

# Boxing's Sambo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Louis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908 to 1938

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The boxing careers of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, the first Afro-American boxers to win the heavyweight title, provide a unique look at American racism. During the thirty-year period from 1908, when Johnson wrested the title away from Tommy Burns, to 1938, when the recently crowned champion Louis successfully defended his crown by knocking out Max Schmeling in two minutes and four seconds of the first round, Sambo depictions of these two fighters appeared regularly on the front pages, editorial pages, and sports pages of our nation's daily newspapers. This paper will trace the early pre-1920, crude ape-like drawings of Johnson to the more humane sketches of Louis of the middle and late 1930s.

Historian Joseph Boskin explained how these Sambo cartoonists helped to perpetuate American racism:

Operating within a system that clearly rewarded Jim Crow policies, cartoonists sought a form that could express black buffoonery. Various styles merged in the decades before the turn of the century. Continuing the African connection, the majority of artists extended the form: lips were widened and rendered a rosy red; teeth sparkled with glistening whiteness; hair was nappy, short and frazzled; faces were glossy, atop bodies that were either shortened and rounded, or lengthened to approximate the monkey or ape.<sup>1</sup>

These and other newspaper cartoons wield considerable power. Consider these words of Scott Long, a well-known cartoonist:

The political cartoon is stronger even than the written editorial for the simple reason that it is a picture, because it communicates more surely with the emotions of the reader, because it speaks visually in a tongue that knows no barrier of language or education. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Folklorist Adrienne Seward and historian Joseph Boskin have both assessed

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1. Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 124.

2. LeRoy M. Carl, "Political Cartoons: 'Ink Blots' of the Editorial Page," *Journal of Popular Culture* 4 (Summer 1970): 39.

the function of these stereotypical cartoons. Seward sketches her definition and function of stereotypes in broad cultural strokes:

To [Walter] Lippmann, stereotypes are 'an ordered more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted.' Stereotypes, then, define and package reality into convenient and manageable perceptions. By definition, they are simple constructs that need not necessarily be consistently modified for practical use. 'To be sure a stereotype may be so consistently and authoritatively transmitted in each generation from parent to child it seems almost like biological fact.' They are learned and processed very early as all other critically important cultural information. Not only do stereotypes 'teach' us about the world, they also defend us against it.<sup>3</sup>

Boskin, on the other hand, etches a much narrower historical statement of these Sambo sketches' function in American race relations:

Not surprisingly, once slavery ended, the linkage to African primitivism became more tenacious and amplified. As the institution faded in the national consciousness, the drawings of blacks became, at the very least, overstated. If whites were unable to restore their master-slave relationship, they were determined to restate that relationship by employing all of the humorous means at their disposal.<sup>4</sup>

In light of this statement is it any wonder that just before the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries fight "a brass band climbed into the ring and played 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' and other 'patriotic' selections. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Folklorist W. K. McNeil's analysis of the coon song found their titles, lyrics, and sheet cover sketches to be chock-full of Sambo stereotypes. McNeil wrote that in coon song lyrics:

Stereotypes about body and dress are less frequently used than those of the Negro's character traits. These included an unusual, often incorrect, use of language and a love of long, ostentatious names; laziness and shiftlessness; an uncommon appetite for watermelon, chicken, possum and gin; an overeagerness to test a razor's sharpness on an unwilling human guinea pig; a phenomenal dancing and musical ability; and a superstitious nature. The most persuasive of these are the stereotypes dealing with the Negro's use of language. Most of the songs are in what is purportedly authentic Negro dialect, a feature so prevalent that it serves as one of the identifying marks of the 'coon songs.'<sup>6</sup>

McNeil noted, also, that the covers of coon song sheet music often featured Sambo stereotypes that can be found in the newspaper cartoon drawings of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis from 1908 to 1938. Male images that appear on these cover pages tend to have small, ape-like heads, big eyes, a wide mouth with large red lips, nappy hair, and big feet. Their skin complexion is "virtually always black, indeed, the blackest possible black."<sup>7</sup> Film scholar Phyllis R.

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3. Adrienne Lanier Seward. "Early Black Film and Folk Tradition: An Interpretive Analysis of the Use of Folklore in Selected All-Black Cast Feature Films" (Ph.D. Diss., Indiana University, 1985), 22.

4. Boskin, *Samba*, 124.

5. Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 53.

6. W. K. McNeil, "Syncopated Slander: The 'Coon Song,' 1890-1900," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 17 (Summer 1972): 69.

7. *Ibid.*, 64, 68.

Klotman calls these “banjo eyes, saucer lips, (and) a permanent, obsequious smile” “the ‘classic’ minstrel features.”\* Folklorist Seward added the element of dress to the minstrel coon image:

Even today the term [coon] connotes its familiar nineteenth century meanings: dialectical malapropisms, mental incompetence, ludicrous physical features, [and] outlandish dress . . . .<sup>9</sup>

The newspaper’s Sambo caricatures of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis are more fraternal than identical twins. Although sired by the same father, Jim Crow, they were conceived in different socio-historical wombs. Papa Jack held the crown from 1908 to 1915, at a time when Jim Crow laws and customs hampered American justice and Afro-American social mobility. Unjust sentences to chain gangs and frequent lynchings marked the era. The Brown Bomber emerges from the bowels of America’s urban black masses, who were fleeing Klan violence and tenant farm peonage, in 1934. During his reign from 1937 to 1949 Louis witnessed both the Southern justice of the Scottsboro Boys trial as well as the promise of assembly line wages. Hence, the Sambo stereotype appears in varying degrees in the newspaper cartoon depictions of these two black heavyweight champions.

Newspaper cartoonists sketched several physical traits of the Sambo stereotype into their depictions of the two fighters. It can first be noted that both Johnson and Louis were portrayed as savage, ape-like figures. On the eve of the Johnson-Jeffries fight, the staid *New York Times* carried a very revealing cartoon. In the ring the artist has sketched the two fighters in contrasting stereotypes. Jim Jeffries is positively portrayed as the strong white champion, complete with a bowed belt tied around his waist. He is disdainfully glaring at what the artist conceived Jack Johnson to be. Russom’s sketch of Johnson is the negative stereotype of the ape-like Negro man. Johnson’s figure has a small, ape-like head, resting on large shoulders, from which are extended massive ape-like arms which touch the floor. Gerald Astor, one of Louis’s several biographers, also discovered a similar newspaper drawing of Joe Louis. He wrote: “The race of Louis continued to loom large in the post-fight reportage. A cartoon in the *Newark Evening News* featured Louis as a toga-clad, thick lipped Sambo-style black on a throne. Another figure was identified as Jack Blackburn, who was waving a frond over his head with the line, ‘Sullivan and Dempsey drew the color line, but not me.’”<sup>10</sup>

A second observation worth noting is that American newspaper cartoonists persisted in sketching both fighters’ facial features in a manner that reflected the grinning, big lipped, buck toothed, bulging eyed Sambo mask. On July 3, 1910,

8. Phyllis R. Klotman, “Racial Stereotypes in Hard Core Pornography,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 5 (Summer 1971): 229.

9. Seward, “Early Black Film,” 49.

10. William H. Wiggins, Jr., “Jack Johnson as Bad Nigger: The Folklore of His Life,” in *Contemporary Black Thought: The Best of the Black Scholar*, eds. Robert Chrisman and Nathan Hare (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1973). 68; Gerald Astor, “. . . And a Credit to His Race”. *The Hard Life and Times of Joseph Louis Borrow, a.k.a Joe Louis* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974). 105-106.

the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a cartoon entitled "All Ready." The cartoon shows Uncle Sam lighting two firecrackers, while Auntie Sam covers her ears to block out the impending explosions. The firecracker labeled "Jeff" sports a face with handsome, symmetrical features; the eyes, lips, and nose are all in proportion. However, the face drawn on the "Johnson" firecracker is vastly distorted. It features the large lips, rolling eyes, and dark complexion of Sambo. Joe Louis was described and drawn in the same manner. A reporter for *The Literary Digest* referred to the champ as "the kinky-haired, thick-lipped . . . none-too-intellectual . . . shuffling, ex-Alabama pickaninny." While a reporter for the *Savannah Morning News* damned Louis with this faint praise caption of a Louis drawing, "His negro (sic) characteristics-thick lips and broad nose—heightened by artist Clyde Lewis, Heavyweight Champion Joe Lewis (sic) is shown above in an air brush caricature."<sup>11</sup> Louis cartoonists also followed the example of Johnson's *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* cartoonist by drawing Sambo-like facial masks of the Brown Bomber on a variety of natural and man-made surfaces. Before his fight with the English former coal miner Tommy Farr, Louis's Sambo-like face was drawn on the wall of a coal mine that Farr is mining with a pick. The cartoonist has used the darkness of the mine and coal to highlight Louis's huge, minstrel type white lips. Another newspaper cartoon features a lonely white boxer standing in the center of "Louis Land," a broad field that sports a Sambo mask of a tuft of nappy hair, large minstrel lips, slanted eyes, and a button nose. Louis's Sambo mask was also drawn on the side of a big cake that Max Schmeling was about to eat. Its caption read: "You Can Have Your Cake-And Eat It."<sup>12</sup>

Sambo's dark-skinned complexion is a third stereotypical trait that newspaper cartoonists included in their caricatures of both fighters. Historian Al-Tony Gilmore referred to two such cartoon examples in his biographical study of Johnson in this manner: "*The Atlanta Journal* mocked Johnson's victory with a cartoon in which a portrait of Jeffries was being ruined as black ink spilled over it from a bottle labeled Johnson. *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* also ran a cartoon of Uncle Sam pointing to a picture of Johnson asking patriotically, 'Who'll wash that off?'"<sup>13</sup> Cartoonists also used the coon song's racial euphemism of "smoke" to refer to Johnson. In a three-panel cartoon entitled, "These Are Busy Days for the Governor of Nevada," panel one shows a cowboy-clad Nevada governor leading a crowd of white boxing fans into Jim Jeffries's training camp; panel two has the governor standing in the ring giving this advice to the Great White Hope, while ringside observers double over in laughter, "Take it from me, Jeff. You've got to put on more speed to stop that Smoke."

11. "All Ready," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 3 July 1910, editorial page; Mark D. Coburn, "America's Great Black Hope," *American Heritage* 29 (October/November 1978): 88; Clyde Lewis, "New Champion in a Distinctive Picture," *The Savannah Morning News*, 29 June 1937.

12. Ed Hughes, "Miner, Beware!," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 25 August 1937; idem, "Every Man's Land— for the Type," *ibid.*, 1 September 1937; idem, "You Can Have Your Cake-And Eat It," *ibid.*, 7 September 1937.

13. Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!: The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), 42-43.

Panel three finds the governor back in his office, which is flooded with tight reports, reading the “sport sheet.”<sup>14</sup> Joe Louis receives similar treatment at the hands of newspaper cartoonists. On the eve of the Louis-Braddock title fight, a cartoon is published in which the Champion Braddock is smoking a “Joe Louis Perfecto” cigar. In the smoke swirling from the smoldering ashes the artist has drawn a Sambo mask of the young Afro-American challenger. Its caption reads: “Still Looks Like Smoke in His Eyes.” Louis is also depicted as a dark cloud—another coon song euphemism for Afro-Americans and their black skin—in some other cartoons. The first Louis-Schmeling fight inspired one cartoonist to portray Louis as a black thunder cloud raining thunderbolt punches on a cowering Schmeling. The Sambo mask of large minstrel lips and wide rolling eyes is sketched on the cloud. The caption reads: “Any Date Will Be Stormy Weather for Max!” The thunder cloud image is used in a cartoon published on the eve of the Louis-Farr fight. In this drawing Louis is once again depicted as an ominous thunder storm. A tiny Tommy Farr approaches the dark thunder cloud holding an umbrella aloft. The caption reads: “The Storm Holds Off a Few Days.”<sup>15</sup>

Dialect is the fourth Sambo trait that newspaper cartoonists attached to their cartoon creations of Johnson and Louis. After Johnson’s defeat of Jim Jeffries, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a four-panel cartoon on its editorial page. In panel one a rotund President Taft, wearing gray trousers, a black coat, white shirt and black tie, approaches Uncle Sam’s cashier window and says, “Boss, I’ve done a year’s work.” In panel two he leaves carrying a money bag marked \$75,000. In panel three a Sambo Johnson, dressed in a checkered suit, white shirt and tie, and wearing a derby, struts toward Uncle Sam’s cashier window proclaiming in coon song dialect, “Boss, I’ve done a HOUR’S work.” In the fourth panel he departs with a \$120,000 sack slung over his shoulder. A New York *Globe* cartoon refers to the world’s first heavyweight boxing champion as “Masta Johnson.” And a Chicago reporter places these choice words of coon song dialect in the mouth of Johnson as a white policeman is writing him a speeding ticket: “Stand back, Mr. White Offisah, and let dem colored peoples hab a look at me.” Joe Louis’s speech was also often reduced to dialect. Historian Mark D. Coburn has noted that “The champion’s speech was debased to make him a *minstrel darcy* [my italics]. Asked how he felt about using a bed where Washington had slept, he was supposed to have said, ‘Mistah Washington sho’ know how to pick beds.’”<sup>16</sup> Cartoon examples of Sambo Louis speaking in dialect are numerous. A cartoon published before the Max Baer fight has the rising young black heavyweight drawling to the flashy former champ, “You ain’t seen no bad hands, Mistah Baer, until you’ve felt these!!!”<sup>17</sup>

14. “These Are Busy Days for the Governor of Nevada,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 30 June 1910, 2.

15. Ed Hughes, “Still Looks Like Smoke in His Eyes,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 February 1937; idem, “Any Date Will Be Stormy Weather for Max!,” *ibid.*, 19 June 1936; idem, “The Storm Holds Off a Few Days,” *ibid.*, 27 August 1937.

16. “Pay Day,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 July 1910, editorial page; Roberts, *Papa Jack*, 91, 115; Coburn, “America’s Great Black Hope,” 88.

17. Ed Hughes, “Another Case of ‘Bad Hands,’” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 17 August 1935

A 1936 cartoon pictures Louis seated on a boxing stool looking at the “washed up,” “old Timer,” and “Young ‘Sucker’ ” fighters that he has met. Sambo Louis says, “Ah’d much rather meet Mistuh Schmeling an’ Mistuh Braddock.”<sup>18</sup> In a 1937 cartoon Louis, a loyal Detroit Tiger fan like television private eye Thomas Magnum, said, “Dem tighas is a fightin’ team. . . .”<sup>19</sup> In short, Sambo Johnson and Sambo Louis often spoke America’s racial mother tongue of coon song dialect.

A critical review of the Johnson and Louis newspaper cartoons published from 1908 to 1938 does present some different Sambo images in each fighter. For example, cartoonists were fond of portraying Johnson as a watermelon eater and a dandy. On at least two occasions American cartoonists employed the cartoon’s most basic ploy of “ludicrous juxtaposition”<sup>20</sup> to lampoon Johnson. In both of these cartoons a watermelon is the humorous foil. The day after Johnson won the heavyweight championship, “a cartoon showing a caricatured thick-lipped, wide-eyed Johnson holding a watermelon and the championship belt proclaiming, ‘Golly, old Santy sho’ was good to me’ was carried in the *Dallas Morning News*.” And, the day after he defeated Jim Jeffries, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a front page cartoon which depicted Sambo Johnson, wearing boxing gloves and shorts, labeled Johnson on the belt, seated and eating a large slice of watermelon, whose seeds spell the name “Jeff.” The fighter’s face is a classic Sambo mask. The ape-like head is crowned by two strands of nappy hair. The eyes are as wide and round as saucers. The nose is flat, with broad nostrils. The upper lip is thick and wide. The four teeth are big and white. And the boxer’s complexion is very dark. The cartoon is entitled “Cutting A Watermelon!”<sup>21</sup>

Joseph Boskin found the watermelon to be a popular racial icon for other types of American illustrators. In addition to portraying other Afro-Americans “devouring watermelons,” he found:

Artists and photographs rendered luscious green watermelons and bright red watermelon slices about to be consumed by eager grinning faces. It was always, it appeared, as one card said about a group about to gorge on watermelon, ‘Dinner-time.’ Watermelons were fondled in ‘Anticipation’; fought over in ‘Give Us De Rine?—Ain’t Goin’ Be No Rine’; extolled in ‘We’s in Hebben.’ One card showed a man with a melon under each arm, eyeing a loose chicken: ‘Dis am de wurst perdicckermunt ob mah life!’ On another:

I’m an American, same as you  
And my favorite flag is red, white and blue  
But when I’m hungry ‘tis plain to be seen  
My favorite is red, white and green.

One postcard simply showed three round circles that read from left to right, ‘Watermelon Into Coon.’ Straight lines within the first two circles gradually descended into a grinning type of pumpkin face. It was entitled ‘Evolution.’<sup>22</sup>

18. Ed Hughes, “Two-Fisted Fighter—By Request,” *ibid.*, 10 October 1936.

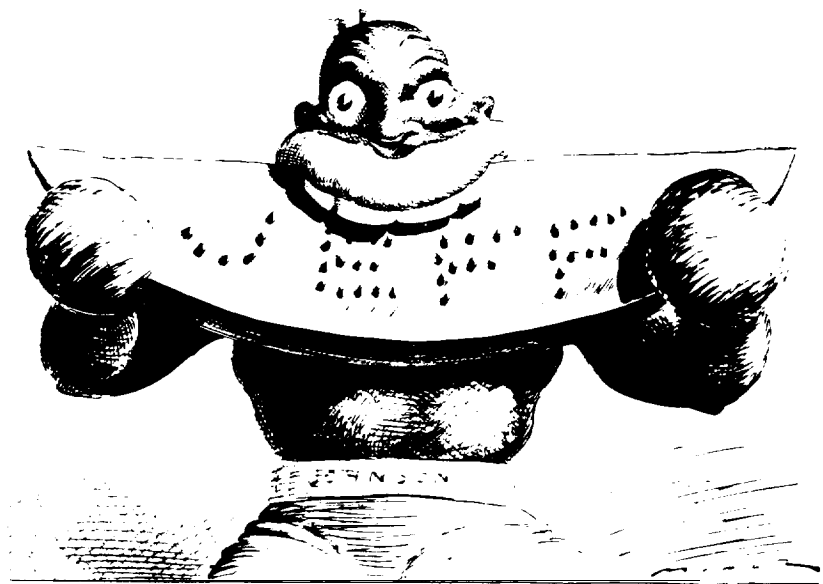
19. Dan Burnley, “The Bomber in Training,” *The Wichita (Kansas) Beacon*, 20 August 1937.

20. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed., s.v., “Caricatures and Cartoons.”

21. Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 28-29: “Cutting A Watermelon!,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 5 July 1910, I.

22. Boskin, *Samba*, 133-134. For a newspaper comic treatment of the watermelon theme, see Tom Little and Tom Sims, “Sunflower Street –o– : Allowing for Shrinkage,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 30 June 1938, 7D.

## CUTTING A WATERMELON!



(*The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) July 5, 1910

Given the numerous stereotypical images that some white Americans associated with watermelon, it is easy to understand why Joe Louis steadfastly refused to pose eating a slice of watermelon for newspaper photographers.<sup>23</sup>

Newspaper cartoonists also delighted in portraying Johnson as a dandy. In these drawings fancy clothes, sparkling jewelry, and fast cars replaced the watermelon as racial icons. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published three cartoons in 1910 that depicted Johnson as a dandy. (This could have been one instance in which cartoon art may have been imitating life since Jack Johnson chose to title his autobiography *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy*.) The dandy's love of bright colored clothes and flashy jewelry is evident in a drawing entitled "Johnson as He Sits Waiting in Dressing Room." This illustration of a full-page article on Johnson's theatrical career presents Johnson as an ape-like figure seated in a chair with his arms folded across his chest and his legs crossed at the knees. Sambo Johnson is dressed in loud colored checkered pants, silk stockings, shiny black shoes, a white dress shirt open at the collar and sleeves rolled up. Just above his crossed arms the cartoonist has drawn a large, sparkling diamond stickpin. The paper published two cartoons which center on Johnson's love of fast cars. On July 9th it published a cartoon entitled "The Joy Rider of

23. Astor, ". . . And a Credit to His Race." 85

Reno,” which shows Johnson driving a speeding automobile out of a cloud of dust and swirling silver dollars. On July 31st, the *Post-Dispatch* published another Sambo Johnson cartoon entitled “Midsummer Diversions.” In this drawing we find a well-dressed Johnson driving a speeding car that is being chased by two policemen, one riding in a squad car, the other one running.<sup>24</sup> Once again it must be noted that this newspaper cartoon version of *Smokey and the Bandit* is based upon some elements of Afro-American folklore. My father told me the following Jack Johnson legend whose story line is clearly related to this newspaper cartoon.

It was on a hot day in Georgia when Jack Johnson drove into town. He was really flying: Zooom! Behind his fine car was a cloud of red Georgia dust as far as the eye could see. The sheriff flagged him down and said, ‘Where do you think you’re going, boy, speeding like that? That’ll cost you \$50.00!’ Jack Johnson never looked up; he just reached in his pocket and handed the sheriff a \$100.00 bill and started to gun his motor: ruummm, ruummm. Just before Jack pulled off, the sheriff shouted, ‘Don’t you want your change?’ And Jack replied, ‘Keep it, ‘cause I’m coming back the same way I’m going!’ Zoooooom.<sup>25</sup>

Although Joe Louis also demonstrated a similar love for fancy clothes and fast cars, newspaper cartoonists chose to associate him with the chicken-stealing, razor-toting, crap-shooting, and lazy elements of the Sambo stereotype. Cartoonists replace Sambo Johnson’s watermelon with the chicken for their racial icon in Sambo Louis drawings. Like other twins, the Johnson and Louis Sambo twins had related tastes. They were different sides of historian Lawrence D. Reddick’s “chicken and watermelon eater”<sup>26</sup> racial stereotype. Sambo Johnson craved watermelon, Sambo Louis loved chicken. On the eve of the first Schmeling fight a New York City newspaper published a cartoon portraying Louis as a chicken thief trapped in farmer Max Schmeling’s henhouse. As the angry, rifle-toting Schmeling approaches the chicken coop, the cartoonist warns Sambo Louis with this caption, “Look Out, Joe, Here Comes a Good Shot.” This statement resonates deep from within America’s coon song tradition and Afro-American folklore. Louis’s cartoon predicament is a harbinger of Louis Jordan’s 1940s hit recording, “Ain’t nobody here but us chickens!” It is also restated in countless chicken-stealing jokes like the following narrative:

The colored boy was up for the fifth time on a charge of chicken stealing. This time the Judge decided to appeal to the boy’s father. ‘Now see here, Abe,’ he said to the older colored man, ‘this boy of yours has been up here in court so many times for stealing chickens, that I’m sick of seeing him up here!’

‘I don’t blame you, Judge,’ replied the father. ‘I’m sick of seein’ him up here myself.’

‘Then why don’t you teach him how to act? Show him the right way, and he won’t be coming before me!’

24. “Johnson as He Sits Waiting in Dressing Room,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 July 1910.25; “The Joy Rider of Reno,” *ibid.*, 9 July 1910, 10; “Midsummer Diversions,” *ibid.*, 31 July 1910, 2

25. Wiggins, “Jack Johnson as Bad Nigger,” 69-70.

26. Lawrence D. Reddick, “Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, the Press, and Libraries,” *Journal of Negro Education* 13 (1944): 369.

'I know it, Jedge; an' I's told him so, many a time. I has showed him de right way, sah,' the man said earnestly, 'I certainly showed him de right way; but he some how keeps gittin' caught comin' away wid de chickens!'<sup>27</sup>

Newspaper cartoonists also present Sambo Louis as a slightly different type of urban dandy stereotype. One cartoon does depict Sambo Louis dressed in a loud colored suit, white spats, and black high hat, leaning back in a chair smoking a big cigar whose ashes spell "Smellin'."<sup>28</sup> But Sambo Louis is noted more for his skills as a crap shooter<sup>29</sup> and razor cutter<sup>30</sup> than for driving fast cars. The former trait is the subject of a cartoon entitled "The Dice Are Loaded," which was published just before the first Louis-Schmeling fight. The latter trait appears in another 1936 cartoon entitled "Joe Looks Better, Flattening Ettore." Dan Parker, the cartoonist, drew Sambo Louis standing beside a barber's chair, with a sharp razor in his right hand, calling out to two apprehensive-looking heavyweights, Jorge Brescia and Bob Pastor, "NEXT!"<sup>31</sup> This razor-toting image of Louis was certainly inspired at least in part by the following joke that had wide circulation among many Afro-Americans and some white Americans during the 1930s and 1940s. One sportswriter even equated Louis's rough treatment of his opponents with the nameless, black razor toter's slashing of his unsuspecting victim:

When Joe Louis gets through with them, they are never the same. They may look the same and talk the same and feel the same, but they don't act the same.

They remind you of the colored gent who insisted, after he'd had his throat razored from ear to ear in a cutting bee, that he was such a tough guy it hadn't hurt him a bit.

'Sho, sho yo' is okay,' soothed his companion, 'but fo' goodness sake, doan' try to turn yo' haid!'<sup>32</sup>

Ironically, there was a series of cartoons published in American newspapers from 1935 to 1938 which do not present Sambo Louis in such a threatening manner. One cartoon entitled "Ah-h! Der Right Hand Makes Him Panicky!" portrays Louis as the fearful Sambo popularized in 1930s films by Mantan Moreland, who always began to shake, roll his eyes and shout, "Feets don't fail me now!" at the sign of any trouble or ghosts. The cartoonist draws a bug-eyed Sambo Louis, paralyzed with fear of Max Schmeling. But the most persistent non-threatening cartoon image of Louis is what film scholar Phyllis Klotman has labeled "the Lazy, Shiftless Tom . . . not too bright, always obsequious, cartoon variation of the Stepin' Fetchit type."<sup>33</sup> Louis biographer Gerald Astor wrote this about the Brown Bomber's image as a dunce: "Some segments of the

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27. Boskin, *Sambo*, 6.

28. Ed Hughes. "Dark Micawber—Waiting for Something to Turn Up." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 24 June 1938.

29. Boskin, *Sambo*, 108.

30. Reddick, "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations," 369.

31. Willard Mullin, "The Dice Are Loaded." *The New York World-Telegram*, 17 June 1936; Dan Parker, "Joe Looks Better, Flattening Ettore," *The New York Daily Mirror*, 24 September 1936.

32. Jack Miley, "Louis Is Villain In Pastor Plastor," *The New York Post*, 7 September 1940.

33. Grant Powers, "Ah-h! Der Right Hand Makes Him Panicky!," *The New York Daily News*, 22 April 1936; Klotman, "Racial Stereotypes in Hard Core Pornography," 225.

press continue to treat Louis in racial stereotypes. The New York Evening Journal ran a cartoon with the caption: 'Use the word "defeat" Joseph.' 'Sho,' answered the crude replica of Louis. 'I pops 'em on de chin and dey drags 'em out by de feet.'"<sup>34</sup> A Louis-Braddock cartoon carried a caption which said that the Irish champion "hopes to outsmart and out box the slow-thinking *Louis* [my italics]".<sup>35</sup> There are several cartoons of Louis taking a nap. These lazy Sambo caricatures include one of Louis napping in a rowboat with a fishing rod dangling from his right hand. A 1937 cartoon entitled "Louis Confident But Not Cocky" portrays Louis reclining in an easy chair, stifling a yawn, "Ho Hum."<sup>36</sup> Another 1937 cartoon refers to Sambo Louis as "The Dark Gent in the Woodpile,"<sup>37</sup> a polite euphemism for the Sambo Johnson era "Nigger in the Woodpile,"<sup>38</sup> who hid from his master in order to avoid working.

Despite the continuation of the Sambo stereotype in Joe Louis cartoons of the middle and late 1930s, it also can be noted that newspaper cartoonists began to portray the second black heavyweight boxing champion in more humane ways than they ever applied to the first black title holder. This erasing of Sambo Louis and replacing him with a more accurate sketch of Joe Louis's handsome face and powerful body is marked by two stages. In the first stage cartoonists depicted Louis sans Sambo's exaggerated facial and bodily features, but, because old prejudices die hard, they transferred these ugly stereotypical traits to other Afro-American figures in their cartoons. A 1935 *New York Sun* cartoon entitled "A Day with Louis" presents Jack Blackburn, Louis's beloved manager, as Sambo. During that same year the rival *New York Daily Mirror* published the cartoon "Joe Louis Has Learned to Smile," which depicted one of Louis's sparring partners as Sambo. And, fittingly enough, Jack Johnson is portrayed as Sambo in a 1936 *New York Sun* cartoon and a 1937 *New York World-Telegram* cartoon.<sup>39</sup> This latter year also marked the beginning of the second phase in which newspaper cartoonists weaned themselves from their need for the milk of racial stereotypes. Many newspaper cartoonists simply stopped including these Sambo figures in their Joe Louis cartoons. Ed Hughes, the sports cartoonist for *The Brooklyn Eagle*, exemplifies the shift that many American newspaper cartoonists were making away from Sambo depictions of Louis to more humane portraits of the Brown Bomber. Hughes's "Ring the Bell!," "How Joe Louis Wrenched Nathan Mann," "Anything Can Happen," and "A Great Winner Either Way"<sup>40</sup> cartoons present Louis as the handsome young Afro-American man that he was and not the ugly Sambo racial stereo-

34. Astor, "... And a Credit to His Race." 131

35. Dan Burnley, "Braddock's Line of Defense," *The Beckley* (W. Va.) Post-Herald, 21 June 1937.

36. Willard Mullin, "Lemme Know When You Want Me," *The New York World-Telegram*, 24 June 1938; Dan Parker, "Louis Confident But Not Cocky," *The New York Daily Mirror*, 16 June 1937.

37. Dan Burnley, "Goose-Stepper's Goose Chase," *The Baltimore Sun*, 23 May 1937.

38. Marvin A. Rapp, "'Nigger' in the Woodpile," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1958): 24.

39. Leonard Lank, "A Day with Joe Louis," *The New York Sun*, 17 September 1935; Dan Parker, "Joe Louis Has Learned to Smile," *The New York Daily Mirror*, 19 September 1935; Pap, "It Can Be Done," *The New York Sun*, 12 August 1936; Willard Mullin, "Odds and Endings," *The New York World-Telegram*, 18 June 1937.

40. Ed Hughes, "Ring the Bell!," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 26 August 1937; idem, "How Joe Louis Wrenched Nathan Mann," *ibid.*, 24 February 1938; idem, "Anything Can Happen," *ibid.*, 21 June 1938; idem, "A Great Winner Either Way," *ibid.*, 22 June 1938.

type that some white Americans perceived him to be. The humane cartoons that Hughes and countless other cartoonists drew of Louis before and after the 1938 rematch of Joe Louis and Max Schmeling are cultural light-years away from the vicious Sambo depictions of Jack Johnson which were inspired by his smashing defeats of Tommy Burns in 1908 and Jim Jeffries in 1910. On the day of the Louis-Schmeling rematch the *Evansville Courier* published a front page political cartoon which has a bespectacled John Q. Public glancing away from a newspaper headline which reads "U.S.-German Relations Grow Tense." He asks, "Gosh, Is it that Serious?" Sketched in the upper left-hand corner of the drawing are facial renderings of Louis and Schmeling. Both boxers are drawn in flattering humane terms; no stereotypical exaggerations are used. The day after the fight this same midwestern newspaper published a handsome sketch of Louis's face which is the ultimate repudiation of the Sambo mask seen in so many newspaper cartoons from 1908 to 1938. Gone is Sambo's unkempt, nappy

# THE EVANSVI

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# SPANISH PEACE S

## PRESIDENT SIGNS SPEND MEASURE; FORESEES UPTURN

Cities Commerce Department Reports to Show Business Better than Reputed

### INTERVIEWS J. P. KENNEDY

World Situation Only Hopeful Roosevelt Says at His Hyde Park Home

HYDE PARK, N. Y., June 21. (AP)—President Roosevelt signed the \$3,700,000,000 spending and spending bill today and declared that business is not as bad as it has been as a lot of people believed it to be.

The president gave as backing for his optimism business a department of commerce report that the national income for this year would be slightly above \$40,000,000,000. Federal Government estimates were \$35,000,000,000.

**WANTS TO START IN 60 DAYS**

The president announced:

- (1) That he would like to see the \$3,700,000,000 public works and industrial projects which he has just signed.
- (2) That the prospects for business during 1939 have improved national income figures for the first three months of the year was definitely improved.
- (3) That he had signed 45 bills and would soon be coming to his Hyde Park home and would act on 10 more before he went to bed to-

IF YOU THINK OF OTHER THINGS AS YOU READ THE HEADLINES ONLY



(The Evansville Courier) June 22, 1938

hair. Gone is Sambo's ink-black complexion. Gone is Sambo's ape-like head. Gone are Sambo's rolling eyes, wide nostrils, overly large white teeth, and bulbous red lips. In their place we find a handsome portrait of the new champion, Joe Louis, and by inference, his millions of faceless black fans.<sup>41</sup> A brass band regaled the crowd with its rendition of the coon song "All Coons Look Alike to Me" before the Johnson-Jeffries bout, but it was a much more solemn American throng that stood to hear the stirring strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the Louis-Schmeling title fight. By 1938 ringside musicians and America's newspaper cartoonists were both singing a new, more positive Afro-American song.

In sum, a majority of the Jack Johnson and Joe Louis cartoons published in American daily newspapers from 1908 to 1938 depict these first two black heavyweight boxing champions in crude Sambo stereotypical images. Physically, both fighters were portrayed during this three-decade era as savage, ape-like figures with coconut heads, long arms, broad shoulders, narrow waists and bulging muscles. Their faces featured thick, grinning, red lips, pearly-white buck teeth, strands of nappy hair, and jet-black complexions. Personality traits of the Sambo stereotype also appeared in these sketches. The loud, flamboyant Papa Jack and the quiet, humble Brown, despite being different personalities, each appeared in American newspaper cartoons as personifications of the Sambo stereotype. Both boxers were depicted as ignorant, uncivilized brutes who dressed up in loud, bright colored clothing, wore gawdy jewelry and spoke in ungrammatical minstrel dialect. Despite their wealth, Johnson and Louis were depicted as chicken stealers and crap shooters by American cartoons. Watermelon and fried chicken were the staples of their diets. And both men, who displayed an uncommon sense of courage and self-motivation during their boxing careers, were ridiculed as being lazy, razor-toting, fearful Sambos.

This pejorative Sambo image began to fade noticeably from the Joe Louis newspaper cartoons which were drawn in 1937 and 1938. Cartoons of this period often shifted the Sambo stereotype from Louis to another figure, e.g., another black boxer, in the picture. But American cartoonists began to portray Louis in a series of sketches which captured his handsome countenance or an occasional caricature which accentuated his sterling character. This shift away from negative Sambo depictions of Louis can be traced back to his 1938 smashing, first round knockout of Max Schmeling. In this epic battle, which was staged on the eve of World War II, Joe Louis successfully represented his country. By knocking out Max Schmeling, who was perceived by the American public as the champion of Nazi Germany, Louis became a true American hero. This heroic deed forced American cartoonists to radically refashion their drawings of Louis. From that historical point on, Joe Louis was presented less as Sambo, the racial clown, and more as the Brown Bomber, a true American champion.

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41. "Gosh. Is It That Serious," *The Evansville Courier*, 22 June 1938; Pap, "He Gets His Revenge," *ibid.*, 23 June 1938, 8.



(The Evansville Courier) June 23, 1938