

RACE AND IDENTITY IN KRAZY KAT: PERFORMANCE, AESTHETICS,  
PERSPECTIVES

by

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A THESIS


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Professor Benjamin Saunders

This work marks an attempt to redirect the focus of academic writing on race in the early twentieth-century comic strip *Krazy Kat* away from its author, George Herriman, and towards the comic itself. I argue that Herriman displays deep concerns with race and (more generally) identity in his work, but that these concerns do not necessarily stem from his own race or family history. In the end, Herriman's work takes a far more complex perspective towards race and identity than current analysis would imply, and this thesis therefore serves as an attempt to reopen the dialogue around Herriman and race by establishing a new point of commencement for such investigations.

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## Introduction

This project inaugurated itself when I started trying to find essays on *Krazy Kat* and race and quickly came to realize that every essay I could find was actually on George Herriman and race. While I understood the allure of studying an individual who was clearly both brilliant and humble, yet also possessed a fascinating secret family history, I also questioned the idea that Herriman's work has much to say about his most personal racial trepidations. Additionally, I felt that the scholarly tendency to focus upon Herriman more than his work was problematic, as such emphasis seems to imply that Herriman's comics are somehow less interesting or less worthy of analysis than Herriman himself. And while the essays I read often cited Herriman's work as addressing concerns about the division between African Americans and society, I wondered if Herriman might actually address identity in a more complex fashion, exploring a spectrum of races and cultures instead of merely examining the divide between black and white.

Ultimately, this paper is meant to tease out more questions about *Krazy Kat* that answers. My goal is not to provide a "solution" to Herriman's identity or to celebrate him as the first great African American cartoonist as some scholars have perhaps rightly done, but rather to suggest that Herriman's identity remains as open a question as *Krazy Kat*'s gender. I wish to pull back from ascribing identity to Herriman, and in fact suggest that his work in *Krazy Kat* implies that the act of ascribing identity is an extremely difficult and problematic subject. As I believe that Herriman's work in *Krazy Kat* displays a fascination with races other than black and white and with forms of identity that are too complex to be easily labelled, I feel that the attempt to assign labels

to Herriman himself is misguided at best. It seems to me that Herriman is not so concerned with probing his own identity in *Krazy Kat* as he is with exploring multiple forms of identity, and examining the problems that accompany the act of simply being an individual in the midst of society. My thesis, therefore, is less about race than it is about identity.

In addressing the issue of identity in *Krazy Kat*, I break my thesis into four parts. Part I addresses Herriman's biographical details and notes some of the perspectives critics have taken towards the creator of *Krazy Kat*. Part II explores performance in *Krazy Kat*, where I attempt to show that Herriman presents all forms of identity as part of a performance in his work, and that he blurs the line between where art ends and life begins; additionally, I address the tensions between individuals and society that arise through the performance of identity, particularly the tensions pertaining to race. In Part III, I posit that Herriman deploys aesthetics and particularly racial aesthetics in a way that dares observers to associate certain objects in his strips with certain values, then tears down any such associations by implying or allowing for other equally valid yet conflicting appraisals of the objects in question. In Part IV I claim that Herriman utilizes perspective in a purposefully perplexing and inconsistent manner in order to exhibit the complexity of perspective, show the extent to which individual perspectives can differ from one another, and expose the various biases that can stem from any single perspective. I further maintain that Herriman's characters actively deny themselves perspective, as they seem to view perspective as a burden rather than a blessing. I argue that the limitations of perspective play an important role in creating division between individuals, as variations in perspective lead to difference.

In the end, my primary wish for my thesis is that it might help to redirect the dialogue around race and *Krazy Kat* back towards Herriman's work and away from the man himself. While there is room for analysis of Herriman's own identity, such scrutiny should serve a supporting role to the vast and captivating world Herriman created in his comics.



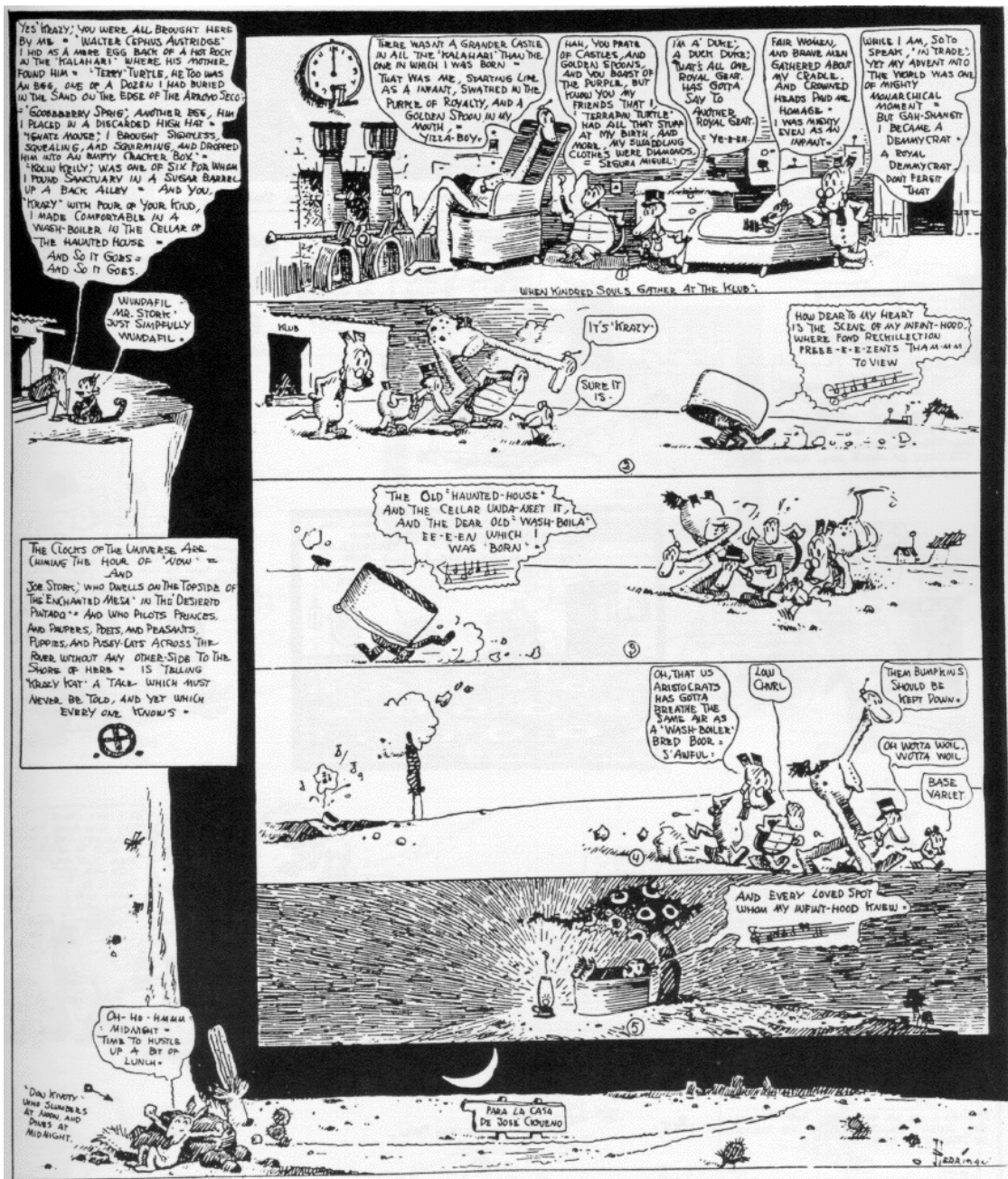


Fig. 1: Undated *Krazy Kat* strip. Joe Stork tells Krazy the origin stories of several characters

## Part I: George Herriman and Personal Identity

In an early *Krazy Kat* strip which might be described as the “origin story” of Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse, and many of the strip’s other characters, the “purveyor of progeny to prince and proletariat” Joe Stork tells Krazy Kat that the cat and most of his

friends were born into very humble circumstances indeed.<sup>i</sup> The stork details these circumstances for Krazy's benefit in an account the narrator describes as "a tale which must never be told, and yet which every one knows," claiming that Ignatz Mouse was born in a cracker box, while Kolin Kelly was born in a sugar barrel; Krazy himself was born in a wash-boiler. Krazy embraces the circumstances of his birth, stating to Joe in his distinctive dialect that it is "simpfully wundaful." Krazy's conversation with Joe does not comprise the whole of the strip, however; another tale related to the discussion unfolds in the middle of the page, physically framed by Krazy's chat with the stork. This second tale suggests that the other animals whom Joe Stork mentions are somewhat ashamed of their modest beginnings, and tell each other tall tales about their respective births to hide the truth and make themselves sound more sophisticated: Terry Turtle goes so far as to claim that his "swaddling clothes were diamonds." The animals continue to brag to each other about the luxury they were born into until Krazy strolls by, his head replete with an upside-down wash-boiler, singing about the boiler into which he was born. The other animals act repulsed, expressing deep disgust at having to breathe the same air as such a "base varlet," and the strip ends with Krazy alone under a tree at night, singing himself to sleep.

In this strip, the animals cast Krazy Kat out from society because he is open and honest about his lowly birth, though many of them typically maintain a tolerably friendly relationship with the cat. In actuality, all of the animals come from beginnings that are equally as humble as Krazy's wash-basin, even if the particulars of their births vary. However, none of the animals except Krazy are aware of the real circumstances of the other animals' births, and have to maintain that they were born into auspicious

circumstances in order to avoid the same fate as the cat. Krazy is the only animal who knows the truth about all of the others, the information Joe Stork imparts to Krazy literally framing the events of the central tale and giving Krazy a privileged perspective upon the events which unfold in the center of the strip. Without the information Krazy possesses, the other animals must perform false origin stories for each other's benefit with no end to the routine in sight, and are stuck thinking quite literally inside the box, unable like Krazy to step outside and examine their roots from another perspective.

Stepping outside of the strip and into the real world, the author's own perspective upon this strip becomes a matter of great interest. Curiously, George Herriman himself was forced to cover up his own "origin story" with half-truths and pretenses.<sup>ii</sup> Herriman's origin story is as fascinating, startling, and humble as any in the strip, and during Herriman's lifetime was also "a tale which must never be told." Only recently have people come to know the circumstances into which Joe Stork delivered Herriman, circumstances which cast this strip in a fascinating light.

Herriman has become a mysterious and controversial character over the years, and details about Herriman's life are often vague or ambiguous. Though cartoonists were quite respected in Herriman's day and often drew large salaries, Herriman was never among the cartoonists that were most popular with the masses, and so he drew little popular attention during his own time. Today Herriman and Krazy Kat are probably as popular as they ever were in past years, but Herriman's work still evades the limelight – much as the author actively avoided the spotlight while he was alive.<sup>iii</sup> Despite the controversy which surrounds him today, during his lifetime Herriman never courted drama, and the great "scandal" of Herriman's life did not surface until long after

his death. The air of mystery that surrounds Herriman today comes not from any cultivated mystique, however, but should rather be attributed to his shyness and humility, and an accompanying reluctance to talk much about himself or his work. By all accounts Herriman was extremely self-effacing, not to mention modest to the point of absurdity; he once wrote a letter to a fan stating: “Your strange interest in my efforts sure has me in a quandary – yes sir I can’t add it up at all – it must be something *you* give to it.”<sup>iv</sup> Herriman’s reluctance to even do so much as take credit for his own work certainly helps to explain why he remains such an enigmatic figure today.

But there was always more to Herriman than met the eye, and a piece to the puzzle discovered long after Herriman’s death has done more to stir up debate and confusion over the man than anything he ever created in his cartoons. Despite his peaceful and retiring lifestyle, Herriman did have one potentially scandalous facet to his persona: he was a black man “passing” for white. In 1971, sociologist Asa Berger discovered that Herriman had been listed as “colored” on his birth certificate, and that he had therefore been “passing” for white since the age of ten.<sup>v</sup> The phenomenon of racial passing has always been an extremely controversial subject, and though Herriman had been dead for almost thirty years before Berger’s discovery, immediately debate began to rage about Herriman’s identity and race, debate which has only grown stronger over the years. Claims that Herriman was unaware of his race, that he plied his craft subversively as a black man under the guise of whiteness, and veiled insinuations that Herriman was a “race traitor” all continue to find weight in writing on Herriman.<sup>vi</sup> Often Herriman’s actual work takes a back seat to considerations of his racial identity, particularly in academic writing, and scholars frequently seem more interested in

finding out about Herriman the man than Herriman the artist. In their papers, Herriman becomes the object under study: his art has become the lens through which scholars examine his life, appraising the man by looking at his work instead of using his biographical details as a lens through which to view his art. The approach becomes problematic, as it implies not only that Herriman's work is somehow less interesting or worthy of study than his life, but also that his comics are autobiographical in some way. Authorship taking this tack often assumes overly simplistic views of Herriman's work and identity: such works operate only within a black and white binary, and attempt to pin simplistic racial allegories to Herriman's strips. To all intents and purposes, after his death Herriman has become the celebrity cartoonist he avoided becoming during his career, his work now playing second fiddle to his life, mannerisms, and behavior. It is not that scholars should avoid dealing with Herriman's life when writing about *Krazy Kat*, or that Herriman's life is not worthy of study; simply put, the problem is that interest in Herriman's biography has overshadowed his work.

Nonetheless, much absorbing scholarship upon Herriman's life does exist, and in fact everyone reading about or writing on *Krazy Kat* should probably be aware of some of the salient details of his youth. George Joseph Herriman was born in New Orleans in 1880 to parents listed as "mulatto" in a census taken that year.<sup>vii</sup> As Berger discovered, Herriman was termed "colored" on his birth certificate.<sup>viii</sup> Little is known of Herriman's childhood in Louisiana, but in 1890 Herriman's family left New Orleans to settle in Los Angeles.<sup>ix</sup> Though the precise reasons behind this move will probably never be fully known, it is easy enough to guess at some of the likely factors which precipitated the change in cities. At the time of Herriman's birth, New Orleans had a large population of

well-educated Creole voters, including Herriman's parents; in fact, black voters within the state of Louisiana numbered almost exactly as many as the number of white voters, and therefore posed a clear threat to those who wished to maintain the economic and governmental superiority of whites.<sup>x</sup> As a result, several laws and amendments went into effect that had an extremely unfavorable effect upon the ability of blacks to vote within the state. In 1889, the year before the Herrimans left Louisiana, the state legislature passed a constitutional amendment that began the rapid disenfranchisement of people of color living in Louisiana.<sup>xi</sup> Changes to the constitution, including a clause stating that voters must be able to both read and write and a clause proclaiming that voters must own property valued over at least 300 dollars, had a terrible effect upon voting rights, and by 1900 only a very few authorized black voters remained.<sup>xii</sup> Jim Crow laws were implemented and strictly enforced, and the separation of white and black voters for the purpose of testing voter literacy made disenfranchisement even more prevalent. The first constitutional amendment may have been the final straw for the Herrimans, who seem to have foreseen the bad direction in which circumstances were heading; luckily, they left the state before Louisiana race relations grew to their worst.

The Herrimans left behind Louisiana for sunny Los Angeles, California, where prospects appear to have been much better for the family. Herriman's father opened up a tailor's shop in the city, and at one point also ran a bakery.<sup>xiii</sup> Herriman helped his father out in the bakery while he was in high school, and once he had graduated went to work at the Los Angeles Herald, where he toiled in the engravings department and drew the occasional political cartoon.<sup>xiv</sup> However, opportunities for cartoonists in Los Angeles

were limited at the time, and Herriman wished to broaden his horizons as an artist, so at age twenty he left town, riding the rails of a freight train bound for New York.<sup>xv</sup> There he attempted to establish himself within the cartooning world whilst working odd jobs at Coney Island.<sup>xvi</sup> Eventually Herriman got his big break as a cartoonist with the Pulitzer papers, and his star grew once he had made it into the system.<sup>xvii</sup> Herriman met with fair success in drawing many of his early strips, but inarguably his greatest artistic achievement was *Krazy Kat*, which first appeared in 1913 and ran until Herriman's death in 1944. Throughout his life Herriman lived variously in California and New York, but also frequently visited the Arizona desert, a place with unique landscapes and rock forms that have a clear influence upon *Krazy Kat*.<sup>xviii</sup>

After his family's move to California in 1890, Herriman seems to never again have identified as African American in either his personal or professional life, and during his career most of his friends in the newspaper industry believed that he was of Greek descent.<sup>xix</sup> How they came to this conclusion is unclear. Herriman may have told his friends that he was Greek, but more likely this was an assumption his friends made themselves based upon his physical appearance: Herriman's cartoonist friend Tad Dorgan claims that he gave Herriman the nickname "The Greek" when they first started working together, as "we didn't know what he was."<sup>xx</sup> Certainly Herriman did not deny that he had Greek ancestry, but instead seems to have embraced his cartoonist friends' false perception of his heritage, allowing the nickname to stick. Although the anecdote suggests that Herriman's appearance may have suggested he was multiethnic in descent, it seems that Herriman had little trouble in passing for white, as his race was never seriously questioned by either his friends or his (seemingly nonexistent) enemies.

However, throughout his life Herriman almost always wore hats, even indoors: he supposedly told a close friend that his constant hat-wearing was for the purpose of hiding what he termed his “kinky” hair, and additionally stated that he was “a Creole” and likely had some “Negro blood” as well.<sup>xxi</sup> Certain scholars see Herriman’s predilection for hats as possibly betraying some fear that his status as passing might be discovered one day; journalist Alexander Stern responds to his own question on the subject by stating: “Was his refusal to be publicly seen without a hat part of a conscious desire for Herriman to “pass” for white? There is evidence to suggest that this is, indeed, the case.”<sup>xxii</sup> Whatever his reasons for wearing the hats, Herriman’s heritage remained undiscovered until well after his lifetime, and Herriman was listed as “Caucasian” on his death certificate in 1944.<sup>xxiii</sup>

There is little consensus among academics today regarding Herriman’s own feelings about his racial identity. Some Herriman aficionados like Bill Blackbeard even claim that Herriman was not actually black, and that his birth certificate simply reflects the biases of census takers at the time of his birth, who supposedly quite often listed children according to their perceptions of the child’s appearance rather than according to any documented or proven heritage.<sup>xxiv</sup> This argument has to all intents and purposes been disproven by recent research: Herriman’s entire family was listed as “mulatto” on both the 1880 and 1890 censuses, and further investigation has found that Herriman’s grandmother was born in Havana as well.<sup>xxv</sup> Room for doubt as to Herriman’s ethnic background may still exist, but it is extremely slight at best.

The claim could be made that Herriman was unaware of his race and lived out his life in ignorance of his heritage. The argument has not been and will probably never



be completely disproven, but its line of reasoning is unconvincing. The fact that Herriman's parents moved out west during a time of great racial prejudice in Louisiana strongly suggests that racial tension played a role in their relocation, and at age ten Herriman would certainly have been old enough to be aware of this tension himself. Additionally, there is the testimony of the friend who claims that Herriman confided in him that he had mixed heritage, and writers like Jeet Heer make fairly convincing arguments for Herriman being at least somewhat self-conscious about his black heritage.<sup>xxvi</sup> It therefore seems extremely unlikely that Herriman was not aware of his racial background.

A friendly brand of Herriman researcher likes to celebrate Herriman as the first and even the greatest African-American cartoonist.<sup>xxvii</sup> On an extremely literal level this statement is of course accurate, but is possibly misleading. Herriman seems to never have identified as black after age ten at the outside, people universally considered him to be white until the seventies, and as a result his work has been "colored" by the racial labels applied to him at any given time. It is therefore somewhat tricky to label Herriman as the first great African-American cartoonist without deeply considering how his heritage may or may not have affected his work and without knowing how Herriman himself would wish to be identified. Of course, it is also problematic to deny Herriman the label of the first great African-American cartoonist, especially without first considering the subcutaneous effect Herriman's need to "pass" could have had upon his work. The point remains contentious at best.

Some writers have implied that Herriman was in denial about his race and even disparaged blacks while passing for white, betraying his own ancestry and taking on the

white mantle while never looking back with even the slightest concern. Such claims always arise when dealing with the phenomenon of passing, an admittedly thorny and difficult issue, and these arguments are actually often fairly difficult to dispel. This allegation is no exception, as Herriman did pass for white his whole life, and much of his early work deals in the problematic racial caricatures so prevalent in early twentieth century cartooning.<sup>xxviii</sup> But the argument also lacks any true supporting evidence, and Herriman's work often deals with racial tension in fascinating and varied ways. Much of the material in *Krazy Kat* belies the "race traitor" claims which often accompany passing, and the argument therefore lacks anything in the way of proof.

So if all these answers to the mystery of Herriman's racial identity are basically dissatisfying, then what possibility is left? The answer seems to be that there is no real satisfying or unifying answer that "solves" the riddle of Herriman's identity, as Herriman defies easy categorization. He is not quite an African-American artist in complex terms, but neither is he white; he was almost certainly aware of his racial heritage, but he never seems to have fully embraced his ethnicity. When Herriman's profound interest in Navajo culture and its influence upon his work is taken into account, it becomes clear that Herriman operates not only upon the greyscale between black and white but amidst the whole spectrum of colors, as his work moves outside of the black-and-white binary to explore other races and cultures as well.<sup>xxix</sup> Though there are many readings of *Krazy Kat* which explore how Herriman's work breaks down the binaries of gender and the black/white racial binary,<sup>xxx xxxi</sup> few go into detail about how Herriman incorporates modes of identity that exist completely outside of these binaries, not just somewhere in the grey area between black and white. And though writers do

mention Herriman's fascination with Navajo culture and the influence of Navajo artistic forms upon Herriman's Sunday strips,<sup>xxxii</sup> the true implications of Herriman's inclusion of peoples and cultures beyond the black/white binary remains largely unexplored. Even the characters who typically are ascribed a specific ethnicity – scholars often claim that *Krazy Kat* is African American, for instance<sup>xxxiii</sup> – cannot actually be pinned down to a single racial label. Through his work, Herriman implies that labels necessarily limit the complexity of individuals.

Herriman seems to occupy a position in relation to race similar to the attitude that the poet Jean Toomer adopted during his career. In his essay “The Crock of Problems,” Toomer asks the reader to imagine a black man who “sees it to his advantage... to be white. He makes the transition and sustains himself in the white group at the expense of a great psychic strain... as long as he lives, there is... the fear lest he be found out.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is the universal fear of any man who passes for white, Toomer claims: the action of passing goes hand-in-hand with the fear of discovery and resultant social ostracization. However, though Toomer was “black” by heritage he never experienced this “great psychic strain” himself, as he never denied his own racial heritage; he simply let others form their own opinions about him.<sup>xxxv</sup> Toomer was light-skinned, and often was judged to be white by people meeting him for the first time; in fact, in “The Crock of Problems” Toomer states: “I have never tried to pass because I have never had to try. I have simply gone and lived here and there.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Toomer, then, sometimes passed for white by letting others label him solely through their own perceptions, neither confirming nor denying his heritage. Herriman may have done the same in his own life, letting his bullpen buddies nickname him “The Greek” without

confirming or denying whether they were right about his heritage; he certainly lets readers label his characters how they wish, depicting them in seemingly racially charged but ultimately ambiguous ways.

Ascribing racial labels to Herriman's characters can become problematic, and when racial labels are applied to actual people like Herriman and Toomer things become even messier. Scholars typically categorize Toomer's work with the works of African American writers, as Toomer's most famous poetry deals with racial problems, and he was listed as a "Negro" when he registered for the draft in 1917.<sup>xxxvii</sup> But Toomer himself did not identify as black, and his work moved away from dealing with race over time. Recently, Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. attempted to reconstruct the course Toomer took in forming his racial identity, implying that while "Toomer was right to declare that he was of mixed ancestry, and that the opposition between 'white' and 'black' was too simplistic... he was wrong to say that he had never lived as a negro."<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is a popular but problematic response to Toomer's refusal to fully identify as black, and though Byrd and Gates recognize the complexity of Toomer's situation, in their essay they fail to truly get at the reasons behind the position Toomer takes in relation to his race. In the end, Byrd and Gates pigeonhole Toomer as "a Negro who decided to pass for white."<sup>xxxix</sup> This is despite Toomer's often-articulated desire to avoid racial labels, implied early in his career in statements such as "I have never tried to pass because I have never had to try" and eventually manifested in his refusal to label his work as the product of a black author.<sup>xl</sup> As Toomer stated to Horace Liveright, his publisher, "My racial composition and my position in the world are realities that I alone may determine."<sup>xli</sup> Toomer clearly felt that the labels "black" and "white" were far too

limiting, and he desired to be viewed as “American” rather than “black,” forming his own persona in whichever way he saw fit. Herriman too is clearly interested in forms of identity beyond the black and white binary, and even told his friend Gilbert Seldes that he wanted to be reincarnated as Indian.<sup>xlii</sup> Attempts to “solve” the problem of racial identity for either Herriman or Toomer are therefore not only fairly misguided, but also appear to be contrary to the artists’ own desires.

The same holds true for Herriman’s cartoons. When essayists attempt to pin any sort of specific racial “identity” onto Herriman, his characters, or his work, they overstep the mark: ascribing racial identity to Herriman and his characters is not only problematic, it also misses the point. *Krazy Kat* is not about establishing identity, but instead is about the confusion surrounding identity, and many of the best Krazy Kat strips deal with the point where identity breaks down, or where seemingly disparate identities blur together.<sup>xliii</sup> It is important, therefore, to step back from attempts to pinpoint Herriman’s racial identity and instead turn to the fascinating explorations of identity and race within his work, which constantly highlights the often arbitrary nature of racial labels. In his work, Herriman deploys racial signifiers in a unique aesthetic manner that allows him to move beyond the “black and white” racial binary to include other forms of identity, and beyond political evaluations of race into explorations of identity and personhood. While Herriman does not avoid political considerations pertaining to race in his work, this does not mean that such considerations are the focus of his investigations of race. Instead, Herriman explores questions of indeterminacy and individuality in his work, issues that necessarily have some political import but do not necessarily make the exploration of racial politics their focus. Herriman exploits

ambiguity, perspective, and the surreal world he creates in *Krazy Kat* in subverting any and all simple evaluations of race and identity in the realm of the strip.

To summarize, while Herriman passed for white during his lifetime, long after his death sociologist Asa Berger discovered that census takers listed him as “colored” on his birth certificate. Though some scholars claim that Herriman was unaware of his race or that he was uninterested in the plight of African Americans, there is little or no evidence to support such claims. However, it is almost as problematic to suggest that Herriman thought of himself as a black man, as this view leads to overly simplistic readings of Herriman’s work, concerned only with the black and white binary while ignoring the vast complexity of identity within *Krazy Kat*. The attempt to pin Herriman down to a single race or identity disregards the possibility that he did not identify fully with any race, and also overlooks the prospect that Herriman may have felt an affinity for races other than black and white. Any chance of ascertaining Herriman’s true feelings about race, then, must come from examining his work, which often explores issues surrounding identity, performance, and perspective. And in the end, perhaps Herriman’s own identity is not the important thing, but rather the explorations of identity which he provides in his work. Let us turn, therefore, to the matter of performance in *Krazy Kat*, an issue that gets at the heart of Herriman’s explorations of race and identity.

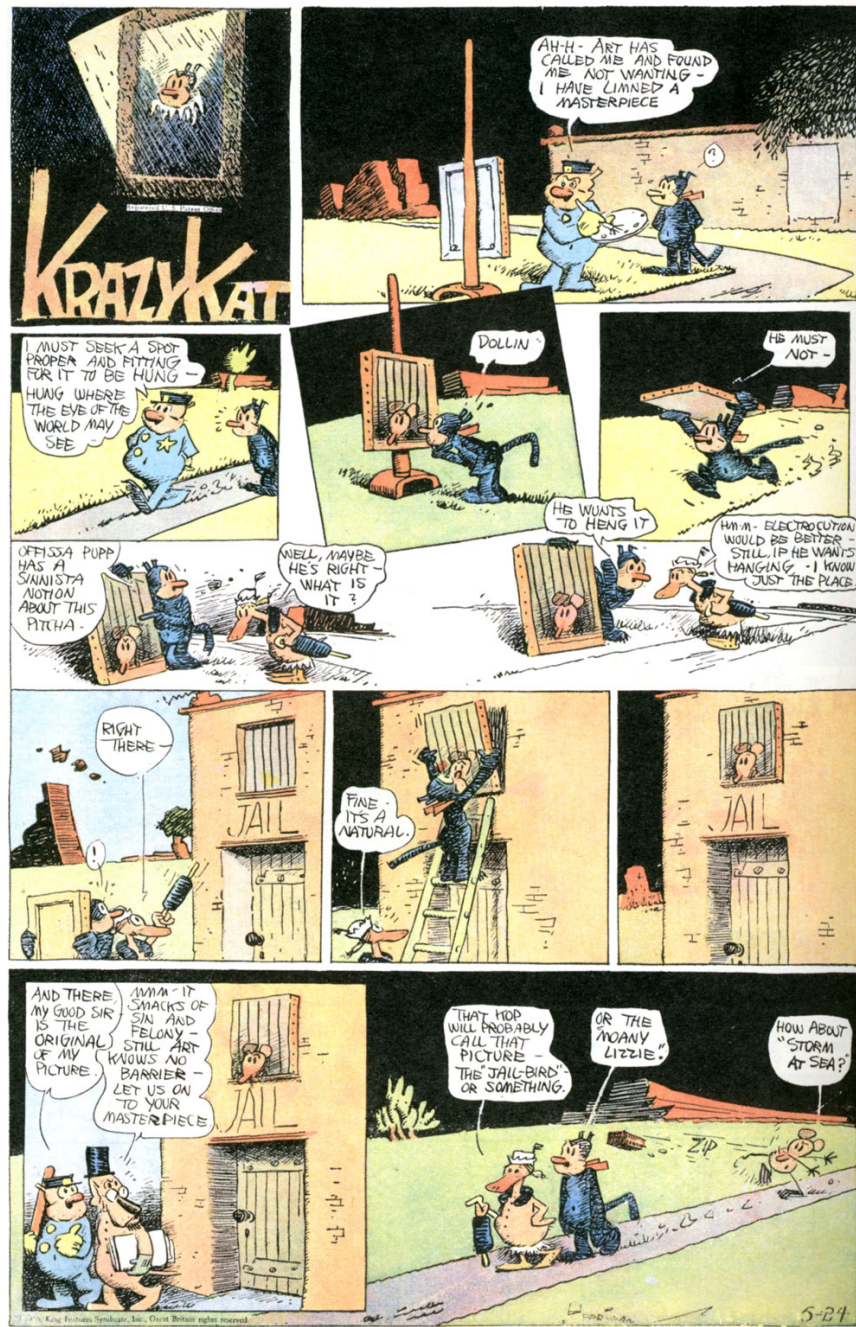


Fig. 2: May 24<sup>th</sup> 1936. Officer Pupp paints a picture of Ignatz

## Part II: Performance – Limning a Masterpiece

On May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1936, Officer Pupp paints a picture of Ignatz Mouse in jail and behind bars, calling it his “masterpiece.”<sup>xliv</sup> Krazy Kat overhears Pupp say that he wishes to publicly hang the painting, and the cat panics at what he perceives as a threat

to the mouse's well-being, stealing the painting and rushing off. Krazy runs into the town gossip Mrs. Kwakk Wakk and tells her the whole story; Mrs. Kwakk Wakk comments that "electrocution would be better" for the painting than hanging, but suggests that Krazy hang the painting over the window of Officer Pupp's jail instead; Krazy follows this advice willingly. Later, Officer Pupp wanders by the jail with another officious-looking dog and, looking up at the jailhouse window, refers the dog to "the original of [his] picture," presuming his own painting to be the real Ignatz Mouse locked up in jail. The dog remarks that the scene "smacks of sin and felony," but notes that "art knows no barrier." The strip ends with the real Ignatz throwing a brick at Krazy as the cat and Mrs. Kwakk Wakk contemplate possible titles for Officer Pupp's work.

Officer Pupp takes on the role of artist in the strip, Herriman's own creation creating an essential component of the very work he appears in. Officer Pupp could easily be mistaken for Herriman himself in this self-reflexive episode: he fashions the protagonist in the little drama which unfolds in the strip, setting the plot into motion as a result. Yet Pupp's own painting takes on its own identity and ends up deceiving its creator: at the end of the strip Officer Pupp believes that Ignatz is in jail and lets down his guard as a policeman, allowing Ignatz to get away with bonking Krazy with a brick. Despite creating the portrait of Ignatz himself, in the end Officer Pupp gets fooled by his own work of art.

However, from the perspective of the reader it is difficult to say whether or not Officer Pupp's painting actually misleads him when he takes it for the "real" Ignatz. Certainly the concept of "reality" in *Krazy Kat* is tenuous at best, and the Ignatz of Officer Pupp's painting is actually no less real than the Ignatz of Herriman's comic.



Even characters other than Pupp treat the painting as though it were the actual Ignatz; Krazy Kat wishes to save the painting from hanging, while Mrs. Kwakk Wakk implies that the portrait of Ignatz itself should be put to death, suggesting that the painting be electrocuted rather than hung. The painting thus takes on a life of its own, possessing a more powerful presence in the strip than the “real” Ignatz, who does not appear until the last panel and goes completely unnoticed by the other characters. Officer Pupp may not be so wrong in suggesting that his painting is the “original” Ignatz; in this strip at least, it is almost the only representation of Ignatz that exists at all. Indeed, as a physical entity the strip itself is not so different from the portrait of Ignatz, and the image may actually be a more accurate reflection of reality than the comic itself. All of the panels of the strip are just paintings like Officer Pupp’s, pictures of the characters drawn inside rectangular boxes. Herriman himself emphasizes this fact by drawing the fourth panel of the strip off-kilter as though it were hanging askew, suggesting that the panels of his strip “hang” on the paper just like the painting of Ignatz. In a way, Ignatz’s portrait actually marks a return to reality since, as a still moment frozen in time, the painting does not attempt to create the illusion of movement or progression – unlike the comic itself, which attempts to depict a series of events in a single, still work of art. The still, lifeless image of Ignatz presents the actual truth: the comic is an image itself, and cannot comprise actual movement or progress. By including Ignatz’s portrait within his work, Herriman highlights the constructed nature of his strip, showing that the cartoon is a mere performance of reality.

Yet perhaps the real world or “reality” itself is just as much of a performance or construction as Herriman’s comic or Pupp’s painting. When Krazy Kat sees the portrait

of Ignatz and overhears Officer Pupp's desire to hang the painting "where the eye of the world may see," he becomes extremely anxious to preserve the painting from this fate. Officer Pupp has quite literally painted Ignatz in a bad light, and Krazy does not want the painting to form the public's view of Ignatz. Presenting oneself publicly literally becomes an art form in the strip, as the painting becomes a part of the mouse's identity; Krazy wishes to allow Ignatz to paint himself into the picture without Officer Pupp's portrait getting in the way. Krazy therefore removes the painting from the eyes of society in order to allow Ignatz to publicly perform his own identity without Officer Pupp's portrait coloring society's view of the mouse. With the advent of Judith Butler in the nineties, the idea that all forms of identity are performative and necessarily constructed and that the pressures, norms, and ideals of society can often clash with self-identification has become almost universally acknowledged.<sup>xlv</sup> Over fifty years earlier, *Krazy Kat* illustrates the same concept: identity is a form of art or performance, and society's vision of individuals can conflict with personal identity.

The notion that identity is necessarily performed would not exactly have been news to Herriman, who reinvented himself as white after moving to Los Angeles at the age of ten; it is therefore unsurprising that Herriman's work exhibits a deep fascination with the performance of identity, a theme which lies at the heart of *Krazy Kat*. The love triangle at the heart of the strip is a performance itself, a ritual which plays out over and over. The central plot of *Krazy Kat* is astonishingly repetitive, and though its essential eccentricity often seems bizarre to newcomers, the theme soon becomes familiar to habitual readers. The titular character is an ambiguously-sexed cat who is passionately in love with a mouse named Ignatz. Ignatz does not return the cat's love, but

aggressively throws bricks at its head instead. Krazy, however, is undeterred by Ignatz's aggression, and sees these bricks as a sign of the mouse's affection. The third point in the strip's love triangle, the police dog Officer Pupp, secretly loves the cat and tries to prevent Ignatz from hitting the cat with his bricks, carting Ignatz off to jail if he catches him throwing a brick at Krazy. This same plot, with only minor variations, repeats itself in the strip almost daily for over three decades. With only two typical outcomes – Ignatz either succeeding or failing to hit Krazy with a brick – the fundamental tedium of the plot cannot be overemphasized.<sup>xlvi</sup> The comic repeats the same performance day after day after day.

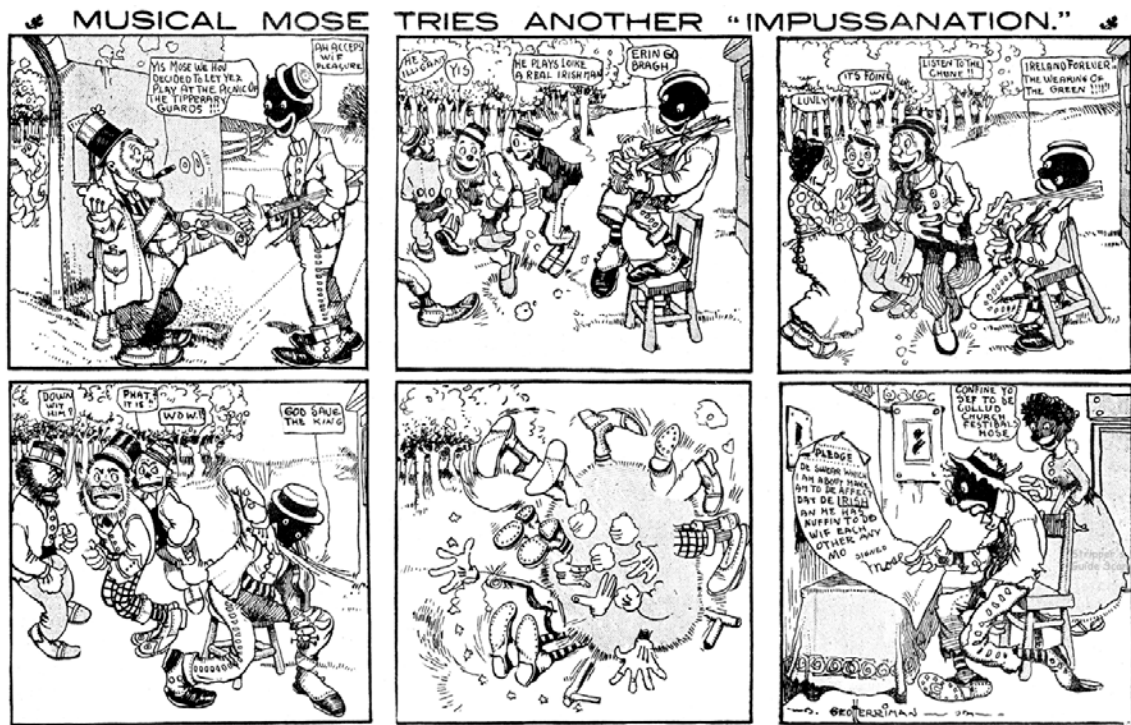
A crucial question regarding the comic immediately becomes obvious: how can a work that seemingly has so little variation in content still hold any appeal? The question is actually more complex than it sounds, and can likely be answered in a variety of ways. One of the more obvious answers has to do with the fact that some of the most popular western cultural practices are actually fairly tedious at their core, and so a tedious core concept does not necessarily connote a tedious spectacle. Certain sports serve as good examples of popular events which are often essentially tedious; in soccer, for instance, the entire purpose of the game is for players to propel a ball into a net without using their hands as many times as they can, a goal which does not really seem to allow for much variation. Yet a lot can happen on the field in between goals, and soccer is the world's most popular sport, with millions of people watching thousands of games each year. *Krazy Kat* is the same way; a lot can happen before Ignatz throws a brick, and even after the brick is thrown the unexpected can still happen and often does. In many ways, then, the central dynamic of *Krazy Kat* is a lot like a

sports performance. Yet the answer to why *Krazy Kat* maintains appeal may still be more complicated than this. Krazy Kat lacks the glamour typically associated with professional sports today, and the actions of the strip feel routine in more than one sense. In fact, perhaps the very familiarity of the strip's plot is precisely what makes it so appealing. It is possible to see the repetitive nature of the strip as not tedious at all, but instead somehow comforting, and readers can find satisfaction and even an amount of security in Ignatz being able to escape Officer Pupp's safeguards and hit Krazy in the head with a brick. Repeated performances are a familiar and even cherished part of our own culture, making it simple for *Krazy Kat* to maintain its prolificacy.

The familiarity of the plot raises another facet to the repetitive core performance of *Krazy Kat* that is appropriate to a discussion of race, which is that the plot centers upon a repeated act of violence towards a single individual who exists upon the margins of society. The beaming of Krazy with the brick might seem shocking to new readers, but for most the shock quickly wears off, and the brick-throwing just becomes another part of the strip's routine. Of course, the violence of the act does not just disappear; instead, readers simply become used to its savage nature, and the act thereby loses its sting to onlookers as they become desensitized to its violence. Yet the deed is still inherently harmful, and the desensitization of readers to the viciousness of the act is not unproblematic. There are clear parallels to adversarial race relations and institutionalized racism in such desensitization. Though modern readers can look at Herriman's time and note moments of institutionalized racism in the era's popular culture, Herriman's contemporaries did not have the same sort of privileged perspective upon their own age; for instance, they grew up with racial segregation as a facet of

everyday life, and though many individuals realized the harmful nature of segregation, the majority of people were too used to the situation to recognize its divisive nature. The repetition of the ritualistic violence committed against *Krazy Kat* and the reader's resultant desensitization to this cruelty, therefore, may be Herriman's way of pointing out that the most deeply engrained cultural performances can also be the most disturbing.





Figs. 3 (last page) and 4: Undated Musical Mose strips. Mose respectively tries to "impussanate" a Scotsman and an Irishman

Herriman's other work also displays an interest in the performative aspects of identity, and particularly the place where personal identity clashes with societal ideals. Though *Krazy Kat* became Herriman's focus as a cartoonist after the strip really got off of the ground, Herriman drew many strips before *Krazy Kat* that met with a fair amount of success. One of Herriman's earliest strips is titled *Musical Mose*. The strip deals with a black musician who attempts to perform music under the guise of all sorts of other ethnicities, pretending to be an Irishman one day and a Scotchman the next.<sup>xlvi</sup> The strip is extremely problematic on multiple levels, and includes crude caricatures of black men and people of other ethnicities. Nevertheless, the strip potentially has a sad poignancy to it when read with the knowledge that Herriman himself was passing for

white.<sup>xlvi</sup> The *Musical Mose* comic is often cited as an example of Herriman's inner turmoil regarding his racial heritage, and probably serves as the best example from his work of any potential insecurity Herriman felt at passing for white. Conversely, of course, the strip could also suggest that Herriman felt he was safe from discovery, as someone who was at risk of being discovered to be passing for white would probably not publish something publicly detailing their precarious position. What the strip certainly does suggest is that Herriman was interested in the divide between the individual performance of identity and society's expectations of individuals. Musical Mose is literally a performer of music as well as a performer of race, and he clearly shows that he is capable of performing the identity of races which are not his own, as he successfully passes himself off as both an Irish and a Scottish musician before his "real" identity is discovered.<sup>xli</sup> Only Mose's physical appearance betrays him for anything other than the various white ethnicities whose music he performs, and he manages to trick actual Irish and Scottish people into believing that he is one of their own. Yet once his true appearance becomes known to these people, they abuse him remorselessly and seemingly undeservedly, attacking him with no apparent provocation other than the color of his skin. Ultimately Mose fails to become a successful musician at every turn despite his skill, society dictating that his race be treated with contempt should any of its members dare to pretend that they are capable of performing cultural feats worthy of another, paler race. An ironic double standard becomes apparent when considering the terrific popularity of blackface performance at the turn of the twentieth century: white people could perform as black, but black people like Mose could not perform as white. The desires of the individual are ultimately subject to the ideals of society.

# KRAZY KAT

:-: :-: :-:

By Herriman

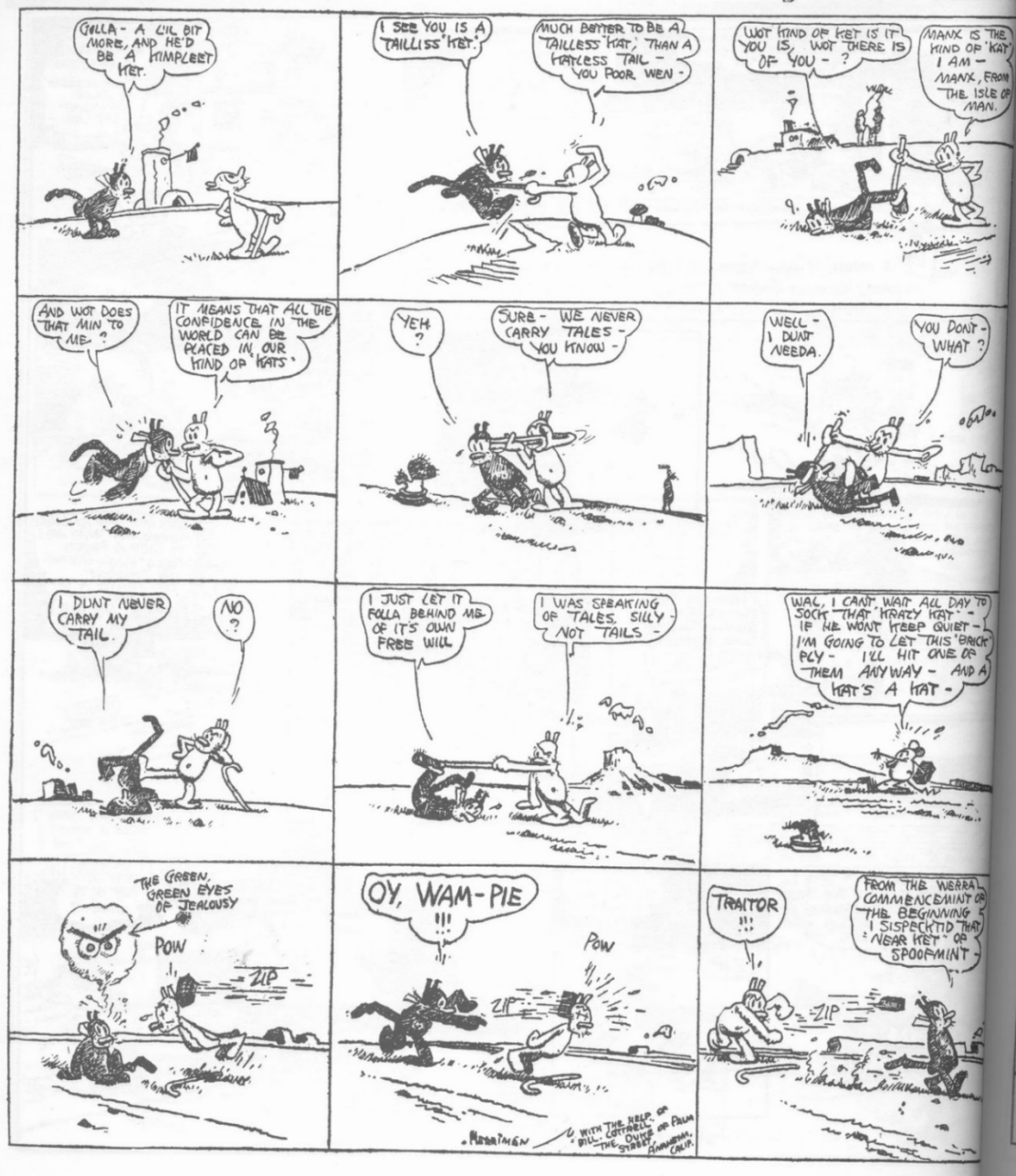


Fig. 5: February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1925. Krazy meets a Manx cat

Though *Krazy Kat* is about animals and not people, the strip nevertheless exhibits many of the same concerns over racial identity as *Musical Mose*. The ostensible absence of human races in *Krazy Kat* actually allows the comic to deal with racial labels in fascinating ways, and the comic exhibits much of the tension that subsists between



personal identity and societal identity, as well as the tendency for society to obscure the vast and complex variations in identity which exist between individuals who share the same racial labels. For instance, on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1925 a Manx cat complete with a tail-like cane runs into Krazy Kat, springing onto the scene as though from out of nowhere.<sup>1</sup> There are few cats besides Krazy himself who ever appear in the world of Coconino County, where *Krazy Kat* takes place, and Krazy seems to be a little resentful of this new intruder. Krazy notes that the Manx lacks a real tail and casts aspersions upon the Manx's "cathood," while the Manx insults and belittles Krazy in return, calling him a "wen." Meanwhile, Ignatz, watching the scene unfold from afar, grows frustrated with the cats' conversation and throws his brick at them indiscriminately, declaring "a cat's a cat." The brick hits the Manx, and Krazy becomes wild with jealousy, picking up the brick himself and throwing it at the Manx in his fury. The differences between Krazy and the Manx cat make this strip's exploration of identity and performance far-reaching in its implications, and even surface-level elements of the strip mark issues of identity and selfhood. Krazy and the Manx impose their own labels upon one another: Krazy speaks of the Manx as though he is a failed or incomplete being, while the Manx terms Krazy a "wen," or in other words a boil or cyst. Both Krazy and the Manx considers himself a complete cat, and considers the other cat to be beneath them and even somehow less than feline. Indeed, although the two cats are clearly both feline, there are actually very few similarities between the cats beyond the fact that they are of the same species. Krazy has a very distinctive mode of speech, for instance, a dialect that has been compared to the speech of black literary characters of Herriman's time. Oddly enough, the Manx's speech is far more typical of the speech of characters native

to Coconino County, though the Manx asserts that he comes from the Isle of Man. The cats are also different in appearance and color: Krazy Kat is black and possesses a tail, while the Manx is white and does not have a tail. The cats themselves notice these differences, and Krazy and the Manx try to distance themselves from each other as much as possible. The Manx both verbally assaults Krazy and physically constrains him with his cane, while Krazy expresses doubts about the Manx's claims and suggests that the Manx's lack of a tail makes him less than feline. Taking the species "cat" to be equivalent to a racial label like "black" or "white," the cats appear to be arguing about who is better at being a member of the race that they both belong to. Each cat has his own interpretation of what a cat should be in the eyes of society, and each strongly suggests to the other that he does not live up to this standard, remarking upon the deficiency of the other's physical appearance or mental faculties. Remarkably, the differences between the cats serve to divide them and even to pit them against each other, while the cats appear to perceive any similarities they share as a threat rather than something to connect them to one another: they celebrate what divides them rather than what brings them together.

Indeed, it is ultimately the similarities between the cats that bring them to harm, and the Manx at least is not wrong in believing that the similarities between the cats pose a threat to his well-being as an individual. Despite the cats' differences, when Ignatz arrives on the scene prepared to throw his brick, he makes no distinction between Krazy and the Manx, stating only that "a kat's a kat." Ignatz fails to note the radical differences in appearance and personality between the kats, directing his violence at the "race" of kats in general rather than a specific individual. For Ignatz, all kats are akin to

Krazy and therefore deserve to be treated violently, just as racial stereotyping can cause people to direct violence or anger towards a single race or group of people due to the perceived shortcomings of a single individual. Here, Ignatz appears to serve as the representative of a racist or patriarchal society. Ignatz has ultimate control over the only weapon in the strip, the brick, and although Krazy make use of the brick as well he can only do so once Ignatz has first thrown the brick at the two cats, or after he has had the “first word.” In this strip, the brick is clearly a source of division, but paradoxically this division comes from the fact that Ignatz fails to separate the two cats into different entities, instead lumping them together under the label of “cat.” Additionally, this judgment comes from afar, Ignatz never even appearing in the same panel as one of the cats. Ignatz’s degree of separation from the cats emphasizes his limited perspective upon their personal identities, though the statement “a kat’s a kat” makes it clear that he does not actually care about this aspect of the cats. Ignatz is the only representative of Coconino society in the strip, and Officer Pupp is not even referenced; there is no law that touches Ignatz here, and he can dispense judgment upon the cats as he wishes. Both Krazy and the Manx have been established as social outsiders, Krazy through his oddball nature and the Manx through having only newly arrived on the scene; in contrast, despite his frequent criminal behavior Ignatz is an established part of Coconino society. The brick thus serves as a putdown to the cats, a violent reminder of their isolation from polite society. Nor do Krazy and the Manx even think about attacking Ignatz, but instead direct all of their fury at each other, each throwing the brick dispensed by Ignatz at the other cat while ignoring the mouse. As a representative of those in control of a racist society, Ignatz is unassailable.

Though the cats each attempt to make the other out to be less than feline, ultimately it is their felinity that marks them out as abject and subjects them to the violence of Ignatz. Sadly, the public identity of the cats makes them the societally sanctioned recipients of violent acts: ultimately, being hit by the brick marks Krazy and the Manx out to be good cats in the eyes of Coconino society, as social norms dictate that cats get hit by bricks. In light of this insight, Krazy's perpetual desire to be hit by the brick and his jealousy upon seeing the Manx hit by the brick seems slightly less strange. Being hit by the brick is an essential part of Krazy's identity, and consequently Ignatz hitting the Manx with the brick seems to Krazy to be the same as saying that the Manx is a better cat than he is.

Krazy reveals that he is at least somewhat aware of his own illusions at the end of the strip. After Ignatz hits the Manx with the brick, Krazy makes no further attempts to cast aspersions upon the Manx's cathood, but instead calls the Manx a "kat" in the last panel while stating that he "sispekted him of spoofmint" all along. The tone of the statement is clearly negative, and Krazy seems to be using the word "kat" as a slur. At the time this strip was drawn, the word "cat" had two common slang meanings; traditionally, the term was used contemptuously when referring to another person, but soon before this comic appeared black Americans had begun to use the word to refer to one another.<sup>li</sup> The term thus has racial as well as wrathful connotations, and Krazy's statement therefore reflects anger towards the Manx and spite towards the race of "cats" in general. In the end, Krazy feels forced to relinquish the title of cathood that he held on to so tightly at the start of the strip, and winds up treating his own source of his identity with contempt. Krazy and the Manx can neither celebrate their similarities nor

appreciate their differences without being dragged into some form of conflict, and the cats come to resent their own race or species as a result.

There is one final element of the strip which bears mentioning: the Manx's cane, which furthers Herriman's exploration of the performance of race in the strip, but also introduces another type of performance which has its own weight in *Krazy Kat*. The Manx carries a cane that appears to serve as a sort of surrogate tail, and it is even possible to read the tail as analogous to the phenomenon of racial "passing." Under such a reading, the Manx's lack of a tail is disguised by his tail-like cane, equivalent to African-Americans hiding their racial "inferiority" by posing as white. The cover the cane provides then gives the Manx power, in particular over Krazy, the black cat, as it is the means by which he drags and twists Krazy through the course of the strip. If the cane is synonymous with whiteness or passing, then of course the control the Manx is able to exert over Krazy suggests that with whiteness comes power and influence. But a cane is also a crutch, so the implication may also be that with the receipt of whiteness comes the "crutch" of the loss of black identity and perspective. The cane also has resonance with canes used for beating slaves, as the cane is used to control Krazy here, and also the cane fields worked by slaves before their emancipation. The cane even has some similarity to Herriman's famous hats, which some believe he wore almost constantly to help conceal his partially African heritage. It is possible, therefore, to read the cane as part of the performance of identity which plays out in the strip. It is also possible to see the cane as the shepherd's crook famously used in vaudeville performances to yank unsatisfactory performers off of the stage.<sup>lii</sup> The Manx constantly yanks Krazy around while critiquing him, calling attention to the fact that both cats are

part of a performance, and that the Manx feels that Krazy's performance of cathood is unsatisfactory.

The episode where Krazy confronts the Manx clearly shows the cats engaged in performing identity, as they each try to construct the ideal nature of a cat and then perform this ideal nature through their behavior. But there is another level of performance going on as well, as the Manx strip includes elements of vaudeville and stage routines. In a profound way, the world of Coconino County is also the world of the stage; many strips drawn throughout Herriman's career include panels with footlights running along the bottom, or with stage curtains hung along the top margin.<sup>liii liv lv</sup> The desert also has the sparseness of the stage, and the constantly changing backgrounds in *Krazy Kat* resemble stage sets, easily converted into another setting in an instant. By deploying the aesthetics of stage performance in *Krazy Kat*, Herriman moves closer to the world of minstrel shows and blackface. Indeed, Herriman does "perform" certain races himself by portraying them in his work, as the cast of *Krazy Kat* includes a duck that bears many of the awkward "Oriental" stereotypes of the time, several Spanish-speaking characters, and even an apparently French poodle named Mimi.<sup>lvi lvii</sup> It is not much of a stretch, therefore, to claim that Herriman himself was in one sense a minstrel performer, as he portrays races other than his own under the guise of the stage show of *Krazy Kat*. Minstrel shows are rightfully regarded as deeply problematic, and scholars are often quick to dismiss minstrel performances as lying at the worst extremes of racial appropriation.

But some blackface performers were black themselves, blurring the lines between performance and identity in fascinating ways. Among the most famous black

blackface performers is Bert Williams, who was born in the Bahamas but moved to the United States with his family at around the age of ten; Herriman was ten years old when he and his family left Louisiana for California.<sup>lviii</sup> Williams too moved to California, and like Herriman moved elsewhere for his work at the age of eighteen, forming a vaudeville duo with his friend George Walker.<sup>lix</sup> As an African American blackface performer, Williams occupied an extremely fascinating position in relation to his race. In his book *The Last "Darky,"* Louis Chude-Sokei characterizes Williams as "Nobody," yet "the one who was multiple": he claims that Burt Williams' performances served as an erasure of his own identity, which in turn allowed him to take on identities other than his own.<sup>lx</sup> Chude-Sokei claims that Williams' blackface performances were based upon "a constant erasure of the black subject through the hyperbolic presence of blackface", which he suggests can have "tragic implications", but goes on to state that blackface can be a positive form of expression in that it holds "possibilities of camouflage."<sup>lxi</sup> This passage seems to encapsulate many of the arguments about African Americans performing in blackface performance that remain prevalent today. While some people sees the "tragic implications" inherent to blackface as outweighing its artistic possibilities,<sup>lxii</sup> Chude-Sokei would argue that the "possibilities of camouflage" that blackface offers provide African Americans opportunities for subversion and constructive expression: although it is easy to claim that any form of blackface is offensive, since blackface has its roots in racism, Chude-Sokei would claim that black blackface also offers the chance for subversive expression and is therefore a valid artistic form. Chude-Soke also argues that Williams' blackface performances offer a form of erasure of the self, claiming that Williams' most well-known song, "Nobody",

draws upon the erasure of the self in its very title. However, this form of erasure is not the mere elimination of identity: as Chude-Sokei states, “[Williams] became and occupied ‘Nobody.’ But in doing so, his absence was not invisibility. The weight of the tragicomic mask was the weight of multiplicity.”<sup>lxiii</sup> According to Chude-Sokei, in being “Nobody” Williams could actually be multiple people at once. Although Williams’ own identity may have been absent in his performances, through the absence of his own ‘self’ Williams was able to take on the identity of others, allowing Chude-Sokei to claim that Bert Williams was the one that was multiple.

It seems that Williams and Herriman, somewhat bizarrely, occupy a similar space in relation to their own race. Like Williams, Herriman was a black man performing in disguise, his race hidden in plain sight. Like Williams, Herriman sometimes performed as a stereotypical black character, the comic Musical Mose an apt example of such a performance.<sup>lxiv</sup> Like Williams, Herriman was an absent presence, creating racial performances in his comics but never actually appearing in his comics himself. And perhaps most importantly, like Williams Herriman's own identity disappeared in his comic, hidden behind the identities of his characters. Herriman performed multiple races in his comics, incorporating portrayals of many forms of identity under his print mask just as Williams took on multiple forms of identity under his cork mask. It is possible that Herriman betrays concern about passing for white in his work in strips like Musical Mose. But Herriman seems to embrace the performance of identity far more than he exhibits stage fright, and in his work Herriman is able to perform not only black and white identities but many other identities as well. To try to find Herriman in his work is largely futile, as he himself is absent.



However, despite his absence Herriman's work still displays a clear investment in racial identity from the outset of his strip, and the manner in which he deploys the aesthetics of race in his strip is both fascinating and complex, showing a deep interest in racial problems and the inventiveness of other cultures.

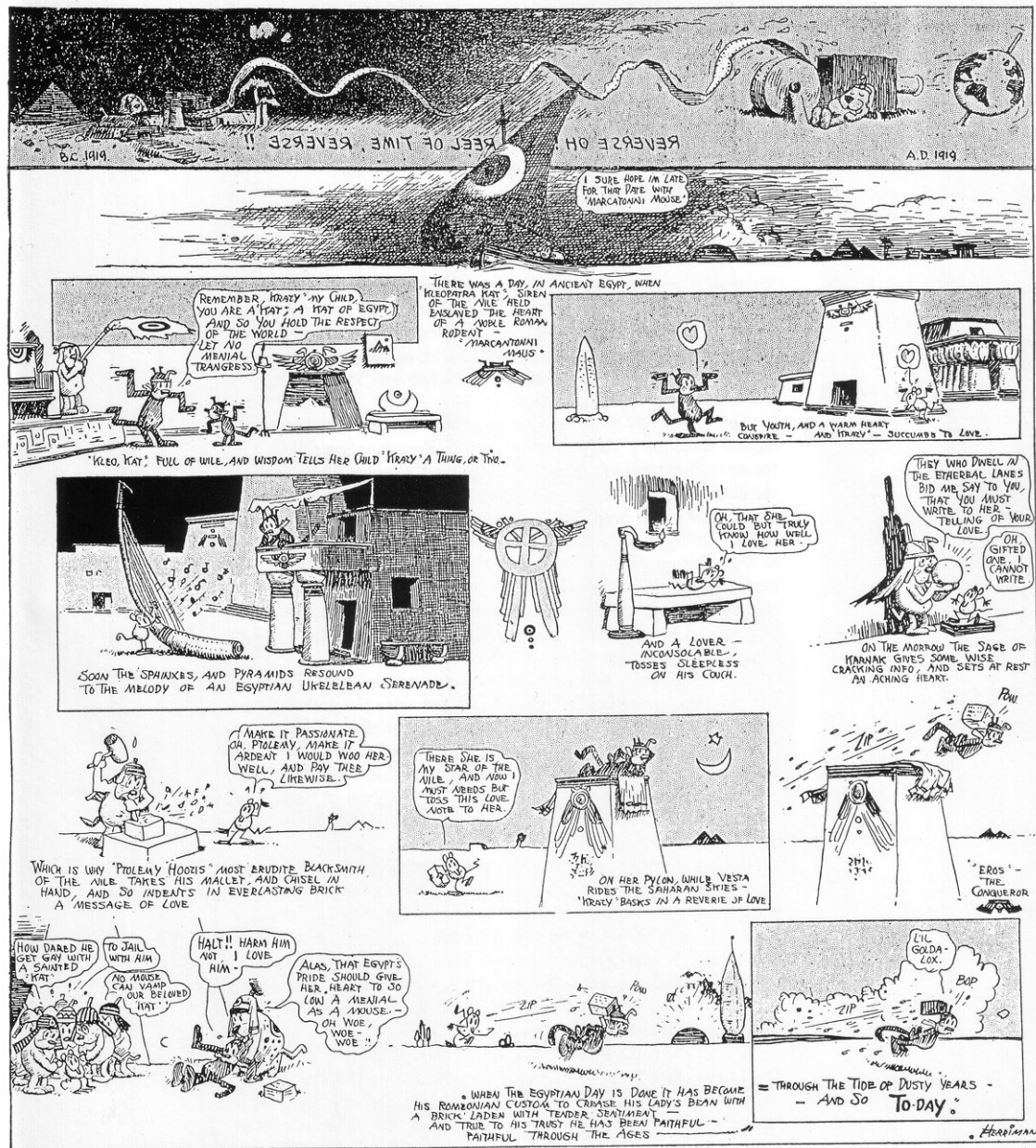


Fig. 6: Strip from 1919. Herriman introduces Krazy and Ignatz's Egyptian predecessors

### Part III: Aesthetics – Reversing the Reel of Race

In the year 1919, Herriman opens a *Krazy Kat* strip with the image of a sleeping dog running a film projector, which projects an image of the Earth spinning around in its orbit; below the Earth Herriman lists the year the strip was created in, “A.D.

1919.”<sup>lxv</sup> The reel of film trails off behind the projector towards an apparently Egyptian

city complete with its own Sphinx and pyramid, labeled with the year “B.C. 1919.” Under the reel of film the appeal “reverse oh reel of time, reverse!!” appears in mirror image. The strip then proceeds to tell the tale of an Egyptian Krazy Kat, child of Kleo Kat, and a certain Roman named “Marcantonni Maus” living in the year B.C. 1919 who are apparently the ancestors of Krazy and Ignatz. Krazy and Marcantonni meet and fall in love, and Marcantonni courts the cat, playing on his “Egyptian ukulele” underneath Krazy’s bedroom window. Marcantonni (his name clearly a pun on Mark Antony, the Roman general who fell in love with Cleopatra, the ruler of Egypt) is clearly of a lower social class than the cat, however, and struggles to find ways to express his love. A soothsayer tells him that he must write to Krazy, but Marcantonni cannot write; he therefore instructs “Ptolemy Hoozis” the blacksmith to fashion him a message in brick. The blacksmith does so, and Marcantonni delivers the message by throwing it at the cat as Krazy sits on a pylon or pedestal, hitting Krazy in the back of the head and knocking the cat to the ground. A bunch of dogs gather around and apprehend Marcantonni, but Krazy halts them, telling the dogs that he loves the mouse. After this momentous occurrence, the brick-throwing became a custom in ancient Egypt, a custom handed down through the ages – until A.D. 1919, where Ignatz Mouse still throws bricks at Krazy Kat, retaining the tradition mostly intact into the modern age.

Though the setting of the strip is ostensibly Egypt, the scene actually looks very much like the Southwestern desert landscape of Coconino County. In the panel where the mouse plays his Egyptian ukulele under Krazy’s window, the buildings which surround the pair are very similar to the mesas which typically dominate the landscape of Coconino County. The locale still retains the sparse feel of Coconino County as well,

and has similarly odd bits of vegetation dotted around the landscape. Egypt also shares many artistic tropes with Coconino County, and a flag and a ship's sail each have an image of a circle inscribed inside of another circle portrayed upon them, a symbol which often appears in *Krazy Kat*. Perhaps most telling, however, is the odd abstract image which appears in the very center of the strip. This image appears to be some odd Egyptian symbol at first glance, and has wings that suggest the eminent Egyptian god Horus, who typically appears as partly falcon in Egyptian art. But the cross inscribed inside a circle which appears in the center of the image does not appear to be Egyptian, and the image actually appears elsewhere in Herriman's art. This symbol comes from Navajo art,<sup>lxvi</sup> which has an enormous influence upon the art of *Krazy Kat*; the image in the middle of the strip therefore combines Egyptian art with Navajo art, marrying the supernatural symbolism of two extremely disparate cultures together in a syncretic figure which seems as though it could come from either society. The celebrated cultural monuments of Egypt and its people may not be so very distanced from the desert Southwest and Navajo culture.

Or are the two cultures not the same at all, but diametrically opposed? The line "reverse oh reel of time reverse" appears as though reflected in a mirror at the beginning of the strip, suggesting that the Egyptian tale mirrors the modern plot of *Krazy Kat*. Yet perhaps this mirroring is also a "reversal," as the opening line of the strip would suggest. In the strip, Krazy is a member of society's elite, holding "the respect of the world," and the cat speaks with an ostentatious quality; this is in direct opposition to modern Krazy, who is a bit of a social outcast and speaks in an outlandish patois. More importantly, the dynamic behind the brick throwing has changed. In Egypt,

Marcantonni Maus clearly loves the cat, and throws the brick at Krazy for reasons which seem to be purely affectionate. In Coconino County, Ignatz appears to despise Krazy, and throws the brick at the cat out of anger or spite. Perhaps meaning has reversed in Egypt, with everything now possessing the opposite significance that it does in Coconino.

In the end, the two cultures appear to be simultaneously connected yet alienated, Herriman creating a binary which is at once both joined and divided. In the strip, Herriman forces his readers to note how similar Egypt is to Coconino County, but then introduces elements into the strip that reopens a gulf between the two locations: the locales are almost precisely the same, but yet again are almost perfect opposites. Herriman forms similar binaries throughout *Krazy Kat*: he creates an aesthetic connection between something in his comic and something in the real world, then tears this connection down while somehow still leaving it intact. In *Krazy Kat*, Herriman implements the trappings of race and racial signifiers in a way that dares the reader to ascribe meaning or significance to them, but which defies the associations that he constructs in the same moment. Herriman's characters and objects resist all stable categorization, and while something may appear to have clear associations at one moment, its affiliations can change in an instant, or it becomes clear that it can just as easily be associated with something else entirely. In drawing these paradoxical parallels, Herriman moves beyond simple, black-and-white evaluations of identity to explore a multitude of races and forms of identification.

Even the protagonist of Herriman's strip is difficult to categorize, though many scholars have tried. *Krazy Kat*, of course, centers upon one character: Krazy Kat

himself. Krazy has a completely unique dialect which no other character in the strip shares, one which might seem to mark him out as an African American cat. Yet Krazy's mode of speech actually shares similarities to a vast range of vernaculars, and cannot be pinned down to that of a single race, any more than his black fur makes him a black person.<sup>lxvii</sup> Additionally, Krazy is the titular character of Herriman's comic, and he is the focus around which all of Ignatz and Officer Pupp's dreams and schemes revolve. However, Krazy Kat is not representative of the comic at all; at least, not in the sense that he is a good indication of what to expect from the other residents of Coconino County, who do not speak in dialect and who are typically far more interested in the trappings of society than the cat. Yet the world of the comic takes its formation around this oddball, the odd one out: Krazy appears to be the true native of Coconino County, while the other characters are merely interlopers. It seems counterintuitive or even impossible that an individual who embodies few or none of the basic characteristics of an area's populace could be the only proper archetype for the region, or even the source of its customs and practices; however, as the source for the comic's title and the center of the brick-throwing ritual Krazy is both of these things. And a similar situation exists in real-world Coconino County, which is home to a large Navajo population significantly outnumbered by white inhabitants of the area.<sup>lxviii</sup> Like Krazy, American Indians have famously been subjected to a violent history, their land forcibly removed from them by white settlers and their traditions and physical appearances publicly mocked even today by sports teams across the nation.<sup>lxix</sup> Yet there is a close popular association of American Indians with the land, and as the first residents of America, American Indians were the first to name geographical locations and to enact traditions

regarding the land. The resemblance of Krazy's position to that of the Navajo people – made abject by others, yet serving as the body upon which the strip's traditions are enacted, and outnumbered by others, yet nevertheless maintaining the position of foremost “resident” of the strip – has been ignored, and the cat seems to be just as much a Navajo cat as an African American cat. Krazy is a raced cat, but he is not a cat of any particular race.

Although there are a number of Kats in the world of Coconino County, it seems that only one is Krazy. This statement is not just meant as a pithy remark upon Krazy's uniqueness; Krazy actually does not seem to share any sort of genetic relationship with other cats in the strip at all. In fact, Krazy's true relations flout science in all of its forms, with the possible exception of Darwin's theory of evolution. Krazy's “kousins” are not Kats: rather, Herriman reveals Krazy's cousins to be a catbird and a catfish.<sup>lxx</sup> The relationship between the “kousins” would seem to be based solely upon their animal names, and of course this is the joke; the family tie apparently comes from the fact that the English language happened to rather arbitrarily ascribe the same prefix to the trio of animals. Yet the three cousins do appear to actually share family ties beyond their names within the world of the strip. The characters share precisely the same facial features, which tends to have a surrealist effect upon strips including the cousins: Cousin Catbird has a nose just like Krazy's, while Cousin Catfish has the family ears. The resemblance is such that Ignatz often cannot tell the three apart when viewing them above the neck. In one notable instance, Ignatz spies the cousins bathing, believes he is viewing Krazy Kat in triplicate, and swears off drinking when all three poke their heads out of the water at once.<sup>lxxi</sup>

Herriman uses the aesthetic appearance of the cousins to playfully comment upon the absurdity of strictly enforced racial boundaries and labels. By composing Krazy's family around the idea that the names of their respective species start with "cat," Herriman highlights the absurdity of using labels like "black" and "white" to identify and group people together. Additionally, Herriman questions simple categorization based upon appearances by making the animals all look alike despite their lack of any true scientific relationship. The absurdity of the three cousins correlates with the absurdity of categorizing groups of people based upon racial labels, genetics or appearance. By making the cousins into a trio instead of a duo, Herriman also denies the possibility of categorizing the cats around a racial binary: the characters either fall into a single camp or three distinct camps, and there is no way to split the cousins up into two camps without establishing some clearly arbitrary form of criteria.

Herriman also raises interesting questions about the nature of evolution in forming the trio of cousins. Even today, a popular conceptualization of evolution derives from the concept of the Great Chain of Being; there is a widespread notion that when things evolve, they somehow "improve" themselves, and that everything in nature therefore falls into some sort of hierarchy.<sup>lxxii</sup> Of course, this perception of evolution is completely inaccurate, but the idea maintains some traction nonetheless, and was once popularly used to justify unequal race relations, with people maintaining that blacks were genetically closer to monkeys than whites and therefore less evolved and more "animalistic."<sup>lxxiii</sup> Herriman points to the absurdity of such an interpretation of evolution through Krazy's relatives. If the cat, the catbird, and the catfish actually do share some relationship in a scientific sense, then it is through the process of evolution. Evolution is



a recurring theme in *Krazy Kat*, and in the comic Ignatz and Krazy even argue about issues surrounding Darwin's theory.<sup>lxxiv</sup> It is therefore entirely possible that Herriman wishes to show a sort of evolutionary process through Krazy's relatives, as the relationship is a common source of humor in the strip. Here, however, evolution becomes more of a devolution, at least under the conceptualization of the evolutionary process as a process of "improvement." Krazy's cousins do not share his bizarre dialect and idiosyncrasies. Instead, they behave much like the more "normal" citizens of Coconino. And while Krazy Kat is quite literally labelled "crazy" by society, his cousins are as sane as any other characters in the strip, and are often able to foil Ignatz in his schemes.<sup>lxxv</sup> If Krazy and his relatives mark the evolutionary process, then instead of the catfish growing legs, standing upright and becoming civilized like Krazy things are rather the reverse, and the catfish is certainly the more "civilized" one of the two. Herriman thus explodes the notion that evolution moves towards a sort of idealized humanity as a goal or end point, suggesting that those who are apparently lower on the evolutionary scale may be just as socially adept as those who appear to be higher up. Even if one were to accept the prejudiced notion that whites were further "evolved" than blacks, Krazy's relations humorously call any sort of hierarchy of intelligence based upon a perceived state of evolution into question.

Herriman's work can become problematic when he deals with certain races, but even in these cases his portrayals may be more complex than they first appear.

Herriman's only recurring character of ostensibly Asian descent is Mock Duck, who speaks only Mandarin Chinese for some time, then learns to speak fluent English for a period, but at one point is also of a very few characters other than *Krazy Kat* who

speaks English in an overtly unique dialect.<sup>lxxvi</sup> <sup>lxxvii</sup> Mock Duck himself is far more complex a character than he appears to be at first glance, and though it is easy to take the perspective that the character is a racist caricature of Asian Americans, such a view may be overly simplistic. Granted, Herriman's explorations of Asian culture in *Krazy Kat* are arguably among his most problematic. Mock Duck wears clothing that is stereotypically Oriental in appearance, runs a Laundromat, and sometimes operates as a seer on the side, his magical "third eye" allowing him to see into the future if paid up front in good hard cash.<sup>lxxviii</sup> In short, Mock Duck has all the clichéd trappings of a stereotypical resident of Chinatown, and the character never really does anything dramatic that breaks away from this stereotype. However, Herriman's priorities in including the character are somewhat unclear, and even the duck's name suggests that Herriman does not actually want to present Mock Duck as an authentic representative of Asian culture. "Mock Duck" is a traditional Chinese food that includes no duck meat whatsoever, but only resembles a duck, and is therefore termed "mock" or fake duck.<sup>lxxix</sup> However, the character Mock Duck is all duck, and so the "mock" part of his name would appear to refer to something other than his duckhood. Herriman appears to be using Mock Duck's name to suggest that the duck is a false representative of Asian culture; he has all the trappings of the Orient, but there is nothing actually authentic about him. Herriman appropriates Asian cultural signifiers in a way that is certainly problematic, but he appears to do so because of his interest in Orientalism and the potential it offers to his strip's artwork, not because he bears any actual malice towards or distrust of those of Asian heritage.

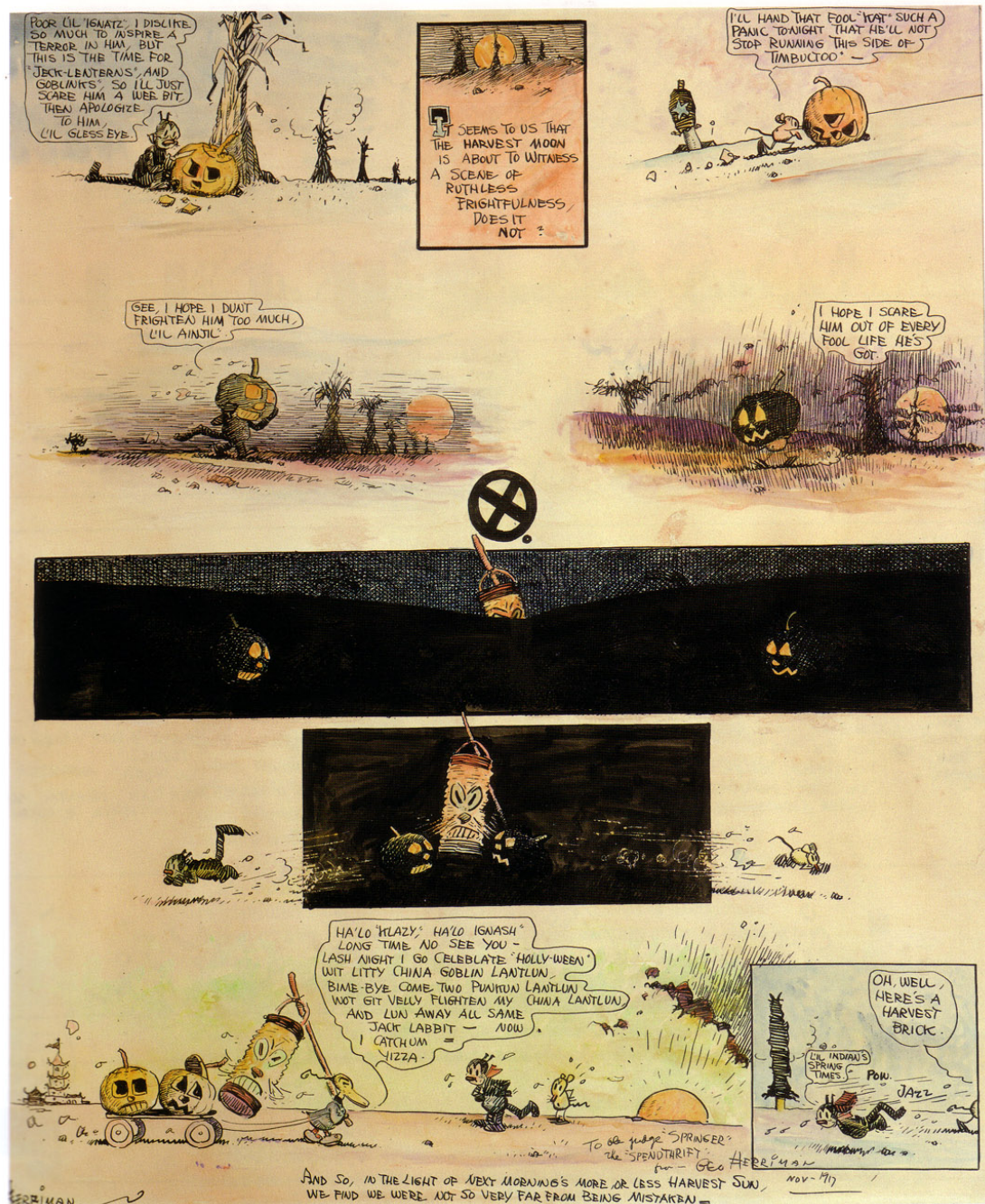


Fig. 7: October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1917. Krazy and Ignatz try to scare each other as a Halloween prank

A beautifully watercolored Halloween strip involving Mock Duck illustrates the idea that Mock Duck's character may only be a façade of Asian culture, but that even on a purely visual level the façade can hold its own power nonetheless.<sup>lxxx</sup> On October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1917, Ignatz and Krazy each carve "Jack-Lenterns" and set out to scare each other with

their pumpkins in the dark. When they are about to meet, a gruesome face ablaze with light suddenly appears from over a ridge and sends the cat and mouse scurrying away, leaving their pumpkins behind. The next morning, the duo runs into Mock Duck, who announces that his “China lantlun,” which appears to be a traditional Chinese lantern with a face painted on it, gained him two new pumpkin lanterns during the night. Having received an explanation for the night’s events, Ignatz decides not to get too worked up about things and tosses a brick at Krazy, reverting to the status quo.

The strip reveals the power of racial aesthetics and their ability to shape opinions regarding the race they ostensibly belong to. The light of day brings easy answers for Krazy and Ignatz, who seem to immediately forget about their scare once their friend Mock Duck has provided them with a convenient explanation for what actually occurred during the night. But the strip shows that there is a hidden power to the cultural trappings of Mock Duck that can manifest itself with the receipt of a perspective upon these trappings that is other than the everyday. At night, Mock Duck’s lantern takes on a power that is literally otherworldly, and though the animals dismiss the lantern when they see it in the light of day, this does not necessarily mean that the lantern has lost its power, but rather that Krazy and Ignatz have lost the perspective upon the lantern as provided by the veil of night. As a source of light, Mock Duck’s lantern sheds its own light upon the scene, a light that weakens and disappears with the everyday light of the sun. It is not that the lantern has lost its ability to illuminate, it is simply that the overwhelming power of the sun that the characters all live under drowns out the light that the lantern casts; when the lantern shines within its “proper” context of night, it still retains its power. The glow of the lantern at night thus belies the ridiculous

and often blundering nature of Mock Duck's character. In this strip, Herriman appears to imply that western ethics often cast a bad light upon Asian customs, and that these customs perhaps need to be evaluated within their proper context in order to realize their full potential and illuminate how narrow western perspectives can be.

Krazy and Ignatz also appear to hold a double standard when judging the performative elements of other cultures against their own. Mock Duck's lantern first serves as a seemingly malevolent beast in the strip, but the light of day reveals it as a prop, just a face painted on a paper lantern. The characters, therefore, recognize the lantern as an element of a performance, and though they were duped into believing the performance during the night are willing to dismiss the lantern for a simple prop come the dawn. Yet *Krazy Kat* itself bears myriad similarities to a stage production, and so the fact that the lantern is revealed to be a prop during the course of the production does not necessarily make it less "real" or authentic than any other object in the strip. Krazy and Ignatz are willing to recognize the lantern as part of a performance, but though their own cultural behavior is no less performative they immediately take up their own performance again as soon as Mock Duck's performance has been discovered to be a façade. The cat and mouse thus reveal that they are willing to dismiss the ceremonies and trapping of other cultures, but are not even willing to recognize their own ceremonies and trappings as such at all.

The aesthetics of one race in particular play an extremely important role in *Krazy Kat*: Herriman exhibits a profound interest in Navajo culture which extends even into the very fabric of the strip. Herriman's Sunday *Krazy Kat* strips, the most acclaimed facet of his artistic output, have a tapestry-like quality to them, similar to the

Navajo blankets he owned and admired.<sup>lxxxi</sup> His Sunday strips typically even include Navajo motifs, such as Herriman's famous zigzag and a cross inscribed inside of a circle, symbols which also appear in Navajo art.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Traditionally, women were always the weavers in Navajo society, and so in a sense Herriman became part of a long-standing feminine tradition by creating strips that bear similarities to Navajo weavings: another strange blurring of Herriman's own identity, as in drawing upon this female tradition Herriman operates outside of traditional gender norms.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Though there are often symbolic meanings accompanying Navajo weavings, the meanings of these symbols can change and vary greatly; according to Professor Eric Anderson, "Navajo traditionals also see this world as balanced between processes of change and processes of repetition."<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Though certain symbols are repeated throughout Navajo art, their meanings can change and gain different connotations. It is therefore just as impossible to state the significance of Navajo elements as Herriman redeploys them in his own work, though it is possible to make generalizations about these elements by tracking their use over time. This is true of Herriman's own creations as well: just as the symbolic Navajo artistic elements Herriman depicts in his strip are free and open to interpretation, yet nonetheless appear to carry deep meaning and hidden significance, so *Krazy Kat* and its basic elements are subjected to a multitude of interpretations, yet even today remain free of being pinned down to any single, particular meaning.

Though their precise import may be open to interpretation, the Navajo symbols that Herriman incorporates in his work often possess some mysterious and mystical power. For instance, *Krazy Kat*'s recurrent zigzag motif comes from Navajo tradition, and the symbol often seems to occur at moments of mischief. Every time Ignatz tries to

climb a tree and something happens to betray him from escaping the clutches of Officer Pupp, the tree seems to have the zigzag somewhere on its trunk. When Ignatz makes use of a balloon and it ends up popping, it often has a zigzag around its circumference. When a lightning bolt strikes suddenly from the sky and makes mischief among the inhabitants of Coconino County, it takes the form of a zigzag.<sup>lxxxv</sup> The Navajo zigzag seems to have some powerful yet mischievous trickster force behind it, neither malevolent nor benign but playful to an extreme. Most accounts of the symbolism behind the zigzag claim that in Navajo culture the zigzag represents lightning, apparently the most powerful elemental symbol in the eyes of the Navajo: to claim that there is a powerful force lurking behind the symbol in Herriman's work, therefore, does not seem to be too much of a stretch.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> As with Mock Duck's lantern, the aesthetics of the Navajo race have their own power, but with the zigzag this power appears to extend beyond mere appearances, actually affecting events in the strip surreptitiously yet powerfully. By deploying the Navajo zigzag, Herriman suggests not only that other cultures may hold their own power, but also that they have the power to shape other cultures in ways that may not even be realized.

The landscape of Herriman's strip is profoundly Navajo in nature.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Herriman directly associates elements derived from Navajo myth with features of his landscapes, suggesting that the "Wind Witches of Winanni" and the "Snow Squaws of Shonto" reside on top of the mesas around Coconino County.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Herriman also typically names geographic features in his strip using Navajo words, stating of this tendency: "That's the country I love and that's the way I see it... All those Indian names mean something to me and they "fit" somehow whether or not the readers understand their

meaning. I don't think Krazy's readers care anything about that part of the strip. But it's very important to me."<sup>lxxxix</sup> Herriman visually ties the landscape to the Navajo people; he includes zigzag patterns on background mesas, and often has potted plants bearing the zigzag or layered circle patterns which commonly appear in Navajo artwork.<sup>xc xci</sup> Objects and elemental forces also often bear Navajo symbols, such as balloons with the zigzag around their circumference, household furnishings with a distinctly Navajo style, and lightning bolts which by design take on the zigzag form as well.<sup>xcii xciii</sup> Even panel borders include Navajo designs, and more than once Herriman opens or closes his Sunday strips with a panel sandwiched between a cross inscribed inside a circle on the left and a zigzag on the right.<sup>xciv</sup> Coconino County, then, is a place shaped by Navajo tradition and lore, and the world the characters inhabit seems as though it is almost untouched by Western culture.

Yet Herriman's landscape is also profoundly urban in nature, and the majority of the elements described above also have an urban side to them. In one drawing Herriman created of his characters staring at some volcanoes off in the distance, Officer Pupp states that the mountains "look like a lotta Woolworth buildings looking for rooms and not finding any."<sup>xcv</sup> Indeed, the mesas of Coconino often bear an uncanny resemblance to skyscrapers, and in several strips seem to possess some of the functions of buildings as well; in one notable instance, Ignatz uses a stove at the base of one mesa that contains a chimney-pipe leading all the way to the top.<sup>xcvi</sup> With the zigzag also playing an integral part in the culture of Coconino County, and with the shock of modern electricity also taking the form of the zigzag in some notable instances, the lines between the peaceful Navajo landscape and the bustle of modernity become blurred.<sup>xcvii</sup>



Coconino County may be a place shaped by Navajo tradition and lore, but it is also a place which is profoundly a part of the modern, industrial world.<sup>xcviii</sup>

How should readers interpret Herriman's marriage of Navajo culture to the industrialization of Coconino County? The connection between the natural beauty of Coconino County's mesas and the skyscrapers of urban America seems to be a reflection of Herriman's time, when America was in a stage of increasing urbanization and industrialization, the country incorporating both the vast, open beauty and possibility of the desert Southwest and the extraordinary industry of the first great American cities.<sup>xcix</sup> The fact that Herriman includes both these extremes in the same aesthetic images implies that these extremes can unquestionably coexist. By creating a world that is both extremely Navajo and wild and extremely modern and urban, Herriman suggests that America can incorporate all sorts of extremes moving forward, and that the cultures already established in the United States do not have to serve as an impediment to modernization, but rather can become an integral and expedient factor in guiding the country into the future. Herriman often deploys the aesthetics of race and culture in order to blur the boundaries enacted by society around these races and cultures. Herriman also constantly suggests that things are never as simple as they appear, but rather have layers of meaning, and that things which may appear to be completely different at first glance might actually be the same at heart. In the end, all races and cultures possess their own power, and the perspectives they offer can serve as a boon for those that choose to accept them. But perspective can also serve to divide people, and sometimes individuals or groups are unwilling to recognize the legitimacy and the complexity of perspectives other than their own.



Fig. 8: April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1926. Mock Duck takes up soothsaying, with less than satisfactory results

## Part IV: Perspective – The Magic Eye

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1926, Officer Pupp goes to consult Mock Duck.<sup>c</sup> Mock Duck used to run a Laundromat, but has taken up the role of seer instead, which is why Officer Pupp confers with him; he wants information on where Ignatz has hidden his brick. Once Officer Pupp has paid him “two bits” for his services, Mock Duck uses his

“Third Eye” to tell him that Ignatz has hidden a brick under a “hot rock” on the road to Kayenta. Officer Pupp finds the hot rock and confiscates the brick, but Ignatz has more bricks hidden elsewhere and gets away with whacking Krazy anyway. Infuriated, Officer Pupp goes after Mock Duck, who tells the dog: “I have but one Third Eye, and so could see but one brick!” At the end of the strip Mock Duck reopens his Laundromat, his venture into soothsaying having ended in tragedy.

The strip adeptly illustrates the limitations of perspective in *Krazy Kat*, and how such limitations are often used as an excuse for failure, but not as an impetus for self-improvement. Even with his third magical eye, Mock Duck misses a vital detail when looking for Ignatz’s brick, and forgets that there may be more going on with Ignatz than he thinks. However, even if Mock Duck had thought of the possibility that Ignatz had other bricks, his statement that he “only had one Third Eye” to Officer Pupp suggests that even magical eyes often see only what they expect to see. The ability of Mock Duck’s Third Eye is nonetheless fantastic, and even without any extra refinement serves as a useful additional perspective upon Coconino County. Yet in the strip, Officer Pupp and Mock Duck somehow turn the Third Eye into a limitation instead, and Mock Duck ends up back at the Laundromat by the end of the episode. The strip makes it clear that every perspective is inescapably limited, and the characters themselves often appear to recognize this fact. But the characters also make it clear that they are unwilling to accept new perspectives nonetheless if they do not match their view of reality, or if they do not serve their own selfish desires. The characters actively make the decision to ignore extraneous or auxiliary perspectives: Mock Duck ends up using the limitations of his perspective as an excuse, but then abandons the perspective his Third Eye offers,

choosing to embrace his limitations rather than attempt to mitigate his shortcomings.

The Third Eye is also a raced perspective, as Herriman styles it his “all-seeing Oriental eye” at the beginning of the strip. Although the issue of perspective in *Krazy Kat* is not often so explicitly racially toned, in many ways issues of race and perspective go hand in hand. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois’ seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk* opens with the concept of a racial “Veil,” a veil which all African Americans live behind.<sup>ci</sup> The “Veil” allows African Americans to see the world both within and outside of the veil, but whites cannot see under the veil, and thus their perspective upon Du Bois’ “black folk” is limited in comparison to those behind the veil. Race, it seems, can provide a privileged perspective upon the world that is largely unavailable to those not of the same ethnicity. In a way, the problem of perspective marks the zenith of Herriman’s examination of race, as it is perspective which ultimately creates division in *Krazy Kat* as well as in the real world: if everyone shared the same perspective upon every issue, there would be no discord or disagreement over anything at all, especially racial topics. Perspective, whether raced or otherwise, is therefore an essential consideration when examining race in *Krazy Kat*, as it differs greatly from individual to individual and marks the inception of difference: Mock Duck’s “Third Eye” ends up serving to distance him from Officer Pupp and the other animals in the strip.

Mock Duck’s travails might serve as a metaphor for readers of *Krazy Kat*: to fully comprehend anything that occurs in Herriman’s work, one always needs to be able to see things from multiple perspectives, and even then something may remain overlooked. Indeed, the perspective of the reader plays a particularly important role in *Krazy Kat*. George Herriman once sent a letter to a fan in which he expressed

bemusement at the fan's interest in his work, wondering how anyone could enjoy *Krazy Kat* as much as the fan claimed to in the letter. Herriman eventually concluded that his fan could thank himself for his interest in Herriman's strip, stating in his letter: "it must be something *you* give to it."<sup>cii</sup> The statement illustrates Herriman's characteristic modesty and bashfulness beautifully, but it also has the ring of truth to it. To explain why, perhaps it is necessary to turn to the immensely varied body of criticism on *Krazy Kat*. *Krazy Kat* has been subjected to readings from every critical perspective imaginable. For the poet e. e. cummings, the central love triangle of *Krazy Kat* is a Marxist "melodrama of democracy... a struggle between society (Officer Pupp) and the individual (Ignatz Mouse) over an ideal."<sup>ciii</sup> For psychoanalysts like Professor Neil Schmitz, "[we] name Herriman's creatures Krazy Id, Ignatz Ego, and Offisa Pupp Super-ego."<sup>civ</sup> Feminist readings of *Krazy Kat* emphasize the indeterminate gender of Krazy and the masculine violence of Ignatz;<sup>cv</sup> the perspectives upon the central trifecta of characters alone are seemingly endless. The vast array of critical perspectives applied to *Krazy Kat* and the great interest it holds for scholars of disparate backgrounds highlight the delightfully sparse and open-ended nature of the comic. Herriman does not provide straight allegory in his work, nor does he offer straightforward solutions to the world's problems; rather, he supplies a space for contemplation within an environment that raises stimulating questions about gender, the individual, society at large, and even race. Returning to Herriman's statement to his fan, then, it becomes clear that Herriman may actually be right; it really is the perspectives readers bring to the comic that gives it its power.

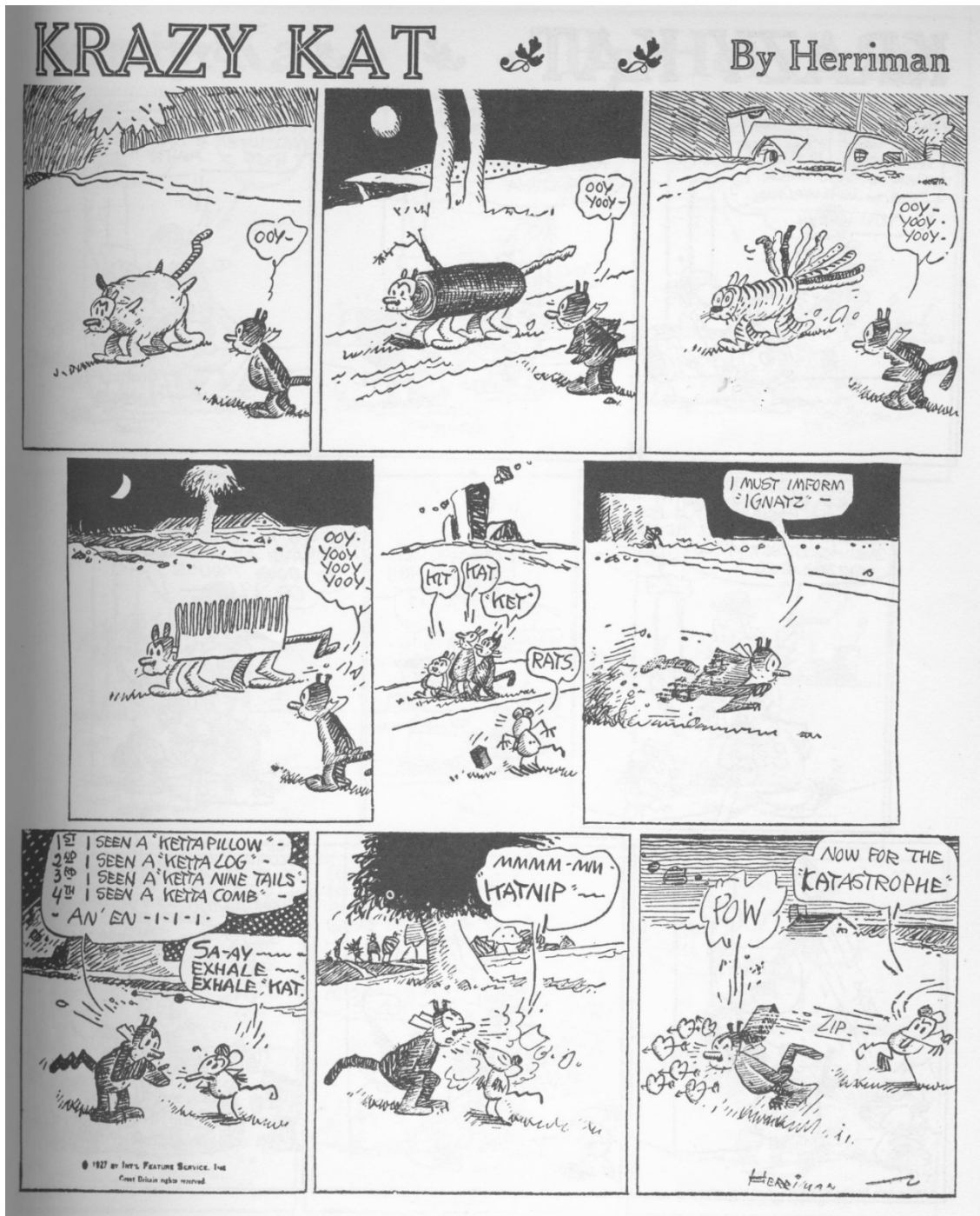


Fig. 9: March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1927. Ignatz claims Krazy has been taking "katnip" after the cat sees some bizarre sights

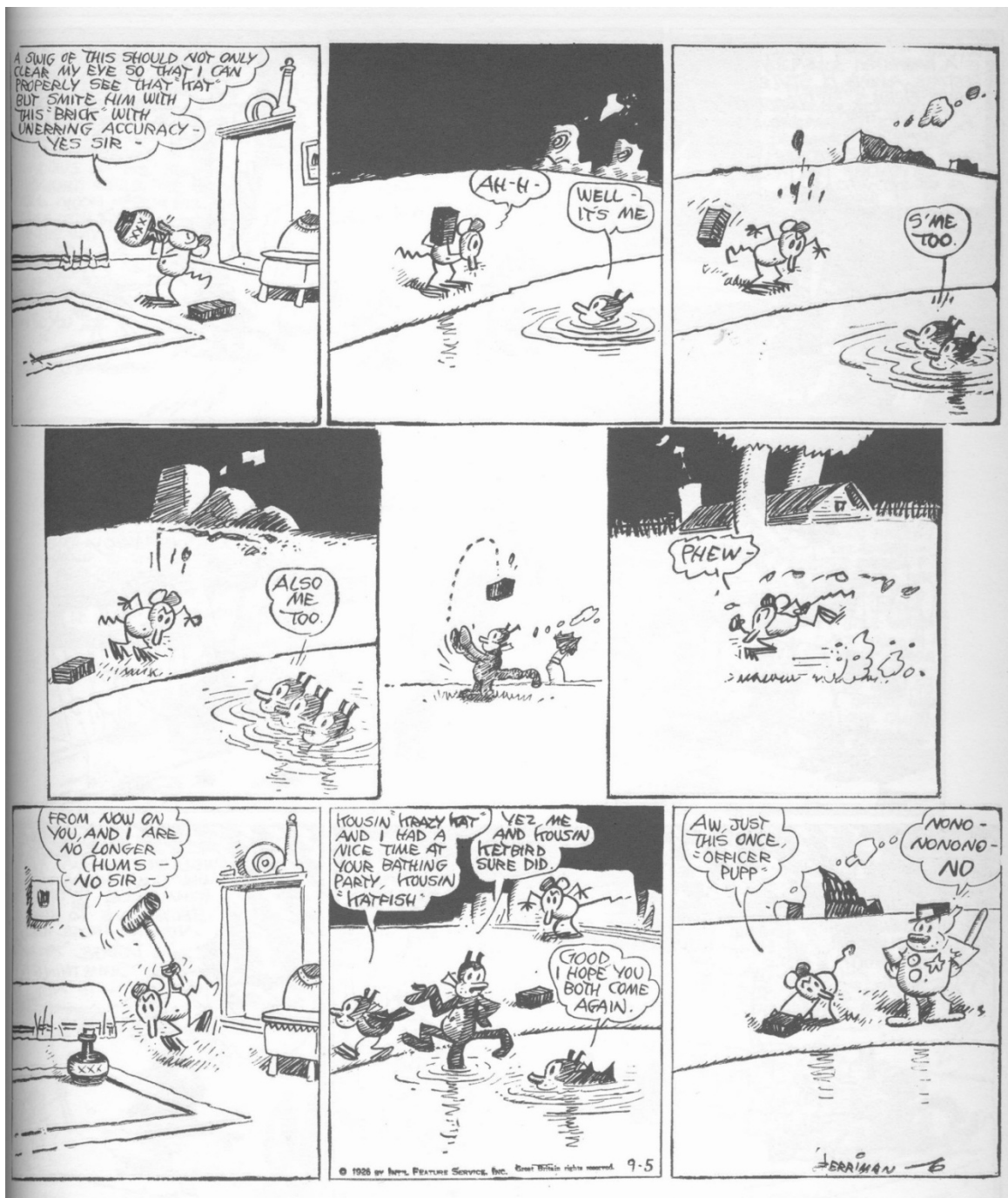


Fig. 10: September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1926. Ignatz fears alcohol has clouded his wits after he sees three Krazy Kats swimming in a pond

But perhaps the importance of the reader's perspective in *Krazy Kat* comes from the way in which Herriman limits and forces perspective, confusing what is real in his strips with what is fictional. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1927, Krazy sees a cat who appears to be half-pillow, a cat with the body of a log, a cat with a comb for a body, and a cat with

nine tails, and rushes off to report his bizarre findings to Ignatz.<sup>cvi</sup> Ignatz smells Krazy's breath and announces that the cat has been indulging in catnip, suggesting that his visions stem from drug use. But Krazy is not the only one to see the odd Kats; Herriman visually presents for the (presumably) above-the-influence reader as well, and the reader is left to question what "reality" really means in the world of the strip. Krazy's bizarre vision of the odd Kats is in fact more real to the reader than the common-sense explanation that Ignatz offers, as even if Krazy's sightings are only visions, they are also the only reality that the reader experiences in the strip. Additionally, Krazy only explains what he has seen to Ignatz through dialogue, and so all Ignatz hears is that Krazy has spotted a "caterpillar, a catalog, a catacomb, and a cat o' nine-tails." The possibility that Krazy has seen these relatively commonplace items is actually not unrealistic at all, and so Ignatz's assumption that Krazy has been dealing in drugs seems to come out of nowhere. It is also impossible for the reader to verify Ignatz's version of events, as Ignatz uses his sense of smell rather than sight to dismiss the cat's claims; of course, the reader would not be able to smell anything but newsprint if they tried to catch a whiff of the cat's breath. Ultimately, it seems possible that Ignatz simply assumes that anything Krazy says will undoubtedly be crazy.

Compare the catnip strip to one involving Krazy's cousins, in which Ignatz is the one left questioning the legitimacy of his own senses.<sup>cvi</sup> Less than half a year earlier on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1926, Ignatz surmises that he has had too much to drink when he sees Krazy and his cousins poke their heads up out of a pond, believing that his vision has become blurred and that he is seeing the world in triplicate as a result. It would seem that readers, too, would be unable to tell what exactly is going on in the strip until its



closing panels; they only see what seems to be Krazy's head poking out of the water three times, and as a result should be just as unsure if they should believe their own eyes as Ignatz. By the end of the strip, however, the truth becomes clear: what seems to Ignatz to be three Krazys are actually Krazy and his identical-looking cousins Kousin Ketbird and Kousin Ketfish. Though readers might be prepared for such a twist, they are forced to follow events from the perspective of Ignatz, who questions his own eyes and the sanity of his own mind before even thinking about accepting the surrealistic possibility that there are three Krazy Kats. Yet Coconino County is a place where surrealism is a part of everyday experience, and an entire landscape can change without the characters batting an eye. In fact, Krazy's cousins, a fish with ears and a bird with a nose, are themselves completely surreal, and Ignatz's tacit acceptance of their existence, when compared to his shock and disbelief at the possibility of there being three Krazy Kats, seems bizarre in and of itself.

In both strips, the reader sees something bizarre and seemingly inexplicable along with one of the characters: in the first strip, the reader sees events from Krazy's perspective, and in the second strip the reader follows Ignatz. In each strip, Ignatz blames substance abuse for the odd visions which appear, believing that they are too bizarre to be explained in any other fashion. In the first strip, the validity of Ignatz's explanation goes unresolved, but in the second he is proven wrong, his apparent hallucination turning out to have a rational explanation. The cousins strip casts the catnip strip in a fresh light. If Ignatz, who is actually shown in the act of getting drunk, nonetheless perceives reality correctly even when he doubts his own senses, then what makes him right when he doubts the senses of Krazy? In the end, the reader has to

choose between two somewhat unsatisfactory explanations: they can believe the mouse's commonsensical yet apparently unprovoked explanation of events, an explanation the reader cannot support and which comes from a source who has already been proven wrong under similar circumstances, or the reader can choose to accept the weirdness of Krazy's bizarre phantasmagoria instead, which the reader sees as well but which seems outside of the realm of possibility nonetheless.

The choice should be a simple one, but it is not. When reading each strip, the reader might believe that there is a commonplace explanation for the dreamlike marvels that the cat and the mouse see, that in fact these marvels might actually exist and have an obvious, rational explanation behind them. In the cousins strip, this belief would be somewhat justified, albeit in its own bizarre way, but in the catnip strip it is not. It is therefore impossible for the reader to side with Ignatz, believing there is a rational explanation for both events, and maintain any consistency in their perspective upon the strip. Yet it is also impossible for the reader to dismiss Ignatz's perspective upon reality. The reader is actually forced to trust Ignatz-as-narrator's senses in the cousins strip even when the mouse does not trust himself, as Ignatz's vision of the three Krazys actually ends up being accurate despite his doubts. But if the reader maintains consistency in trusting their own perspective upon the strip and chooses to trust Krazy-as-narrator in the catnip strip, then they must contravene the rational explanation of events instead. Herriman creates an exercise in trust by playing with perspective in these strips, forcing the reader to analyze their own biases of perspective and come to a difficult decision as to whom they should really trust, a decision that may even contravene their own observations.

The strips also illustrate the biased perspective Ignatz takes towards Krazy Kat. At first, there seems to be little reason not to trust in Ignatz's version of events in the strips; he has no obvious incentive to falsely present reality. Yet Ignatz's reaction upon seeing the cats betrays a fear of what he cannot understand, especially when such circumstances involve Krazy. Indeed, Ignatz's dismay upon seeing what seems to be three Krazy Kats seems to go much deeper than a simple unwillingness to trust his own senses. While Ignatz is ready to accept that there are more of Krazy's "race" or relations, however unbelievable their relationship might be, his mind is completely unable to process the possibility that there is more than one Krazy. What Ignatz actually seems unable to stand is that there are facets to Krazy's persona which are beyond the mouse's comprehension. Ignatz's perspective upon Krazy is that he is an ignorant simpleton, and the idea that Krazy might be more complex than he believes him to be comes as a threat to the mouse, causing him to flee in a mixture of fear at what he has seen and anger that he redirects at the alcohol he has consumed. Ignatz would rather acknowledge the limitations of his own perspective, blaming his seeming hallucination upon demon rum, than admit that there may be more to Krazy's persona than meets the eye.

And perhaps the reader is implicated in this bias as well. In the catnip strip, the reader sees the same bizarre cats as Krazy, yet Ignatz's claim that Krazy has been taking catnip is easier to accept than the idea that the cats are actually real for the simple reason that the images of the cats are so strange. The reader is likely reluctant to subscribe to the cat's point of view because it is so foreign to their experience, difficult to reconcile with reality both inside and outside of the strip. Yet this is Krazy's world, a

place where a catfish can play doppelganger to a bird. Though Krazy likely has a better perspective upon reality than anyone else in a comic which is named after him, the reader tends to trust Ignatz because his point of view is more familiar to the reader and therefore easier to understand. This tendency to side with the familiar despite contrary evidence is extremely appropriate to a discussion on race or identity, as it helps to explain how division is created amongst groups of people and between cultures. By presenting Krazy's view of reality, Herriman forces the reader to view the world from a perspective that is uncomfortable to them, but then allows the reader a way out through Ignatz's explanation; ultimately, the reader has to decide whether or not to dismiss Krazy's view of the world.

It is no wonder that perspective creates division in *Krazy Kat*, as in both the real world and in Herriman's comic even the emotions which accompany any act are often a matter of perspective. Herriman introduced movies to Kayenta in Navajo County, Arizona; he had a projector delivered to a sanitarium in the city, and also sent films to be shown on every Friday.<sup>cviii</sup> Both Navajo and white inhabitants of the area would gather to watch these films; Mike Goulding, who owned a trading post in the area with her husband, claimed in an interview that “the Navajos always laughed at the sad scenes.”<sup>cix</sup> Sadness, of course, is a matter of perspective, and what may have seemed sad to a white woman like Goulding would likely not seem sad at all to a Navajo – particularly given that at least some of the movies Herriman showed were apparently Westerns.<sup>cx</sup> The same holds true for *Krazy Kat*. The strip centers upon an act of violence and even abuse, and is therefore an act which most people would probably find sad under most circumstances. But sadness is not the typical reaction to Ignatz hitting Krazy

with the brick; more often than not, the brick-throwing serves as part of the punchline of the strip. The emotions that accompany the brick-throwing thus become a matter of perspective, not only for onlookers but for the characters themselves; Ignatz sees throwing the brick as an expression of angry passion, Krazy sees it as an act of loving passion, and Officer Pupp sees it as a crime.

Herriman deploys perspective in yet another way: he often utilizes visual perspectives in creating an aura of mystique around certain facets of his comic. Readers of *Krazy Kat* almost never get to see the tops of the mesas which surround Coconino County. Herriman typically only allows the reader the perspective of a viewer standing at the base of the mesas, and as a result their tops take on an air of mystery: Herriman uses visual perspective to instill a feeling of awe and wonder in the viewer. From the little glimpses Herriman does allow of the plateaus on top of these mesas, they certainly do appear to be places of magic and intrigue.<sup>cxix</sup> Joe Stork's Enchanted Mesa is one of the few mesas that Herriman allows the reader to glean a glimpse of at its apex, and the place is certainly full of enchantment. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1927, Herriman lets his readers know that Doctor "G. Naufel Aufel," the "Molder of Men," lives at the top of this mesa with Joe Stork and creates the animals who reside in Coconino County, shaping them out of dough; the mesa is also apparently home to "Eppis," a wormlike orphaned appendix.<sup>cxii</sup> Other mesas are home to beings that are equally as otherworldly, like the aforementioned Wind Witches of Winanni and the Snow Squaws of Shonto.<sup>cxiii</sup> The mesas are the residences of the spiritual and magical element of Coconino County, whose members have a large hand in shaping the events which occur in the world below them. Access to the mesas would provide an unrivaled perspective upon Coconino

County and its inhabitants, as the mesas physically provide a great view of the county and are also home to a world of mysterious insight upon the world below. Krazy Kat seems to be the only character in *Krazy Kat* who regularly gains access to the world on top of the mesas, and as a result often gleans privileged information that the other animals cannot access. Indeed, when Krazy Kat visits with Joe Stork on top of his Enchanted Mesa, as he often does, the bird will typically provide the cat with fascinating information concerning life in Coconino.

For instance, in an early *Krazy Kat* strip which might be described as the “origin story” of Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse, and many of the strip’s other characters, the “purveyor of progeny to prince and proletariat” Joe Stork tells Krazy Kat that the cat and most of his friends were born into very humble circumstances indeed.<sup>cxiv</sup> Krazy gains a privileged perspective upon his friends from the stork, as all of his friends insist that they were born into the lap of luxury. In the end, Krazy’s privileged perspective upon events in the strip cause him to wish fondly for a return to his point of origin, and he takes up a wash-boiler akin to the one he was born in, singing all the while. The wash-boiler becomes an aesthetic object that marks Krazy out for persecution as a low-class and vulgar figure to the other inhabitants of Coconino, who snub the cat and abandon him to his own devices. Though the other animals actually come from beginnings which are just as vulgar, they perform different identities than Krazy, lacking his perspective upon the origins of the others; the animals choose to feign great beginnings instead, which saves them from the same fate as the cat. But what exactly is Krazy’s fate? Ostracized from society, Krazy seems to find a way to return to his point of origin, escaping the pressures of race and class. At the end of the strip, Krazy appears

in the dark womb of night under a tree lying within the wash-basin into which he was born. The scene, with its single tree, suggests the Garden of Eden before the Fall, and the moment marks a return to innocence and a sort of rebirth as well. Krazy Kat ends up back at his own beginning, untouched by the evils of race and society only in isolation. But the cat never stops performing his song.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, Herriman appears to imply that it is impossible to escape the performance of existence, as even at his own rebirth Krazy continues to sing a song about his identity. Krazy cannot escape the aesthetics of a lower social class either, his wash-boiler marking him out as poor. And finally, Krazy escapes the judgmental perspectives of the other animals only in isolation. Herriman does not allow for the possibility that individuals can exist without difference; identity is formed not only from the circumstances of one's birth, but from one's actions and even from the perspectives of individuals.

But perhaps there is room for harmony nonetheless. Early in my thesis, I compared Herriman to Jean Toomer, who famously advocated for a post-racial society. Herriman and Toomer do seem to share many similarities in their perspective towards race. But there is one essential difference between the two men: Herriman does not seem to advocate for a post-racial America so much as he advocates for a post-racist America. Rather, Herriman actually appears to embrace difference in his strip, and in showing the similarities between purposefully leaves their differences intact as well. In strips like the Egypt strip, Herriman implies that while Egypt and Coconino are similar in terms of their cultural value, they are also profoundly different, and are therefore equivalent in merit yet distinct in character. Similarly, by tying Navajo topographies to the landscape of modernity, Herriman suggests a world where Navajo traditions and modern United States culture can operate peacefully side by side in a mutually beneficial relationship. Herriman advocates for a healthy version of "separate but equal," an America where difference is celebrated and where all perspectives are of



equal value.

Ultimately, it is unclear what *Krazy Kat* has to say about George Herriman, but it may be clear what George Herriman has to say in *Krazy Kat*. In his work, Herriman highlights the complexity of identity, suggesting that no two individuals can ever truly be the same. But Herriman allows room for reconciliation despite difference. Like Krazy in his wash-boiler, people simply must learn to accept both their own identities and the identities of others.

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