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The Color of Paper: Seeing Race in the Comics Medium[*]

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For uncolored works in the comics medium, ink is paradigmatically black and paper is paradigmatically white, creating conceptually complex relationships for images representing race. When characters are rendered as the negative spaces within lines that frame the interiors of bodies, the actual background color of the page represents skin color. If the actual page is literally white, then that whiteness represents the non-literally white skin of both racially white and nonwhite characters. Whatever its actual color, a page may also be understood as conceptually white: a uniformly blank default background denoting no color. Both page and racial whitenesses are composed of many of the same light-tone colors which are often grouped and conceptualized as a single monolithic metaphorical color treated as an unacknowledged background norm.

Keywords: Race, negative space, color, whiteness, paper

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Figure 1 - Glenn Ligon

“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” writes Zora Neale Hurston in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Glenn Ligon literalizes the observation in *Untitled (Four Etchings)*, repeating Hurston’s sentence in black paint on a white canvas. Claudia Rankin includes Ligon’s painting in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, later remarking that the absence of “books on how whiteness works in the art world” allows “whiteness to hold onto universality without questioning how it’s constructed” (Steinhauer, 2016). Hurston’s, Ligon’s, and Rankin’s shared focus draws attention not only to whiteness as a dominating presence in U.S. culture but to visual metaphors of race, especially in black and white images. Sharpening that focus to black and white works in the comics medium, I analyze the significance of paper color by examining examples from a diverse range of graphic novels that illustrate the complex interactions between paper color and racial color.

Though ‘race’ and ‘color’ are often used synonymously, the first is a set of socially-constructed categories, and the second is a synecdoche used to define those categories even though skin tones map onto them inaccurately. Since the actual skin color of white people is a range of colors, none of them white, racial whiteness does not correspond to literal whiteness. While some comics pages are white, Certified Guaranty Company’s page quality scale includes a list of adjectives that also suggests racial whiteness, including cream, light tan, and pink. The visual overlap influences racial thinking. In his study of early African American print culture in the nineteenth-century southern U.S, Jonathan

Senchyne observes that because reading "print relies on making meaning out of the difference between black and white … the black/white dualism underwriting print legibility further naturalized black/white racial dualism" (2012, p. 142), and "the adoption of whiteness as a central metaphor makes paper inextricable from the process by which blackness becomes difference and whiteness the unmarked center" (2012, p. 145).

In the comics medium, ink is paradigmatically black and the background of a page is paradigmatically white. Two conventions are especially pertinent: the representational qualities of paper color to imply skin color, and the normative invisibility of a background color. Attending to these conventions requires reversing a norm of visual analysis: rather than focusing on the marks that comprise an image, attention falls on the negative spaces indirectly constructed by those marks. In comics studies, the negative spaces between black lines that represent frame edges have received a tremendous amount of attention, perhaps most influentially in Scott McCloud's claim that "the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (p. 66). The representational qualities of negative spaces between other black lines have gone largely unnoticed.

Often human characters are rendered as the negative space within lines that frame the interiors of bodies, making the actual background color of the page the default color representing any skin color. If the actual page is literally white, then that whiteness represents the non-literally white skin of both racially white and nonwhite characters. If the page is some other color, then that nonwhite color represents the colors of racial whiteness and nonwhiteness instead. Both page and racial whitenesses then are composed of many of the same light-tone colors which are grouped and conceptualized as a single monolithic metaphorical color able to represent all possible skin colors.

Whatever its actual color, a page may also be understood as conceptually white: a uniformly blank default background denoting no color. Colors instead are mixtures of ink added to the page, with no mixture producing either the literal or figurative whiteness of the unmarked paper. Racial whiteness also can be conceptualized as an absence of racially-defined color when other races are identified in contrast to a white norm. Imitating page whiteness, racial whiteness implicitly claims to be uniquely and inherently pure since all additions reduce it and all mixtures require it as a comparative measurement and baseline background.

Comics scholarship has only begun to address these issues. Frederik Byrn Køhlert observes that "to be raced as white in many comics often means to *not* have your outline filled in—to be at once racially invisible and at one with the page" (2020, p. 203), and as a result, "characters are often almost automatically raced as white, and as the universal human form from which other identities must diverge" (2020, pp. 203-204). Jeesham Gazi analyzes the discursive presence of paper color within skin-denoting negative space as diegetically transformative. Gazi identifies a scene in Paul Pope's 2009 comic *100%* that "demonstrates the freedom offered by the destruction of ethnic markers – the embracing of blankness" (2017, p. 134). The protagonist's "skin is screentoned and her features might" appear Puerto Rican or "racially unspecified," leaving her ethnicity "ambiguous," but when she transforms into her stage persona for a dance performance, "she pins back her long black hair and hides it under a long wig, which, in the black and white art, may be deemed

blank rather than blonde. Most strikingly, as she strips herself of her street clothes the screen tones fall away from her body, leaving her skin blank" (2017, p. 134). Gazi describes the "selftransformation" as a "kind of erasure," one

> already afforded to white persons. They are blank in their designation as the opposite of 'coloured' people, as if their skin has no hue at all. Which is really to say that they are blank in terms of the variation of character afforded to white personages, their inherent potential to be anything, anyone, at all, whether in real-life or in fiction. (2017, pp. 133-134).

Charles Hatfield analyzes Yvan Alagbè's use of page background similarly: "his pages pose indistinct or half-completed figures against blank, undifferentiated backgrounds, exploring the tension between positive and negative spaces. Simply put, Alagbe's characters seem constantly on the verge of dissolving into the page itself" (2005, p. 61), "thematizing the blackness and whiteness of ink and paper as signs of ethnic and cultural difference" (2005, p. 63).

Racial whiteness further employs the metaphor of a default background color through a claim of normativeness that obscures a range of characteristics and renders them figuratively invisible. The racial metaphor is common. For example, Andrea Hawkman and Sarah Shear title their edited essay collection *Marking the Invisible: Articulating Whiteness in Social Studies Education*. Other titles include D. W. Sue's *"The Invisible Whiteness of Being: Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, and Racism" and* Maureen T. Reddy's "Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness." Scott McCloud uses the same metaphor in the subtitle of his seminal *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. A *Marking the Invisible* chapter employs another of McCloud's central terms: "White Supremacy in the Gaps of Practice." Neither the gaps that are central to McCloud's concept of closure nor the gaps that reveal racial biases in classrooms are literal gaps (even though McCloud's gaps often correspond to undrawn areas of the page). Since comics theory and social studies pedagogy share little else in common, the use of additional identical metaphors further highlights how both whitenesses are similarly constructed.

McCloud accidentally provides an example when he claims that his cartoon version of himself, because of its detail-removing simplification, is a "blank slate" that viewers "fill" with themselves. Jonathan Flowers critiques that assumption, noting that McCloud "fails to recognize that it is his own whiteness that is amplified … It is only because whiteness goes unnoticed … that McCloud can present his avatar as a blank slate," and so "when we question the whiteness of McCloud's avatar, its universality, we begin to question the fundamental nature of a world organized by whiteness and treats whiteness as universal" (2020, pp. 210-211).

By subsuming all skin colors into its representational range, page color is effectively universal and so invisible. Though it is a literal color—the color of the actual paper—it is also conceptually no color because page color is not necessarily perceived as an intended element of the artwork printed on it. Paper choice is likely perceived as a quality of what Christy Mag Uidhir differentiates as "collective production" rather than "collective

authorship." Though "different people are responsible for different production elements" of a comic (Mag Uidhir, 2012, p. 1), the people responsible for selecting paper and therefore paper color are likely not understood to be co-authors. As an element of collective production but not collective authorship, the actual paper of a comic is both present and not present. Racial whiteness operates similarly: white people are both of a specific race and also sometimes conceptualized as though paradoxically belonging to no race if the category of race is constructed in contrast to the unexamined norm of whiteness.

To explore the implications of page whiteness representing multiple skin colors in relation to the invisible-like normativeness of racial whiteness, first consider the drawing convention of delineating a figure's skin as the negative space within contour lines that define the shapes of body parts. The artistic approach is so common both in and outside the comics medium, viewers may not register the fact that such lines are an interpretation of visual information. "In the real world," explain neuroscientists Bildge Sayim and Patrick Cavanagh, "there are no lines around objects," but "lines trigger a neural response that … lets lines stand in for solid edges," providing artists with "an economical and powerful method for representing scenes and objects" (2011, p. 1). The technique was a fine art norm before da Vinci's innovating sfumato technique of borderless edges in fifteenth-century Italy. It remains a pervasive norm in the comics medium.

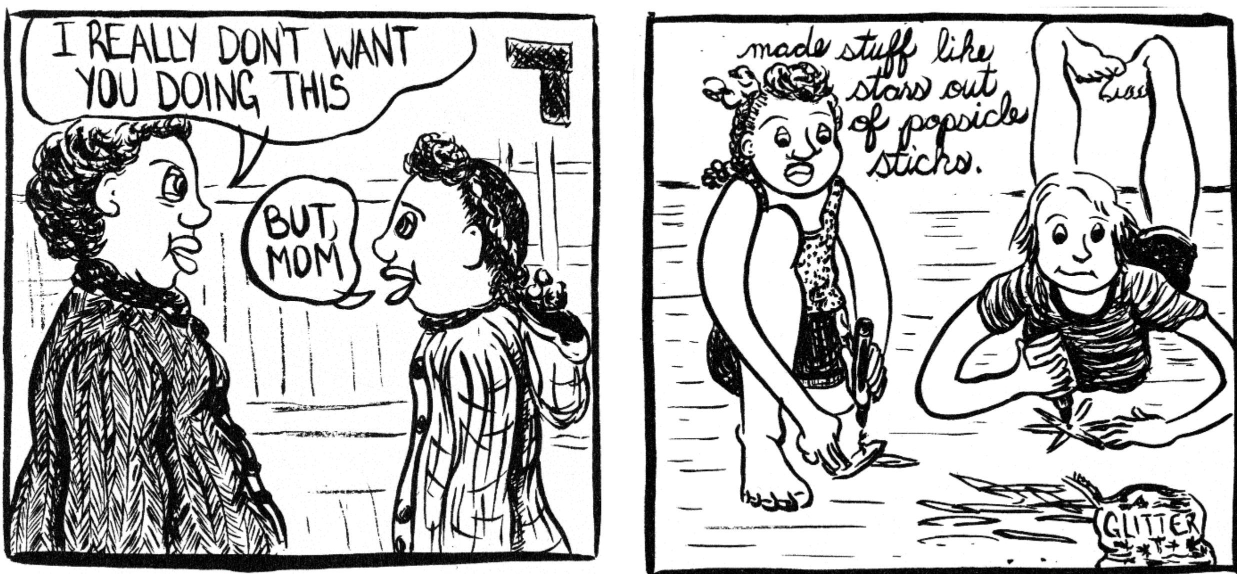

Figure 2 - Ebony Flowers

When Ebony Flowers draws a mother and narrating daughter in the titular comic of her 2020 collection *Hot Comb*, their bodies are shaped by black lines without additional colors or gradations. Because the comic is printed on white paper, that shade of white represents the two characters' skin colors because it is the literal color visible within the body-defining black lines. When the image is reproduced online, those skin colors are the backlit white of each viewer's screen. If the comic were printed on a different shade of paper, that shade would instead represent the same actual skin colors. If "Hot Comb" is understood as a memoir (its status is ambiguous) the representations of Flowers and her mother are likely

perceived as having the same skin color, but whether Flowers and her mother actually have the same skin color is impossible to determine.

Roy T. Cook addressed that ambiguity by proposing the “panel transparency principle,” claiming that: “Characters, events, and locations within a fictional world described by a comic appear, within the fictional world, as they are depicted in typical panels within that comic” (2012, p. 134). Since Flowers’ and her mother’s skin are represented by the same page color, a strict interpretation of the transparency principle might require understanding them both to have paperwhite skin. Alternatively, if paper color is understood to be outside the principle (perhaps because it is selected by the publisher and so beyond Flowers’ artistic control), viewers might still conclude that the absence of other differentiating details indicates that Flowers and her mother have the same skin color, one represented by whatever color paper the line art happens to be printed on. Even this less strict interpretation, however, is difficult to support. Cook later rejected his own transparency claim, arguing instead that “our access to the physical appearance of drawn characters in general is indirect, partial, inferential, and imperfect” (2015, p. 25). If so, viewers may understand skin color, along with a range of other details, to be underspecified, meaning the negative spaces within body contour lines lack representational information. The unmarked white of the page does not correspond to complexion or any other character quality.

While Cook’s second claim replaces his first, it does not reverse it. Where the panel transparency principle concludes that represented subjects are as they appear, the second claim draws no corresponding conclusion. Represented subjects may, may not, or may partially be as they appear, and a subject’s individual qualities may each vary along unknowable spectrums. As a result, the representational nature of a white page varies too. In the cases of Flowers and her mother, viewers likely understand that neither has paperwhite skin and, while their precise skin tones are unknowable, that each is considerably darker than they appear in their representations. However, in the case of Flower’s childhood friend, Ellie-Mae, the representational nature of the white background shifts. Because Flowers’ text identifies her friend as racially white, viewers likely understand her skin color to be nearer to the whiteness of the page than is Flowers’ skin color. While Ellie-Mae’s skin color is still unknowable, the page whiteness is more representationally suggestive for the racially white character. Also, for Flowers and her mother, because both are Black and also related, the white page represents an unknowable but possibly similar skin color. The contrast between Flowers and Ellie-Mae is presumably greater. The same whiteness then implies two racially dissimilar skin colors and also two racially similar skin colors simultaneously.

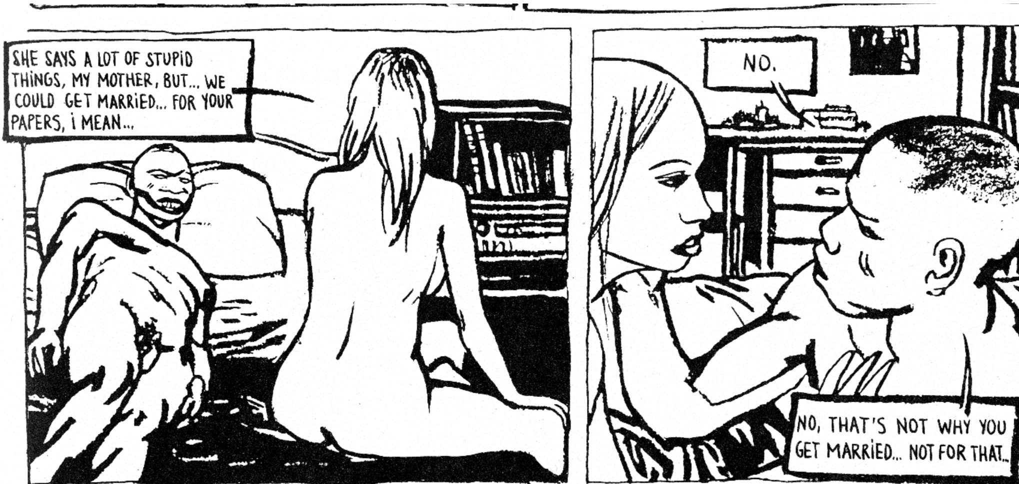

Figure 3 - Yuan Alagbe

Rather than presenting an exception, *Hot Comb* encapsulates a norm. Yuan Alagbe's collection *Yellow Negroes and Other Imaginary Creatures* reveals the same relationship between page color and race. Page whiteness makes the skin colors of an interracial couple indistinguishable, prompting viewers to project colors based on facial and hair features alone (2018, p. 29). Viewed in isolation with hair significantly cropped by the panel frame, the female figure might appear racially ambiguous. Though Alagbe's text previously establishes that the character is white (because her father is shocked to learn that she is in a relationship with a Black man), the text does not account for differences in skin color within and between the racial categories. The connotative quality of the white page, however, may paradoxically increase the perception of contrast between the two figures. Viewers may experience the page whiteness as filling in the body of the racially white character, while also having to perceptually reject that same whiteness from filling in the racially black character. The two figures are conceptually white and nonwhite, even though within the storyworld their skins tones could be similar. Page whiteness then increases perceptions of racial difference.

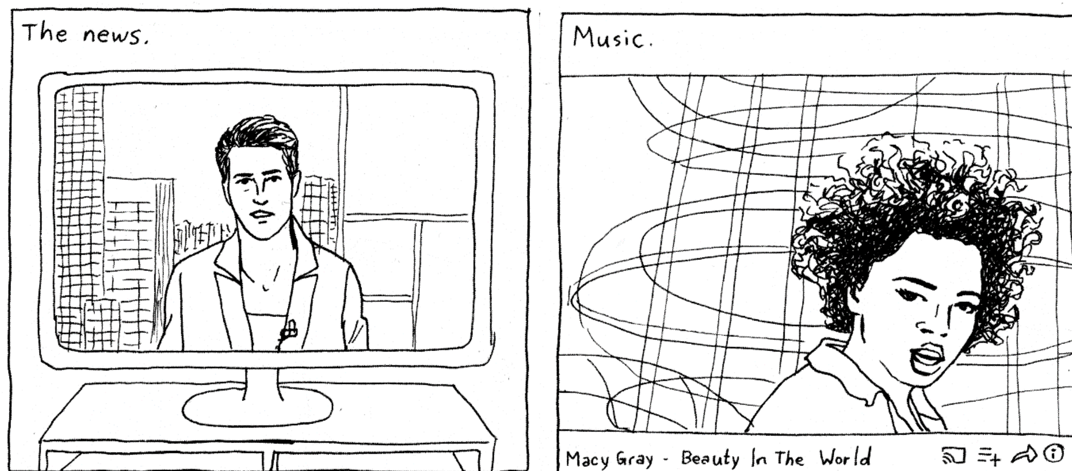

Figure 4 - Keiler Roberts

White artists rely equally on the representational convention. Keiler Roberts' graphic memoir *Rat Time* appears to include only racially white characters, but her portrait of Black singer Macy Gray also consists only of black lines enclosing white space, the same as the unnamed portrait of white political commentator Rachel Maddow on the same page (2019, n.p.). Viewers who do not know the celebrities' appearances must perceive skin color based on assumptions about nose, lip, and hair shapes. Such viewers could mistake either figure's race and therefore experience their skin color accordingly. While photographs of Maddow typically capture a light skin color, and photographs of Gray a darker one, the contrast is not extreme. Viewers familiar with both celebrities may not recall either, but the conceptual influence of page whiteness instead produces a white/nonwhite dichotomy of absolute difference.

Figure 5 - Eleonor Davis

Similarly, Eleanor Davis' graphic novel *The Hard Tomorrow* includes Black secondary characters whose racial identities are suggested through hair and facial features but not by crosshatching or other darkening effects (2019, p. 42). The representational qualities of Davis' ink is further complicated by hair color. She draws the hair of Black characters with black ink to represent what is presumably black hair. Where hair interiors are not opaquely black, Davis' expressive line qualities contribute to an impression of racially Black hair too. The hair of racially white characters, however, may be represented with the white paper enclosed by black contour lines, presumably representing lighter colors such as blonde and light brown. Though Davis draws some white characters' hair with the same black interiors as racially Black dark hair, the White characters' hair might be understood as black, dark brown, or medium brown, meaning the same ink has a greater representational range depending upon the perceived race of the character.

Figure 6 - Jessica Abel

The norm applies similarly to less distinct ethnic differences in skin color. Jessica Abel sets her graphic novel *La Perdita* in Mexico, and while the cast includes Latinx, Asian, and European American characters, all skin colors are equally undifferentiated by page areas enclosed in black lines. Viewed out of context of the graphic novel, the various figures may appear racially and ethnically ambiguous, but if a viewer interprets a facial feature as racially or ethnically defining, perception of the figure's skin could vacillate accordingly – even though the ranges of skin tones of individuals within those socially-constructed categories overlap. Again, page whiteness paradoxically reinforces viewer assumptions of racial differences in color.

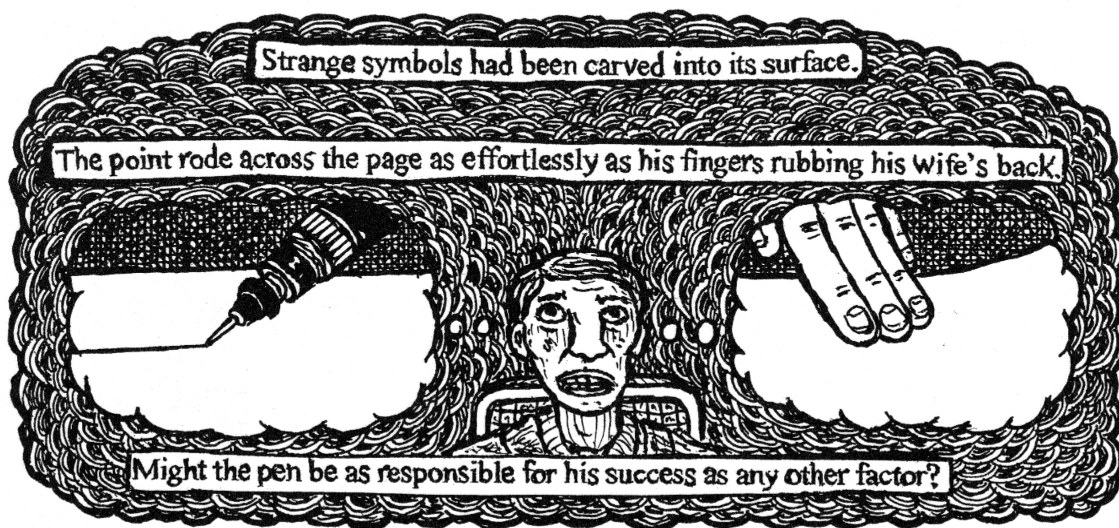

Figure 7 - Theo Ellsworth

Theo Ellsworth makes the conflated relationship between page and skin colors explicit in *Secret Life*, an adaptation of a Jeff VanderMeer story. Ellsworth draws a fountain pen in the white space between two panels, and inside a lower panel, he separately

frames two interior images: the same pen drawing a line across a cropped area of a white piece of paper, and fingers touching a cropped area of a figure's back. Through a Gestalt effect, the black line defining the top edge of the represented paper and the black line defining the top edge of the figure's back seem continuous, as though the two diegetically distant areas are a single area interrupted—which, as ink-framed portions of the same actual piece of paper, they are. Above both images a caption box contains: "The point rode across the page as effortlessly as his fingers rubbing his wife's back" (2021, n.p). The color of "the page" within the represented world and the color of the wife's back are both represented by the actual color of the actual page, which is white.

Though the visually implied assumption that the represented page is a similar color as the actual page may be justified, an assumption that the wife is racially white is not. Ellsworth draws the wife's face four pages later, but his cartooning style is simplified and exaggerated in ways that do not provide sufficient detail for determining ethnicity. Ellsworth follows the image of the two having sex with two caption boxes: "He could not think of the pen without thinking of her soft, hot skin" and "He could not think of the pen without remembering her nakedness, shining in the dark room." The description "soft, hot" suggests nothing about skin color, and "shining" might describe a range, especially when contrasted to the literal darkness of the surrounding room and if the skin is illuminated with sweat as the description of sex might suggest. The white space framed between the two texts is connotative, likely directing viewers to imagine the wife to be very light-skinned—even though nothing in the text suggests that.

Figure 8 - Adrian Tomine

The above analysis applies to comics consisting of line art only. Many works in the comics medium instead add gray tones to line art or are composed initially in that style, eliminating or at least reducing areas where page color is visible. In those cases, skin color may be represented by a color other than the color of the unmarked page. In Adrian Tomine's *Summer Blonde*, a white character's skin color is represented according to the

norms of line art discussed above, but the interior areas of a Black character’s skin are instead shaded opaquely gray (2016, p. 38). The effect is naturalistic because the gray is understood to correspond to the actual darkness of the skin, as though the image were a black and white photograph. The white character’s skin—even though still represented by the white of the page—is also naturalistic, because it is now understood as having the same photographic quality as they gray it contrasts. Yet it is unclear in the next panel how closely the color of the white character’s skin is to the color of the Black character’s shirt also represented by the same page color. While it is possible that the shirt is, for example, beige, neither a beige shirt nor beige skin would appear as purely white in a black and white photograph. The naturalistic effect either collapses or, if unnoticed, employs gray in relationship with page whiteness to produce similar racial impressions.

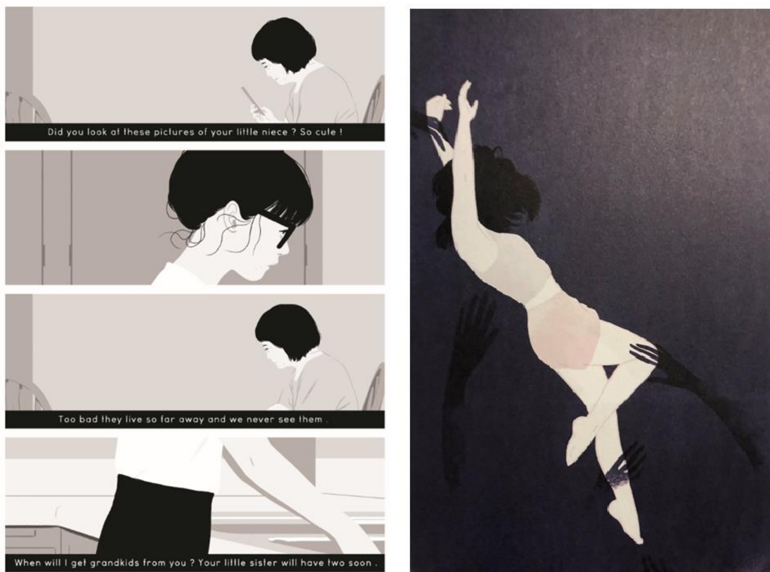

Figure 9 - gg

In *I’m Not Here*, graphic novelist gg represents the light skin of Asian-Canadian characters with opaque gray shapes only slighter darker than the page background visible in the margins and gutters. The effect again is of actual skin colors altered to gradations by black and white photography, and so the near-white shade is perceived as representationally realistic. This parallel norm further highlights the peculiarity of a similarly light page color in line art representing a range of skin colors, some significantly darker. Similar contrasts can appear within works employing color gradations too. In gg’s *Constantly*, she draws black hands and arms to represent a main character’s depression as a living being. As a result, the representational qualities of the two colors are opposite. The very light shade is realistic, while the black is only metaphorical since it represents a psychological experience.

Though less common, some works in the comics medium are or are composed in the style of relief art. The printing method is commonly identified with woodcuts, but it includes any surface with two levels so that non-recessed areas leave ink on the paper and recessed areas leave none. Though, like line art, only one color of ink appears on typically

lighter colored paper, the technique and resulting style usually produces two kinds of shapes, one black and one white. Though both may have representational qualities, traditionally white is reserved for skin color.

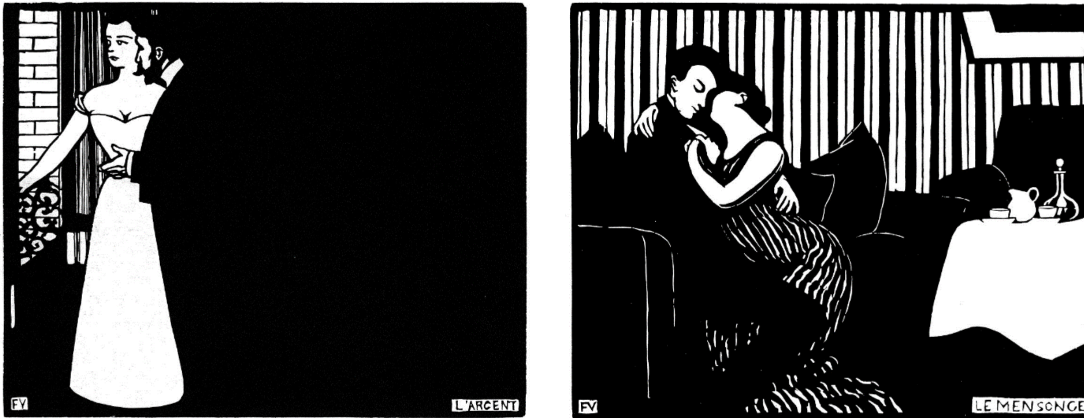

Figure 10 - Felix Vallotton

The norm originates from outside the comics medium. For example, French woodcut artist Felix Vallotton's1898 woodcut series *Intimates* depicts ten couples in private domestic scenes. Though, as with line art, it is impossible to determine the skin qualities of any of the ten individuals depicted, all are represented by the color of the paper, which, instead of leaving skin color ambiguous, implies that all twenty characters are racially white. The inference occurs despite Vallotton's rendering minimal facial features, as well as orientalist influences of the period. Vallotton also never uses non-recessed areas to represent skin, even though actual skin color may no more resembles black ink than it resembles white paper.

Figure 11 - Frank Miller

Black ink signifying racially white skin is uncommon in the comics medium too. An exception occurs in the opening pages of Frank Miller's 1991 *Sin City*. Avoiding all gradations and adopting a binary style similar to relief art, Miller uses both black shapes of opaque ink and areas of an unmarked page to represent not only skin, but the skin of the same two characters, alternating and reversing the representational qualities of the black ink and the white page. When first drawn, the exposed skin of the character Goldie is represented by white page areas surrounded by black ink. Later, the skin of the same character is represented by areas of black ink surrounded by unmarked areas of the white page. The same is true of the narrating character. The technique could imply silhouettes if the embracing and seemingly merging bodies are understood to obscure a light source, but the seemingly white bed sheets, defined by page areas enclosed by black contour lines, contradict that interpretation. Though neither character is racially identified by Miller's text (except perhaps connotatively by the name "Goldie"), their facial features, the tradition of film noir that defines the work's genre, and the lack of racial diversity in Miller's overall oeuvre suggest that both characters are racially white.

Figure 12 - Sue Coe

The rarity of black ink representing racially non-white skin color emphasizes the near universality of the contrasting norm. Sue Coe reflects similar norms in her two relief images in the 2020 issue of the comics omnibus *World War 3 Illustrated*. In these cases, however, the page is black and the ink white. Despite the reversal, the whiteness of the ink rather than the blackness of the page still carries greater representational qualities. Though the rows of faces in "Doctor MAGA" presumably include a range of racial identities, all skin colors are represented by the same white (2020, 89). Because masks obscure nose and lip shapes and Coe renders hair with little variation, eyes alone are potential racial and ethnic markers, resulting in minimal and ambiguous differentiation. The faces then are perceived as multi-racial only because viewers draw that conclusion based

on the critique of a president infamous for racist remarks. Coe's "Cardboard Coffins" does include a figure whose skin is literally black because it is composed predominately of areas of the black page enclosed by white ink (2020, 124). Since the figure is a corpse, the black likely suggests skin darkened by decomposition and so not racial identity. Again, the minimally rendered facial features and hair shape likely determine race.

Even when thrown on a sharp black background, whiteness retains its normative universality and paradoxical invisibility. Since page whiteness is the predominant norm in the comics medium, it literalizes the assumption of racial whiteness as universal, representing the skin color of all characters, regardless of race. Yet page whiteness is comparatively more representational for racially white characters than for nonwhite characters. If a character is understood to be dark skinned, viewers must see past the contradictory quality of the page color. Since light-skinned characters are also not literally white, viewers must also see past the page color in those cases too, but to a lesser degree. The result is likely increased perceptions of skin color difference between white and nonwhite characters. Moreover, the literal whiteness of the page and the metaphorical whiteness of racial whiteness are aligned and so easily conflated. The statement 'white people are white' seems self-evidently redundant, while 'Black people are white' seems overtly paradoxical. That paradox remains a prominent norm of the comics medium.

Nota biografica

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