From graphic passing to witnessing the graphic: racial identity and public self-fashioning in *Incognegro*

Pramod K Nayar

Department of English, University of Hyderabad, India.

pramodknayar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article studies Mat Johnson and Walter Pleece's graphic novel about lynching, *Incognegro* (2008). It demonstrates how "passing" is central to the public self-fashioning, for public consumption, of the African-American, but it is a passing that enables the transgression into spaces of horrific racism, such as lynching. It then moves on to the portrayal of improvisation by the two main protagonists via the use of the erotic (Carl) and the acquisition of a dual cultural citizenship (Zane). The essay concludes with Zane's fashioning himself as a crusader-witness by continuing to be 'Incognegro'.

Keywords: Graphic novels; visual cultures; race and ethnicity; lynching.

Set in the 1930s American south, Mat Johnson and Walter Pleece's *Incognegro* (2008) is a graphic novel about lynching and passing. The African-American reporter Zane Pinchback is almost white-skinned and passes for white. He is 'Incognegro', a portmanteau term bringing together 'incognito' and 'negro', a reporter who, passing as white, covers the lynching for a New York newspaper. The narrative opens with Zane barely escaping with his life when they discover his identity as 'Incognegro' at a lynching he is documenting. 'Incognegro' also serves as a nom de plume for Zane Pinchback. In his final assignment Zane sets out to rescue his brother, Alonzo, who has been imprisoned for the alleged murder of a white woman, Michaela Mathers, in Tupelo (Mississippi). He is accompanied by his best friend, Carl. Upon reaching the town of Tupelo, Zane discovers that Alonzo did not kill the white woman and, rather than wait for the due process of

a trial, the town was preparing to lynch Alonzo. Meanwhile Carl, masquerading as a wealthy Englishman, befriends the town's racist white families who squabble to host him in their homes. The town sheriff seems involved in some way in Alonzo's predicament, and Zane resolves to unravel the mystery behind the murder. He meets the presumed-dead Michaela, still alive, and hiding. In the process he discovers that the missing deputy sheriff was a woman, Francis, from the slightly deranged family of the Jefferson-Whites, who reside deeper into the south. Michaela reveals that she had killed Francis and rendered the dead body's face unrecognisable, and the rest of her disguised as Michaela for the world to assume she (Michaela) is dead. Carl is meanwhile discovered to be African-American, and mistaken for 'Incognegro'. Carl, who has never had a proper career, and is constantly role-playing, decides to let this mistaken identity be retained so that Zane can stay incognito and safe, and is lynched by the enraged town – an event Zane witnesses from a distance. Zane rescues Alonzo from the police station, in the course of which the Sheriff kills Michaela for murdering Francis (his lover). Carl and Alonzo return to New York, where Zane publishes the Tupelo story, and in an act of revenge for the murder of Carl, "unveils" the true identity of 'Incognegro', the "race spy", as being the Ku Klux Klan leader who led the Carl lynching. The last visual of the narrative shows the town crowds approaching the beleaguered white man, presumably preliminary to lynching him for passing and for being a spy.

Incognegro has been described as an 'interventionist' text (Anwer 2014) that undoes the American visual archive from 'within' and which foregrounds modernity's great innovations – the railway system, the camera – as central to the process and spectacle of lynching. This article, however, treats the graphic novel as interventionist in a wholly different sense.

Incognegro appropriates two crucial cultural symbols and phenomena – lynching and passing – in order to demonstrate an African-American public self-fashioning designed for public circulation. I treat passing as a key process of racial masquerade that enables the African-American Zane to fashion a particular *public* identity. Passing becomes a mode of insinuating himself into the racial dynamics of the places Zane travels through, even as it relies upon his sense of self as a light-skinned African-American man. It intervenes in the visual archive by turning both spectacles of lynching and passing into moments where, despite the tragic outcome of the former and the risks involved in the latter, a certain amount of agency is prised open for the African-American man. Zane Pinchback insinuates himself into the spectacle of lynching in one case, successfully thwarts a second and is a horrified witness to a third (of his friend Carl).[1]

1. There is another cultural symbol that might be profitably used as a frame to read Zane's performance: that of the superhero. The superhero, ordinary and common, shifts into super-power mode when required to guard property, advance the cause of justice, rescue humans and, in general, be of public benefit. The disguise where gods 'pass' as ordinary humans to benefit the humans is akin to African-American passing as his racial Other in order to bring about social awareness and contribute to the campaign for justice. I am extremely grateful to the reviewer of the essay for drawing my attention to the masked superhero trope that might be a useful frame to read *Incognegro*.

Zane's public self-fashioning moves through various stages: from passing through improvisation and finally to witnessing, in the course of which Zane himself grows from a distanced observer of lynching to a more empathetic witness. Passing is achieved through a series of improvised role-play and performances. While role-play and performance are modes of designing a self for public consumption, together they contribute to Zane's political project of passing. In other words, this article tracks the elements of passing in *Incognegro*.

Passing is subversive performativity in *Incognegro*. Performativity, as theorised by Judith Butler (1993) and others (e.g., Lloyd 1999) is an iterative and citational performance of practices, whether of clothing or speech acts, within established and acceptable social norms to produce the *effect* of a social identity. *Incognegro* demonstrates how these practices can be mimicked effectively to produce *temporary* social identities of white professionals, but also serve to subvert these identities. Through improvisation and role-play Zane *performs* his role as white reporter or witness and Carl performs an English identity, but both are directed at demonstrating how white social identity also consists of participation in horrific practices, such as lynching.

In the case of the graphic text, we *see* the African-American perform white identity, even as the whites *see* the African-American man as a white one. Given that passing is effectively a process of rendering legible as a non-obtrusive part of the *scene*, the graphic novel locates the African-American man in various integral positions in the panels. This becomes a meta-narrative strategy. Writing about the historical agency of actors as presented in graphic novels, Spencer Clark (2013:502-503) argues that the manner in which an author positions the actors vis-á-vis the historical events helps us, the readers, determine the constraints placed on an actor's agency. It is performativity that allows Zane to be close to the events and in the middle of the panels, suggesting that given the historical conditions, the African-American man by performing white roles can become a part of the main scene.

Passing and trespassing

A well-known feature of light-skinned African-Americans in the USA, passing, involves, in the case of Zane when we encounter him at the lynching scene and later in New York, more than just an inversion of racial dynamics founded on cognitive and perceptual dissonance.

Adrian Piper (1992:30-31) famously defined racial identification as the shared experience of being visually or cognitively identified as African-American by white society which 'joins me to other blacks'. Ron Mallon (2004:652-653), writing about passing, makes the following observation and qualifies, in my view, Piper's thesis:

> Passing in a social category is possible because there is a distinction between those properties that are indicative of category membership (such as easily perceptible racial markers), and those that are central. A property is indicative of category membership if having the property increases the likelihood that one is a member of the category … having a certain color of skin or a certain way of speaking may be indicative of one's being a member of a particular race, even though skin color and manner of speaking are neither necessary nor sufficient for racial membership. Other properties, however, are more central.

Zane first enters our visual field in a formal suit, indicating a businessman or professional, notebook in hand, recording the 'personal information' of the participants in the lynching (Johnson & Pleece 2008:9-10). He is nearly caught and has to run for his life. The text boxes consist of Zane's retrospective reporting of this lynching to his best friend Carl and Carl's fiancée, Mildred. In the course of Zane's recounting, we realise that he is an African-American man passing as white. We also recognise that the formal attire and professional air in Zane's first public appearance in the book was not mere passing, but an improvisation based on expectations and sartorial codes of the professional class: suits, hats and ties. Passing here therefore involves the employment of cultural codes – of speech, clothing, mannerisms, even gait – adapted from the *white* group, community or class into which the African-American Zane Pinchback hopes to infiltrate.

Zane is drawn as extraordinarily composed at the lynching scene. The visual emphasis is on the very believable manner in which he is able to penetrate this ritual/spectacle as a white man. "Graphic passing" is my term for this visualisation of passing in the graphic novel. Graphic passing is the seamless adoption of white clothing, mannerisms and behaviour by Zane so that he is almost invisible to the crowds in the diegetic level *and* the realism of detail that helps us see how he penetrates the white crowds. Graphic passing occurs therefore at two levels: the diegetic level where Zane insinuates himself into the white crowd and at the level of the reader where we see him merge flawlessly into the crowd. He has become invisible – as "one of us" for the white – and to us as well.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Zane documenting identities of the lynching crowd.

Later, shifting the scene to New York and his career, we are introduced to Zane's process of 'camouflage' (his word) (Johnson & Pleece 2008:18):

> I don't wear a mask like Zorro or a cape like the shadow, but I don a disguise nonetheless …
>
> My camouflage is provided by my genes, the product of the southern tradition nobody likes to talk about. Slavery. Rape. Hypocrisy.
>
> American negroes are a mulatto people; I am just an extreme example, a walking reminder.

We are then shown Zane straightening his hair, ironing out the tell-tale 'kinks' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:18). Zane steps out of his home and merges into the crowd of New York streets.

> Race is a strategy … the rest is just people acting. Playing roles.
>
> [White folks] think they're normal. That they are the universal, and everyone else is an odd deviation from them … that's what makes them so easy to infiltrate (Johnson & Pleece 2008:19).

Taking these two incidents together, I wish to unpack *Incognegro*'s strategies of public self-fashioning.

In the first incident, the passing consists of three specific dimensions. Zane dresses in the attire of a professional white man when presenting himself as a reporter. The formal appearance of the white reporter helps him insinuate himself into a cultural process: the documentation of the lynching which is already underway in the form of a photographer at the scene. The participants in the lynching initially assume Zane is the photographer's 'assistant' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:9). When his cover is blown, Zane who in his retrospective account to Mildred, describes himself as a 'colored man', runs. Here Zane asserts his professional 'property' – his expertise as a reporter – as a necessary addendum to his act of racial 'passing'. It is made obvious that an African-American reporter would not, of course, be welcome at the scene – therefore the only mode of being a spectator-reporter is to be a *white* spectator-reporter. Zane needs to appear as white – for which he fashions for himself the public persona of a white reporter, complete with the accoutrements expected of such a job – *before* he can appear as his "true" professional self. His agency in this incident stems from his professional role in conjunction with his racial role-*playing*. It is his whiteness that allows and precedes his professional role.

Further, the role of photographer itself is a historical one, as studies of lynching have demonstrated (Wood 2006). A reporter with a camera or notebook on the scene is an integral component of the very public spectacle, and performance, of lynching, and Zane is thus treated as a natural 'player' in the cultural sport of lynching. In order to acquire a measure of agency that would help him expose the participants in the heinous acts of lynching, Zane appropriates the historical and public role of the archivist and documentation expert. This is one more tier of improvisation and role-playing that Zane indulges in. There are only two kinds of people at the lynching scene: those who perpetrate the act and those who witness the act (the photographer and Zane himself). But *Incognegro* suggests (and Anwer's (2014) essay notes this point) the witnesses are integral to the act. It is part of the 'organizational methodology' (to adapt Catherine Zimmer's (2011) term from a different context) to have the documenting, mnemonic and museumising device as part of the spectacle itself, adding further insult to the injured African-American man who is made aware of the fact that his slow death would be circulated in images forever. Zane's role in the visual grammar of the text as a mnemonic device is at once 'authentic' in terms of the history of lynching, and an act of passing because his intention is not to glorify the 'heroes' as he calls the perpetrators, but to expose them. Zane's agency then must be read as an appropriation of a historical role with an entirely different agenda, and can be construed as passing. Graphic passing is the visual representation in the text of Zane's insertion into the cultural contexts in a manner that shows him perfectly positioned within the ritual of lynching. As an intruder, he is almost invisible except as the necessary addendum to the photographer.

Thus, passing as white is performed through the historically authenticated role-play of photographer, eyewitness and even perhaps a docent who traverses the various stages of the lynching process. Racial passing is achieved through a series of cultural enactments and role playing.

Finally, passing as a white man through the fashioning of the public self of a spectator-reporter is in fact an act of *trespassing*. The geographer Steve Pile (2010:26) argues that 'the practice of passing is politically ambiguous: both fixing and transgressive of identity and space'. Zane transgresses, trespasses into, the physical space of the lynching and the cultural practice of it, and this is tantamount to the 'infiltration' (the term Zane uses to describe what he does) of white spaces (Johnson & Pleece 2008:19). That is, passing as a spectator-reporter enables Zane to pass as a white interested in the 'business' of lynching. He acquires a cultural citizenship as a legitimate white, professional presence at the event, but is in fact asserting agency as an African-American man documenting the heinous act. Passing as white in the streets of New York is far less transgressive, the text suggests, than passing in the deep South.

I propose that far from being invisible as an African-American man, Zane is visible as a white participant in the first. His public self-fashioning consists of this mix of visibility and invisibility he is able to generate when playing the role of the photographer's apprentice. The ability to infiltrate, to trespass, is an act of public self-fashioning. Graphic passing is a mix of signs of racial and professional affiliation cathected onto the African-American body that enables him (Zane) to fit into multiple roles.

The passing at the site of lynching folds into the passing Zane performs on a routine basis, in New York City. Here the nature of 'infiltration' is not quite the same as it was at the lynching scene. Zane is no longer a reporter or an infiltrator, in fact he is invisible. If in the first scene he is visible in a particular role as noted above, in the city space he is one more 'regular' white man.

In both these sets of visuals we can discern the gamut of the African-American man's modes of public self-fashioning. In Mallon's (2004) terms, neither the indicative nor central properties that would categorise him as African-American are present, or visible, in Zane. He can neither be visually nor cognitively identified by the whites – as Adrian Piper (1992) would say about racial identification – in the city's public spaces he inhabits. At the lynching, nobody can see the indicative or central properties of his racial identity because all they see is a white professional doing what he is supposed to do: document, like "white" photographers before him, the lynching. The graphic novel form underscores this involuntary (because it is partly genetic) and wilful (because he works at smoothening his hair) becoming invisible, or passing.

Passing, then, consists of playing racial and professional roles in order to function in a specific context and for a definite purpose. It is always, in Zane's case, trespassing because rather than passing to avoid scenes of possible discovery of his true racial identity in this trespass he *confronts* the extremity of race-based encounters: lynching. That is, Zane does not utilise his purely biological gift of being near-white to acquire privileges for himself, but rather to deploy it in conditions of extreme risk. Whiteness thus is an asset he turns against the whites themselves.

Improvisation

Improvisation is the manipulation of processes, places, and relations – of sexuality, familial and power – that seem fixed and established. In the case of racial passing, improvisation is the adaptation of cultural codes – from speech to sartorial regimes – of the white race in order to present an acceptable *white* self for public consumption. That is, improvisation might be seen as a component of the larger process of racial passing.

Improvisation is at the heart of the public self-fashioning process in *Incognegro*. If passing enables Zane to insinuate himself into a cultural membership, however temporary, of the lynching scene, improvisation generates this cultural membership by allowing access to a larger field of white culture as he investigates the murder his brother is indicted for. However, it is also to be noted that Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece (2008) do not focus on improvisation by African-Americans – white people also do so, for very different reasons. Indeed, it might be argued that *all* race relations in *Incognegro* are grounded in a dynamics of improvisation.

Language and hospitality

On arriving in Tupelo, Zane quickly establishes himself as a member of the KKK with the use of the code: AYAK ('are you a Klansman?') ((Johnson & Pleece 2008:24). He warns Carl: 'cut the southern accent; its horrendous' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:28). With this, Zane makes two moves: he establishes himself as a guest in the town but as a member of a 'klan', and therefore of the 'family', and he cautions Carl that his southern accent makes him stand out as an outsider. Zane himself is at once insider (of the Klan) and outsider, but Carl, unless he plays it carefully, will always be a guest.

Carl, however, is a better improviser. If Zane takes on the identity of a white supremacist Klansman, Carl dons the role of an English duke intending to acquire large tracts of land in the area. He says to the horrified Zane: 'I just tried an English one [accent] … they love it'. Carl manages in a few hours to become an honoured guest in the town, with people waiting on him hand and foot (Johnson & Pleece 2008:37), even as he discovers details about Alonzo's case in the course of his socialising.

Carl comes to Tupelo as a guest whose identity is open to question and suspicion. Yet, oddly, it is because of his exaggerated accent as an Englishman that he is welcomed. That is, it is the *character* of his language – at once English and yet a foreign tongue – that positions him as a guest, but a valuable guest: 'Sir Carlton of Lancashire' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:72). If, as Jacques Derrida (2000:15-17) asks in his analysis of hospitality, 'he [the foreigner] was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner …?' Carl 'becomes the foreigner by language' (Derrida 2000:17). He is a foreigner who is welcomed because of his foreign accent and because this accent appropriates a specific social register, or idiom. Carl informs Zane: 'I told them I was in town to buy some land to add to my American holdings, and these jokers ate it up. They don't see a negro in front of them, all they see is green' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:37). Later,

in a conversation among the hosts, a landholder who has asked Carl to stay at his home, says to another: 'I'm a land-rich man. And word is he is buying up property by the acre' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:52). He refers to Carl as an 'esteemed guest' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:72).

Carl shares with the hosts a love of property, as he makes clear in his phony accent. He claims a home in Paris (Johnson & Pleece 2008:73), for instance. The Americans are keen on him as a guest because of this shared love of "green", the colour of (American) money. Carl speaks English but in the *register of wealth, property and privilege*. Carl's formal dress complete with black bow tie and cigar (Johnson & Pleece 2008:72-73) – again a language of its own – in conjunction with the accent ensure that he is accepted as the complete English gentleman.

I propose that Carl's improvisation as a privileged Englishman is founded on the "foreignness" of his accent that endears him as a guest because he speaks in the register that is *not* foreign to the American hosts. The guest is at once a foreigner by language and a potential regular houseguest, for as his host of the evening puts it: 'a lovely houseguest, one we hope to see much of in the future' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:72). Carl is no longer simply a foreign guest, he is likely to be a frequent foreign guest or maybe even a neighbour if he buys property in the area. I am of course distinguishing between Carl's language as a linguistic act in communication and his "other" language: the idiom of property. I further propose that a mere English accent would not suffice for this daring improvisation in the heart of racist America: Carl appropriates the language of acquisition and greed so as to be accepted.

The first sign of Carl's identity fracturing is when a new register is introduced into the social interactions: visuals in the form of lynching postcards. Two men at the party proudly exhibit their souvenir photographs made available as postcards.[2] The visual grammar of the scene is revealing: the formally clad gentlemen leering at and taking obvious pleasure in torture porn (Johnson & Pleece 2008:75). A masculine solidarity is being built through the circulation of these icons of white supremacy: indeed, the cards represent the common language of the KKK and white supremacy embodied in the gentlemen at the party.

Carl's expression changes visibly at the sight of the grotesque cards: of 'the nigger's neck snap[ping] like a turkey's' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:75). Unable to cope with these horrific visuals, he is forced to rush to the washroom to throw up (Johnson & Pleece 2008:76), and comes out to see the suspicious Klansman waiting for him. The impersonation, for Carl, is over – from here he will be assumed not only as an African-American man, but mistaken for the celebrity African-

2. Wood (2006) notes that this was a common feature of lynching.

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Carl at the formal dinner with the white men displaying lynching postcards.

American reporter, 'Incognegro'. It is Carl's inability to respond like a white supremacist to the visual language of lynching that outs him. Carl's response is not that of a foreigner or Englishman, but as an African-American man – and the Klansman recognises this. The visual language of racialised torture is what finally exposes Carl: to not respond in the same *language* of voyeuristic pleasure (as the others do at the gathering) to the visuals reveals him as an outsider to the white culture of lynching. That is, his expression of revulsion, an unexpected register in a "white" man in the view of the racists at the gathering, is what gives him away. Ironically, the language of the postcards – lynching – is not truly foreign to Carl, since, as an African-American in America, the history of the process is surely available to him.

After he is caught under the mistaken identity of 'Incognegro' Carl first offers his lack of good English as a proof that he is *not* 'Incognegro': 'Trust me. I can't write for nothing, I failed English at Cheney' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:92). Here, Carl retreats from the position of a foreigner with impeccable English to that of a local, or native, with bad English skills. The reversal of fortunes and identities is almost entirely cast as a change in language skills. Eventually, of course, when he discovers that the white supremacists are likely to go after Zane as well, Carl decides to sacrifice himself to save Zane. He now declares himself 'Incognegro' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:92). From an honoured and welcome guest, Carl has morphed into an unwelcome intruder in the town.

The uses of the erotic

Improvisation also involves a particular deployment of the erotic. There are at least three instances in the text where sexual relations serve as modes and contexts of improvisation. The Alonzo Pinchback-Michaela Mathers tale is one of taboo sexual relations: of the African-American man with the white woman. Alonzo, one could argue, insinuates himself locally through his relations with Michaela. The two are at once sexual and business partners although, as Carl later discovers and informs Zane, she was notoriously promiscuous. Alonzo's move, as we learn later, is ill-advised because Michaela does not seem to be entirely loyal to him although she is loyal to their bootlegging business. The sheriff says as much to Alonzo after he, the sheriff, has just shot her dead: 'that weren't no angel' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:123).

The town's welcome to Carl includes, the narrative suggests, the possibilities of a liaison. Carl tells Zane: 'I might even lay me a pinktoes tonight' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:37). Inviting Carl to his home the rich landlord explains: 'I have an entire guesthouse that's just wasting. And a wife and two daughters who insist they're

wasting in boredom' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:51). After dinner when the men are about to adjourn to another room, the landlord's girls, who are hanging on to Carl on either side, plead with their father: 'father, don't steal him from us' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:73). Hospitality extends to the possibilities of an erotic entanglement, and the playboy Carl is happy to improvise a sexual angle to his billionaire role as well.

Yet another instance of improvisation around the sexual is seen in the sheriff-Francis relation. Francis Jefferson White is a woman masquerading as a man, and serves as the deputy sheriff. Francis and the sheriff have a relationship until she is killed by Michaela Mathers. In her death she is revealed as a woman. The sheriff mourns her as his woman, while the town is mystified by the disappearance of their deputy sheriff, the man Francis.

In the case of Carl, he sees the possible sexual liaisons with the local women as a means of cementing his role as a wealthy English playboy simply giving in to warm southern American hospitality. Although the sexual is only a promise, Carl is quite positive that it is imminent (as his statement to Zane suggests). Later, when he is caught the Klansman, Mr Huey, tells him:

> And on the other side we got all the mud people, the invaders, who want ours … you want our money, our education, our homes, our land. You even want our women too (Johnson & Pleece 2008:91).

Here in an ironic twist Huey points to the possible sexual conquest Carl was hoping to make in Tupelo. The African-American man desires the white man's property, including sexual property, Huey suggests, and Carl, as we have seen, has presented himself as a buyer and speculative investor in property. Thus, the sexual innuendos in the early parts of the episode and Huey's comments actually conjoin to produce the thematic of improvisation: the African-American man improvises in a way that he seeks control over all forms of property.

Dual cultural citizenship

In the case of Zane, what he pursues is a complicated dual cultural citizenship. When the story opens he is a 'white reporter' of lynchings at the site of the lynchings, but in reality runs a column under the pseudonym, 'Incognegro'. He wishes to quit being 'Incognegro' and instead 'wants some recognition for a change', as he says to his boss (Johnson & Pleece 2008:15). He admits to Carl and his girlfriend: 'everyone knows who "Incognegro" is, but Zane Pinchback is

a nobody. It is the age of the African-American writer, and Zane Pinchback has done nothing, it appears' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:13). Zane seeks to be a member of a cultural phenomenon: the African-American writers collective coming together in Harlem: 'there is a movement happening right here in Harlem, a renaissance. I'm a writer. How could I not want to be a part of that?' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:13).

He is essential to the race consciousness of the country, but as 'Incognegro'. His boss tells him: 'I got local columnists … But what I only have one of, and what nobody else has, is a white nigger columnist mad enough to go out and get the story from hell itself' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:15). Mildred assures him: 'everyone reads your investigations into the lynching problem. All of Harlem knows *Incognegro*. If it wasn't for your investigative work, many of these lynchings would never be revealed' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:13). He also recognises that the true identity of 'Incognegro' cannot ever be revealed: 'If I publish under my name and picture, I can never do undercover again' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:13).

Zane's improvisation as 'Incognegro' is at once a requirement and demand on the part of his race and an obstacle to his identity as an African-American writer. If he stops being 'Incognegro' he might gain recognition as an African-American writer in the midst of the renaissance in Harlem, but then there is the possibility that he would lose a readership (as Mildred points out, 'all of Harlem knows Incognegro'). He cannot be incognegro any longer because he seeks a readership, says Zane. He has a readership because he is incognito as an African-American investigative writer, Mildred points out. Toward the end of the tale, Zane is reconciled to his dual cultural citizenship: one forced on him by the demands of his race and society, and one that fulfils his ambition:

> I want to keep going *incognegro*. Somebody has to. I can, so I will. But I wasn't kidding about my arts column. I'm doing that too, and I'm doing it in my own name. I'll just wear two hats, so to speak (Johnson & Pleece 2008:130).

Here Zane takes the next step in his public self-fashioning when he decides to be an African-American columnist passing as white in order to reveal the flaws of American society. I will return to this point for elaboration in the last section of this article.

His 'two hats' idea is the acquisition of a dual citizenship in a different mode as well. As an African-American columnist he is seen as he wants to be seen. As 'Incognegro', he is seen as the white people want to see him. This reiteration of passing relies on the white race's visual and cognitive recognition of his light-skinned person as a white person, and this passing sits on the same 'epidermal

schema' (to borrow a term from Frantz Fanon (1986:84)) as that of an African-American columnist writing under his own name and with his face revealed. This last is a brilliant sleight-of-hand. At the end of the tale there is the imminent 'unveiling of the Incognegro' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:131). Zane publishes the photograph of the Klansman, Huey (who led the lynching of Carl), as the *true* 'Incognegro'. The last page of the book has an inset of the cover page of the newspaper. The headline reads: 'Incognegro: Negro Race Spy's Identity Revealed' and the accompanying illustration is that of Huey. The larger spread of the visual shows an armed mob of whites marching menacingly toward Huey who pleads: 'Hi, Y'all. Uh, there seems to be a case of mistaken identity' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:134-135).

Zane's dual cultural citizenship hinges on being African-American and passing for, or being, white for certain purposes. If he wishes to acquire membership in the Harlem renaissance, he needs to publish under his own name and face. If he wishes to publish as 'Incognegro' he cannot ever reveal his true name and face. To continue playing at 'Incognegro' he needs an additional layer of anonymity, and to this end he publishes the Klansman as 'Incognegro' unveiled. That the Klansman himself possesses a double and hidden identity – as a regular white gentleman and as member of a secret organization – complicates the conclusion of the tale further. 'Incognegro' as an identity is rendered safer for Zane, ironically because the identity has been presumably "unveiled". It is only after he sacrifices a white man to the African-American cause – of documenting white supremacist activities like lynching – that he can be truly 'Incognegro' again.

Witnessing

Zane's task of documenting lynching nearly gets him killed in the tale, and causes the death of his best friend Carl. In the case of the first Zane is showing handling the spectacle of violence with the aplomb expected of a white man at a ritual serving the cause of white supremacy and power. In the second, however, the role-play slips.

Carl is balanced on a typewriter and some paper, symbolising the reporter's apparatuses, with the noose around his neck (Johnson & Pleece 2008:108). He is hanged over the instrument that was symbolic of African-American agency: the typewriter. The hanging symbolises the distance of the African-American *body* or African-American human agent from any means of asserting agency.[3] The reporter's tools thus become apparatuses of his execution. By the time Zane arrives at the scene, Carl is dead. The white boys are shown beating the body with a stick, and

3. Many blacks were hanged because they sought to claim some land for their survival (Beck & Tolnay 1995). Thus, land was perceived by the blacks as central to the acquisition of at least minimal agency and identity. Sandy Alexandre (2008:76), examining lynching photographs innovatively argues: 'hanging, as most of these black bodies are — a few feet, sometimes only a few inches — above ground, the opportunity to count, to matter, to belong, to occupy a plot of land, by simple virtue of standing on that solid ground, is summarily denied them. They are condemned to hang over land that would kill them were they even to attempt from that position to touch it with their feet'.

a sign 'Incognigger' is strung around Carl's neck. The dead Carl is 'returned' to his racial identity – nigger – even as the 'incog' signals his attempt to escape this identity, however briefly.

Carl is hanged because he "passed" as a wealthy Englishman, but also because he is suspected of having been a witness to several acts of racial violence (lynching). The page has two insets. In the first, at the top left hand corner of the page, we have a wide eyed Zane staring in horrified and stunned silence. The second, at the bottom right hand corner, shows Zane screaming 'Nooo!!!' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:110) before he is quickly muffled by the African-American horse cart driver. The driver tells him 'control yourself, man. You about to join him up in that tree, so just calm yourself down' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:111). Later, Zane laments: 'I killed him. I got him killed. My actions, my work. That's what got him killed' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:111).

Zane's work has been to eyewitness the gory acts of lynching and now he will need to report the lynching of his best friend as well. I have already noted the shift in his responses to the two lynchings. Now, the two inset visuals of Zane in the representation of Carl's execution mark a transition within Zane's own public self-fashioning. From the suave and controlled reporter of the first lynching we see in the text, we see a horrified, highly emotional Zane in the second.

By the time Zane witnesses Carl's killing, he has already encountered his falsely accused brother and heard the story of Francis. He comes, therefore, to Carl's execution already burdened with a mystery (the dead woman) and a personal tragedy (Alonzo in prison and facing lynching). Zane by now develops an empathetic identification with the executed, a state he did not possess at the beginning of the tale (or if he did, we are not shown this).

Lisa Cartwright (2008) theorises empathetic identification as a condition where 'I recognize the feeling I perceive in your expression'. She elaborates: 'in thinking I know how you feel, I do not need to know about you or identify with you'. But more importantly, Cartwright (2008:24) argues, 'I may feel in some sense responsible for your grief – not because I believe I have directly caused it, but because I feel that I might, or should, intervene or help – that I can make a difference for you'.

It is the onset of this empathetic identification that induces a sense of responsibility in Zane at the end of the text: 'I want to keep going *Incognegro*. Somebody has to. I can, so I will' (Johnson & Pleece 2008:130). Empathetic identification is about the shift from eye-witnessing to bearing witness, from being merely at the scene of a lynching to report it to recognising the social conditions in which such violence

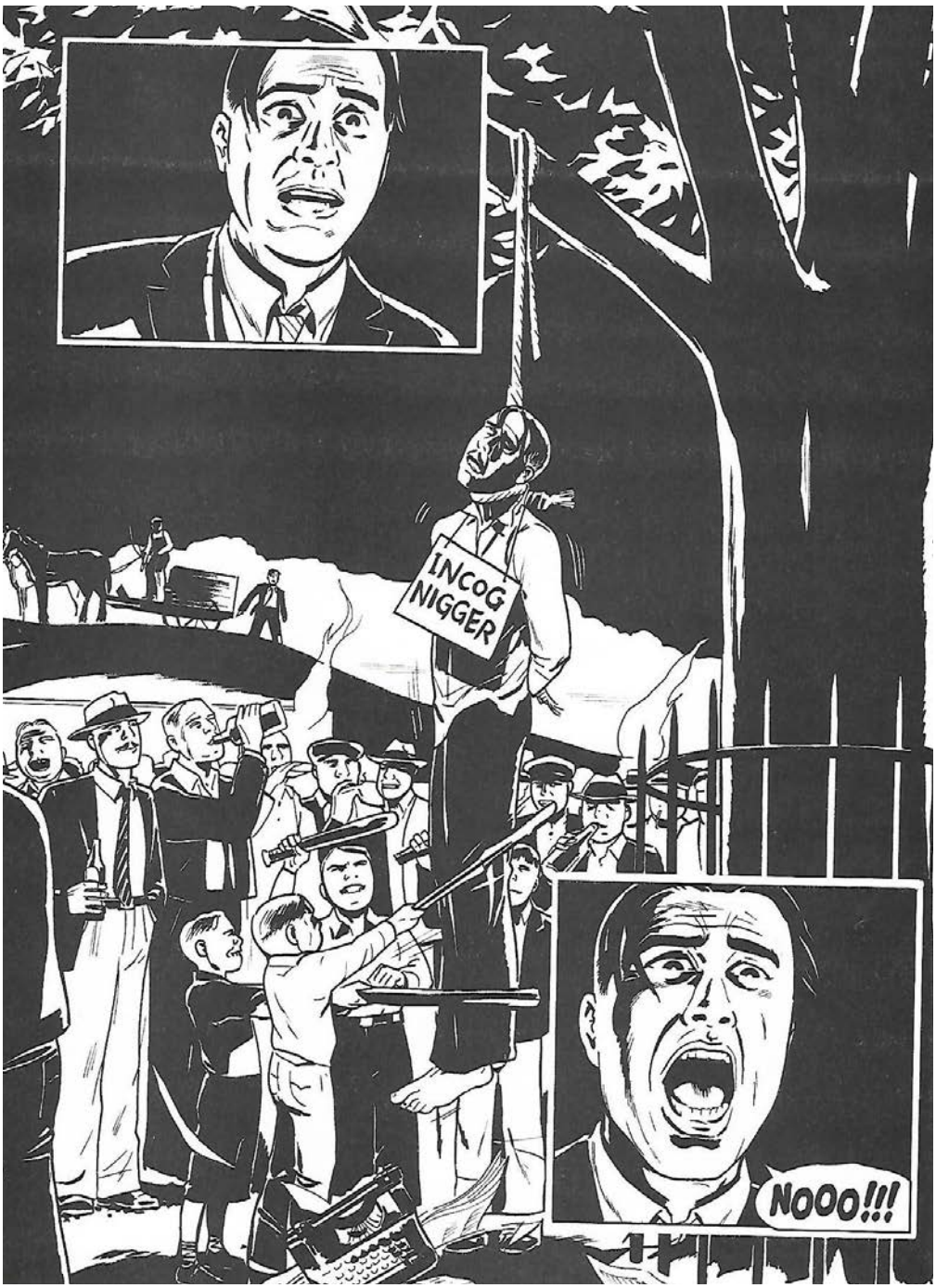

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Zane witnesses Carl's lynching helplessly.

is made possible – the violence Zane sees unfolding in Tupelo. Empathetic identification is visualised in the expressionist medium of the graphic novel when we *see* the suave Zane transformed into the screaming Zane.

Witnessing is the tension between eye-witnessing and bearing witness. Witnessing is a factual recording of events by an individual physically present at the event. To bear witness demands a complex interpretive negotiation with the cultural and symbolic meanings of the events one has witnessed, 'bearing witness to a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts' (Oliver 2004:80). When Zane demonstrates marks of sympathy, horror and empathy, he has embarked upon the transformation. But he is also for the first time in the narrative, demonstrates the social role he needs to play.

If public self-fashioning rendered him a polished "white" gentleman witnessing a lynching (graphic passing), empathetic identification brought on by witnessing the death of his friend (witnessing the graphic) induces the public self-fashioning of a more responsible Zane. While this certainly seems to imply that it is only the personal tragedy and not a more anonymous suffering that really stirs one into the empathetic identification mode, *Incognegro* concludes with an African-American man whose public self-fashioning is now more-or-less in tune with the social order's expectations of him. This places a considerable burden on him – given the memory of Carl's death – emotionally and morally, but Zane's acceptance of the responsibility suggests the emphasis remains firmly on his social and political commitment.

Incognegro as a graphic account of the public self-fashioning of the African-American man focuses on the extreme conditions under which such a public self-fashioning occurs. From the graphic passing that is essential to survival in the midst of the white supremacist mob to bearing empathetic witness to graphic racist violence, Zane has evolved as an African-American man in white America. Public self-fashioning here is therefore about the rise of a more socially responsible Zane, one who is determined to carry on being 'Incognegro'. While it suggests that for the African-American man to be a crusader requires passing, the overarching theme of public self-fashioning gestures more toward the responsibility one owes to one's social contexts.

To remain an *incognegro* is to remain committed to the making of an African-American visual culture archive by documenting lynching and white atrocities.[4] Zane's passing and subversive performativity undermines the hegemony of white documentation of white atrocity. Marcus Wood (2013) has called attention to this aspect of lynching postcards and the kind of reframing that is essential if we are to see other dimensions of these artefacts. Wood (2013:205) writes:

> if these images are to be understood as anything beyond records of atrocity and articulations of victim-hood, then a new standpoint is required. Such a standpoint denies the assumptions of white power,

4. For such a collection of historical lynching photographs, see James Allen's controversial *Without sanctuary* (2000).

> white guilt and white terror which still dictate the perceptual parameters for the cultural reception of these unique images. This new standpoint demands that we see in these tortured forms something perhaps with both an iconic and an aesthetic status which circles around an abject reliquary import.

Wood (2013:205) continues:

> Cameras and their white operators, the people who organised the theatrical structures of lynchings, could after all only control up to a certain point how the images supposedly recording both the results of their actions and their racist attitudes could be and would be interpreted. After that the promiscuity of the visual sign comes into its own, and the African-American bodies now tell us things which white racist thought and action were powerless to control and incapable of imagining.

Wood's emphasis on agency and the circulation of the African-American body of the photograph or postcard beyond the limits set by the white instruments and archivists is further complicated in *Incognegro* when we are shown an African-American performance (Zane's) that is agential in documentation and circulation. We *see* through the African-American man's camera the African-American body and the white perpetrator. When Zane decides to continue to be the mysterious 'Incognegro' he in effect decides to reassert his agency as the medium and perceptual lens for the 'new standpoint' Marcus Wood theorises as essential for a viewing of lynching history. That is, Zane's continued performance of white identity *is* the standpoint we need to understand how the African-American man may have viewed images of the fellow African-American's lynching. Zane's agency through passing is therefore an intervention both in white agential control over lynching documentation and in the African-American man's perception of this same lynching documentation.[5] We as readers therefore understand and view through Zane what it meant to be African-American and view African-American lynching. This is the key argument *Incognegro* promotes.

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5. There have been studies of the African American consumption of images and stories of lynching. See Bryant 1997 and Apel 2004, among others.

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