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Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist
(review)

Edward Brunner

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disciplines, as it has currency for scholars of history, journalism, literature and literacy studies. Similarly, it is a valuable addition to the library of any scholar interested in the role of discursive practices in the journey to American citizenship.

Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist. By Nancy Goldstein. Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2008. ix, 225 pp. Illus. Index. \$35.

Reviewed by
Edward Brunner
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

Nancy Goldstein's handsomely-packaged assemblage of powerful images produced by African American cartoonist Jackie Ormes (1911–1985) introduces an important cartoonist, who prompts a closer examination of the comic strip and the single-panel gag as central features in the black press before and after World War II, at a time when African Americans were emerging as a consumer bloc with economic power and political convictions. From work produced between 1937 and 1956, Goldstein reprints seventy pages of carefully-annotated illustrations, framing them with biographical information and background research that establishes a perspective from which to revalue the power of the black press, not in its conventional acts of reportage, but in serial features in which "the news" and "the editorial" are often interlocked. Recovering material otherwise accessible only in deteriorated resources like microform, Goldstein reproduces numerous images from actual newsprint and, when possible, provides pristine copies of original artwork. She also reprints in full color two dozen pages from the Smith-Mann syndicate's ambitious postwar experiment offering black papers a lavishly-designed 8-page funnies section with an all-African American cast. Since the first two years of this funnies section were unaccountably never microfilmed and are thus unavailable even in research libraries, some material here has gone literally unexamined for decades.

Though Goldstein presents various works Ormes developed over her twenty-year career, at the center of her research is a trove of single-panel gag cartoons from the feature entitled *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*, which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1945 to 1956, then America's largest-circulation black weekly. Though the gags, Goldstein explains, "most often focused on topics relating to boyfriends, clothing styles and human foibles" (56), she is interested in moments when Ormes courts controversy, and she has selected and annotated eighty-eight examples (out of five hundred) that comment on a remarkable variety of hot topics: HUAC excess, restrictive rental covenants, ill-conceived Supreme Court decisions, Jim Crow laws, the

Korean War, A- and H-bombs, boycotts in Alabama, and the Emmett Till murder. Enabled by close friendships and strong institutions in the Chicago black community, such as Margaret Burroughs (founder of the DuSable Museum) and the fabled South Side Community Arts Center (at which she served for a time as President), Ormes used the pages of the fourteen nationwide editions of the *Courier* to disseminate narratives with the confident aspiration that characterized Chicago's Bronzeville. Because Ormes could envision an upwardly-mobile black audience that saw itself as valuing education, appreciating fashion, and following politics, she could pitch a cartoon every week that confirmed this readership's existence—and almost certainly helped summon it into being.

Everything about Ormes's feature diverged sharply from the *Courier*'s other one-panel gag, O. L. Harrington's *Dark Laughter*, that centered on the misadventures of the hapless Bootsie—overweight, working-class, and silent (in the gag line, someone is always talking to him). But in *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*, the five-year old Patty-Jo always speaks back astutely, usually addressing her glamorous older sister, Ginger, impeccably dressed (or sometimes caught half-dressed). The idiom that Ormes gave to Patty-Jo was as sharp and as novel as Ginger's fashion was chic, a mixture, in Goldstein's words, of "elevated language with low, slang vernacular and confusions of meaning that often result in sly puns" (85). Even when building a joke around boyfriend problems, Ormes can use her single-panel gag to signal the arrival of a new generation ready to take charge, eager to lead a rich cultural life, and willing to speak boldly.

Comics-art depends on exaggerating and stylizing the way figures look, and Ormes's life-long interest in fashion design is, as Goldstein suggests, a crucial component in her art. Ormes conceived two comic strips some years apart, each with an alter ego called Torchy Brown and with fashion playing a crucial role. In 1937–1938, as a young woman beginning her own career, Ormes traced Torchy's adventures as a rural farm girl who left the south and triumphed as a Cotton Club singer and dancer. Key to Torchy's success was her skill in fashioning clothes. Ormes's message—inventiveness in one realm could, with confidence, be transferred to another—enabled movement upward, from the backwater to the urbane. Indeed, Ormes's feature introduced elegant design to a *Courier* funnies page known previously for its rough humor. Her fine-line drawing style of the 1930s eschewed close-ups, displaying instead a character's entire body. If this labor-intensive style was an unwise choice for a deadline-driven cartoonist, it was the right choice for a fashion designer who could never be alert enough to the drape of clothes on a figure.

When Ormes revived an older, wiser Torchy Brown in 1950–1954, she unfolded a harsh plot-line for her heroine: her boy-friend dies in a casino raid, an angry seaman turns sexual predator, a Brazilian plan-

tation owner threatens slavery, and (in a celebrated segment heralded by Trina Robbins as anticipating eco-villainy) an industrialist's toxic waste poisons a town. The counterpoint, however, was a regularly-appearing side-feature, *Torchy Togs*, with a Torchy paper doll and a wardrobe of elaborate outfits. "Demonstrating her keen fashion knowledge," Goldstein writes, "Ormes describes fabric, cut and texture, and sometimes credits designers like Christian Dior or Chicago hat designer Artie Wiggins" (134), a close personal friend. Paper doll Torchy always speaks directly to her readership, often in articulate, evocative descriptions ("Soon the smoke of burning leaves will fill the air. It'll be time for wonderful fall evenings, long walks in the woods, and dances after the football games") that invite a glimpse of a grander, more sequestered life that is, if unreal, suddenly made palpable.

Ormes surely counted as an important intervention, then, the sixteen-inch high doll of Patty-Jo that was issued by the Terri Lee Corporation in the late 1940s and that offered imaginative companionship to black children. Goldstein's most erudite chapter, with several extended sidebars, situates the Patty-Jo doll at a moment in the evolution of the doll industry that coincided with the growth of African American consumerism. An upscale product that cost \$11.95 (minimum wage was forty-five cents an hour), each model was hand-painted with the bold stare that characterized Patty-Jo. Ormes painted the visages on several models herself and left a large-scale drawing for artists hired specifically to paint faces in Terri Lee's Nebraska headquarters. Serious about product placement, Ormes even incorporated a pre-existing black doll from the Terri Lee line, Benjie, as a continuing character in *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*. Goldstein's sharp eye catches several panels in which Patty-Jo is garbed in outfits that were available as doll clothing through Terri Lee. Fashion is a continual presence: at one point, Patty-Jo competes with her sister, admiring herself in a mirror while wearing the 1940s "new look" of an ankle-length skirt.

In a comics-art field dominated by men, Ormes designed and scripted three ground-breaking and long-lasting features (a fourth, centering on a black maid, was in production only four months), all of which introduced distinctive heroines who acted with independence, moved confidently, and spoke unhesitatingly. Drawing upon her own interests and role as a self-educated upwardly-mobile black woman, she developed ingenious plot-lines and conspicuously-elegant drawings that enabled and encouraged a readership to desire even greater recognition in a rapidly-changing consumer culture. Goldstein's pioneering recovery work convincingly proposes Ormes for consideration as a figure whom Michael Denning, in *The Cultural Front* (1996), could have placed as a "star"—a major cultural worker who serves to alter an era's structure of feeling through her command of a popular medium.