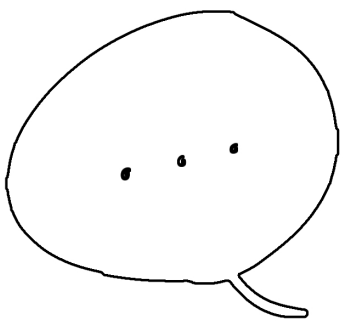
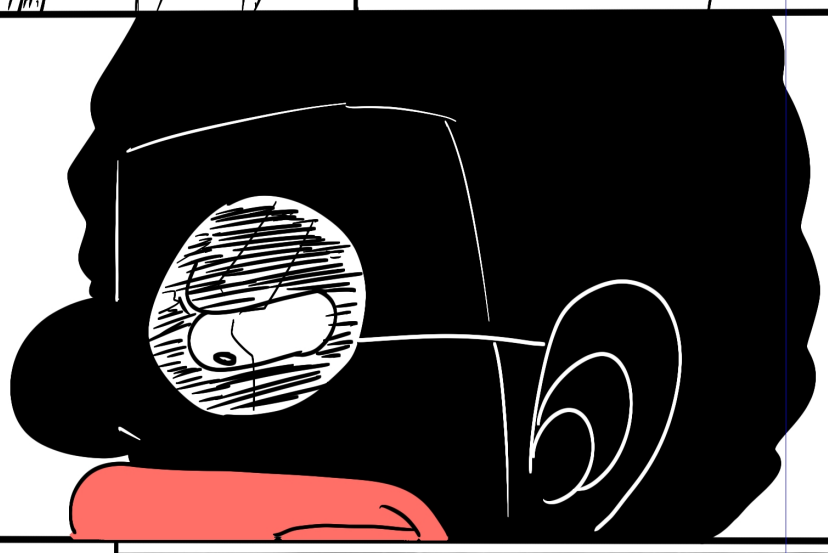
PARALLEL LINES and BIG LIPS.

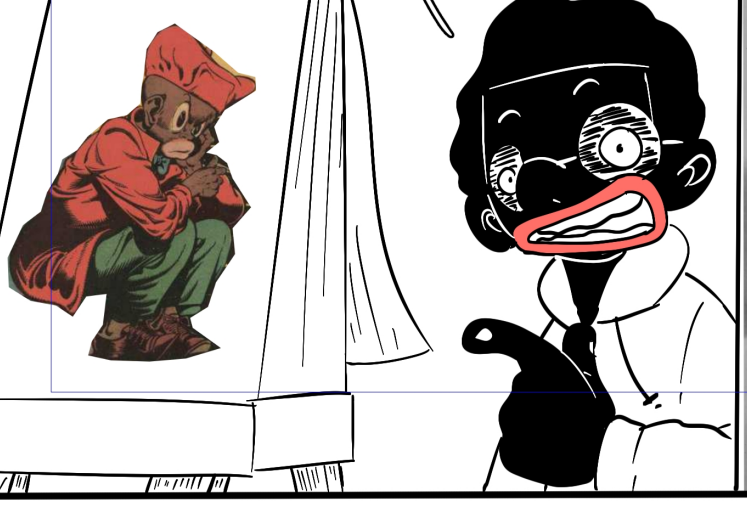
As an African-American man,
I find comics' representations of
race intriguing. Because back when
comics started
really lifting off around the 1950s-

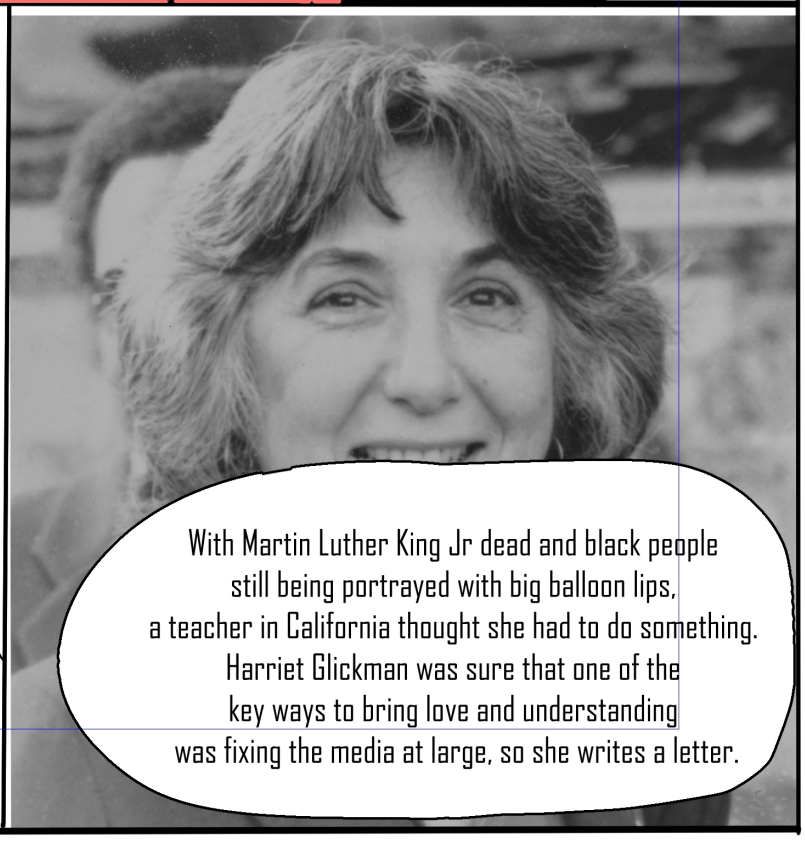
They were
shown like this.





Now, I don't look like that.
And many others shared this sentiment.
Racial tensions were high and depictions of POC
often resulted in insulting caricature.





With Martin Luther King Jr dead and black people
still being portrayed with big balloon lips,
a teacher in California thought she had to do something.
Harriet Glickman was sure that one of the
key ways to bring love and understanding
was fixing the media at large, so she writes a letter.

In the month of April, Charles M. Schulz receives a letter among his many others from fans. In it is a plead to add an African American character to his comic strip, believing that it could change the world. Schulz's response is enlightening. He says that he and many of his contemporaries would love to but they didn't know how. They feared making something insulting.

Dwayne?

Fred?

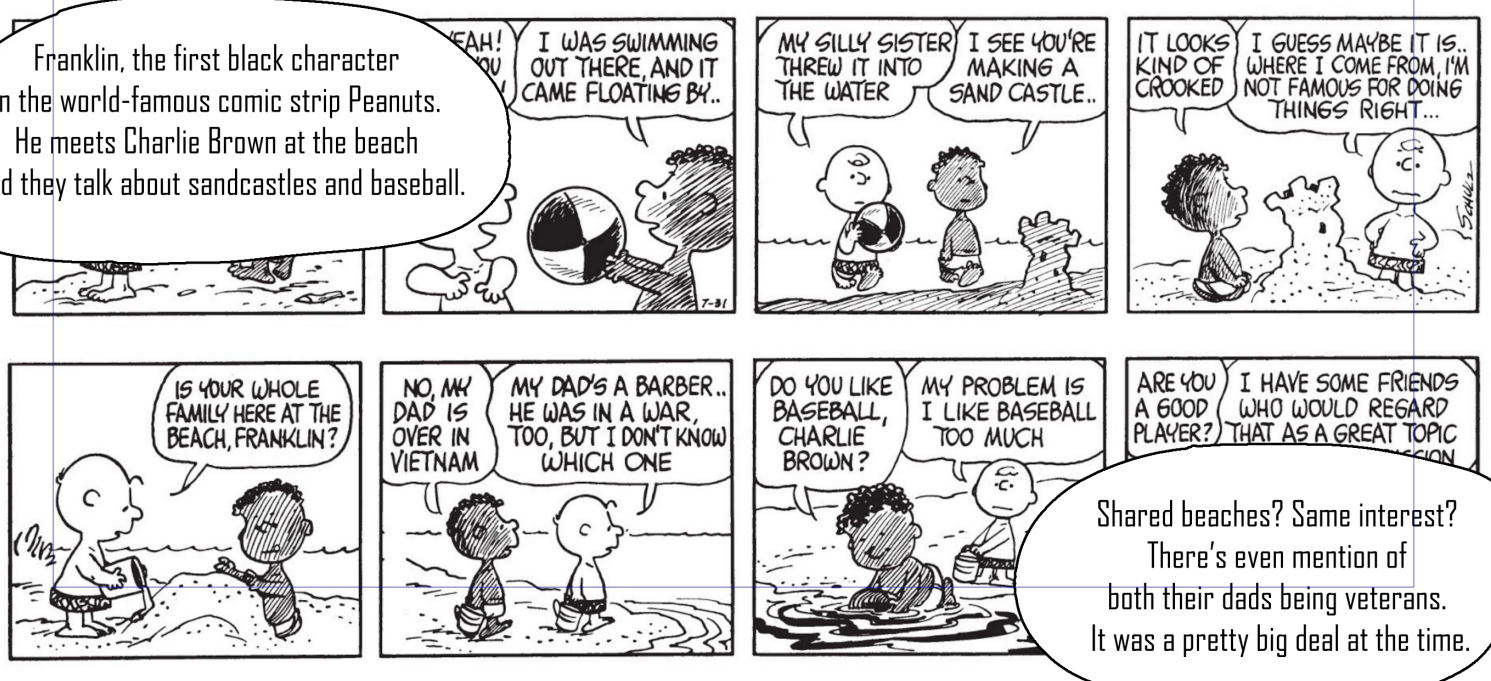
Glickman says that she'll ask some of her black friends to write him some letters.

Frank?

Roy?

And then on July 31st, 1968, he shows up.

Franklin, the first black character in the world-famous comic strip Peanuts. He meets Charlie Brown at the beach and they talk about sandcastles and baseball.

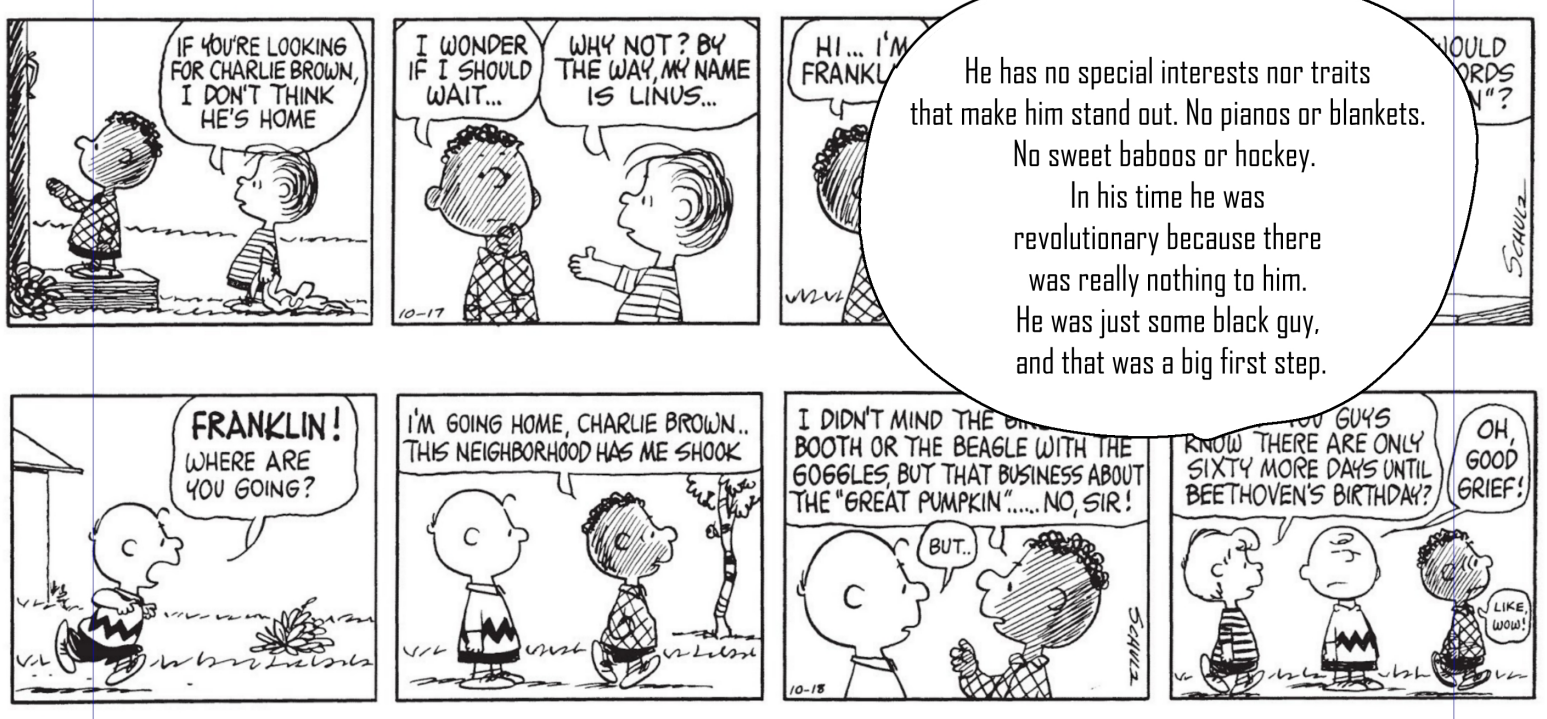


Shared beaches? Same interest? There's even mention of both their dads being veterans. It was a pretty big deal at the time.

Most seemed receptive to it.
A few southern newspapers were outraged.
It got so bad once that Schulz
threatened to quit if they ever changed his art.

It's funny-

because now Franklin exists as
the template for a token character.



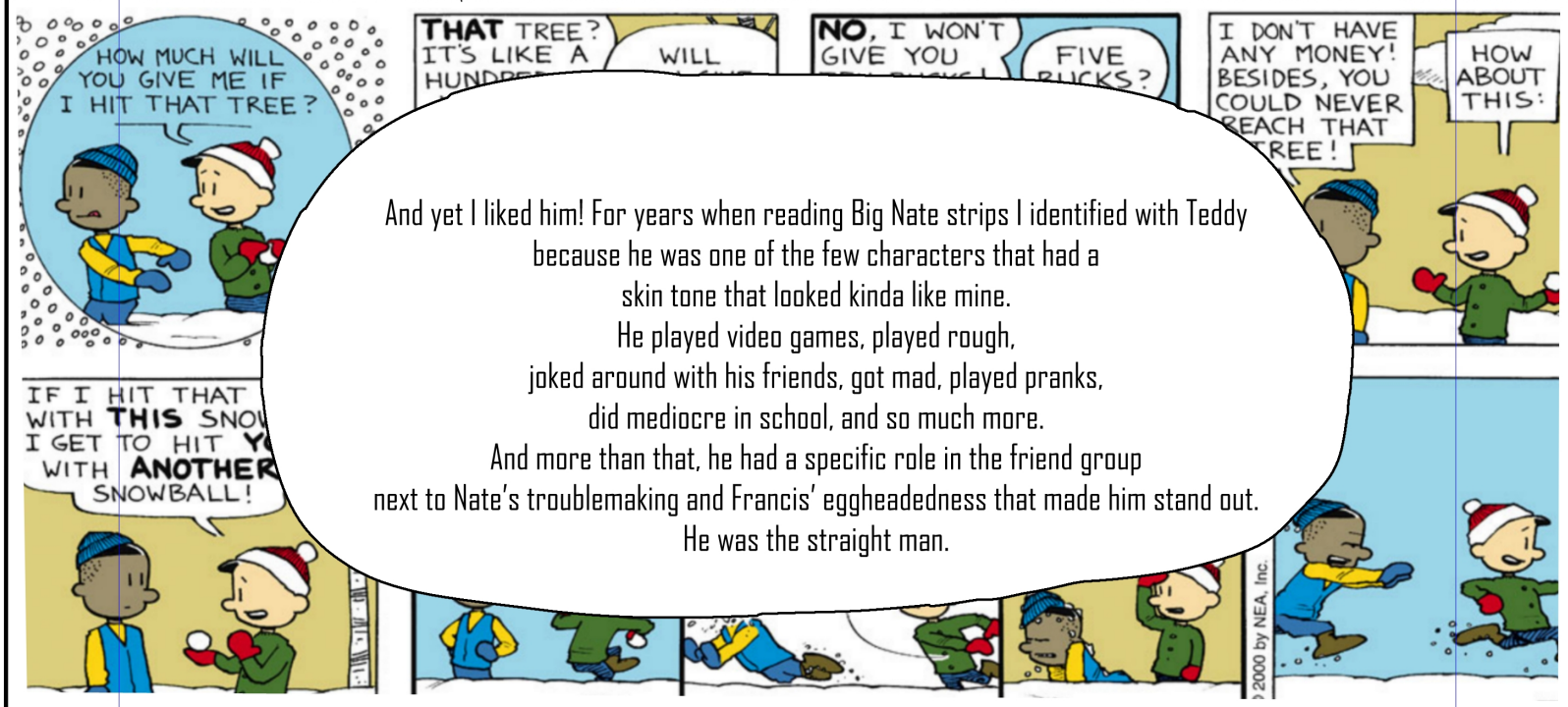
He has no special interests nor traits
that make him stand out. No pianos or blankets.
No sweet baboos or hockey.
In his time he was
revolutionary because there
was really nothing to him.
He was just some black guy,
and that was a big first step.

But by the 90s, that wasn't enough.
POC, black people in particular, had
made it clear what they wanted to see.
And comic artist who listened
made some great stuff. Like Teddy from Big Nate!

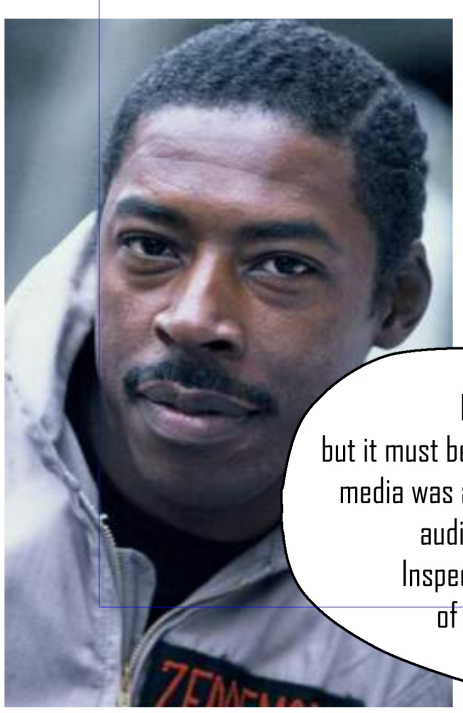
I found out a week ago he's actually Hispanic.

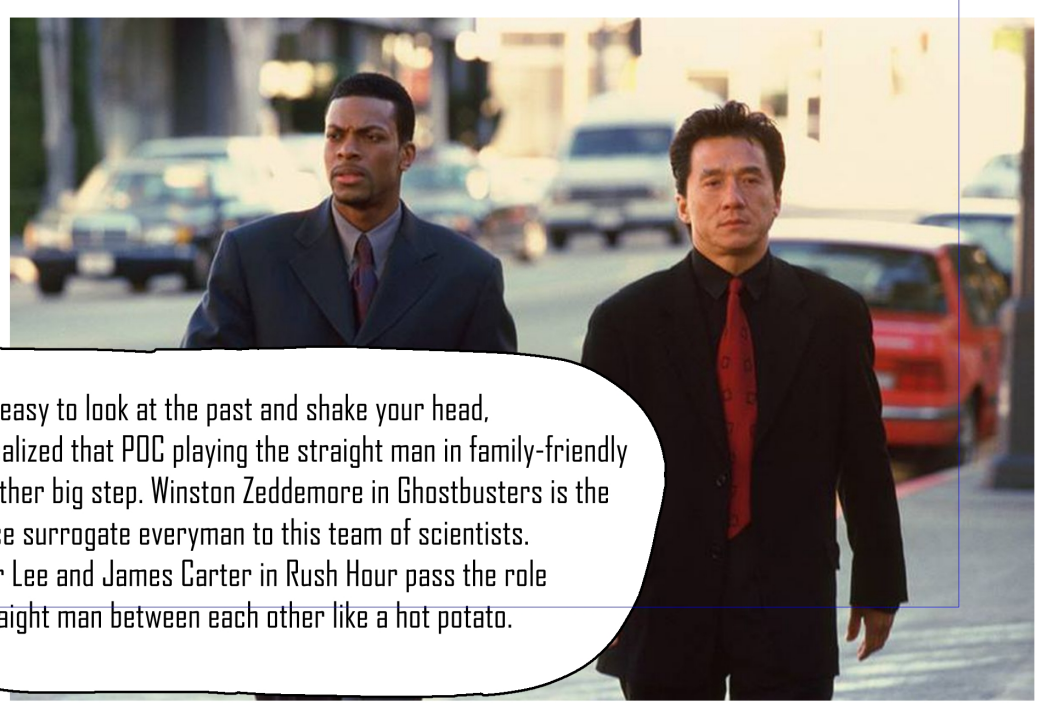
There it is again. That sense of homogeny.
The attempt to humanize POC by making a "normal person"
and then draping them in a different skin color.
Any semblance of their culture would be watered down or hidden.
From the 90s to the late 2000s, this would remain
the case for a lot of children's media. POC would often not be
shown as overtly African, Muslim, Hispanic, Etc.
A line dropped here, a little Spanish there.

Namaste, Amigos!



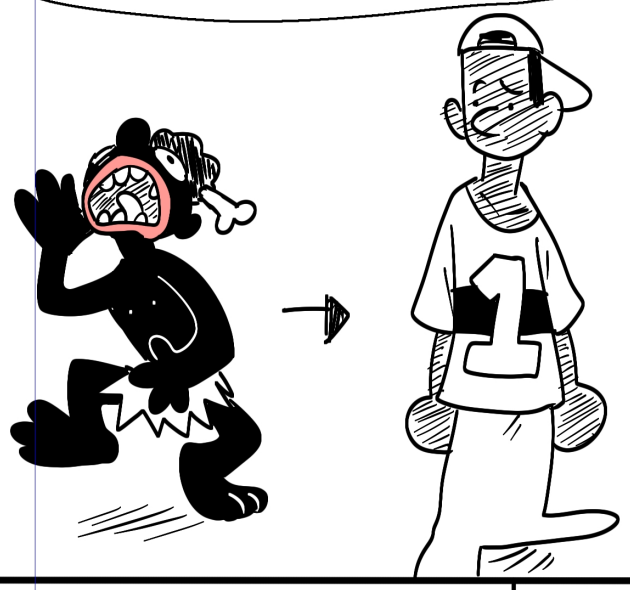
And yet I liked him! For years when reading Big Nate strips I identified with Teddy
because he was one of the few characters that had a
skin tone that looked kinda like mine.
He played video games, played rough,
joked around with his friends, got mad, played pranks,
did mediocre in school, and so much more.
And more than that, he had a specific role in the friend group
next to Nate's troublemaking and Francis' eggheadedness that made him stand out.
He was the straight man.





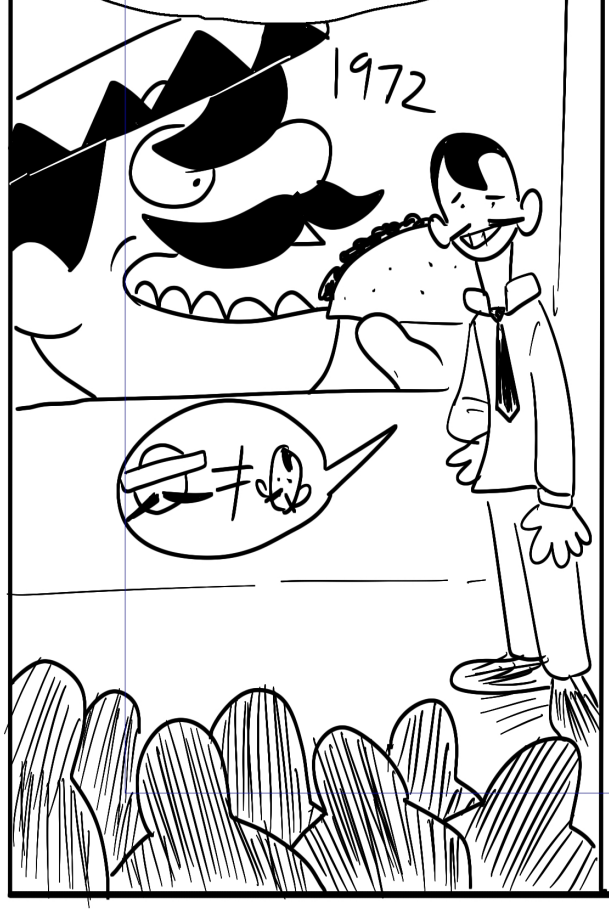
It's easy to look at the past and shake your head,
but it must be realized that POC playing the straight man in family-friendly
media was another big step. Winston Zeddemore in Ghostbusters is the
audience surrogate everyman to this team of scientists.
Inspector Lee and James Carter in Rush Hour pass the role
of straight man between each other like a hot potato.

POCs in a piece of media not being a vicious mockery of the original culture through costumes and odd noises but being intelligent people who are aware of the world around them and can comment on them?



Having the agency to make fun of the ridiculous scenario around them? Not only that but when they do get goofy it's not them being the outgroup clown but rather joining in the joyful playfulness of the people around them? That was insane.

Watching representation go from minstrel show material to a respectable blank space to actual characters full of wit and personality is wild.
We can look from the present and miss all the grit and blood it took.
But decades are still a relatively short amount of time for progress.

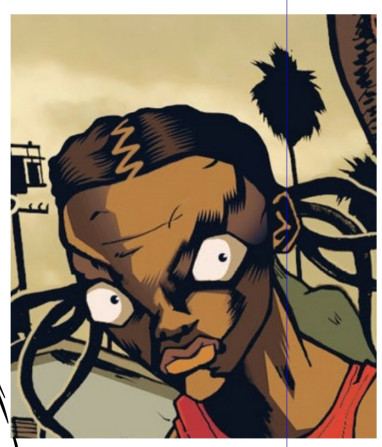


From the 2000s to the 2010s, American television got an influx of cartoons that had characters that you couldn't remove "black" from. Huey Freeman for The Boondocks. Cyborg from the Teen Titans. Static Shock from Static Shock. Characters were no longer attempts at homogeny, only respectable due to how "like us" they were to a primarily white audience.

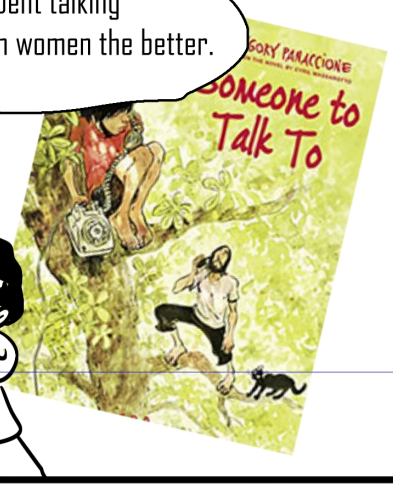
They had cultural roots, whether it was to an urban city life or immigrant struggles. It'd take a little while before other POC in America got the same treatment but it was on the way.

Meanwhile overseas, Japanese manga still would give characters balloon lips to show fuller lips. However, over time POC stopped being an oddity in these mangas but characters as well.

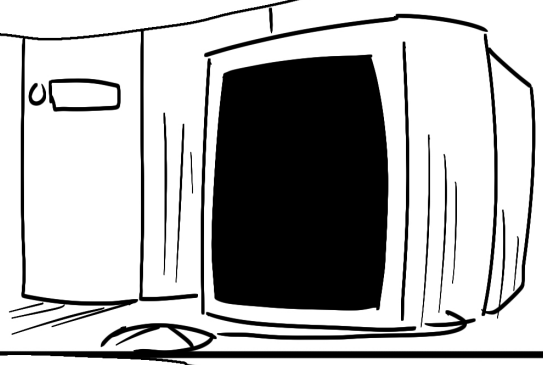
France also has lessened the disrespectful caricatures and has given some interesting representation. However, like Japan, they do let "over-exaggeration" get to their heads when giving characters their "features".



...And the less time spent talking about their fetishizing of Asian women the better.



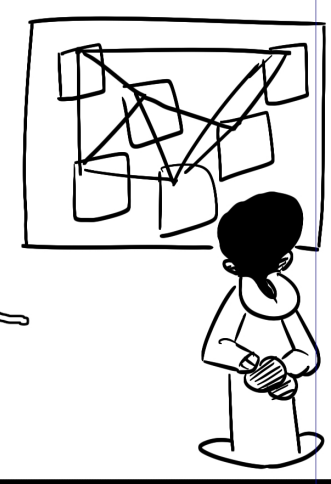
It's very easy to be dismissive of past representation.
As new POC creators flood the scene,
gone are the days when reliance on an old
white man was necessary.
The general public now knows what is
offensive misrepresentation and the ability t
o study cultures to avoid disrespect
is easy thanks to the internet.



But looking back really does give insight to
what is behind a lot of the characters of today.
What is a token? To answer that all you
need to do is look at the first, Franklin.
Made for the pure purpose of pleasing a
black audience and making
the comic seem more diverse.
Why are so many POCs in 80s and
90s movies the same? Studios were finally
getting around to giving them an actual personality.

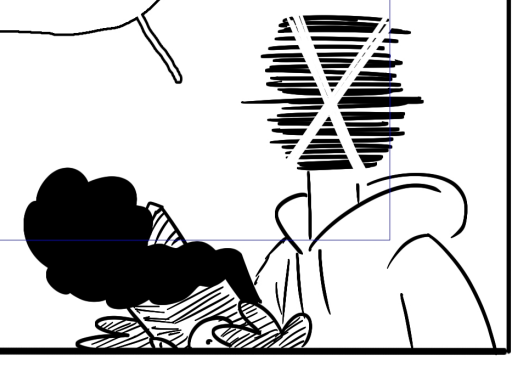
Looking back lets you sift through the
inner machinations of characters and
find out not only what's going on but also how
to make it better. Not only when looking
at White creators but also when
discussing the works of POC
trying to represent other POC.

Are Japanese creators racist because
they have a culture of drawing balloon lips for
big-lipped characters(even when they aren't black)?
Do Black characters shy away from drawing
Chinese characters because they're scared to
misrepresent them? How does a Hispanic
creator go about portraying Indian characters?



Do they want to be respectful?

What traits do they give them to
make them different or homogenous?

What do they see?

It's just something to think about.