

The Aesthetics of Franklin in *Peanuts*:

The Prevalence of Structural Racism and the Limitations of White Activism

My presentation explores this year's conference themes of activism and empathy by examining the character of Franklin from Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*. Making his debut in the newspaper strip on July 31, 1968, Franklin was "a cartoon black face in a sea of cartoon white faces" (Wong, par 29). During a time when desegregation was receiving widespread national attention—along with intense regional resistance—Schulz made a bold statement about inclusion and diversity. Furthermore, by presenting Franklin as unwaveringly kind, the cartoonist sought to engender empathy among his white readers toward other black children. Given this situation, for the past 50 years, Franklin has been viewed as an overwhelmingly laudatory character and Schulz has been praised for his brave undertaking of newspaper strip activism.

My talk will take another look at the comics life and cultural legacy of Franklin, complicating such longstanding views. In a heretofore overlooked detail, the shading technique that Schulz used to signify the race of his new black character mirrors the one that he used to shade another long-established figure from the strip: Pig-Pen. As his name implies, Pig-Pen is known for being filthy. Schulz uses a similar line-hatching method to indicate that Pig-Pen's skin is dirty as he does to indicate that Franklin's is black. In so doing, *Peanuts* connects itself with the long history in U.S. culture of likening blackness with dirt. The visual links between Franklin and Pig-Pen challenge views of Franklin as a wholly progressive character, while they also call attention to the prevalence of structural racism and the limitations of white activism.