

Wayward Travels

Racial Uplift, Black Women, and the Pursuit of Love and Travel in Torchy in Heartbeats by Jackie Ormes

ABSTRACT Golden Age cartoonist Jackie Ormes created dramatic narratives in her comic strip *Torchy in Heartbeats* (*Pittsburgh Courier*, 1950–54) that were unique, in that they were created by a Black woman cartoonist for Black women readers. Ormes skillfully manipulated the typical strip’s narrative structure to creatively depict a single Black woman freely traveling the world in the era of Jim Crow. This essay examines two specific *Torchy in Heartbeats* strips from 1951–52 to reveal how Ormes worked within the then-dominant framework of respectability politics—not to challenge it, but to present a Black woman navigating racialized gender discrimination and pursuing her desires despite her “respectable status,” with sometimes terrifying results. In the process, it works to redress the paucity of scholarship on Black women’s contributions to comic books and strips. **KEYWORDS** Black press, Black women, mobility, newspaper comic strips, respectability politics

In the early 1950s, single Black women’s mobility was restricted by various institutional and communal oppressive regulations in the United States. Single Black women who did travel, whether for job opportunity, romance, or adventure, faced racialized sexual discrimination due to Jim Crow laws and their encouraged enforcement by white citizens.¹ Self-policing behavioral tactics were adopted by Black individuals as way to curb racist attacks, as the belief that being respectable would set a model of Black behavior that would uplift the race out from oppression. Under such conditions, Golden Age cartoonist Jackie Ormes’s *Torchy in Heartbeats* emerged as a color comic strip that cleverly used the dominant framework of racial uplift to present an unmarried, middle-class Black woman, lead protagonist Torchy Brown, freely traveling the world. Brown’s peregrinations were idealized to match the genre and tone of adventure and romance strips like Tarpé Mills’s *Miss Fury* (1941–52), yet at the same time, Ormes was careful to realistically present the threats an “unprotected” Black woman would encounter while traveling. Torchy Brown, however, was resilient.

Feminist Media Histories, Vol. 4, Number 3, pps. 12–29. electronic ISSN 2373-7492. © 2018 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.3.12>.

This essay will examine two strips from the *Torchy in Heartbeats* series—one from November 10, 1951, and one from February 23, 1952—to reveal how Ormes worked within the dominant framework of respectability politics, not to challenge it, but to present a Black woman navigating racialized gender discrimination despite her “respectable status” and pursuing her desires all the same, frequently with terrifying results.

Torchy in Heartbeats was featured in the eight-page color comics section that accompanied the weekly *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper from 1950 to 1954. An investigation of the paper’s articles, editorials, reports, and advertisements of that time reveals a deep focus on Black women’s appearance and manners; the sheer abundance of space it devoted to their behavior, skin, hair, and dress shows that Black women’s “respectable” appearance played a critical role in discourses at the time surrounding Black racial progress and equitable justice. It can be understood as what scholar Lisa B. Thompson calls “circulating ideologies such as the Cult of True Womanhood and the Cult of Domesticity, which emphasized piety, purity, and submissiveness, [and] held promise for revising notions about Black peoples as immoral.”² There was (and still is) an overwhelming focus on Black women’s bodies as representative of the race and a deep belief that changing the appearance of Black women through the adoption of respectable qualities would uplift the race and counter prevailing notions of immoral behavior. In trying to work against these notions and promote a positive image of Black women, the *Pittsburgh Courier* engaged excessively with imagery that promoted respectability and placed the burden of visibility and behavioral change on Black women. Yet Ormes’s comic strip offered a counter-narrative, hidden in plain view, couched in terms of Black women’s mobility.

THE BLACK PRESS

The Torchy Brown that readers encountered in *Torchy in Heartbeats* in 1950 was a revamp of a character Ormes created for her first comic strip series, *Torchy Brown in “Dixie to Harlem,”* which ran from 1937 to 1938, also in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Ormes was living at the time with her husband, Earl Ormes, in Pittsburgh. Sometime during her one-year contract, they moved to Salem, Ohio. Comic historian Nancy Goldstein’s extensive research on Ormes has revealed Salem—a “seemingly” progressive Quaker town—as a place filled with micro-aggressions toward Black Americans, which took their toll on the Ormeses, who moved permanently to Chicago in 1942.³ Ormes then worked briefly as a columnist at the *Chicago Defender*, one of the leading Black newspapers in the

country (along with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*). Her column paid specific attention to civil rights issues and Black women's sociality.⁴ Although Goldstein's research demonstrates that Ormes was a persuasive columnist, she was also quoted as saying: "Well that's fun, but I want to draw."⁵ The *Defender* gave her a gig to draw a single-panel series, *Candy*, for four months in 1945, but they were unable to pay her, and she returned to the *Pittsburgh Courier*.⁶ In the fall of 1945, Ormes started what would be her longest-running comic, *Patty Jo 'n' Ginger*, a single-panel series that continued for eleven years. By 1950 the *Pittsburgh Courier* expanded its comics section to include an eight-page color magazine insert, in which *Torchy Brown: Heartbeats* (later changed to *Torchy in Heartbeats*) would debut.

Most of Ormes's career as a cartoonist was enabled and financed by the *Courier*. One of four major Black newspapers in the United States, it was the most widely distributed after the *Chicago Defender*.⁷ As Ormes's life in comics demonstrates, the Black press was integral to establishing and sustaining not only her career, but those of many other Black artists, including Elton C. Fax (*Susabelle*, 1942–45), Liver Harrington (*Jive Gray*, 1941–51), Wilbert Holloway (*Sunny Boy Sam*, 1928–69), and Jay Jackson (*Bungleton Green*, 1920–63), to name a few.⁸ Black newspapers have always been rooted in Black cultural production—the practice of making culture that collectively speaks to spaces, subjects, and experiences racialized as Black. Black newspapers were reporting news for a Black audience, creating content rooted in Black geographies, bodies, and content, and the inclusion of comic strips was part of this larger undertaking. Widely considered as having started in 1920 in the aforementioned major Black newspapers, Black comic strips were an outlet to reflect and comment on Black popular culture and politics, as Sheena Howard writes in "Brief History of the Black Comic Strip: Past and Present" (2003).⁹ Politics was not an uncommon topic—many cartoonists used the form to speak about racial injustice. For example, Howard writes that *Sunny Boy Sam* introduced sociopolitical commentary in 1928, and by the time it appeared in the color comics section of the *Courier* in 1950, that commentary was still present but reflected the politics of racial uplift.¹⁰ Howard asserts that Black cartoonists were often from the middle class, like Ormes and Holloway, and were asked to create content that reflected the editors' vision.¹¹ As Charles A. Simmons writes in *The African American Press* (1998), the editors of Black newspapers in the United States were the backbone of the papers, and the style and tone of each paper followed its editor's ideological perspective.¹²

The majority of Black newspapers framed their content around racial equality through the lens of racial uplift—an idea, project, and rhetorical strategy in “which individual self-help was the key to collective progress of American Americans.”¹³ Featuring discourse that prompted social, economic, and racial equality, as well as “positive” accounts of Black upper-class mobility, was integral to the newspapers’ mandate of being informative and “progressive.” Assuming a respectable, “pragmatic” tone was also perceived as safer, as more “liberal” discourse would usually result in buyers, sellers, and distributors of Black newspapers, specifically in the South, being subjected to racially motivated public attacks.¹⁴ Black newspapers generally lacked adequate advertising support and often compensated for it by limiting their distribution to a weekly basis and charging more per copy. The higher price point was necessary to sustain the Black press, and it had implications for who could purchase a paper. Buying a newspaper was a luxury, especially considering that Black individuals often worked longer hours for considerably less than any other racial group.¹⁵ Sharing a newspaper among a household or apartment (as many as four different families might live in a single unit) became a common way in which Black individuals consumed the news—meaning that the actual number of readers was much higher than the published circulation rates but impossible to accurately quantify.¹⁶

Black cultural studies writer LaShawn Harris emphasizes the severity of these cramped conditions in her study on racial uplift and informal work practiced by Black women in New York during the early half of the twentieth century, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy* (2016). Harris comments on the cramped inner-city apartment units and adds that the city block became a place to wander and escape those conditions: “Using the streets to escape their cramped apartments, ordinary Black men and women fraternized on city sidewalks and on their apartments’ building stoops, in doorways, and on fire escapes—which many perceived as extensions of their overpriced apartments.”¹⁷ While Harris’s study focuses on Black women and their “informal work” (whether sex work, numbers running [gambling], or fortune telling), she frames the conversation of respectability politics as something that was used to determine who was who and who did what type of work among Black women, and that in many cases, informal work was used to buy into racial uplift codes that concerned health and beauty.¹⁸

Knowing the socioeconomic and housing constraints of Black Americans in the first half of the twentieth century informs us how a large proportion of the

readers were not seeing their lives reflected in the Black press. The content produced in Black newspapers was meant to be aspirational and uplifting. A large proportion of the readers were not seeing their lives reflected in the papers, but rather consuming content that was meant to be aspirational and uplifting. In the “women’s section” of the *Courier*, for instance, reports often centered on newlyweds’ travels or a woman’s relocation to live in her spouse’s hometown.¹⁹ In her “Toki Writes” and “Men’s Only” columns in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Toki Schalk Johnson frequently editorialized about women’s need for respectable “manners” in the press. In the February 3, 1951 edition of “Toki Types,” entitled “Watch Your Manners,” Johnson wrote in support of a pamphlet by the “Women’s Better Pattern for Living” courtesy campaign: “Nothing could be finer for a group to do . . . because all of us need a bit of tightening up on our manners.” She added an astute connection to her promotion of good manners with the advertisements that plague the press: “Advertising is THE industry of this modern age. . . . Without advertising we wouldn’t be as pretty (!), as well dressed, as charming as we are. . . . Then, why not advertise as this Toledo group does . . . and remind us that ‘minding our manners’ is very, very important.”²⁰ Johnson’s “Men’s Only” column of June 16, 1951, which was accompanied by a cartoon of a man in a chair reading the paper and a woman on her knees taking his shoes off, strongly advocated for men to encourage their spouses to engage in consumerist culture, for their “desires” as women were there “to serve them.” Johnson’s focus on advertising’s influence on Black women’s behavior and appearance is revealing. LaShawn Harris likewise notes the role that Black women’s bodies played in constructing an image of respectability for racial uplifters to promote: “Regardless of their financial status, African American women, for the collective betterment and representation of the race, were expected to adhere to elite definitions of public behavior despite individual viewpoints and quests for self-exploration and discovery.”²¹

Three key features shaping Black women’s “respectable” image concerned their hair, their skin, and their manners. Having “finer” hair and lighter skin were heavily promoted, as these details were believed (and in many instances, did) lead to an improvement in lifestyle and treatment from both white and Black individuals.²² Skin lightening and whitening creams, along with wigs, perms, and flat or hot combs were frequently advertised in the pages of the *Courier* (fig. 1). The ads ostensibly aspired to “improve” Black women’s role in society and suggest that if one’s appearance can change, then one’s manners can and should reflect that change as well—hence Johnson’s support for and promotion of ads in her “Watch Your Manners” editorial. What the pages of the

Through the Rice—Traps of the Tobacco-Regional, Cavalier. It is a stich their heads steadily where the growing crop is a risk paddy as they seek and following North Carolina in the South.

Report From The Capitals

(This is the first of a series of articles presenting the views of various states, including the South, on the subject of federal aid to the states. This series will be published in the coming weeks.)

REPORT FROM THE CAPITALS

Northwest provisions for the distribution of federal aid to the states. This aid is to be distributed in the form of grants to the states.

Medical Test Prevents The Spread of Rabies

FEMALE PAIRS

HAIR?

7-DAY TEST

HIDE AWAY GRAY HAIR

SLICK-BLACK

A DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTION FOR THE SCALP

LARGE BOX 50c

AT ALL DRUG STORES

Worked Directly On The Color In Your Skin—Working To Bring You—Smaller LIGHTER SKIN

BLACK AND WHITE BLEACHING CREAM

IN JUST 7 DAYS

LONGER HAIR

IN 20 DAYS

Washington—The Senate passed the bill for the second time on July 23 by the vote of 69 to 27. The bill is the same as the one passed on July 15.

N. C. Mutual Maps Lott Carey Meet Training Schools

\$19,000 From Convict Fund To Teachers

WASHINGTON—The Senate passed the bill for the second time on July 23 by the vote of 69 to 27.

WASHINGTON—The Senate passed the bill for the second time on July 23 by the vote of 69 to 27.

FIGURE 1. Ads in the August 26, 1950, edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* focus on “improving” Black women’s hair with the aid of scalp oil, wigs, hair dye, and the infamous “Black and White Bleaching Cream.” Microfilm sourced from the Schomburg Center, New York.

Courier in the 1950s tell us that the “burden” of racial equality in the States hinged upon Black women never being a burden, whether in appearance or behavior.²³

Torchy in Heartbeats

Ormes’s use of rhythm and improvisation in *Torchy Brown* in “Dixie to Harlem” was innovative in terms of both narrative and composition and layout. Popular comic strips of the time tended not to invest in longer story arcs and were instead weekly one-offs where whatever sequentiality was present was used to set up and deliver a joke. *Torchy in Heartbeats* was more sophisticated in these terms, and supported Ormes’s larger goal of creating a sustained narrative

of a glamorous Black woman. I am interested in demonstrating how *Torchy in Heartbeats*, as part of a Black newspaper, was a product of Black cultural production, and a semiotic reading of this work would not be sufficient for my argument. Reading comics semiotically—that is, looking at what the visual language signifies and interpreting meaning based on the signals from the pictorial information, as Thierry Groensteen describes—is but one way to interpret such texts.²⁴ I instead will use narrative analysis and scholarship that addresses temporal readings of comic strips to elucidate my argument regarding Black women’s mobility. To do so, I first turn to Robert C. Harvey’s analysis of the comic strip in *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* (1994), as it establishes a framework for reading space and movement in a comic strip.²⁵ I will deploy these tools to analyze how Ormes used the aesthetic and narrative properties of the strip to comment on the threats facing Black women traveling “unprotected” in the world.

Ormes worked with the comic strip’s inherent qualities and possibilities (in terms of narrative, layout, style) to play with the perception of the reader. Having a weekly rhythm, she established continuity with respect to Torchy’s frequent travels. The narrative content could be extreme, featuring stories about rape, sexual harassment, mobility, and discrimination. Additionally, the drawing style is meticulously detailed and uses glamour to heighten the details of the character; Goldstein writes that Ormes styled Torchy off her own likeness and habits.²⁶ Ormes’s attention to detail and deployment of glamour enabled her to add depth to Brown’s character and present her wardrobe, style, and appearance as fully rounded and aspirational to the reader. Ormes wanted to see “positive” representations of Black women in the funnies.²⁷ This would have mattered to her readers as well, as the comics featured in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, for instance the black-and-white *Jive Gray* and the single-panel *Dark Laughter* by Ollie Harrington, featured Black women in passive roles (fig. 2). Ormes’s narratives suggesting that Torchy had integrity, freedom, and, most importantly, aspirations outside of love were unique and critical for Black women to encounter in the 1950s.

When Ormes returned to Torchy in 1950 in the new strip, she refashioned the character as in the throes of romantic pursuits in the style of the romance comics genre. In the late 1940s romance comics were one of the most popular types, but by 1950 they had suffered a sharp decline, as Michelle Nolan writes in *Love on the Racks* (2008).²⁸ Perhaps Ormes was inspired by the genre’s earlier popularity, or perhaps the *Pittsburgh Courier* wanted to have a comic strip ostensibly for “women only.” Whatever the reason, the romance genre afforded



FIGURE 2. *Dark Laughter* uses satirical images of Black women; *Jive Gray*'s female protagonist follows the titular character's sociopolitical beliefs and actions, as evident in the preceding week's strip, where Jive had to "guide" her in understanding oppression. *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 2, 1950, 12, microfilm sourced from the Schomburg Center, New York.

Ormes the opportunity to work with real-life issues pertinent to Black women—indeed, she leveraged its tropes to relate Torchy's new adventures with love, although she was certainly not trying to follow the genre's conventions to the last degree, as is evident given Torchy's consistent state of travel. Torchy often traveled by herself, was rarely confined to a single place (or home), and was never to blame for her failures in love—that last a common trope in romance comics.²⁹

Torchy's central conflicts usually pertain to matters of the heart, either physically or metaphysically. Goldstein writes, "The word *heartbeats* in the title

prepares readers for tales about a tender heroine whose caring nature leads her to intimate relations that sometimes end up hurting her. . . . Sometimes readers are not quite sure exactly what kind of work Torchy is meant to be doing in her difficult careers but we are never in doubt that she is capable, independent, adventurous, noble, and sweetly vulnerable to the vagaries of the heart.”³⁰ *Torchy in Heartbeats* (at that early moment titled *Torchy Brown: Heartbeats*) commences with Torchy leaving a bad relationship with a man who has become involved in organized crime. This first narrative arc (out of four) ran from August through December of 1950 and featured Torchy’s beloved, a racketeer, murdered by the mob, and Torchy running away to start a new life.³¹ She boards a bus (going anywhere) which then breaks down. This incident enables her make a dramatic rescue (in the rain!) of the musical genius Earl, whom she nurses back to health and enters into a romance with. When it becomes apparent that Earl loves his music more than Torchy, she makes the difficult decision to leave him to find a more fulfilling life. Torchy leaving Earl is the dramatic risk that begins her third arc, where she finds work on a banana plantation in South America. This story features more elements of an adventure comic setup, with thrills and terror at every turn.³² The incorporation of adventure may have been a natural progression for Ormes’s narrative in *Torchy in Heartbeats* as it was entering its second year of publication. Ormes’s turn to adventure, however, allowed for a realized heroine to emerge in Torchy Brown, which must have been an exciting comic strip for Black readers, specifically women, to encounter in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Following her escape from the plantation, Torchy and her new paramour, Dr. Paul Hammond, return to the United States, where they settle (separately, as they are not married) in a working-class neighborhood. This arc would be the final and most critically acclaimed of the series, as Torchy combated (and raised awareness of) environmental pollution and racism. The move to suburbia also saw the strip return to a romance comic and, predictably, concluded with Dr. Hammond proposing marriage.

The earlier narrative arcs of *Torchy in Heartbeats* are generally dismissed as superfluous romance threads, but I perceive many deep and fascinating threads there, including the opening, portraying Torchy leaving a failing relationship—a Black woman trying to pick up the pieces and begin anew. In her chapter on the Black cultural front and Jackie Ormes in *Black Women in Sequence* (2015), Deborah Elizabeth Whaley devotes extensive cultural analysis to *Torchy Brown* in “Dixie to Harlem,” *Candy*, and *Patty Jo ‘n’ Ginger*, but gives only three paragraphs to *Torchy in Heartbeats*.³³ It appears that at least this scholar was seemingly disinterested with the romance-driven narrative, regarding

it as not providing enough “overt” political discontent to be worthy of cultural critique. Nancy Goldstein references previous scholars’ dismissal of the earlier arcs in *Torchy in Heartbeat* in her essay “The Trouble with Romance in Jackie Ormes’ Comics” (2013), but what is missing from Goldstein’s argument is the explicit link to Black culture as well the subtle political subversions that Ormes executed in *Torchy in Heartbeats* through her emphasis on Black women’s pursuit of love and travel in a time where respectability was prominent.³⁴ The following analysis makes note of the formal and narrative elements in two of Torchy’s arcs that, I argue, are often sidelined in favor of Ormes’s political commentary featured in her other comic series and the last *Torchy in Heartbeats* arc.

The end of the second arc concludes with Torchy again packing her bags, this time to take not a bus but a tramp freighter headed anywhere. One six-panel comic from this arc (November 10, 1951, fig. 3) features crisply drawn lines but also panels with no clear borders. In the first panel, Torchy looks at a sign in a window advertising help wanted in South America, suggesting that she is thinking of leaving her boyfriend and her life in the city. The next panel features Torchy with her back to the same window, deciding to wait all night to be first in line when the agency opens. Following this image, a caption appears in the gutter between the previous panel and a muted-color panel of Torchy passing time: “A small park nestled nearby and Torchy seated herself on the one of the benches. The minutes ticked slowly on and the mantle of restless slumber fell over the girl’s slim shoulders while ever-so-slowly, dawn touched the sky.” The succeeding panels overlap and show Torchy flexing her legs and staring above the city-space, and ending with a conversation with the employment agent. Ormes cleverly uses the layout and composition of the strip to comment on the passage of time, as opposed to using a more conventional layout that only depicts in the present occurring in the scene and space.

Using the gutter, for example, to show an entire evening pass is a clever strategy to express Torchy’s desperation and need to get away from Earl. This strip illustrates what Robert C. Harvey describes as the visual-verbal relationship that emerges in a comic strip’s “narrative breakdown”—a reference to the objective of a strip to be “pictorially lively, varied, and intense as possible in order to balance with visual effects the verbal weight inherent in exposition.”³⁵ For Harvey, narrative breakdown controls the focus of duration and motion in a strip through composition, layout, and narrative. Ormes’s careful consideration in composing the panels to convey time passing in the gutter instead of through sequential drawn panels heightens the reader’s awareness of movement—in this



FIGURE 3. Torchy prepares for a new adventure after leaving her paramour. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 10, 1951, reprinted in Nancy Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 144.

case, the movement of time. Ormes then uses the narrative (the visual-verbal relationship) to progress the movement of Torchy's story and day. Readers must make sense of the narrative breakdown through what is missing in the gaps between panels. This strip could have easily ended with Torchy waiting on a bench, with the following week's strip opening on the next morning. Instead, we have a multitude of durations depicted, in many ways replicating the human experience of lived time, which is often disconnected, or perceived in fits and starts. The muted-color panel of Torchy on the park bench represents a pause in the narrative, in which an entire night passes and the character's circumstances and stakes have completely changed. Torchy is suspended between dusk and dawn. Yet although the narrative is focused on a night of stasis, Ormes uses the aesthetics of the comic strip to draw out the intensity of Brown's desire to be on the move.

In just six panels, Ormes demonstrates the necessity of Torchy carving out her own life, one that is not dependent on a man who is not considerate of her needs: a taboo subject not only for an uplift narrative, but for any Black culturally produced creation, as Black women were (and still are) often expected to put their needs last and take care of others.³⁶ Moreover, the strip opens with the following caption: "meandering." In between relationships, Torchy allows herself to meander, to stray away from the "straight and narrow" path. This, perhaps, might be the most politically charged concept in Ormes's work. Torchy freely moves around not just the country, but the world, allowing herself to get lost and to contemplate. At the same time that Torchy was freely traveling, Jim Crow laws were regulating Black women's bodies in the South. Black women could not freely move about or pursue love, as *Torchy in Heartbeats* would suggest. Even given the intense focus on upper-middle-class mobility in the Black newspapers at the time, the "traveling woman" was not a common plot device for romance comics, as women were generally understood as confined to the space of the home. Yet it had long been a topic in Ormes's work. In a telling comic strip from *Torchy Brown in "Dixie to Harlem"* dated September 4, 1937, Torchy playfully confronts and dismisses the segregated section while she is riding a train. The unrestricted travels in *Torchy in Heartbeats* demonstrated, through such refusals, a world where Black women could freely travel. But Ormes also showed that, for Black women, pursuing your heart's desires and moving freely could come at a cost.

A ways into Torchy's new narrative arc away from Earl, she experiences a physical attack (February 23, 1952, fig. 4). While traveling via boat, she is sexually assaulted by a man named Fred Fromer, who was introduced about a



FIGURE 4. On a ship's deck during a storm, Torchy fends off Fromer's physical assault. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1952, reprinted in Nancy Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 146.

month and half earlier (January 5, 1952) and has been stalking her in the intervening strips. This strip begins with the title card “Torchy in Heartbeats” displayed over a depiction of Fromer grabbing Torchy, who declares: “No—Please! You—(ow)—You’re hurting me!” Fromer replies, “Save it sister, this is where I finish what I started.” They are standing on the deck of the ship during a storm. Ormes disorients her readers through the lack of “establishing shots” in her layout. It is telling that she does not show the boat rocking, but conveys the existence of the storm solely through Torchy’s harrowing encounter, suggesting that the storm is an outward expression of her inner turmoil. Indeed, the maelstrom is so severe that it nearly knocks Torchy off the boat. Grasping at a rope, she hangs on for dear life while the waves engulf Fromer. As soon as he is taken by the sea, the storm begins to cease and Torchy is able to gather herself amid some strewn furniture on deck. While things begin to right themselves from the frightening ordeal, Ormes promises readers in the closing caption that next week will feature “Torment!”

The innovative layout of the panels conveys the turmoil of the attempted rape and the turbulent weather. The two panels immediately after Fromer has been thrown overboard flow together, with splashing waves and rain to convey the chaotic and slippery scene. Although known for using plenty of dialogue, here, Ormes gives Torchy few words other than her insistent denials and relies heavily on captions to describe the scenario. Torchy’s senses are the center of not only the narrative but the storm as well, suggesting that her embodied reaction to the assault is driving our engagement with and perspective of the narrative. Ormes successfully demonstrates this embodied perspective through the omission of information from the narrative in succeeding panels. We do not actually see Fromer hit by a wave—we only read his screeching cry. This doubling effect, rereading and making sense of what’s missing, reinforces Torchy’s panicked state.

By focusing on Torchy’s spatio-temporal experience on the deck, Ormes conveys some of the gravitas and pain that she is undergoing. As in the example discussed earlier, each panel, and the literal and narrative gaps between the panels, allude to varied temporal registers. Readers must ask themselves: How long have the two characters been on deck? How long has the storm been going on, and how long is it going to last? None of these questions, of course, matter, as the condensed moments of near rape are the real focus. These are the moments that will stay with Torchy and that in turn exhaust her and are mirrored by the storm. Even after the storm has ceased, the patio furniture strewn about the

deck symbolically suggests that Torchy will have to pick up the pieces, emotionally speaking, for some time.

Depicting an attempted rape from a woman's perspective would have been exceedingly daring for a comic strip at this time. It would have served as a frank reminder that although Torchy was free to travel, her body would still encounter and have to fend off racialized sexist attacks.³⁷ Torchy's encounters with sexual assault reminded readers that traveling the world as a Black woman was risky business. Depicting this was something Ormes obviously deemed worth the risk in her work, but nevertheless, Torchy's sexual assault made for a sobering installment in her story, demonstrating the realities of patriarchal culture for Black women's bodies. To read in the *Pittsburgh Courier* about the death or rape of a Black woman was not uncommon; what *was* uncommon would have been to read about the capture and arrest of an attacker. A fictional would-be rapist being thrown overboard may have served as a small moment of justice in readers' eyes, countering the effects of rape and death that real Black women experienced, which lacked the detailed study and context that was afforded to the *Courier's* reports of racial discrimination against Black men.³⁸ In this environment, Black women were expected to uplift the race by self-policing their manners and appearance, or otherwise expect violent "punishment" by the state or their spouses. Torchy's pursuit of love, desire, and mobility was a counter-narrative to the overwhelming emphasis on constraining Black women's appearance, mobility, and behavior in society.

CONCLUSION

Given its clearer political content by today's standards, and its use of the comic medium to speak about environmental pollution and underrepresented communities, the concluding narrative arc is the one for which *Torchy in Heartbeats* is most frequently praised by critics and scholars. This arc finds Torchy successfully escaping the evil grips of Le Gran with the handsome Dr. Paul Hammond. (As Goldstein points out, the name Le Gran was a reference to the cruel slave master Simon Legree in the 1852 book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.)³⁹ They return to the United States, where Hammond opens a small clinic at which Torchy works. While trying to uncover the truth behind pollution at a nearby lake, Torchy navigates standard romance comic tropes such as jealousy, doubt, rejection, et cetera over her relationship with Hammond, until he proposes to her in the final strip. My focus in this essay on the previous story arcs has been to illustrate how Ormes subverted the form and genre of

romance comics and narratives of racial uplift to illustrate different temporal states of Black women's lived experience—states driven by suspense and escape. In fact, although Ormes herself contributed to and fundraised for civil rights and even attended Communist Party meetings during the 1940s and 1950s, her work in comics has generally been overlooked, or when it has been discussed, is often considered frivolous. Revealingly, Ormes had a whopping 287-page FBI file, but it barely references her comic strips—they are glossed over, not considered incriminating evidence of anything.⁴⁰

Reading Black art through a perspective of Black cultural production brings its own demands, histories, and theories. As we continue to recuperate the work of Ormes and other Black artists, it is imperative to note the subtler points—a Black woman freely traveling, the name Le Gran, leaving a relationship where one's needs are not put first—and consider them in their proper context. While they might seem pedestrian to contemporary readers, especially those outside of Black communities, to Ormes's Black female audience in the early 1950s these "subtleties" were not only very apparent, but groundbreaking. I find it extraordinarily amusing to imagine teams of white male FBI agents surveying *Torchy in Heartbeats* and dismissing it as apolitical. There is power in this dismissal, because it means that Ormes successfully worked within the system (while being surveilled) to produce a wealth of politically challenging material that spoke to Black women's lived experience and desire of unchallenged mobility in the world. ■

AYANNA DOZIER is a PhD candidate in art history and communication studies with a graduate option in women and gender studies at McGill University, a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and a 2018–19 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Study Program. She is a contemporary art curator, filmmaker, performance artist, and cultural theorist who writes extensively about Black feminist philosophy, experimental cinema, performance art, and comic books, among other topics. Her writings have appeared in the journals *Cléo*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *Liquid Blackness*.

NOTES

1. LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 50.

2. Lisa B. Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 3.

3. Nancy Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 20. Goldstein quotes Ormes as saying, "I needed Chicago. I talked him (Earl) into it" (20).

4. “According to her sister, Ormes simply walked into the *Defender* office and presented herself, along with a packet of her cartoons and other work on the *Courier*, and was hired on the spot as an occasional writer and reporter. She submitted personality profiles and news articles and, for a period of seven weeks in the spring of 1945, authored a women’s page column titled ‘Social Whirl’ under the byline Zelda J. Ormes” (ibid., 25).

5. David Jackson, “The Amazing Adventures of Jackie Ormes,” *Chicago Reader*, August 16, 1985, 18.

6. Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes*, 33.

7. Ibid., 39. “The mid- to late 1940s turned out to be the Black press’s heyday, and Ormes joined its ranks at a propitious moment. In 1947 the *Courier*’s circulation figure was 286,686 compared to 161,253 for the *Defender*; *The New York Amsterdam News* came in third at 111,427. The next year, the circulation for the *Courier* climbed to its peak of 358,000.” Ibid., 39.

8. Ibid., 61.

9. Sheena C. Howard, “Brief History of the Black Comic Strip: Past and Present,” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 11–22.

10. Ibid., 15.

11. Ibid., 16.

12. Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage during National Crises* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 6.

13. Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), x.

14. Simmons, *The African American Press*, 25–26.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 45.

17. Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners*, 31.

18. “Holding on to childhood lessons of religiosity, chastity, self-help, community building, and other tenets of respectable politics, some Black women reluctantly secured extralegal employment that was incongruent with learned and expected family and community values. In fact, many used illicit labor to support respectable behavior, ambitions, and attitudes.” Ibid., 32.

19. “Alabama Bride to Live in New York City,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 30, 1950, 17.

20. Toki Schalk Johnson, “Watch Your Manners,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 3, 1951, 8.

21. Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners*, 32.

22. Space does not permit me to unpack the impact that respectability politics had on Black women’s hair. In an article on Black women’s hair, self-perception, and history in the West, Cheryl Thompson uses social comparison theory to examine how Eurocentric beauty standards affect Black women’s consciousness and hair aesthetics in society: “For the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one’s lived experience.” Cheryl Thompson, “Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being,” *Women’s Studies* 38, no. 8 (October 2009): 831–56.

23. “Tells Women Not to Become a ‘Burden,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 3, 1951, 12. This article is an example of the news events that the *Courier* would report on by way of “preaching” respectability to Black women. The report details Mrs. Grace Sloan Overton’s speech to Spelman College advocating the importance of Black “girls” learning and modeling “winsome friendliness” in their behavior.

24. Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).

25. Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 8.

26. Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes*, 42–44.

27. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

28. Michelle Nolan, *Love on the Racks: A History of American Romance Comics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 62.

29. *Ibid.*, 80.

30. Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes*, 135.

31. *Ibid.*, 133.

32. *Ibid.*, 135.

33. Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 62–65.

34. Nancy Goldstein, “The Trouble with Romance in Jackie Ormes’ Comics,” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, 23–44.

35. Harvey, *The Art of the Funnies*, 14.

36. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing, 2007), 62.

37. I use the phrase “racialized sexist/sexual” to indicate how, as a Black woman, Torchy’s race is inseparable from her gender. Her identity is a Black woman and thus any attacks are always, whether explicitly stated or not, informed by her racialized body in the world.

38. A clear example of this appears in the November 10, 1951, issue, where a man accused of rape is given the headline, “Postal Worker Denies Raping Babysitter,” with a subtitle that reads, “Admits Disrobing Girl on Lonely Road and Leaving Her in a Ditch; ‘I Just Wanted to Make Her Suffer for Lying on Me,’ Kirven Says.” The report is based on Kirven’s side of the “story,” with little attention paid to the victim of the alleged assault.

39. Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes*, 137.

40. *Ibid.*, 31. “Around this time Ormes probably became aware that FBI was interested in her activities, and by 1952 the bureau began to approach her for interviews. Curiously, the FBI file mentions nothing about her cartoons and, in fact, never refers to her artwork” (31).