urban League, and with charities like the March of Dimes, and her own career choices exclusively as an artist of African-American materials—even surviving an FBI file kept on her because of her attendance of an event of communist sympathizers—we see the work in a richer, socially-resonating light. Jackie Ormes was born Zelda Jackson in Pittsburgh in 1911. When she was six, her father died in an automobile accident, and she and her older sister lived with their grandmother while their mother worked as a live-in maid. Her grandmother, mother, and stepfather (her mother later remarried and the family moved to Monongahela, outside Pittsburgh) encouraged Jackie and her sister to get an education and pursue their talents. As a girl, Jackie always drew—pictures on raincoats, work for school papers. Her sister, Dolores, became a singer (Torchy is named for her musical style). The creative lives of both these young women were inspired by experiences where they learned more and from which they modeled themselves. As a girl, Ormes’s public school curriculum included four years of English, languages, sciences, and math, and a French club. But for the maturing Ormes, this special place of learning was the daily, urban newspaper.

When Ormes was still in high school, the Pittsburgh *Courier* published her first article. She had pressed them for a job, an early indication of her ambitions and awareness of her creative talents. After graduation, the newspaper hired her as a cub reporter. Immediately, along with predictably covering events for the

social page, she was asked to be a sports reporter. She found herself responsible for covering fights, for example, thus going typically where few women did. In 1936, she married Earl Ormes, an older man; they moved to Chicago to make their home. There she joined the staff of the *Chicago Defender* as a news reporter, covering the city's major racial stories, including segregation at the Great Lakes Naval Academy, riots at the St. Charles Penitentiary, and a number of court cases. By the time she began drawing "Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem," Ormes was working political beats atypical of women's newspaper assignments. During this same period she began to spend many of her off hours working for various causes ranging from the NAACP to the Urban League on whose board she eventually served. Though as a successful black woman, artist, and journalist these activities would appear to situate Ormes in a world where preoccupation with women's roles, sexism, and racism might be lessened, most critics agree that the public Torchy suggests the private Jackie who was not quite admitted to the fray. As she quickly became known primarily as a cartoonist, she had to confront the typical marginalizing of that art form as well as the prohibitive attitudes towards women cartoonists. She apparently was underpaid for "Candy," and had to weather fads in cartooning which challenged the romantic and even political concerns of her female protagonist. In the 1950s, when she was very well known, the *Chicago Tribune* tried to woo her away from the *Defender*. But Ormes declined, fearing that the white-owned and directed newspaper would attempt to compromise the content of her strip by absorbing the racial themes she felt free to express to the black readership of the *Defender*. The positive sense of self Jackie Ormes expressed in her latter years she attributed to the creation of the public and popular Torchy Brown, and to a lesser degree, her other characters, as they advanced the concerns of other black men and women.

The opening episode of "Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem," a weekly four-panel black-and-white strip, Torchy, "who doesn't know a thing about life, but suspects an awful lot," is living on a farm in Mississippi with her aunt and uncle, while her mother, "a gay divorcee," lives in the North. Torchy soon grows bored with farm life, and prompted by a visit from a stylish Northern relative, sells her animals to buy a train ticket, and heads for New York. She becomes a dancer at the famous Cotton Club, where she encounters the likes of Cab Calloway, Bill ("Bojangles") Robinson, and the Nicholas Brothers and finds romance and danger. "Dixie to Harlem" is obviously the work of a young woman but all the more interesting for that. Torchy is tall and sexy with big, alluring eyes and long, long legs. Like so many of her generation, she wants nothing more than to leave the farm behind for the glamour of the city. Though her feelings are quite individual and personal, the treatment of the "Great Migration" theme and by implication,

the opportunities available for migrating blacks surely struck an authentic chord with her audience. Jackie Ormes had never been South or to Harlem as a young woman, but she used her reporting skills and the available national news in the *Courier* to establish the verisimilitude of experiences.

Though amateurish and rather simple in its narratives, “Torchy” established a youthful hope and a positive identity for black women primarily due to its autobiographical aspect, which contributed to its authenticity. With the exception of the long legs in the cartoons, five-foot-one Jackie Ormes used herself as model to draw Torchy Brown, Candy, and Ginger. Not only Ormes’s newspaper and civic work, but also her husband Earl’s jobs as a banker and later manager of major hotels in Chicago, enabled the couple to live a comfortable middle-class life—one which put them in touch with major political figures and performers of the day, such as Cab Calloway and Lena Horne. Ormes was extremely fashionable, a beauty, later training models and directing style shows for charities. The cartoons are an embodiment of their creator—a positive image of black working women.

[B]ell hooks has written extensively about the crisis of black identity, focusing much of her analysis on the power of images in identity formation. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, she reminds us:

Many audiences in the United States resist the idea that images have an ideological intent. This is equally true of black audiences. Fierce critical interrogation is sometimes the only practice that can pierce the wall of denial consumers of images construct so as not to face that the real world of image-making is political—that politics of domination inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed. (5)

Recent sociologists have paid particular attention to the phenomenon they call “misrecognition,” a process by which we formulate what is reflected through images in the construction of identity. An early theorist, Charles Taylor, allows: “Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people of society mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (27). The term has been particularly helpful in understanding internalized racism and the responses to images by whites which are blatantly stereotypical. Though she does not mention cartoons, hooks examines the effect of misrecognition in Hollywood films on generations of blacks. Referencing the power of spectatorship—particularly the white male gaze—she argues, for example, that this kind of popular entertainment privileges white female beauty while relegating black females almost exclusively to roles as

maids or mammies, or, as Toni Morrison notes in *Playing in the Dark*, by completely omitting the black experience. Most importantly, hooks is interested not solely in critique but in transforming the image—“creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews” (4). She advocates the “transgressive image,” a political act which raises the questions about the perspective from which we look, “who... we identify with, whose image do we love” (4).

Most of hooks’s argument assumes the power of the colonizing culture and, in so doing, inadvertently necessitates a somewhat reactive stance. Black identity is tied largely to the countering of images constructed by others. But Ormes’s cartoons are proactive, striking an attitude of personal power, culturally derived. The creation of strong, glamorous, smart black characters for a black audience shapes a perspective of “recognition” of the black experience. Without the prohibitions she would have faced had she drawn for white newspapers, Ormes raised the normally forbidden topics of violence against women and drew semi-nude characters without sensationalizing or exoticizing them. Her spunky and savvy primarily middle-class heroines were individualistic yet representative. They were desirable because despite the obvious tropes of the strips—adventure, mystery, and romance—they were forceful in their autobiographical/realistic references. Ormes’s adult females were not only the mirror of her own looks—beautiful figure, the latest hair and dress styles—but of the artist’s “looking” which established the viewpoint for the audience. A measure of this authenticity came from the detailed interiors and settings, the accuracy of the fashions coupled with compelling and newsworthy issues. Due to the popularity of her Torchy Brown cartoons, Ormes was regularly greeted on the street as “Torchy.” The gorgeous heroine was real. And her actions and adventures, if Ormes’s life is any sign, argued a measure of verisimilitude as well.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue for the power of embodiment in autobiography. The body is the site of memory and agency. Given the history of many African-American women for whom slavery and its continued influence was defining, positively possessing one’s body is key to self worth. Critic Nellie Y. McKay argues that Zora Neal Hurston in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, transgressed the “race-representative text of oppression” (101). Such “narrative identity,” according to McKay, “rejected the primacy of slave history and the supremacy of white racism over black lives” (101). Historically, African-American autobiography has been a prime genre for reimagining the self, for women in particular. “The black self-story... sees autobiography as a weapon in the continuing search for black freedom” (101). As Toni Morrison says, that self is presented as both “solitary and representative” (101). In the case of the panel, “Candy,” (modeled

physically on Ormes) featuring the wise-cracking and svelte maid (in service to a white matron), she is certainly “eye Candy,” but also espouses political insights and sound perspectives. She appeared at a time when the *Defender* campaigned for improved wages and conditions for black women in domestic service. She also provided black servicemen with a pin-up girl during a period when convention prevented them from posting the popular white pin-up girls in their barracks. After Candy’s run was over in the *Defender*, Ormes received a letter from a serviceman praising Candy as “wholesome American womanhood” (81). Ormes cleverly connects beauty to intelligence and pluck in these panels.

Though “Candy” is certainly of interest as a single panel during the 1940s, it is particularly so when juxtaposed against the artist’s own experiences of that decade and when considered as part of the cartoon art and journalism contemporaneous to it in the Chicago *Defender*. As Ormes became heavily involved in Civil Rights issues, the cartoon at first may seem by contrast merely play or diversion for her. Candy, after all, is a good-looking, shapely maid of a white mistress and all the “action” occurs around the single figure of Candy who comments in one-liners about her boss, social conditions, class and race relations, and womanhood. As a self-trained artist drawing a panel each week, Ormes only sustained “Candy” for four months. But during that time the maid demonstrated that although she had worked for Mrs. Goldrocks, she was prettier, smarter, more resourceful, and independent than her boss ever dreamed of being. As Candy strikes one gorgeous pose after another, she makes comments like these: “I’d better answer this GI mail for Mrs. Goldrocks so she’ll have something to brag about at the meeting”; “Mrs. Goldrocks admits her biggest thrill is black-market bargains—That’s because she’s convinced they’re really exclusive”; “Im’getting fed up with rolling her cigarettes. It’s enough to make me break down and share my tailor-mades.” In cartoon after cartoon, Candy inverts class and race divisions demonstrating that the black community often has superior ways of approaching problems and thoroughly demonstrating that black America, as the major service group of the country, enables the privileged class to function. “Oh, Mrs. Goldrocks, one of your guests took my mink scarf home by mistake.... will her face be red” (she holds a fox fur). Another theme is the superiority of black womanhood. Candy says: “So that is the great Swoona Stagrow. Hmmmph.... I’ve seen gals with more by accident than she’s got on purpose!” Or: “This job’s good for me.... The more I see of her friends, the more I appreciate my own.” In fact, Candy reverses the expected roles completely: “Course, Mrs. Goldrocks, you realize these first weeks you will be on probation?”

Candy ran on the same opinion page with W. E. B. DuBois, Walter White, S. I. Hayakawa, Langston Hughes and other esteemed writers of the day, functioning



"I'm getting fed up with rolling her cigarettes. It's enough to make me break down and share my tailor-mades!"
June 2, 1945



"Gee, I hope Mrs. Goldrocks doesn't gain any more weight. I can't possibly wear a size larger."
March 31, 1945

not so much as light fare as a kind of political cartoon. She often shared the page with Jay Jaxon, another cartoonist who addressed other social aspects of race relations. Both cartoonists followed a page which usually had political cartoons prominently displayed at the top, and the strips, "Speed Jaxon" and "Bungleton Green" ran concurrently. Toward the end of the time in which Ormes drew Candy, Jay Jackson appears to have imitated the classic female form she originated.

Though cartoons or comics often are said to be effective because of their general rather than specific appeal, Ormes empowered women through images of a black subjectivity at once visualized in the authorial body and by focusing the spectators' gaze on characters who bear subjective witness. The definition of black beauty as related to intelligence marks all her strips. But instead of objectified, exotic black women, her curvy and glamorous Torchy, Candy, and Ginger are innocent of their allure, enjoying the pleasure of their own bodies—charmiers but not seducers. Historical objectification of black bodies has been successful because it denies the central ingredient of subjectivity—intellect. But these beautiful women are smart, well-informed, and speak their minds.

Because Ormes drew during the height of the black press, she enjoyed particular popularity and exposure. In 1947 the *Courier's* circulation figure was 286,686, the *Defender's* 161,253. The next year the circulation for the *Courier* climbed to its highest, 358,000. Langston Hughes in his "Colored and Colorful" column for the *Defender* once commented: "If I were marooned on a desert island... I would miss Jack Ormes's cute drawings" (Goldstein 75). Not until the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s prompted the mainstream presses to cover African American subjects more and the advent of television caused the *Courier's* circulation to plummet to 159,238 in 1953. According to Nancy Goldstein, "the *Courier's* news page often featured articles about individuals who had risen from humble beginnings to success, and editorial pages regaled readers with instructive pieces on such topics as the virtues of thrift, ambition, and sacrifice," alongside current political debates and issues (40). Torchy Brown "Dixie to Harlem" can be read as a rags-to-riches story. And Candy is certainly a maid who has done well for herself. The fact that Candy looks better in her boss's clothes than she does suggests much about the Emperor's clothes.

The most popular and certainly longest running cartoon was the single panel "Patty Jo 'n' Ginger," which ran from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Featuring the spunky and smart little sis, Patty 'Jo' and big sis Ginger, who never speaks, the weekly tracked the stylish sisters' engagement with topics from the Truman doctrine to neighborhood segregation. Working from the perspective of a middle-class black family, in three of the earliest cartoons, Patty-Jo converses with a soda-jerk, a store-keeper, on the city streets, and in the school yard. Though several of the panels take place within the sisters' home, often the commentary has to do with the outside world, as both sisters show they are concerned citizens who see the limitations of certain attitudes and political positions. In one panel, Patty-Jo is the head of the Junior Defense Squad, and pronounces a businessman, who has been hit on the head with a toy plane launched by one of Patty-Jo's friends, "the first American AIRRAID casualty of World War 2 ½." The joke is on Mr. Pushbottom, who obviously has to be forced off his chair to do his patriotic duty. Often it is the child's view, of course—fresh, direct, without pretense or guile—which makes the adults see their own complacency or hypocrisy. Sister Ginger is the straight woman to Patty-Jo's observations. Patty-Jo, wearing a soap-box-like costume, comes into her sister's bedroom to say: "It was a game over at Benjie's house... I thought it was a matter of record that God an' General MacArthur decided the NATIVES didn't have a Chinaman's chance in Asia!" In these scenes, the older and supposedly wiser sister is not. In fact, she is always absorbed with her appearance, checking her nails, trying on lingerie, or being courted by a good-looking man. The desirability of romance is not lost on Patty-Jo, however.



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

Oct. 8, 1955



"It's a movie starring CINAMACARTHY again. . .continued from last week."

May 8, 1954



"It would be interestin' to discover WHICH committee decided it was un-American to be COLORED."

April 7, 1951



Copyright 1946, by Jackie Ormes Features.

"This oughta bring em out to do something even if it's wrong."

Nov. 2, 1946

She says at one point: “Does your type come in smaller sizes,” referring to Ginger’s handsome suitor. But mostly Patty-Jo has done her homework, and when big sis picks her up from school, she notes: “We kids got up a petition for the new Congress.... protesting guaranteed SOCIAL INSECURITY. We claim it’s heading us for a DESPAIR STATE an’ robs us of our ambition as adults.” Certainly some anticipated perspectives on political and social arguments are revealed here. But Patty Jo’s precociousness goes beyond the certain positions which may reflect Ormes’s own thoughts. In one panel, she takes on the repopularization of biological determinism as applied to minorities and the complexities of race construction. Playing with a monkey from the circus, she says: “Lookit, Ginger.... It’s Zambia from the circus.... We discovered we’re KINDRED SOULS on account both of us love popcorn so much.” To the side of the door Patty-Jo enters is a sculpture resembling that of Augusta Savage, suggesting contributions of African-Americans to the fine arts. The juxtaposition of primitive imagery and the fine arts is another Ormes hallmark. Throughout the strip, Patty Jo’s insights imply multiple and complex meanings through visual and verbal play. As Nancy Goldstein points out, Patty Jo’s language is a pastiche of adult vocabulary and “low, slangy vernacular. Her speech is not quite the way people talk, regardless of age, but is constructed in a way that defines her personality as childlike yet shrewd” (85). Patty-Jo even knows her music, and in one scene she refers to “Ode to Spring” and directs with a Stravinsky-like style. Like a host of entertaining child stars who one-upped their elders, Patty-Jo exposes their ignorance through her ironic tone, but is never mean. Her opinions provide insights into the compelling issues of the times: union strikes, segregated communities and schools, school curricula, America’s imperialism as Ormes saw it expressed in the Korean and other Asian conflicts, the actions of the House on Un-American Activities, voting rights and responsibilities, responsibilities toward charities like the March of Dimes, and many others.

From the popularity of Patty-Jo came the first African-American doll in the late 40s and 50s, advertised as “America’s only Negro character doll.” Margaret Goss Burroughs, the founder and director of the DuSable Museum of African-American History in Chicago, which houses some of Ormes’s work, notes: “Jackie devoted her life to turning around the stereotypical images which have been so long used to degrade and depict African-Americans as mammies and picknannies. It was she who started the trend which resulted in more humane portrayals and images of African-American people” (qtd. in Goldstein 64). Ormes’s doll often appeared alongside Patty-Jo in some panels, her stylish outfits mirrored in Patty-Jo’s dress. Since the panel could be enjoyed by both adults and children, the doll was another way of physically materializing positive images within the black community. For



"Now you folks can REALLY stop worryin' . . . Uncle Sam's blowing our national wad as an H-bomb for your PROTECTION . . . course, that don't spell HOUSING, but you gotta admit it ain't 'RAY', either!"

Feb. 13, 1950



"YOU BETCHA I'M MAD . . . THAT SMART ALEC MICKY O'SHANNAN STARTS SNIKEERIN' AT LI'L OL' BROWN ME WEARIN' ST PATRICK TRIMMIN' AN' I HADDA USE MY AERICAN AN' INDIAN WAR-FARE TO DEFEND MY IRISH!"

March 18, 1950



"I'm joining the NAACP tonight . . . Maybe if we all get 'On the ball' now, we won't find ourselves behind that ol' 'B ball' Daddy talks about!"

Oct. 5, 1946



"What'd I tell you? . . . underground workers . . . Jus' wait till the un-American Committee hears about this!"

Feb. 11, 1950

Ormes who had lost her only child, a daughter, Patty-Jo was a sort of surrogate child—a creative progeny of this creative woman.

Returning to her Torchy character for the advent of the colored comics page in the *Courier*, “Torchy Brown Heartbeats,” Ormes echoed in narrative and style the successes of local radio soap operas, plays featuring black historic figures by the W. E. B. Du Bois Theater, and adventure and romantic strips like “Terry and the Pirates” and “Brenda Starr.” Like “Brenda Starr,” Torchy was beautiful and shapely and fell in and out of love, though her romantic interests were more likely to be gamblers and jazz musicians rather than the so-called Mystery Man. Yet Jackie Ormes, as in the case of “Candy,” was, if not sexually explicit, at least more earthy than her white counterparts. Her heroine appeared in various states of undress, even in nude-bathing scene, and she was seemingly always fighting off would-be rapists and forces that would undermine her. She used these ostensible formulae to attract an audience yet the images and narrative had serious intent. The “adventure” strip suggested that meaningful female action had to do with self-protection and self-expression (rather than dependency and victimhood), and though these behaviors and attitudes certainly had to do with men, they were not determined by them. As an initiator and self-reliant person, Torchy grew as a non-conventional character redefining certain stereotypic notions of womanhood during these years, even as she embraced the desire for love and romance.

As an example, in 1953, the Torchy strip took an even more marked turn. Rather than creating action due to a shift in perspective on female attitudes and behavior or due to settings, which included the high seas and snake-infested jungles, Ormes began to write about bigotry and pollution, subjects no white cartoonist would treat for another twenty years. At the same time, what had been a rather decorative style became more gritty and realistic in the strip.

The plot during this period of refocus in the strip goes something like this. Torchy escapes from a failed romance on a dark, rainy night and decides to take a bus to wherever it stops. The bus caroms off a lonely mountain road and Torchy encounters Earl Lester, a young jazz pianist whose hands had been crushed. Torchy persuades Earl to have an operation that will allow him to play again. She nurses him back to health and falls in love. But Earl’s first love is his art, and Torchy realizes she can’t play mistress to his music. Fleeing him, she signs on for a mysterious job in South America, and a second saga begins. En route, she escapes an attempted rape aboard ship—Ormes’s subject here a taboo for contemporary cartoons of the day. Once there, she discovers that her “job” is to be mistress to the evil plantation owner LeGran, a tyrant who controls his workers by terrorizing them. She soon meets the handsome Paul Hammond, also

Torchy in Heartbeats

Feb. 23, 1952



Oct. 25, 1952



LeGran's prisoner, with whom she escapes through the perilous Brazilian jungle. Of course they fall in love.

Eventually Paul and Torchy go to Southville. Torchy, by now trained as a nurse, is Dr. Hammond's assistant in a town where Colonel Fuller runs a poisonous chemical plant and where Hammond is forced to set up his clinic in a run-down shack, because he is black. Colonel Fuller is a raving bigot, controlling the town and its people. Moreover, there is an epidemic in the town, which Hammond traces to wastes from Fuller's factory that contaminate the town's water supply.

May 8, 1954

TORCHY
in
HEARTBEATS

THE STORY THUS FAR:
TORCHY, A VIBRANT, ALIVE GIRL SEEKING TRUE LOVE AND HAPPINESS, FINDS THAT LIFE IS A THING OF TEARS AND HEARTACHES ALL TOO OFTEN!

WHEN SHE MEETS EARNEST, HANDSOME, YOUNG DOCTOR PAUL HAMMOND, THEY FALL IN LOVE! BUT PAUL IS CALLED TO A SMALL TOWN, SOUTHVILLE, WHERE HE TAKES CHARGE OF THE TINY CLINIC.

TORCHY FOLLOWS PAUL TO SOUTHVILLE WHERE SHE BECOMES HIS INVALUABLE NURSE AND GIRL FRIDAY! AS THEY WORK SIDE BY SIDE, THEIR LOVE DEEPENS!

BUT AT SOUTHVILLE, PAUL FINDS THAT WASTE PRODUCTS OF THE HUGE FULLER CHEMICAL PLANT, A GIANT INDUSTRIAL COLOSSUS, IS POISONING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH ABSORPTION IN THE VERY LAND AND WATER.

COLONEL FULLER, OWNER OF THE HUGE CHEMICAL PLANT, IS A PREJUDICED, BIGOTED MAN AND REFUSES TO EVEN LISTEN TO PAUL'S WARNINGS!

BUT PAUL'S WARNINGS COME TRUE AND THE CHEMICAL POISONING STRIKES HARD—INCLUDING COLONEL FULLER'S OWN BELOVED LITTLE NEPHEW, JAMIE! HOWEVER, PAUL PERFECTS A SERUM WHICH SAVES THE COMMUNITY. WHEN COLONEL FULLER COMES CARRYING LITTLE JAMIE, PAUL ADMINISTERS THE PRECIOUS SERUM WITHOUT QUESTION OR FAVOR!

AND NOW, HIS EYES OPENED TO THE TRUTH, COLONEL FULLER COMES TO PAUL IN REMORSE, AND AS THE TWO MEN TALK, THEY CLASP HANDS IN PROMISE OF A NEW DAY, FREE FROM UNREASONING PREJUDICE WHERE ALL MEN ARE JUDGED AS MEN AND NOT BY RACE, CREED OR COLOR!

CONT'D NEXT WEEK! 2-8-54

Fuller, of course, refuses to listen to the black doctor. Hammond must then work tirelessly to develop a serum to cure the pollution-poisoned townfolk.

Meanwhile, Torchy has made friends with Fuller's lonely little nephew, Jamie, even though Fuller, of course, has forbidden Jamie to speak to black people. Predictably, Jamie gets sick from drinking the polluted water. Doctor Hammond saves the child's life with a serum he has developed, and at the end of this sequence Fuller has a change of heart. The Southville episodes embody Ormes's view of the modern South in the 1950s. Plantations have been replaced by factories, but conditions remain the same: a poor black underclass is exploited by a racist overseer. Only a dedicated and fearless African-American physician and loving woman save the workers and begin to transform this racist and "poisoned" atmosphere.

Due to her light skin tone, Jackie Ormes could have passed as white and the issue of passing, which she addressed humorously once in the first Torchy strip, possibly could have insured a job in the mainstream press early in her career. Late in her career when the *Chicago Tribune* did offer her a position, she refused, citing the complex collaborative process involving more than the single artist. For creative as well as political reasons, Ormes could never freely treat the issues she valued working for a white press and moreover for a white readership. The inclusion of a black girl character in 1965 in "Brenda Starr" led to its temporary removal from circulation in the Southern states. And when the African-American Lieutenant Flip joined "Beetle Baily" in 1970, the strip was dropped by a number of Southern newspapers. In the 1970s the *Chicago Tribune* did get a strip featuring an African-American woman, actually another creative woman who was a photographer and who got herself into some of the same scrapes as Torchy Brown. But "Friday Foster" was drawn by two men, Jim Lawrence and Jorge Longaron. Other male cartoonists had featured black women previously, but never centrally as Ormes. That she had imitators is demonstrated in these strips, but her legacy is deeper. Performers such as Allen Ally have cited Torchy as inspiring not only because of the timelessness of the cartoons and their subjects but because of the depiction of the body in movement in the art itself. Ormes's inspiration as an artist—the way in which female agency was visualized—is as important as the themes she treated. Her last great challenge physically was her own accelerating rheumatoid arthritis which ended her career as an artist.

As for the question of color, after only one instance in "Torchy from Dixie to Harlem," Ormes uniformly treated pigmentation—all of her black characters highlighted the same. She was not interested in issues of color and class, as emphasized in Milai's cartoons, for instance; she championed equity and natural grace. Creating a "black" perspective is not simply "uplift." As hooks has said,

“black looks” has to do not only with the subject itself but with how a black audience (and artist) looks at that subject. The work of contemporary African artist, Renee Cox, offers some insight into the effect of Ormes. She constructs self-portraits about embodiment which problematize the perceived subject and subjectivity. “Cox derives a public figure borne out of her own experiences as an embodied black woman,” says Bob Myers, which could be said of Jackie Ormes. “She [Cox] reclaims the public space where women are denied” (32). One way Cox accomplishes this reclamation is in her celebration through nudity, of essential womanhood. Cox says “nudity is about coming out as a woman” and in her self-portraits displays an attitude of self-possession, creating what Myers calls a “transient subject”—one that transforms objectifying looks. Similarly Ormes, specifically for a black audience, consistently created characters who celebrate black womanhood through the attitudes of Torchy, Candy, and even Ginger, who revel in their semi-nude poses.

For belle hooks, interrogating “black looks” means not only transgressing so-called dominant perspectives and image-making, but investigating and reconstituting how African Americans see representations of themselves. Despite her emphasis on fashion and middle-class life, Ormes depicts a range of black life, social positions, and “class” situations. Patty-Jo and sister Ginger appear well-situated in the black middle class, but Patty-Jo is not blind to the situations of other African Americans nor is her daily life separate from them. The cartoon which Ormes selected to represent her work in an encyclopedia of cartooning has Patty-Jo visiting a poverty stricken inner city family, commenting ironically: “Now you folks can REALLY stop worryin’ . . . Uncle Sam’s blowing our national wad on an H-bomb for your PROTECTION. . . . course that don’t spell HOUSING, but you gotta admit, it ain’t HAY either.” Patty-Jo regularly addressed world, national, and local issues against a realistic backdrop of Chicago neighborhoods and locales, featuring a host of characters faithfully depicted. An example is her playmate Benji, son of a “right-winger” and Bumps, an overweight girl. For the black press with its reach to a variety of readers, such visual and verbal range always encouraged what “misrecognition” scholars, Martineau, Meers, and Thompson call “imaginative recognition of the other,” suggesting a resistance to essentializing the black experience (Montineau 6). Black looks need not suggest one view but rather an attitude of viewing—including people whose lives are not one’s own.

In this way, the most recent problematizing of misrecognition theories offers that such a view, such a look, if you will, is not rational. That is, it is not psychologically based-needs based. Rather, it is a moral dimension in the struggle for recognition, “to have one’s moral status as a person appropriately

recognized” (Montineau 6). Part of imagining ourselves richly is to imagine others who are strangers—and to do so is an act of love. Thus what belle hooks calls “loving blackness” is predicated on black looks which emanate from and engage the individual’s imagination in seeing oneself as morally worthy and whole and acknowledging that right for others. One might argue that Ormes’s overarching theme is human rights—a loving blackness which advocates personal responsibility and rights for all. In drawing adventure strips, romance-based narratives, and in having the voice of social justice come from the mouth of a child, Ormes plays upon and extends the imagination, offering such a look but at the same time challenging her audience to engage their own imaginative play of identity. She accomplishes what hooks regales: work that engages and enchants.

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