

Surrealism, Non-Normative Sexualities, and Racial Identities in Popular Culture: the Case of the Newspaper Comic Strip *Krazy Kat*

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Abstract: *In Krazy Kat, George Herriman painted with humorous strokes the endless variations of a sexual pantomime that challenged the boundaries of gender, race, and even species, in a recurrent pattern of sadomasochism and unrequited feelings: Krazy, a cat of indeterminate sex, is madly in love with the mouse Ignatz, whose greatest pleasure in life is throwing bricks at the feline character; such aggressions do nothing but increase Krazy's passion for the rodent; at the same time, Krazy has a silent admirer of his/her own in Offfisa Pupp, who puts the elusive Ignatz in prison once and again. Such a minimalist tragicomedy develops against the ever-changing background of a dreamlike desert, which accentuates the surrealism of the strip. Strangely enough, this unorthodox piece of comic work appeared for over three decades in papers of the Hearst chain, with the personal support of this press tycoon. The following text traces connections between Krazy Kat and surrealistic sensibilities, and offers an interpretation of this graphic narrative in terms of sex, psychology and race.*

Keywords: *comics, surrealism, sexuality, race.*

Resumen: *En Krazy Kat, George Herriman pintó con trazos humorísticos la infinidad de variaciones sobre una pantomima sexual que desafiaba las fronteras de género, raza e incluso especie, en un patrón recurrente de sadomasoquismo y sentimientos no correspondidos: Krazy, un gato de sexo indeterminado, está locamente enamorado del ratón Ignatz, cuyo mayor deleite en la vida resulta de lanzar ladrillos contra el felino personaje, unas agresiones que no logran sino aumentar la pasión de Krazy por el roedor; al mismo tiempo, Krazy tiene su propio admirador secreto en Offfisa Pupp, que encarcela una y otra vez al escurridizo Ignatz. Esta tragicomedia minimalista se desarrolla sobre el fondo en continua transformación de un onírico desierto, lo que acentúa el surrealismo de la serie. Curiosamente, esta poco ortodoxa obra historietística apareció durante más de tres décadas en periódicos de la cadena de Hearst, contando con el apoyo personal de este magnate de la prensa. El texto siguiente traza las conexiones entre Krazy Kat y las sensibilidades surrealistas, y ofrece una interpretación de esta narrativa gráfica en términos de sexo, psicología y raza.*

Palabras clave: *historieta, surrealismo, sexualidad, raza.*

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1. Introduction

Krazy Kat was a daily strip by American cartoonist George Herriman (1880-1944) that appeared from 1913 to 1944 –and also in weekly full-page format since 1916- in a varying number of American newspapers. Very little is known about Herriman's early years apart from the fact that he was born in New Orleans, and his family moved to California when he was still very young. Around the turn of the century, he travelled to New York to become a cartoonist and since 1910 he worked regularly for William Randolph Hearst's *New York Evening Journal*. That year he started drawing a strip called *The Dingbat Family*, where the eponymous characters had an unnamed domestic black cat which would evolve into Krazy Kat and emancipate into a strip of its own in 1913. For over thirty years, Herriman told, once and again, several times a week, the story of Krazy, a black male cat, madly in love with Ignatz, a white male mouse, who, on the contrary, hates the feline protagonist and knows no greater pleasure in the world than hitting him with a brick, an aggression which the cat indefectibly interprets as a gesture of affection. As for the third main character of the series, Offissa Pupp, he is a canine police officer who adores Krazy and constantly tries to imprison the mouse. Poet E. E. Cummings best summed up this minimal drama as follows: "Dog hates mouse and worships 'cat,' mouse despises 'cat' and hates dog, 'cat' hates no one and loves mouse" (1946: nn).

As stated in the title above, *Krazy Kat* constitutes an intersection of surrealistic sensibilities with non-normative sexualities insofar as the cat-mouse-dog love triangle which is the basic premise of the strip turns upside down the natural (stereotyped) order of things –dog hates cat; cat fears dog and hates mouse; mouse fears cat- and transgresses the traditional boundaries of erotic attraction – heterosexual, same-race, same-species-. It is my purpose in this paper to elaborate on the historical and textual ties between Herriman's strip and Surrealism, as well as explore the *raison d'être* of its core network of normativity-breaking affections and dislikes.

2. *Krazy Kat* and Surrealism: extra-textual connections

Amongst the few scholarly works that have traced with some rigour the actual ties both historical and intellectual between *Krazy Kat* and Surrealism, special attention should be paid to those by Rosemont (1979) and Inge (1990). The latter outlined the connections between *Krazy Kat* and Dadaism, the movement that was the immediate precursor of Surrealism, noting that, "Herriman was at work well before the Armory Show of 1913 and the subsequent art movements, he anticipated a good many of the ideas and attitudes which would characterize their art" (1990: 41-58). After Herriman's death, an article firmly stated that the cartoonist had been "Hailed as one of the first surrealists"¹. Actually, André Breton's seminal *First Manifesto* acknowledged the surreal impulse in precursors as diverse as Shakespeare, Dante or Poe, but Herriman was not amongst those illustrious forefathers of Surrealism (Breton, [1924] 2006: 434). Nevertheless, there is some recorded evidence that *Krazy*

¹ "Death of Herriman," *Art News*, 1-14 May 1944, p. 7.

Kat may have exerted an influence on him and other young French poets in the early 1920s. A decade later, some Americans tried to reclaim the inspirational effect American popular culture had had on the origination of the avant-garde movement. Thus, in 1932, Matthew Josephson wrote: “[Americans] have long been producing super-realist [i.e., Surrealist] art in the raw state. The European artists of the French capital have inspired themselves with our movies, our jazz comedians, our folk customs, have refined all this material and sent it back to us” (1932: 321-322). As he elaborated later in his memoir, Josephson himself had played an instrumental role in that process of cultural pollination, since in 1921 he had met Dadaist writers Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault and Breton in Paris. Soupault sustained, “literature alone did not suffice the new generation” (qtd. in Abel, 1976: 84), and these soon-to-be founders of Surrealism were very interested in popular culture: films, dime novels, advertising... Josephson helped them by “furnishing them with a goodly store of recent ‘Americana’ in the form of *Krazy Kat* cartoon serials by George Herriman [...] These were exhibited to my French friends [Soupault, Aragon, Breton] as ‘pure American Dada humor’” (Josephson, 1962: 124).

Other historical evidence of *Krazy Kat*'s possible influence on Surrealism includes the reported devotion to the strip by Eduardo Paolozzi, who donated the *Krazy Kat* Archive to the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1980s (Grieve, 2001: 306). Amongst the accolades of Herriman's work from Surrealism and other avant-garde movement were visual artists like Ad Reinhardt – “a lifelong admirer of *Krazy Kat*” (Howe, 1974: 5)–, as well as Pablo Picasso and Willem De Kooning (McDonnell et al., 1986: 26). A decade and a half after Herriman's death, Jack Kerouac called *Krazy Kat* “an immediate progenitor of the Beat Generation” (1959: 31), which was in some sense an inheritor of Dadaism and Surrealism, born of a similar reaction to the impact of a world war. Also, in 1990, the New York City Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* juxtaposed original *Krazy Kat* panels of 1919 with oil paintings by Joan Miró (Zurier, 1991: 98). According to Eggener, “Paintings such as Miró's *Carnival of Harlequin* [...] were praised for their ‘perky, goofy’ imagery, their fantastic humor and jaunty wit. Miró's figures were compared to *Krazy Kat* comic strips [...] and Mickey Mouse cartoons” (1993: 39).

3. George Herriman: the cartoonist as an artist

According to all biographical sources, Herriman was a very shy person whose view of himself as an artist was “modest to the point of self-effacement.” (Blackbeard, 2003: 11) As for what he may have thought of the favourable reception of his work by members of the artistic avant-garde, there is no evidence that he was conscious of it at all (Inge, 1990: 41). Most probably, he ignored it but even that we cannot assure, since not even the most exhaustive biography of Herriman (McDonnell et al., 1986) brings out any clues about his artistic or literary interests². Regarding what Herriman

² An exception is the fact that he liked comedy films, especially those by Charles Chaplin, as, aside from his cartoons and comic strips, one of the few known public texts by Herriman was an appreciative review of Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) for one of the most popular film magazines of the time (Herriman, [1925] 2002: 9). It was a fondness shared by Surrealists (Abel, 1976: 90).

thought about his own work, all we can find is an absolute lack of affectation and apparently little understanding of the critical praise he received.

Probably, the foremost apostle of *Krazy Kat*'s virtues was American cultural critic Gilbert Seldes, who wrote enthusiastically about it and personally introduced several illustrious acquaintances of his to the strip³. Seldes called *Krazy Kat* "the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America today [...] Mr. Herriman, working in a despised medium, without an atom of pretentiousness, is day after day producing something essentially fine" (1924: 309). Seldes went on to lament that the previous statement, along with others in his book, would be condemned as heresies, in accordance with the prevailing high-vs.-low-culture paradigm. And Herriman was no exception to that norm, since neither did he think of himself as a fine artist nor did he feel he could relate on equal terms with members of the intelligentsia like Seldes, no matter how much they admired his work⁴. Nevertheless, Herriman's unassuming stance should not be misinterpreted as disrespect or carelessness in his career: the constant struggle for innovation that shows in his work is the unequivocal result of the dedication he poured into the medium of comics, even if it was deemed as vulgar and unworthy of scholarly attention. Consequently, it is not in the sparse biographical material on Herriman that we should look for an insight into the sources of a sensibility akin to Surrealism but in the *Krazy Kat* daily strips and weekend full pages themselves, which he produced for over three decades.

It has been noted that within the broad field of mass media, newspaper comics "are extraordinarily susceptible to individual creative impulse", and even though "not all comics are produced by a single creative intelligence [...] most of the greatest strips have been the expression of a single creative vision" (Harvey, 1994: 171). Such is the case of *Krazy Kat*, because, while Herriman's private life may have been obscured by his own introversion, as an artist he had a strong and distinctive personality which showed in his work. Additionally, it should be noted that Herriman benefited from pretty unique working conditions for a practitioner of a medium where the success and the chance of survival of a product depended on how many readers it could attract, since comic strips had been conceived to boost the sales of newspapers. Therefore, a cartoonist had to strive for the favour of readers, even if that meant sacrificing personal interests or adhering to a formula of proved mass appeal, to the detriment of more experimental approaches. However, *Krazy Kat* was protected from such pressures for, if Herriman was the father of the strip, it also had a most powerful godfather in the person of none other than W. R. Hearst. The legendary press mogul enjoyed the little cat-and-mouse pantomime so much⁵ that he gave Herriman a lifetime contract and carte blanche to do whatever he wanted (Blackbeard, 1989). As noted by several comic strips historians, colleagues and intellectuals revered Herriman's talent, but "their high opinion of *Krazy Kat* did not translate into

³ "Seldes's circle included the renowned literary figures F. Scott Fitzgerald, e. e. cummings, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and H. L. Mencken, all of whom were introduced to *Krazy Kat* by Seldes" (McDonnell et al., 1986: 67).

⁴ As best illustrated by a passage from his infrequent correspondence with Seldes: "It's sure nice, folks like me —getting letters from folks like you" (qtd. in McDonnell et al., 1986: 67).

⁵ Reportedly, Hearst himself had encouraged Herriman to develop the comings and goings of the cat and the mouse that appeared in the marginal spaces of The Dingbat Family panels into a strip of their own (Schwartz, 2003: 8).

circulation. *Krazy Kat* appeared in very few newspapers relatively speaking” (Harvey, 1994: 179), so “Hearst had to personally back Herriman [...] despite calls from Hearst editors to cut the strip” (Schwartz, 2003: 8). Thus, *Krazy Kat* has even been described as “an unpopular failure that survived largely due to the whim of one popular fan, William Randolph Hearst” (Zurier, 1991: 102). To be fair, the strip enjoyed considerable popularity during its early years up to the 1920s, the decade that witnessed the so-called “death of nonsense,” a shift from the whimsical humour so dear to Herriman toward the situation comedy that would prevail during the 1930s and 1940s (Schwartz, 2003: 9). Though Herriman often satirized “popular culture [...] the latest fads in music, clothing, mass media, or popular belief” (Inge, 1990: 52), hardly any allusions to political and social issues ever entered the universe of *Krazy Kat* in an explicit way. As pure fantasy gave way to a more reality-based kind of humour, other cartoonists started developing their strips in close correlation with the pulse of current events in order to satisfy their readers’ taste for social commentary and lampoon. However, thanks to Hearst’s protection, the real world rarely affected the development of *Krazy Kat*, which remained “a self-contained aesthetic universe largely impervious to history” (Orvell, 1992: 112).

In short, Herriman produced his strip under a regime of patronage which may have been more or less common in the domain of the fine arts, but was almost unheard of amongst practitioners of mass media culture. This situation allowed *Krazy Kat* to evolve responding above all to its author’s creative impulses, much to the delight of his patron: “Increasingly, Herriman became a court jester to an audience of one” (Schwartz, 2003: 10). As the years passed, *Krazy Kat* progressively monopolized its author’s efforts to the point of completely absorbing him after the death of one of his daughters in 1939. During this last phase of his career, isolated from the external world, Herriman unconsciously embodied the romantic idea of the artist who lives only to produce art for art’s sake, even if it was within a popular branch of the visual arts like comics.

4. *Krazy Kat*’s surreal world

The uncanny presided over *Krazy Kat* from the beginning of the strip. One of its most celebrated surreal aspects is the way Herriman designed sceneries that somehow resembled Giorgio de Chirico’s metaphysical landscapes, which so strongly influenced Surrealist painters. Still, Herriman’s inspiration came from his direct experience in the vast plains of the American Southwest deserts to which he made a yearly pilgrimage. It must not be disregarded as a mere coincidence that, when Herriman was given a more spacious weekend full page to play with in 1916, he decided to move the action of his strip from New York to his own imaginative version of the Arizona territories he loved so much. If the unreachable line of the horizon and the natural stone formations of the real-life Monument Valley already bore an undeniable likeness to the never-ending alien landscapes of Dalí’s and Tanguy’s paintings, Herriman recast it as a veritable collage of disparate elements. The Coconino County where the *Krazy Kat* strip takes place is a juxtaposition of the desert and the big city⁶, as well as the modern American culture and the Hispanic and

⁶ According to E. G. Anderson, it is “a mixture of two actual adjoining and complementary places, Kayenta [Northeast Arizona] and Monument Valley [Northeast Arizona and South Utah]

indigenous ones. Especially, Navajo designs and motifs had an important presence in Herriman's panels, mirroring a fascination for these North American natives which the anti-colonialist Surrealists came to share:

It was towards the peoples of Arizona and New Mexico [...] that the Surrealist gaze in North America was first directed [...]. A romantic interest in the lives of North American "Indians" had been nurtured by the movement long before its American sojourn. Apollinaire, in 1903, made the first reference to American "Indians" in one of his earliest articles (Tythacott, 2003: 154).

In *Krazy Kat* this blend of cultural influences also manifested itself in the dialogues of the characters and the discourses of the narrative voice, which were written in "a bastardized dialect drawing on all the varieties of English [...] Brooklyn Yiddish, Spanish and a little French" (Inge, 1990: 49) that resulted in a distinct language with "the flavour of [...] the Surrealist 'one-in-the-other' game" (Rosemont, 1987: 124). Most of all, *Krazy's* speech displays a uniquely intricate kind of patois which American critic Robert Warshaw described as "an arbitrary dialect [...] attributable in its finished form [...] solely to the mind of its creator" ([1946] 2004: 64). It is not difficult to detect in Warshaw's words the ring of Dada, just as Hugo Ball had stated in 1916:

I shall be reading poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language [...] I don't want words that other people have invented. All the words are other people's inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too, matching the rhythm and all my own [...] It will serve to show how articulated language comes into being. I let the vowels fool around. I let the vowels quite simply occur, as a cat miaows [...] ([1916] 2006: 34)

Nevertheless, Herriman was not an inventor of words à la Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear, nor did he intend to reach a nihilistic situation in which there could be no possible communication with the reader. Instead, he realised that language was not something stable, but it could be bended and stretched, so he became a manipulator of words, writing them as they sounded, breaking them or fusing them, and, of course, throwing in the mix as many Ks as possible⁷. And not only is *Krazy Kat* the character whose name is doubly defamiliarised by the initial K, but, as noted above, his speech is so strange that it becomes a challenge to his relationship with the other characters in the strip.

Herriman's manipulation of written language exemplified Breton's doctrine of poetry as free and unlimited play even before the French poet had enunciated it. And the cartoonist applied a similar playfulness to the visual components of the comics' language, continuously stretching the limits of the medium, though "he didn't transcend comics, rather he took the special language of comics and gave it a personal lilt as no artist did before" (Heer, 2007: 7-9). Of course, his taste for experimentation shows in the inventive layouts he designed for the weekly full pages, but it is also evident in the most basic mechanism of the sequential language of comics: the transition between panels. In a blatant rejection of every rule of *raccord*, Herriman

[...] Herriman urbanizes these places [and] reinvents them as surreal, abstract, jerry-built figurative sites [...] migrated from New York to the southwest without leaving behind its urban genealogy [...] continually merges the skies and seas of Manhattan and Arizona" (1999: 151).

⁷ Herriman's fondness for this letter may be part of a more general fad (Pound, 1925).

abruptly changed the backgrounds from one panel to another, without any apparent relevance to the narrative and most often without the characters ever referring to the non-sequitur shifting of their spatial settings. The result is a world in continuous metamorphosis which, added to the already mentioned surreal treatment of the landscapes, led to an effect of disorientation of the viewer not unlike Max Ernst's collage novels. Just as Alfred Jarry's revolutionary staging of his play *Ubu Roi* had the backgrounds change even within the same scene, Herriman dispensed with the plausibility of *Krazy Kat*, in accordance with what Sartre would later describe as one of "the three essential refusals in the contemporary theatre": the refusal of all realism (1966: 67). And, in the plane of content, compliance with the other two "essential refusals" formulated by the Existentialist philosopher –the refusal of psychology and the refusal of plot– allowed Herriman to indulge in his taste for formal experimentation. Like Jarry, Herriman renounced to naturalist psychologies and elaborate plots, in favour of symbolic characters and a minimal farce he revisited once and again. The simplicity and the repetition of the content gave him the freedom to improvise and toy with the form of the expression: he would always tell the same story, but in an infinite number of variations.

5. *Krazy Kat's* plot: the omnipotence of desire

Breton distilled what he considered to be the pure essence of Surrealism in the following statement: "the omnipotence of desire [...] has remained, since the beginning, surrealism's sole act of faith" ([1934] 1974: 49-50). Instinctively, by that time Herriman had already been exploring the overwhelming power of desires and obsessions as the basic theme of *Krazy Kat* for over twenty years, and would continue to do so till the end of both the strip and his own life. The development of the theme had been almost casual, seemingly unplanned, starting with a mouse throwing a piece of brick at a cat's head in the 26 July, 1910 instalment of the *Dingbat Family* series. In this manner the rodent began a campaign of attacks against the feline which would constitute a subplot somehow mimicking the conflicts between the human main characters of the strip. By the time they were finally given a daily strip of their own, on 28 October, 1913, the basic dynamics of the relationship between the two animals had already been solidly established: more than anything else on the world, Ignatz, the mouse, wants to hit *Krazy Kat's* head with one of his bricks; and, correspondingly, *Krazy* craves for the collision of the projectile on his cranium. This violent slapstick was a direct appropriation in comic strip form of the two-man act so common in the American vaudeville theatre, with the original twist of the victim longing for the aggressions. Two daily instalments published with an interval of only a few months clearly confirm that the impact of the brick causes *Krazy* pleasure instead of pain even though, at heart, the *Kat* knows the mouse actually attempts to harm him. The first of these (11 October, 1918) shows *Krazy* gradually approaching orgasm as Ignatz's aim fails once ("Ah, Ignatz is nigh"), twice ("Ah-h"), thrice ("Ah-h-h") and finally hits his target ("AH-H-H, li'l sharp shoota [sic]"). Some months later (4 February, 1919) *Krazy* directly asks Ignatz whether he loves him, to which the mouse answers with a rotund negation while throwing a well-aimed brick at the cat's head; in the last panel, alone and contused, *Krazy* complains about his luck: "Ah, if only he was as dimunstrative [sic] in loving me as he is in not loving me, what a heppy, heppy ket [sic] I'd be".

By making Krazy struggle to interpret Ignatz's attacks as gestures of affection and even find them pleasurable in themselves, Herriman was turning the typical vaudevillian routine into a blend of denial, fear of abandonment and low self-esteem in the best classical Freudian tradition so dear to Breton and many of his fellow Surrealists. American critic Edmund Wilson had already related vaudeville to Freud and the French avant-garde after the First World War, as he noted that at both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the humour of the illogic became a trend (Berman, 1999: 79-80, 92): in Europe it was cultivated first by the Dadaists and then by the Surrealists in their own oneiric fashion; in the United States it was already a staple ingredient of many vaudeville acts, but it also adopted more sophisticated forms, such as the "crazy humour" of the Algonquin Round Table. Nonsense was at the core of the basic plot of *Krazy Kat* as it dealt with desires so irrational and hates so obsessive that they contravened the natural order of things: aggressor/predator and victim/prey swap their roles, and what is more, both of them find pleasure in the aggression. Consequently, the two-man act of the early *Krazy Kat* strip worked as an exercise of sadomasochism in which the torturing side of the couple is masculine, whereas the tortured side is feminine, in consonance with the Surrealists' admiration for the Marquis de Sade's fantasies. As Breton had put it in quite an ambiguous way in his *First Manifesto*, "Sade is Surrealist in sadism", but the consequences of such a declaration of principles would later clash with the poet's own conservative attitude toward sex, in contrast with the divine marquis' embrace of all kinds of sexual practices: "For de Sade homosexuality was natural, because humans have an innate 'polymorphous perversity'" (Blasius & Phelan, 1997: 48). On the contrary, it is well known that Breton kept a stubborn, narrow-minded rejection of homosexuality, which distanced him from associates of Surrealism such as René Crevel or Georges Bataille.

In the former quote, the allusion to the theory that humans are born polymorphously perverse leads from Breton's vindication of Sade's Surrealism to what may have been his greatest source of inspiration in the foundation of Surrealism: Freud's doctrines (Hopkins, 2004: 118-120). It has been suggested that Breton's claim of a Sadean heritage responded to "the psychoanalytically oriented attempt to develop a theory of sadism as part of the epistemological foundations of surrealist aesthetics" (Weiss, 1989: 49). In the case of *Krazy Kat*, the Freud-Surrealism connection throws an amount of light on the nature of the violent relationship between the cat and the mouse. According to art historian Hal Foster, a defining characteristic of Surrealism is the "tension between binding and shattering tendencies, the play between sadistic and masochistic impulses" (1991: 94). In this regard, Freud considered sadism and masochism were opposed, but complementary, forms of sexual fantasies and behaviours that stemmed from an association of sexual and aggressive instincts. Both of them consisted of a search for sexual arousal or gratification through either the infliction or the suffering of physical or mental pain, as the active and passive sides of perversion rooted in the anal period of the child development. In keeping with his belief in the superiority of men over women, Freud considered sadism as a result of the exaggeration of the normal aggressive component of the more active masculine sexuality, whereas he related masochistic tendencies to the weaker superegos and penis envy of females. This attribution of genders to the roles in sadomasochistic practices is consistent with the dynamic of the two main characters of *Krazy Kat*. Ignatz, the torturing side of the couple, is masculine and his portrayal includes such

traditional features as his married state and his paternity of a triplet of little rodents. On the other hand, the femininity of Krazy is much more controversial, since Herriman enjoyed playing with the ambiguous sex of the protagonist⁸.

In the strips, Krazy is always referred to by means of the pronouns he, him, his, leaving to speculation whether they actually denote a masculine character or, rather, they are being used in a generic way to indicate an individual whose gender is indefinite. This ambiguity is often used by Herriman as the comicity basis of the strip, as, for example, in a daily instalment from October 1915 where Krazy wonders: "I am confronted with a serious quandary [...] Y'see [sic] I don't know whether to take unto myself a wife or a husband". Nevertheless, the fact is that the Kat's ways most usually correspond to a traditional pattern of female behaviour, either in the passive, non-aggressive attitude formerly mentioned, or in the fondness for female attire, such as parasols, ribbons and gowns. Therefore, Krazy's role of choice is unequivocally feminine, as capably recognised by E. E. Cummings: "the ambiguous gender doesn't disguise the good news that here comes our heroine" (1946: nn). Even so, Herriman still took pleasure in mystifying his readers with the occasional gender-bending turn of the screw, as in the page from 15 April, 1923 in which Krazy employs his mostly unexploited gentlemanly charms, and even shouts compliments at the coquette Pauline Pullet, though his only motivation to do so is preventing her from flirting with Ignatz, Krazy's genuine object of desire (Crocker, 1994).

The third component of the classic *Krazy Kat* love triangle was not part of the strip from the beginning. The canine police officer Offissa Pupp started appearing sporadically as just another secondary character amongst the many picturesque ones that populated Coconino County. At first, Pupp's function, in accordance with his job, was exclusively that of acting as the guardian of moral order in the region. In consequence, it is no surprise that the nature of the threesome relationship has been interpreted in terms of the classic tripartite model of personality introduced by Freud: "A common Freudian reading of Herriman's Kop-Kat-Mouse triangle assigns Offissa Pupp the role of superego, Krazy the ego, and Ignatz the id" (Blackmore, 1997: 20). As the dog acquires his status as the third protagonist of the strip, he also develops more passionate, and diametrically opposed, feelings toward the other two central characters: Pupp becomes the silent admirer of Krazy, whom he tries to protect from attacks by Ignatz, whom he, conversely, detests. Gradually, the canine officer develops a behaviour which reflects Ignatz's cruelty to Krazy: Pupp takes pleasure in imprisoning the mouse and also progresses toward an adoration of the jail, symmetrical to Ignatz's own worshipping of the brick. This way, the classical plot becomes an even more satisfactory allegory for Freud's notion of the human mind locked in a cycle of incessant conflict between the interests of three different agents. And, just as the never-ending struggle between id, ego and superego results from the tension between the realisation of primary desires at any cost and the repression of those same desires, in *Krazy Kat* it is Ignatz's brick that comes to symbolise the object of pleasure to seek or proscribe: "The brick becomes a symbol of communication and miscommunication; the love triangle lets Herriman play with

⁸ So much so, that he was often asked about it by his readers, as in the case of a young Frank Capra who only got from the cartoonist the following answer: "[...] I realized Krazy was something like a sprite, an elf. They have no sex. So the Kat can't be a he or a she. The Kat's a sprite – a pixie – free to butt into anything" (qtd. in Capra, 1971: 40).

every possible angle at which desire and authority meet” (Wolk, 2007: 354). In different ways, the brick can satisfy the diverse instincts of the three characters in a convoluted circle of gratification and repression: being perhaps the most directly linked to the id, for Ignatz the brick is just the missile with which he can satisfy his primary wish to punish the Kat; nonetheless, Krazy’s imagination transforms the brick in a brutal –albeit acceptable within the confines of the vaudeville conventions– means of receiving erotic pleasure from the mouse; as for Offissa Pupp, he is constantly trying to confiscate the brick –which he often labels an instrument of sin– before Ignatz has a chance to use it against his adored felid. Some authors have gone so far as to suggest the brick is the fourth protagonist of the strip, and have produced some evidence for their claim:

The consistent placement of all characters’ names in quotation marks within dialogue is a signature feature of Herriman’s style [...] by designating “brick” the same way he designates “Krazy”, “Ignatz”, and the others, Herriman emphasizes the brick’s agency in the storylines (Crocker, 1994).

What is for sure is that the brick transcends its function as a mere prop and takes on a crucial role in the repetitive plot in virtue of the extraordinary value the Kat, the mouse and the dog assign to it in their interminable game of desire and frustration. This brings the brick close to another of Freud’s preoccupations, namely fetishism, which he defined as “those cases in which the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim (Freud [1905] 1953: 153). Also, the brick has to do with the fetish understood in the Marxian sense of the commodity fetish, since it is the basis for the most frequent portrayal of economic transactions within the Krazy Kat strip, those between Ignatz and his purveyor of bricks. In this aspect, the mouse’s behaviour is akin to that of a drug addict, constantly seeking money to get his missiles and, unsurprisingly, it is Krazy himself who often gives him the sum to buy them and thus fulfil the appetites of both. Once again, the brick, understood as a fetish, links Herriman’s strip to Surrealism, for, as Dawn Ades explains, fetishism interested Breton not so much “because of his sexual obsession per se, but as someone who is convinced by his imagination [...] The fetishist offered a supreme example of the reconciliation of imagination and reality” (1995: 389).

6. Herriman’s outing

According to Richard Dyer, “Queer theory is especially interested in manifestations of male-male sexual attraction where you wouldn’t expect to find it, where it’s been diverted or repressed or else obliquely expressed or unknowingly sublimated” (2001: 4). Doubtlessly, a mainstream comic strip from a major American press syndicate that ran uninterrupted during the first half of the twentieth century is one of those unexpected places to find not only same-sex attraction but also other forms of non-normative sexualities, such as sadomasochism and fetishism, as exposed above.

It is difficult to determine to what extent Herriman was consciously aware of the gender-bending and transgression of heteronormativity he was embedding in the naïve pantomimes of *Krazy Kat*. The fact is that he was allowed to do so thanks to the support of Hearst, who most probably regarded all that as nonsensical eccentricity.

Whatever was at the root of Herriman's discourse, he wrapped it all in a surreal landscape in constant metamorphosis, inhabited by oddball creatures of animalistic appearance that speak strange dialects, in the same manner as the dreamwork which, according to Freud, constitutes the manifest content of dreams. (Freud & Oppenheim, [1911] 1962: 181) Even the humorous tone and comical intention of *Krazy Kat* reinforce its connection with dreams, since Freud considered these were closely related to jokes because they were all due to the same mental processes. ([1916] 1979: 273-274) It seems, then, adequate to conjecture about the latent meaning concealed within the little mental comedy around the comings and goings of Krazy, Ignatz and Pupp.

In fact, the queer ingredient of *Krazy Kat* did not go unnoticed to everyone at the time of its first publication, since there is some evidence to support the possibility that the strip acquired a special significance within the clandestine gay communities of that time. Concretely, Heer has pointed out the existence of a club called Krazy Kat in Washington, D.C.:

The clientele included college kids, flappers and gays. A diary by a gay man kept in 1920 refers to the Krazy Kat club as a "Bohemian joint in an old stable up near Thomas Circle [...] Is it possible that Krazy's shifting gender identity made him/her an icon for gays? [...] The building that housed the Krazy Kat club remained a gay hangout for decades to come (2008).

Either consciously or not, in some sense, in *Krazy Kat* Herriman codified a discourse about his own kind of "queerness", as his posthumous outing revealed almost three decades after his death. However, instead of the proverbial closet, it would be more proper to say that the cartoonist was brought out of a cabin, for the social identity he had kept mostly secret throughout his life did not have anything to do with his sexual orientation but with his racial origins. In 1971, Arthur Asa Berger discovered that Herriman had been described as coloured by the New Orleans Board of Health in his birth certificate and his parents had been listed as mulatto in the 1880 census. According to Harvey, Herriman "was probably one of the 'colored' Creoles who lived in New Orleans at the end of the nineteenth century –descendants of "free persons of color" who had intermarried with people of French, Spanish, and West Indian stock" (1994: 179). Whatever the precise blend of races that made up his ethnic identity, Herriman chose to pass as white and took great care to conceal any features that may have given his true ancestry away, so much so that he wore a Stetson hat all the time most likely in order to hide his black curled hair. Apparently, Herriman's "passing" was so successful that he was listed as Caucasian in his death certificate and his own granddaughter did not learn the truth about the racial origins of her family until Berger's discovery: "That was a family secret [...] I was certainly never told about it" (Heer & Tisserand, 2008: x). In this sense, the cartoonist's attitude hardly qualified for the kind of revolutionary stance Breton seemed to be invoking when he wrote that, "the emancipation of people of colours can only be the work of those people themselves, with all the implications inherent in that" (qtd. in Stansell, 2003: 125-126).

While he eluded it in real life, through *Krazy Kat* Herriman translated his own identity conflict into an allegory where racial and ethnical barriers were replaced by sexual and gender boundaries which the main characters crossed back and forth once

and again⁹. From this point of view, the kat-mouse-dog love triangle that constitutes the basic plot of *Krazy Kat* has been described as “a comically thwarted fantasy of miscegenation” (Heer, 2005: 13) where racial identity conflicts are disguised as erotic relations. Jack Babuscio defines “the gay sensibility as a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression” (1977: 121). Accordingly, Babuscio adds that the gay sensibility is not actually exclusive to gays, but it is also developed by “members of minority groups which have been treated, in essential respects, as marginal to society” (idem: 132). Regarding race, the equivalent of the heteronormativity of sexual orientation was whiteness. As noted by D. R. Roedinger, “To refer to people of color as nonwhites almost perfectly exemplifies the tendency to place whites at the normative center of everything and to marginalize everyone else” (2003: 17). Thus, it has been a frequent reaction amongst those who did not actually identify themselves with the norm, either sexual or racial to avoid marginalisation by pretending they did conform to that norm. Known as “passing,” both in its sexual and racial modalities, this kind of behaviour is “often productive of a gay sensibility” (Babuscio, 1977: 126). Consequently, it is plausible that Herriman instilled *Krazy Kat* with the special perception of the world he had developed as a result of his lifelong impersonation of a white man.

In contrast with the cartoonist, who struggled to assimilate to the white majority, his creation, Krazy, embraces his homoerotic attraction toward Ignatz without inhibitions, which is in consonance with Freud’s theory of the artist as “a man who turns away from reality [...] and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of phantasy” ([1911] 1962: 244). It should not go unnoticed, however, that Herriman chose to represent the relationship between the black cat and the white mouse as one in which the former willingly submits himself to the aggressive disdain of the latter. Maybe, after all, Herriman was justifying his own “passing” in real life because, otherwise, the white American society would have treated him just as badly as Ignatz treated Krazy. But, at the same time, the cartoonist seemed to express genuine admiration and affection for Krazy, who openly expressed his true self, no matter the punishment. As for the way Herriman felt about his passing as a white man, probably his last known reflection about it was the *Krazy Kat* strip from 21 May, 1944, in which he equates it to the behaviour of a lowly weasel that gets itself bleached in a beauty parlour in order to “pass” as a precious ermine.

The question of Herriman’s racial identity brings about yet another connection between *Krazy Kat* and Surrealism. As Amanda Stansell points out, “The Surrealists’ presentation of racial difference as socially constructed, yet unfixed, anticipates the work of ‘whiteness’ critics” (2003: 115). Similarly, when interpreted as a metaphor for the impersonation of different racial identities, the gender-shifting Krazy also questions established notions of race and purity of blood, though Herriman’s critique, conscious or not, was hardly obvious to his contemporary readers. Even so, some of them were able to recognise the racial subtext underlying the sexual metaphor of this strip, for, just as there was a Krazy Kat club in Washington, D.C. which congregated gay citizens, there was also a namesake club in Chicago which served as a meeting place for African American teenagers (Heer, 2008). And, despite his timidity,

⁹ Only occasionally did Herriman address the question of racial identity in a straightforward fashion. See Amiran (2000) and Heer (2005).

Herriman himself planted the seeds of his posthumous transformation into an early symbol of the African diaspora in the United States: once, when asked about the conception of his strip, the cartoonist answered that “Krazy Kat was not conceived, not born, it jes’ grew” (qtd. in McDonnell et al., 1986: 54). His words echoed the famous answer given by Topsy, the slave girl in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when asked who her parents were and when she was born: “I s’pect I just grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me” (Stowe, [1852] 1986: 356). Decades later, shortly after Herriman’s nonwhiteness had been uncovered, African American author Ishmael Reed dedicated to him his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), in which a “mighty influence, Jes Grew, infects all that it touches” ([1972] 1996: 13), with orgiastic effects. Furthermore, in 2000, poet Harryet Mullen commented with regard to Herriman’s influence on her work that “Herriman was a melting pot American [...] The issue of lost kinship, of lineage and the denial of relationship in ‘passing’ is evident in Herriman’s story” (Frost & Mullen, 2000: 406-407). Thus, not only has the revelation of Herriman’s hidden identity served as the platform for a reading of *Krazy Kat* in a racial key, embedded in homoerotic tensions and elements akin to surrealism, but has also turned both the cartoonist and his creation into symbols for the cultural liberation of African Americans.

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