

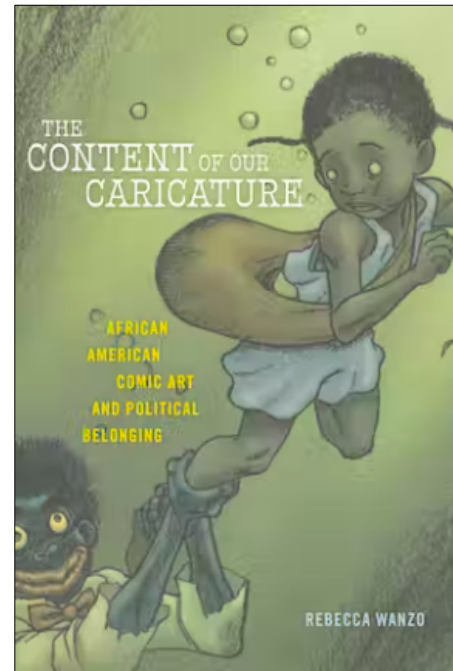
Rebecca Wanzo, **The Content of Our Caricature: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging**, New York: New York University Press, 2020, 256 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$29.00 (paperback).

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What can caricature tell us about citizenship? Rebecca Wanzo's **The Content of Our Caricature: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging** explores how Black comic art, from political cartoons in the Black press to Marvel's *Black Panther*, provides "a visual grammar of citizenship" (p. 25). The author not only analyzes caricature as political discourse, but she also provides a history of the gendered and racialized nature of various comic genres. While the book is relevant for those who share the author's disciplinary background in gender and sexuality studies and African American studies, this text can also be read by media scholars more broadly as a mapping of the history of the comic book industry, popular culture, and theories of political engagement, belonging, and exclusion in the United States.

The book makes a compelling case for why we should, despite our initial intuitions to look away, engage with what seem like racist representations, stereotypes, and caricatures. Wanzo provides sophisticated textual and literary analyses to argue that African American cartoonists have been questioning, reconstructing, and using racist stereotypes to critique notions of the "ideal citizen" in the United States. They have been marking the unmarked citizenship that Laurence Bobo (2012) identifies as an ongoing conundrum for Black life. Caricaturing the Black body has been a vehicle of ongoing "visual imperialism," and the author aims to place "possible Black perspectives at the center of our reading practice to explore the ways in which some images respond to Black degradation and not only replicate it" (p. 4).

Wanzo is not suggesting that we embrace every racist caricature and stereotype but that we consider how African American cartoonists have used the "visual vocabulary" of Black caricature to subvert white supremacy, to signal freedom, and at times to find pleasure in play. Her perspective adds to the growing body of work on visual representations of race and racialization, such as Danielle Fuentes Morgan's (2020) *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century*, accounts of African American humorists across time in Glenda Carpio's (2008) *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, and understudied Black artists in foundational anthologies like Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson's (2014) *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*. Indeed, racial stereotypes have been at the heart of American identity and popular culture. These representations have provided various conundrums that Wanzo addresses.



One conundrum is that such stereotypes have aimed to dehumanize Black people; however, avoidance of stereotypes in caricature through "race-neutral" characters also denies individuality and humanity. Another is that representations of race, religion, gender, and other "identifiers" in publications in leftist magazines, from *Charlie Hebdo* to *The New Yorker*, have highlighted tensions between antiracist politics and progressive ideologies/leanings. The question of injury is also salient throughout the book. What does it mean to be "in on the joke"? What of the "wounded subjects;" Black subjects denied "ideal citizenship" (p. 23) time and time again?

The first chapter, "'Impassanations,' Coons, and Civic Ideals: A Black Comics Aesthetic," focuses on the racial grotesque and its use by various editorial cartoonists, including George Herriman and Sam Milai, and more contemporary artists Jeremy Love and Valentin De Landro. Wanzo's objective is to read how noncitizenship status is "marked" in these works, and how these artists negotiate this space. The remaining chapters continue to explore the space between negative and positive caricatures of Blackness. Chapter 2, "The Revolutionary Body: *Nat Turner*, *King*, and Frozen Subjection," further unpacks what has been idealized aesthetics of Black citizenship. The two Black comic biographies at the center of this chapter, Kyle Baker's (2008) *Nat Turner* and Ho Che Anderson's (2005) *King*, push back on images of Black supplication and idealized subjectivity.

Baker's work on the Black male body features again as a point of analysis in chapter 3, "Wearing Hero-Face: Melancholic Patriotism in *Truth: Red, White & Black*." Baker's depictions of a Black Captain America in 2003 depict a "melancholic citizenship" that "indicts idealized white citizenship" (p. 26). This chapter critically engages more familiar theoretical frameworks in humor studies, particularly ambivalence. Wanzo argues that Black superheroes embody an inherent contradiction, representing the nation-state even as the nation-state fails as an ideal. Perhaps some of the strongest points in the manuscript are where Wanzo's own personal archive of family photographs and experiences add to the richness of the analysis. In this chapter, we see a photograph of her grandfather in uniform in WWII from the family archives. Such personalized, humanizing, self-representations of African American soldiers were necessary to counter the military record and the white¹ press. However, the photograph's frame still has its limits. What caricature does is unmask the historical wounds and continued challenges beyond photographic portrayals of Black soldiers. This analysis of multimodality also leaves the reader wondering what else Wanzo could say about the circulation of images and caricature in the digital age.

Another indictment of white caricature ideals comes in the form of the infantile citizenship narratives through the caricature of Black and white children in the fourth chapter, titled "The Only Thing Unamerican about Me Is the Treatment I Get! Infantile Citizenship and the Situational Grotesque." This chapter, like the others, both points out and disrupts binaries in U.S. visual culture. Black children have been othered from white children; they have been made to be adults and are portrayed as threatening. At the same time, Black comics utilize the racial melancholia and the incongruity that springs from these depictions to produce the joke, and to include play.

¹ Throughout this review, "white" is not capitalized while "Black" is capitalized because Black signals a shared identity, similar to African American identity (often capitalized) in the book. Unlike "Black," "white" does not signal the same sense of shared identity, experience, and exclusion explored in the book.

The uncomfortable issue of the “equal opportunity offender” rears its head in chapter 5: “Rape and Race in the Gutter: Equal Opportunity Humor Aesthetics and Underground Comix.” This is perhaps the most provocative chapter in the book. It quickly becomes clear why it is the only one where Wanzo comes closest to offering a content warning. The spotlight is on Black underground cartoonists, but Robert Crump’s (1967) “Angelfood McSpade” stands as particularly jarring—a rendering of a Black woman in minstrel-style depiction, as she is “oversexed,” “lives in a jungle” and is ripe for “phantasy” (pp. 180–181). These desires, as Wanzo notes, are in line with what Moya Bailey (2013) terms as “misogynoir representations” (p. 182).

This moment in the chapter takes one back to the introduction. There, Wanzo analyzes what was technically Michelle Obama’s first appearance on a magazine cover. It is a caricature of her by Barry Blitt (2008) for *The New Yorker* captioned: “Fistpump: The Politics of Fear.” She is depicted in a huge afro, military boots, and holding a machine gun. But, as Obama shared later in a speech, “Now, yeah, it was satire, but if I’m really being honest, it knocked me back a bit. It made me wonder just how are people seeing me” (Gayle, 2015, para. 6).

Reading Angelfood McSpade as “antiracist” because it is so over the top would, as Wanzo states, “require a belief that the audience understands that the representation is not a satire directed at Black women as well,” (p. 182). As a Black woman, it is hard to trust that one is ever *not* the joke, especially in a world where misogynoir is the norm, not the exception. Throughout the book, there is tension between “racist” and “racialized” caricature, as well as gendered and misogynist caricature, and when and under what conditions one is the other. It is a never-ending project, and this book is not there to offer easy answers—it is, rather, a guide toward what Wanzo calls an “ongoing investment in revision” in what it means to be American (p. 27).

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