Joe Louis's Talking Fists: The Auto/Biopolitics of *My Life Story*

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Dulled by clichés, haunted by hacks, and compelled by debts, the first autobiography of legendary boxer Joe Louis, *My Life Story*, would seem to deserve its obscurity. Published in 1947 when the aging champ faced a waning career and mounting bills, *My Life Story* might be dismissed as a facile attempt to exploit his fame in order to raise sorely needed cash. Louis also received "editorial aid" from Chester Washington and Haskell Cohen, two sportswriters whose involvement might cast the value of the boxer's official story into doubt, insofar as they compromise the authenticity of the narrative. Moreover, the book resulting from this collaboration hews closely to the banal conventions of celebrity autobiography, portraying Louis as ordinary and modest, hard-working but lucky. This up-by-the-jockstrap tale of the boxer's rise from poverty to prominence disappointed reviewers in both the mainstream and black press who expected something "that would reveal a little more of the man" (Dulles 36). One reviewer grumbled, "there is hardly a passage that couldn't have been written by a well-informed sports writer assigned to ghost the story of Joe Louis" (*My Life Story* 99); another complained that *My Life Story* neglected the boxer's "early years—a portion of Joe's life which might make fresh and interesting reading" (Fay B14); another regretted that the book "falls short of giving an adequate picture of the man who did this fighting" (Martin 15); and yet another panned the book as "trite and unrevealing to the point of inanity" (Lardner 235).[1]

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To scholars seeking to define—and defend—a selective literary tradition of African-American autobiography, Louis's book, like the overdetermined memoirs of other black celebrities, has been insignificant. Unlike Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), *My Life Story* can be dismissed easily for lacking art and authenticity, as well as the sharp, sustained engagement with American racism that has made Wright's literary narrative so compelling to critics. Nevertheless, beyond matters of quality and canon, Louis's memoir raises salient questions about the cultural politics of recognition that has often induced the public black self. More specifically, *My Life Story* arrived at a pivotal moment in the advent of the black athlete as a distinct autobiographical figure, which impels us to examine the historical insertion of athletes' bodies into African-American autobiography. We can trace the self-presentation of the black athlete to G. W. Offley's 1859 slave narrative and James Corrothers's 1916 autobiography, which recount their authors' experiences as boxers. In the 1920s, two more notable professional athletes, both retired, published their autobiographies. Notorious prizefighter Jack Johnson, who preceded Louis as the world's first black heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1915, published *Jack Johnson—In the Ring—and Out* in 1927. In the following year, the acclaimed cyclist Marshall "Major" Taylor published *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World*. No other black athlete would produce an autobiography for the next two decades, but Louis's *My Life Story* (followed shortly by Jackie Robinson's *My Own Story* in 1948) belonged to a new configuration taking shape within black autobiography. After World War II, the number of such books grew steadily. Black athletes published four autobiographies in the 1950s, 12 in the 1960s, and more than 30 in the 1970s (two-thirds of which appeared between 1970 and 1975).[2] Whatever its proximate causes, this proliferation registers the limits and pressures shaping African-American autobiography as a discrete form of cultural production. Upon what grounds, then, could Louis and other athletes come to inhabit the black "I"?

One of Louis's key tropes should elucidate the transitional significance of those black athlete autobiographers whose body language narrates them. Throughout his career, Louis's reticence was well known, and the boxer explains in *My Life Story* that "I always believed in letting my fists talk for me" (54). While he essentially adapts the pragmatist's cliché that "actions speak louder than words," the narrated Louis replaces both writing hands and "talking books" with talking fists as the source of his power.[3] As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Robert Stepto have so influentially shown, black autobiographical narratives since the eighteenth century served as self-conscious expressions of humanity and

intellect, material proof of the race's ability to craft its own image by crafting the written word.[4] In the post-slavery era, black autobiographers extended these representational priorities to fashion themselves into proponents of racial uplift, a discursive shift that harnessed the black "I" to the needs of a specific formation of aspirational Negroes. While autobiography presented black people's antiracist claims to humanity and, later, respectability, *My Life Story* illustrates how black athletes revised the basis for these claims from the mastery of whites' language to the spectacular achievements of the black body—including the physical mastery of white people themselves. This substitution of talking fists for talking books thus privileges Louis's public body as both the origin and the medium of his construction as an emblem of racial progress, and his memoir frames this story of African-American success in terms of his body's expanding symbolic status. Like other black autobiographers, Louis used the book form itself to evince his respectability, but *My Life Story* contains few instances of the boxer himself occupying the writerly role of the black self striving for literacy; instead, he is narrated as a great fan—and subject—of the movies and comic strips of mass culture. In effect, Louis's autobiography shapes his life into an allegory of political recognition predicated on the incorporation of his conspicuous body into the arenas of mass consumption, *not* on the triumphant literacy that has been central to the establishment of a black literary canon in the last three decades.

To be sure, Louis's autobiography does not proffer a radical black subjectivity. Rather, *My Life Story* reflects the shifting grounds upon which the embodied black male subject could be, at once, both representative and autobiographical. For my purposes, black autobiography functions as a mode of racial representation that derives much of its discrete significance from the reality effect of the formal black "I," even when other writers collaborate to evoke an ostensibly autonomous narrator. Regardless of its vague authenticity, Louis's autobiography produces and circulates blackness for public consumption under the privileged sign of the self, so I examine how *My Life Story* constructs the autobiographical figure of "Joe Louis," endowed with the authority of concrete experience and the conclusive example. To this end, I situate *My Life Story* between two broader trajectories: a residual uplift tradition that cast black self-presentation according to the prerogatives of a black middle class, and the concurrent growth of Fordism and its culture of mass consumption wherein black masculinity "became more and more defined by the consumer goods one owned, the leisure practices one engaged in, and one's physical and sexual virility" (Summers 8).[5] In the discussion that follows,

I consider the historical circumstances that informed the production of *My Life Story*, placing Louis's narrative in relation to the limits and possibilities of black autobiography as it served the ends of racial publicity. Insofar as Louis's tale of personal success signified black progress, it shared the synecdochic premises of earlier narratives which had been circumscribed by the class interests of respectable Negroes. At the same time, *My Life Story* departs from its antecedents by embracing Louis's conspicuous black body to revise racial uplift within the logic of Fordism. Suspended between older conventions of racial representation and newer conditions of black visibility, *My Life Story* narrates the boxer's rise from factory worker to heavyweight champion to loyal soldier as an allegory of political recognition, but it does so within the terms of consumer culture. In this respect, Louis models a citizenship that does not simply culminate in his military service but that also depends upon the incorporation of his body into an economic regime. At this intersection of personal success, racial publicity, and an expanding consumer culture, the narrated Louis becomes what I call an idol of integration. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the boxer's body as the source of his authority as a representative Negro, Louis's memoir advances an "auto/biopolitics," as I demonstrate through my reading of *My Life Story* in the second half of this essay.

1

By the time he published *My Life Story*, Joe Louis was one of the most visible black male bodies of his generation, due to both his proficiency in the boxing ring and his carefully managed profile outside of it. Born in 1914, Louis migrated from rural Alabama to Detroit with his family in 1926. In the city, he eventually left school to work on the assembly line at Ford Motors; he also discovered boxing. Once he started fighting professionally, he won 27 consecutive matches before suffering a dramatic loss to Max Schmeling in 1936. Louis became the second black heavyweight champion by knocking out James Braddock the next year. In 1938, he avenged his earlier loss to Schmeling during the first brutal round of their rematch, and this victory over Germany's former champion elevated Louis as a national hero, a symbol of democracy vanquishing Nazism. With Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, he joined the military and devoted himself to the US war effort, though his duties were limited to building morale among his fellow soldiers and lending his image to American propaganda. After the war, Louis resumed his career as prizefighter. As

heavyweight champion for nearly 12 years, he defended his title 25 times, retiring in 1949 with a remarkable professional record: 60 wins, 50 knockouts, one loss.[6]

Louis's iconic appeal transcended the boxing ring, and the black public sphere embraced him as a "Race Hero" from the beginning of his career. For example, between 1933 and 1938, Louis was the most prominent figure in the *Chicago Defender*, appearing on the weekly's front page in either headlines or pictures more than 80 times (Drake and Cayton 403); due to its extensive coverage of the young boxer, the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s circulation grew large enough to make it "the leading black weekly in the country" during the same period (Buni 257). For black America, "any Negro becomes a hero if he beats the white man at his own game or forces the white world to recognize his talent or service or achievement" (Drake and Cayton 395), and Louis embodied this redemptive "politics of fulfilment" by dominating his white opponents (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 37–38).[7] Because of the disreputable, working-class character of prizefighting, many members of the black middle class were reluctant to accept the uneducated boxer as an icon of racial uplift. However, by the time Louis became the heavyweight champion in 1937, his stature rivaled that of black America's most respectable leaders, and he became a conspicuous participant at meetings held by black political organizations seeking to benefit from the boxer's mass appeal, including the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.[8]

As Louis's prominence grew, his handlers knew that his professional future would depend heavily on his image both in and out of the ring. They especially feared that the boxer would never contend for the heavyweight title unless he could distinguish himself from the infamous Jack Johnson, so they constructed his persona as diligently as they trained his body. Sensitive to the pitfalls and possibilities of Louis's visibility as a representative Negro, they sought to make him "a perfect *black* example of the Protestant ethic" in the public eye (Gilmore 258). In this they were successful. Contrasting Louis with Johnson in 1946, C. L. R. James linked the boxer's public self-presentation to the civil rights struggle, noting that "Joe himself has stated in public that he would rather die than do anything which would discredit his people. . . . Joe feels he is not only a boxer but a social figure, someone whose actions can harm the struggle of Negroes for their full democratic rights. In that sense he feels he is a genuine 'representative' of the Negro people" (James 62). While Louis provided black people with a vicarious outlet for their hostility to Jim Crow,

he did not flaunt the threat of black defiance suggested by his mastery in the ring; rather, he diminished this threat with his conscientious devotion to "the teachings of church and family—restraint, sobriety, and faith in perseverance" (Gilmore 260). Unlike the flamboyant, immodest Johnson, Louis epitomized a disciplined Negro: the humble young boxer worked diligently, fought honestly, and lived cleanly; he was impassive, neither gloating over his fallen white opponents nor mugging for the cameras; and most importantly, he was uninterested in white women.[9] Although his original managers no longer handled Louis in 1947, *My Life Story* continued to perpetuate the respectable public image for which he was best known, an image that fixed his emblematic status on behalf of black America.

For this reason, Louis's ghostwriters do not compromise the import of *My Life Story* as a text that mobilizes the autobiographical "I" to serve the demands of racial publicity. Throughout his career, Louis's political significance resulted largely from his persona as a respectable model of black citizenship, earned through proper home-training, painstaking ring work, and dutiful military service. The narrated Louis of *My Life Story* remained faithful to the discourses that had produced him as a representative Negro, and in this sense Haskell Cohen and Chester Washington preserved the truth of "Joe Louis." Furthermore, these two writers endowed Louis's narrative with the institutional weight of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which had played a key role in fashioning the boxer's persona in the black public sphere throughout the 1930s and 1940s. During the same period, the *Courier*, reputed for the depth of its sports coverage, had engaged in the long battle to integrate major league baseball; during World War II, the paper had also demanded a "double victory" against fascism abroad and racism at home.[10] Given the *Courier*'s campaigns to integrate the nation's playing fields, armed forces, and industrial factories, we should not be surprised that Louis's two collaborators were connected directly to that newspaper (just as Jackie Robinson's ghostwriter in 1948 was the *Courier*'s Wendell Smith).

When Louis signed the contract for his autobiography in 1946, Cohen was a sportswriter who had begun his brief career at the *Courier* in 1944 as one of the paper's war correspondents (after V-E Day, the paper touted his "unique" position as "a white man covering activities of Negro troops for a Negro newspaper" ["Eight" 19]). More significantly, black journalist Washington had worked at the *Courier* for more than two decades, and his writing career had been intertwined with Louis's fighting career. In fact, he had already helped to shape both the boxer's public image and printed voice after meeting Louis in 1934. With fellow

sportswriter Bill Nunn, he wrote a weekly series of "as told to" articles on Louis's life story in the four months leading up to the bout against former champion Primo Carnera in 1935. During the same period, Washington also became Louis's secretary, charged with answering the boxer's fan mail. He quickly became one of the fighter's confidants while providing the *Courier* with exclusive access to Louis's professional and personal life (Buni 252). In late 1941, he even wrote a short-lived column of Louis's boxing observations, "as told to Chester Washington," for the *New York Post*.[11] Throughout Louis's career, Washington thus practiced other forms of ghostwriting that supported the boxer's persona, and because of these experiences, he actually preserved the continuity between the celebrity and his autobiography. Critics tend to distrust such ghostwritten narratives, but *My Life Story* needed to sustain the political work of Louis's public image because of his status as an exemplary Negro. This meant that his sanguine narrative was driven less by the desire for personal revelation than by the desiderata of racial representation in the immediate aftermath of the war.

In this respect, the upstanding Louis of *My Life Story* resonates with premises that had structured the development of black autobiography long before World War II. By the end of the nineteenth century, teachers, preachers, reformers, missionaries, professionals, and other strivers dominated black autobiography, and their ideologies of "racial uplift" established limits and exerted pressures upon the narratives they produced. These figures certainly sparred over the meanings of racial uplift (evinced, for example, by the intense debates over protest and accommodation that arose in the years following Booker T. Washington's 1895 speech in Atlanta). Nevertheless, they often shared a belief about the links among racial representation, political recognition, and black progress.[12] That is, these autobiographers sought to control the race's image in order to elevate its status, all assuming that the race would advance materially, socially, and politically by proving itself capable of bourgeois standards of comportment and respectability.[13] This ideological assumption generated what I call a cultural politics of racial synecdoche, since the burden of proof fell to exemplary individuals whose publicity would both evoke and effect the race's progress. As the quintessential form of literary self-presentation, autobiography thus served the interests of a new class of aspirational Negroes who used it to present themselves as exemplars of personal respectability, familial responsibility, and collective duty. Such was the nature of racial publicity according to the dictates of uplift: seeking to imagine themselves into being as a coherent formation, these figures published their narratives as

proofs against antiblack racism and as blueprints for other black people.

Driven by the synecdochic premises of racial uplift, these respectable Negroes were apprehensive about the position of their bodies in their narratives. Because the black body routinely served as an overworked site of racist speculation—on the minstrel's stage, the lyncher's stake, and beyond—these autobiographers sought to personify the race's heads rather than its hands, its souls rather than its bodies. This was true even for ideologues like Booker T. Washington, who espoused a "new dispensation of mind, morals, and muscle" as the foundation of racial progress (*Tuskegee* 15). Washington and other autobiographers promoted manual labor and industrial education in order to champion the productivity of the black body and reject its alleged profligacy. Emphasizing their discipline, these devotees of racial uplift narrated themselves as emblems of producer values such as thrift, temperance, chastity, and cleanliness; consequently, they demonstrated their abhorrence of consumerism and their ambivalence toward the black body. For them, the uplifted Negro was a builder rather than a buyer, and they disdained consumerism for fostering self-indulgence and dependence. According to Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), racial progress required his Tuskegee Institute and its satellite schools to reform those black folks who would resort to theft and prostitution as their desires to consume outgrew their abilities to produce (21, 45). Moreover, the proponents of racial uplift during the Jim Crow era delineated their own elevation against the bodies of other black (and mostly working-class) people, presumed to be criminal, sexual, or simply unruly.[14] As a result, they depicted their own bodies cautiously, if at all. For example, manual labor at Tuskegee served a disciplinary function central to Washington's brand of racial uplift, but the effective lesson of his own autobiographies was that he himself had graduated from hand work to head work; rather than become a respectable laborer himself, he rose from slavery to become a formidable manager of black workers. If Washington and other autobiographers of his day promoted a collective commitment to race-building by managing the bodies of other black people, they also drew attention away from their own in the process of becoming representative Negroes. These earlier figures thus sought to establish their synecdochic authority by transcending their own racialized bodies in their narratives.

Louis's earliest precursors, two preachers who had also boxed, treat their athleticism with decided ambivalence, further illustrating the tensions among the black male body, the synecdochic self, and racial elevation. In his brief 1859 narrative,

A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, the author describes how, as a slave in Maryland during the late 1820s, he learned to read by teaching a white boy to fight, thus exchanging his physical dexterity for an exalting literacy; later, he "taught boxing school, and learned to write" (133). As an autobiographer, Offley attempts to show how he has transcended his "earthly" body for the sake of his "immortal" soul, since he sees himself as "a compound being, possessing two natures, a soul and a body" (134). Opposing his boxing career to his spiritual ascent, he confesses, "Then I thought he who could control his antagonist by the art of his physical power was a greater man. But I thank the Lord . . . I have been enabled to see things in a different light, and believe the man is greater who can overcome his foes by his Christlike example" (136). Corrothers's 1916 autobiography, *In Spite of the Handicap*, recounts his own years as a fighter and even exhibits some pride in his manly athleticism (his book includes an impressive full-length portrait of him in his boxing attire) (Gaines 200–201). Nevertheless, the narrative also distinguishes clearly between his "disgraceful" boxing career, which results from economic necessity, and his spiritual and literary elevation, which allows him to join the community of uplifted Negroes. Upon reciting his "Psalm of a Race" at the national meeting of the Afro-American Council in 1899, the poet writes, "The best coloured families in Chicago insisted upon 'lionising' me—much to my discomfort. I could not well carry out my boxing programme under the circumstances. For *now* I felt that *that* would disgrace my race" (92). Once Chicago's "best coloured families" recognize him, Corrothers decides that his entry into a black elite requires him to assume (in both senses) his status as a representative of the race. In other words, Corrothers conflates his own class mobility with the race's public image as he realizes that his sporting black body undermines his social position. Ultimately, both of these narratives follow a logic of conversion that typifies uplift autobiography, and the boxing experiences of these men belong to past selves that they renounce to become respectable Christians. In short, athleticism alone does not warrant the autobiographical acts of Offley and Corrothers.

If these earlier narrators displace their bodies, Louis embraces his. In this respect, *My Life Story* registers the new domains of consumer culture within which Louis's body could generate fame, recognition, national influence, and racial esteem. As the US transformed from an industrial nation to a consumer society, celebrity journalism, well established by the 1930s, stimulated popular interest in the lives of stars, while sport grew in importance during the interwar period and surged with the advent of television in the

1940s.[15] With the advance of Fordism, an economic regime wedding mass production to mass consumption, famous athletes took their turn occupying the intersection where the work of the professional, the play of the athlete, and the leisure of the celebrity meet. As a result, they began to surpass the older "idols of production," which had arisen "from the productive life, from industry, business, and natural sciences" of an earlier age (Lowenthal 112).[16] Like other stars, the athlete appeared to be "directly, or indirectly, related to the sphere of leisure time: either he does not belong to vocations which serve society's basic needs . . . or he amounts, more or less, to a caricature of a socially productive agent" (Lowenthal 115). No longer "the leading names in the battle of production," these "idols of consumption" dominated America's pantheon of heroes by mid century. As profiles in the mass media or as book-length autobiographies, the life stories of these new idols fueled their celebrity, and these stories developed specific conventions that promised to make these stars more familiar without revealing much (Lowenthal 116).[17]

To be sure, the increasing salience of sport, the growth of celebrity culture, and the evolution of the publishing industry would spur the autobiographical production of *all* athletes, black and nonblack alike. Still, Louis bore an additional burden because his self-presentation was bound to the demands of racial publicity, and *My Life Story* adheres to the synecdochic assumptions of earlier autobiographers. With the expansion of mass culture, Louis rose as a representative Negro to enact the progress of black people within a racially segmented economy and a racially segregated society. For this reason, the narrated Louis of *My Life Story* becomes more than simply an idol of consumption that happens to be black; rather, the boxer emerges as an idol of *integration*. Louis symbolizes the potential incorporation of black men into a nation of citizen consumers just as "the formation of the racial system and resistance to it moved out of workshops and into spaces of consumption—into houses, stores, movies, and sport" (Holt 60).[18] If Louis's representative status depends on fame that originates within the political economy of Fordism, this fame ultimately depends upon the deeds of his spectacular, athletic body. It is this body that warrants *My Life Story*.

Given the uplift tradition of black autobiography—with its anxiety over the multivalent body, its discomfort with consumer culture, and its commitment to the synecdochic self—the ascendancy of the athlete marks a significant historical shift in the politics of black self-presentation. *My Life Story* draws attention to Louis's own body as the vehicle for racial uplift within a culture of mass consumption. Consequently, the narrative signals a

growing "biopolitical" mode in black autobiography. According to Paul Gilroy, biopolitics occurs when "the person is defined as the body and . . . certain exemplary bodies . . . become impacted instantiations of community"; more specifically, such a biopolitics restricts the representative black self to an iconic body idealized for its athletic or sexual prowess (*Against Race* 185).[19] Following the logic of commodity culture, this biopolitics blurs the stark contrast between physicality and spirituality that sustained notions of black freedom in the past and justified acts of black self-presentation. The narratives of former slaves, for example, conjoined freedom with the survival of a metaphysical self *despite* the body's brutalization. Emphasizing the black self beyond the facts of its body, the narrators of uplift autobiography also turned *away* from their own bodies in order to bolster the stories they had to tell, as we find in the narratives of Offley and Corrothers. However, in Louis's *My Life Story*, the black self draws attention *to* its own body as the basis of its authority and appeal, and this makes all the difference. Under the powerful sign of the outwardly autonomous, self-narrating "I"—powerful even when it unsuccessfully mystifies the collaboration that actually produces it—biopolitics becomes "auto/biopolitics." Chronicling Louis's progress from factory worker to boxer to consumer to commodity to soldier, *My Life Story* invites a reading that attends to this auto/biopolitics. I turn now to this interplay between the cultural work of *My Life Story* and the exemplary black body it presents.

2

If *My Life Story* marks a transition in the development of African-American autobiography, then it is fitting that the narrative quickly sets Louis apart from his fathers. First, *My Life Story* opens with a confrontation between the young man and his disapproving stepfather, Patrick Brooks, that establishes an important opposition between fighting and factory work. After Louis has "worked hard in Ford's factory all day," he visits the gym because it keeps him "feeling swell," and he "[likes] the idea of trying to keep in better shape than the other boys" (11–12, 23). One night he returns from his workout to find an angry Brooks, who declares, "If you keep on wasting your time down at that gym, and foolin' around with boxing, *you're never gonna amount to nothing!*" (11–12). For Louis, these "words hit me harder than some of the blows I got in the gym that night"; unable to respond to Brooks directly, he adds, "I had never taken my boxing too seriously. But I liked it. And then, just like that, he had made it seem so important"

(12). An autoworker himself, Louis's stepfather personifies the Washingtonian ethos of the productive black self as he scolds the young man for using his body for play rather than work. However, *My Life Story* undermines this unrelenting dichotomy between leisure and respectable labor at the outset. More than mere recreation, Louis's evening workouts offer him a potential escape from a future of routinized wage work in Ford's factory, and boxing offers him a more pleasurable form of physical labor.[20] Insofar as the young protagonist must overcome the doubts of a disapproving stepfather, this opening conflict might appear to be little more than a stock intergenerational struggle, but in *My Life Story* it holds a deeper biopolitical significance: resulting from a clash over the productive capacity of the young man's body, this formative crisis sets in motion Louis's career as a heroic boxer, one who is destined to represent the race as a result of his incorporation into the realm of leisure and consumption.

Following this conflict with Brooks, *My Life Story* describes the tragic demise of Louis's biological father, Munroe Barrow, who embodies the fatal consequences of sharecropping. According to Louis, "The work and worry finally broke him. His six-foot three-inch frame no longer carried his two hundred pounds. He had lost weight steadily. Our family, being poor, could not send him to a hospital, so he was sent to a state institution. A few years later he died" (14). This prosaic description of Barrow's death introduces the father's wasted body as a sign for the South's brutal regime of racialized labor. However, the narrative follows this omen with a cheery description of Louis's birth, adding, "My mother told me that I was a healthy baby at birth, weighing nearly nine pounds. She said that by the time I reached ten I had broad shoulders and was taller and heavier than any of the boys my age" (14–15). Given the teleological conventions of celebrity autobiography, Louis's readers should expect his book to end with success, so his father's belabored, wasted body (juxtaposed with his own young, healthy body) evokes the unhappy ending that Louis would have faced below the Mason–Dixon line. Furthermore, this contrast reinforces the intergenerational conflict between black men that opens *My Life Story*. After distinguishing himself from one father representing the factory, Louis now distinguishes himself from another representing the cotton field.

Together, Brooks and Barrow portend the ill effects of the old producerist ethos that Louis eludes by becoming a boxer, and by the end of the first chapter his earnings fully vindicate his choice to fight for a living. While Brooks's factory job allowed Louis's family to migrate north from rural Alabama, the onset of the Depression meant "My stepfather was getting very little work

at Ford's. Something had to be done. So we applied for relief. . . . Our family had always been able to take care of itself, no matter how hard the going got. But my mother promised, 'Some day we will pay every penny of this money back'" (16). When that day finally comes, Louis's earnings restore the family's dignity: "In 1935, I wrote a check for $269 and, with a letter of thanks[,] mailed it to the welfare board. This made my mother very happy. It was one thing that had worried her all through the years since we had been forced to accept the money. It had hurt her pride" (16). Although Louis offers this concluding anecdote without comment, the first chapter promotes profitable ring work over unstable factory work. The succession of failed fathers at the outset of *My Life Story* creates the narrative space for Louis to critique the limitations of a wholly utilitarian black body. As the chapter's final anecdote attests, Louis's decision to box not only frees his body, it also redeems the honest, hardworking black family from the shame it associates with welfare. The young boxer assumes the role of dutiful provider, supplanting the narrative's first two father figures who then disappear from the text altogether. Fraught from the beginning with the tension between the pleasurable gym workout and "productive" work in both factory and field, *My Life Story* offers Louis up as a member of a new generation replacing the old. In fact, the young migrant seems to escape the realm of labor altogether in this tale of success.

Louis's check to the welfare board enables the young fighter to do for his mother what his father(s) cannot, and in subsequent chapters he continues to vindicate his choice to box as he integrates himself further into the realm of consumption. This becomes apparent when he buys his mother a new house. Prizefighting for less than six months, Louis earns a hefty purse after a bout in 1934, and with his earnings he "started making plans for playing Santa Claus to my family" (43). He writes, "I guess that was my happiest Christmas, for I was able to do something I had wanted to do ever since I first came to Detroit as a kid: Buy my mother a home there. So that's what I did. . . . It was a swell Christmas" (43). This new house, "a long way from the little cabin we had left in the backwoods country of Alabama," becomes a symbol of Louis's progress and elevation; as a Christmas gift, it also becomes a sign of his new status as an American consumer in the urban North (44). Furthermore, this new house carries an added weight given the racial politics of consumption in the Jim Crow era. Widespread restrictions on African-American home ownership meant "blacks were being denied the right not only to a house—a physical space to live—but to an identity—as citizens in a polity, as persons in the process of self-realization" (Holt 73). Rather than

employment or unionization, "it was housing—a key item in the market basket of the new consumption regime—that became one of the key sites of racial conflict in that new economy" (Holt 72). This new house thus stands as a Fordist symbol of civic belonging, the result of a meaningful act of consumption (not, in this case, of collective struggle). If this house signals Louis's growth from black laborer to citizen consumer, then it also represents the first step in his emergence in the narrative as an idol of integration.

This important measure of success soon gives way to another once Louis's own emblematic black body becomes a thing to be consumed. During his first year as a professional, Louis realizes that his body has begun to accumulate symbolic meanings in the eyes of others. After knocking out an opponent in 1935, Louis gets his "first test at being a public hero" (47). Celebrating in Pittsburgh's nightclubs after the fight, Louis notes,

> I had never shaken so many hands in all my life. It made me feel good. I said to myself that night:
>
> "Joe, you got to make good. You got to keep punching and winning. People all over the country are watching you and they're pulling for you to win." (47)

When Louis once struggled to decide whether or not to leave Ford's factory, his manager convinced the young man that as a boxer he "could do a lot of good for [his] country and [his] people" (30). This early victory confirms Louis's growing significance as a representative Negro, which Louis reiterates elsewhere in *My Life Story* (102, 128). In light of his recent emergence as a consumer, this moment alters his relationship to the market—from purchaser to purchased, from agent to referent. No longer representing his success solely in terms of his capacity as a consumer, Louis's narrative begins to present his rise in terms of his body's availability to ardent fans and other spectators. In Louis's life, both his earnings and his status reinforced the boxer's importance; however, the autobiography subordinates his buying power to his body's symbolic value as Louis becomes an increasingly desirable object of consumption for "People all over the country."

Although the narrated Louis seems to resist the commodification of his body's labor in the factory, he embraces the commodification of his body's significance in the ring. Beyond the realm of labor, he still emphasizes the virtues of self-discipline and hard work, as when he remarks, "If I was going to be a fighter I had to fight, fight hard and fight often" (52). *My Life Story* consistently stresses the boxer's work ethic to show that he does not simply play; his strenuous training pays off according to the meritocratic

logic of the narrative, and in this respect, Louis aligns himself with the uplift autobiographers before him. All the same, he measures his recognition in consumerist terms as well, highlighting his growing popularity among spectators and fans as well. Undefeated after his first year of boxing professionally, Louis writes, "I was on my way to becoming a big-time drawing card. The top cities were demanding my services" (52). In addition, Louis's narrative substantiates his mass appeal by detailing the gate receipts and attendance figures for his bouts. For example, he points out that "The gate passed the $215,000 mark with over forty thousand people buying tickets" and that "a capacity crowd of twelve thousand, who paid $52,000 at the gate, turned out" (78, 80; see also 57, 83, 93, 101). As proof of Louis's acclaim, these box office figures measure the value that his body commands, while the attendance figures mark the importance of his body as a spectacle to large numbers of people, including other idols of consumption. At one fight, "there were nearly as many Hollywood stars around the ringside as there were up in the sky," and the presence of such spectators as Tyrone Power, Cary Grant, Olivia DeHaviland, Mickey Rooney, and Douglas Fairbanks endorses his own rise as an idol of integration, a black star watched by other stars (116–17; see also 48).

In *My Life Story*, Louis's tale of success depends on his capacity to represent the race. As the narrative chronicles the boxer's thriving career, it places greater emphasis on what his body means than on what he buys or earns. The narrated Louis thus associates his public significance with additional efforts to commodify him. After a successful string of fights, Louis buys his first automobile, a "black Buick sedan"; at the same time,

> life stories began to appear in papers. Reporters were always around asking questions. My managers got Russ Cowans, a Detroit sports writer, to write up the facts on my life and mail them to papers. The *Pittsburgh Courier* was the first to carry *my life story* and the *New York Daily Mirror* the first to run it in a cartoon strip. My managers signed a contract with a Chicago photographer to make and sell postcards with my picture on them. Another company put out statues of me in a fighting pose. My future was starting to look brighter and my chances of going places were bigger. (52–53; emphasis added)

At this moment in *My Life Story*, the boxer continues to move from the realm of production as an erstwhile laborer into the exalted community of consumers. Because Louis once worked on

the assembly line at Ford, his upscale Buick sedan is a poignant sign of his refinement. Still, the car itself seems relatively insignificant here, despite the symbolic heft it shares with his mother's house. Instead, Louis devotes the bulk of this passage to the process that renders his own body legible and consumable, again staking his success on the transition from purchaser to purchased. As a postcard or statuette, his body assumes reproducible forms that allow it to circulate among a broad community of consumers. Furthermore, this passage also conjoins this commodification with his successful rise and his "brighter, bigger" future. His status as both celebrated "public hero" and representative Negro thus grows in direct relation to his increasing availability as a body worthy of admiration, emulation, and recognition. Finally, the mass publication of the boxer's life as facts, story, and cartoon at this moment in *My Life Story* is crucial: first, it introduces autobiographical production *itself* as a key marker of Louis's success; second, it situates the origin of his autobiography *within* the process of marketing his consumable, representative black body. As athletic success, consumer culture, and black self-presentation converge, this turning point in *My Life Story* marks the inception of Louis's auto/biopolitics.

With his proliferation as cartoon, postcard, statuette, and story, Louis fully belongs to the realm of American consumption—not simply as a consumer, but as one beholden to those who consume him.

With his proliferation as cartoon, postcard, statuette, and story, Louis fully belongs to the realm of American consumption—not simply as a consumer, but as one beholden to those who consume him. *My Life Story* frames the boxer's representative status as an idol of integration in these terms as he prepares for one of his first major fights, which advances the emblematic meaning of his body. In June 1935, Louis fought Primo Carnera, a middling boxer who had managed to become the heavyweight champion from 1933 to 1934 after a brief career of fixed fights.[21] As titleholder, Carnera's massive body fueled the fascist biopolitics of his native Italy: Benito Mussolini presented the boxer with an oversized black shirt, and his body became a model for fascist monuments erected throughout the country.[22] With Italy threatening to invade independent Ethiopia that summer, Louis's bout with Carnera assumed a symbolism of international scale.[23] Indeed, on the day of their fight, the *Washington Post* published an editorial cartoon that depicted the two fighters in the ring, casting formidable shadows labeled "Ethiopia" and "Italy"; Louis's smaller shadow carried the distinctive profile of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, while Carnera's carried that of Mussolini.[24] This symbolism drew further poignancy from the visible difference in size between the two boxers—while the 200-pound Louis stood just over six feet, the 260-pound Carnera stood six-and-a-half-feet tall. While the Italo-Ethiopian conflict

informed the fight's "racial contrast," the Carnera bout was also the first major interracial boxing match staged in the US since Jack Johnson's era, so it aroused distinctly American concerns.[25] Fearing outbreaks of the racial violence that routinely followed Johnson's title bouts, the fight's promoters arranged for more than 1600 uniformed and undercover policemen to patrol Yankee Stadium (Bak 90); beforehand, ring announcer Harry Balogh pleaded with fans, "regardless of race, creed, or color, let us all say, may the better man emerge victorious" (Mead 59).

These complex circumstances thus elicited a range of responses to the bout's racial meanings. However, Louis's autobiography presents the Carnera fight as a contest of strictly national proportions so that the two boxers' mismatched bodies stage a conflict close to home. With no reference to the Italo-Ethiopian conflict brewing abroad, *My Life Story* disregards the internationalist meanings attached to Louis's black body.[26] Rather, the Carnera fight marks Louis's first major test as a possible contender for the heavyweight title and, thus, a pivotal moment in his struggle to overcome Jim Crow in American boxing. If Louis's introduction into the national spotlight coincides with his transformation into a commodity, then the account of the Carnera bout in *My Life Story* strengthens the connection between the boxer's body and his representative status. Describing the fight's importance in corporeal terms, Louis's narrative stresses, "this was a big moment because Carnera was surely a big man" (55). In fact, Carnera's pale body—"the hugest (living) hunk of human fighting flesh"—rather than Louis's dark one becomes the abnormal spectacle in this interracial contest (53). In his typical style, Louis details the fight round by round with an assortment of wisecracks about the size of his opponent's body. Louis refers to him as the "Man Mountain" and likens him to the Giant from the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk (56, 55). After Louis connects with a right, Carnera sways "like an oak tree waving in the wind"; after another right, he "[drops] like a watersoaked log" (56). Despite the Italian's lackluster boxing skills in reality, his body appears in *My Life Story* as both obstacle and threat, and this victory teaches Louis that "When you go hunting, hunt for big game. Not for small fry. I decided to aim high in life" (57). With an auto/biopolitical drive, *My Life Story* constructs Louis's representative potential as an idol of integration against the symbolic body of his opponent.

Louis's most significant reference to Carnera's body occurs with a rare allusion to the color line, which injects a complex of racialized meanings into a narrative that otherwise tends to assume, rather than assert, the boxer's blackness. During the fight,

Louis's trainer "told me to keep boxing and working 'downstairs' until he gave the signal to start punching higher. So I kept boxing and weaving in the second [round] and planting a solid right just above the 'Mason–Dixon line' whenever I got a chance" (55). This quip admits the racial contrast at work in the boxing ring, since the belt dividing fair play from foul becomes the boundary dividing North from South. As a result, this metaphor actually maps Carnera's body with a geography of Jim Crow, so that *My Life Story* replaces Italian Fascism with American racism; insofar as the bout itself effectively desegregates the ring, Louis fights to overcome Jim Crow and transcend the Mason–Dixon line. By refusing to stretch forth and embrace the identity of "Ethiopian," Louis's autobiography thus stakes its claim to a national identity as a black American rather than to a diasporic identity with international roots. With this quip, *My Life Story* specifies an identity for Louis in strictly national terms that accord with the narrative's integrationist aims.

According to his memoir, Louis's early success as a boxer introduces his black body into a community of American consumers within which his recognition originates. Even before it recounts his battles with Germany's Schmeling, *My Life Story* frames Louis's bout with Carnera in national terms that cast him as an idol of integration to be recognized as an American body. With Louis's transformation into a soldier during World War II, his famous body becomes even more conspicuous as a symbol of national strength. A month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Louis defended his title against Buddy Baer in a rematch organized to benefit the US Navy Relief Society (Louis donated his share of the purse); the next day, he reported for duty in the Army. In *My Life Story*, Louis refers obliquely to the racial symbolism of his earlier fights when he opines that the Baer fight "was not just to help any one race, it was a fight for my country, for all my fellow Americans" (144). After describing his quick, decisive victory, Louis concludes, "That was my first real job for Uncle Sam. I was looking forward to a still bigger job as soon as I could get into uniform" (147). Once he has been inducted, Louis stresses, "That's what I was, a soldier. I was not the heavyweight champion of the world. I was Private Joseph Louis Barrow. And I had a big job to do" (162; see also 148, 173). *My Life Story* thus marks wartime by distinguishing the black boxer out of uniform from the American soldier in it, and this sartorial conversion represents his integration into the country's war machinery. Still, once he becomes a soldier, Louis's body does not completely disappear beneath his Army uniform, and his narrative continues to draw attention to his muscles, as this comical exchange suggests:

> One fellow who was handing out the clothing cracked:
> "We have only two sizes, Joe, too big and too small."
> "They don't come too big for me," I answered. (149)

Like his fellow inductees, Private Barrow submits his body to the military as "Army property" (153). Contending that he was just another GI, his narrative emphasizes how he became a symbol within a spectatorial community of fellow soldiers, not stars. All the same, this consistent attention to his meaningful body in *My Life Story* stakes Louis's incorporation into the military on his emblematic appeal as a celebrated black athlete.

In *My Life Story*, the size, skill, and strength of Louis's body signify the capabilities of American manhood, and his importance as an iconic fighter trumps his usefulness as an actual combatant. After his promotion to corporal in 1942, Louis receives orders "that I was not to do any actual combat fighting, that [the War Department] wanted to use me to give boxing exhibitions, and help build morale" (164). Eventually, the military incorporates Louis into its mass propaganda campaign, and in 1943, he writes, "I was ordered to Hollywood by the War Department to work in the film 'This Is The Army,'" adapted from Irving Berlin's popular stage production (166). For much of the war, Louis tours the US with his group of boxers, including eventual champion Sugar Ray Robinson and future soul singer Jackie Wilson. In this capacity, he fights exhibitions for servicemen, referees bouts between servicemen, lectures on physical fitness, provides comic entertainment, and visits hospitals; later, he takes his exhibition tour overseas to perform for troops in England, France, and Italy (167). Even as a soldier, Louis remains on stage, on display; in fact, *My Life Story* stresses the importance of his body as materiel. Training for his fight to benefit the Army Relief Fund in 1942, Louis notes, "The boxing drills and gym work were not open to the public. But through the post headquarters every soldier on the base got a chance to watch those drills. We admitted about three thousand each day. Of course, newspapermen were admitted. But the public was not. After all, I was Army property and was fighting for the Army. So it was made an all Army affair" (153). Fulfilling his obligation as an American citizen, Louis circulates here for the pleasure and inspiration of his fellow soldiers, both black and nonblack; lest his image be rationed, Louis continues to circulate in the public sphere as a sight, since his drills are open to the press.

At the conclusion of *My Life Story*, Louis writes, "Brotherhood should always be the symbol of America. We had that brotherhood during the war" (188). According to the narrative,

Louis's wartime visibility situates his body within an interracial fraternity that will ensure America's postwar progress. As the autobiography draws to a close, it describes a series of encounters between the boxer and other men in which Louis's integration into such a brotherhood coincides with the fetishization of his muscles. Explaining why he refused opportunities to become a commissioned officer, Louis argues that his role as a morale-boosting emissary among his fellow soldiers depended on the immediate availability of his body. As he puts it, "if I got to be an officer, then the privates would think I was a lot farther away from them. I know a lot of them like to slap me on the back, *or feel my muscle*, or shake my hand and chat with me. If I got to be an officer, they wouldn't feel free to do those things. I figure that if I'd be wearing bars, they wouldn't have that close, friendly feeling for me" (170–71; emphasis added). Soon thereafter, Louis briefly describes a meeting in Alaska with Russian soldiers, who

> spotted me and came up to me, smiled, *felt my muscle*, and shook my hand.
>
> I said, "I'm glad to meet you."
>
> They smiled, looked at each other, and they said, "———."
>
> I don't know what they said. (172; emphasis added)

Most importantly, Louis opens his final chapter, "P.S.—What America Means to Me," by describing "a big thrill"—his famous meeting with President Roosevelt before the Schmeling rematch in 1938. According to Louis, Roosevelt remarked, "'You know, Joe, America is never supposed to lose.' Then *he felt my muscles* and smiled" (186; emphasis added). With their common gestures of physical recognition, these three encounters bind the meaning of Louis's uniformed body to his public availability. Even when language fails during his encounter with Russian soldiers, Louis's accessible muscles convey his national identity and democratic promise; given Roosevelt's anxieties over his own polio-stricken body, this final contrast between the boxer and the president bears a poignant auto/biopolitical significance.[27] Though fraught, these physical gestures recognize the black prizefighter as an American among men, the final measure of a successful life, according to the teleology of Louis's autobiography.

When *My Life Story* appeared in 1947, the desegregation of the US military had not yet been achieved, nor was it inevitable. During World War II, African Americans had rallied around the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s "Double-V" campaign to address the contradictory meanings of the black soldier, unrecognized as a full citizen yet fighting for democracy. With its direct links to the

Courier, Louis's autobiography would contribute to this ongoing struggle, though it does not directly confront racial inequality in the armed forces—with one poignant exception. While stationed in England, Louis and other black soldiers are refused admission to the local movie theater until the cashier recognizes the famous boxer ("I guess the girl in the ticket office must have known me from my pictures"), and the group then enters free of charge (168). According to Louis, "that night, I sat down and wrote a letter to the proper authority," and the subsequent investigation relieves the area commander who had ordered the town's segregation (169). In this case, Louis's celebrity gives him power, as both a vision and a voice, to overcome discrimination. Like his earlier quip about the Mason–Dixon line, this rare admission of racism serves to heighten Louis's national identity rather than his unequal status. As he puts it, "I've always felt that all of our soldiers should be treated just one way, and that is as American soldiers, and not as one group or one race or another"; recalling the wartime push for a double victory, he concludes that all soldiers "wanted to do the job we had to do over there as a team, and felt that it wouldn't be a bad way to keep our country out of another war—if we would all just get together and do the same thing at home" (169). *My Life Story* thus settles on the image of a uniformed Louis to resolve the contradictions of black citizenship, presenting his body as both hard proof of African-American loyalty and hopeful promise of a reformed military. Still, Louis joins a fraternity of American soldiers on the symbolic strength of his accessible black body, deployed for ideological battles rather than military combat. Even as a soldier, Louis's status as emblematic black citizen originates in the looking relations of consumer culture, which produce his boxing body as a sight, symbol, and spectacle. As an exceptional idol of integration to be watched and desired, embraced and emulated, the narrated Louis thus presumes that his synecdochic visibility elicits a broader political recognition, and this premise, however dubious, motivates his rise throughout *My Life Story*.

Joe Louis's 1947 memoir imagines a solution to racial inequality through the celebrity accorded to the boxer's body within a Fordist regime, and this marks a historical variation upon the cultural politics of racial uplift that had dominated black autobiography. Mediocre, mediated, and market-driven, *My Life Story* yet prompts us to account for the complexity of cultural practices rather than assume the purity of a seamless, selective tradition.[28] Consider, then, how this and other such neglected texts enhance our understanding of black autobiography as they arrive at the intersection of the narrating black "I," racial publicity, and regimes of

consumption. How do the postwar autobiographies of other black athletes, such as Jackie Robinson (1948), Henry Armstrong (1956), Althea Gibson (1958), and Roy Campanella (1959), configure their subjects as idols of integration? How do the autobiographies of black women performers, such as Lena Horne (1950), Ethel Waters (1951), Eartha Kitt (1956), and Katherine Dunham (1959), complicate or qualify such auto/biopolitics?[29] How do all such figures, enmeshed in the expanding culture industries, constitute a distinct configuration within black autobiography? How does the accelerated production of black athlete autobiography in the 1960s enter into a complex dialectic with the burgeoning narratives of black nationalists (some of whom became celebrities themselves)? How does the interrelation among the black male body, the synecdochic self, and the residues of racial uplift vary from *My Life Story* to Louis's *My Life* (1978) to Charles Barkley's *Outrageous!* (1992), the memoir of a notorious basketball player who once declared—in a Nike commercial, no less—that "I am not a role model"? And finally, from the discourses of "Joe Louis" to those of basketball-loving "Barack Obama," how does black self-presentation intersect with regimes of race, gender, celebrity, and consumption to shape our political imaginations? Ultimately, the case of *My Life Story* prompts us to face a broad challenge: insofar as autobiography operates as a discrete form of racial representation, we must develop capacious critical frameworks for scrutinizing the full range of autobiographies, both renowned and obscure, that publicize the black self.

Notes

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2. For these data, I rely upon two bibliographies: Russell C. Brignano, *Black Americans in Autobiography: An Annotated Bibliography of Autobiographies and Autobiographical Books Written Since the Civil War* (1984), rev. and expanded ed. and Mary Louise Briscoe, ed., *American Autobiography, 1945–1980: A Bibliography* (1982).

In 1978, Louis himself published another autobiography, *Joe Louis: My Life*. Written during his reign as champion, the earlier *My Life Story* seeks to uphold his well-managed image; written long after Louis's boxing career (and amid an emergent racial formation issuing from the epochal 1960s), the candid *My Life* seeks to complicate this image in retrospect. The divergences between these two

narratives are instructive, but I focus on *My Life Story* here to examine the boxer's self-presentation within his post-World War II conjuncture. See Joe Louis, with Edna and Art Rust, Jr., *Joe Louis: My Life* (1978).

3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues that the "trope of the Talking Book" appears in Anglo-African narratives from the late eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth, thus delimiting "the first discrete period in Afro-American literary history" (131). Although this intertextual trope would lose its appeal for slave narrators after the 1830s, its motivation—that is, to claim equality and human dignity by "placing their individual and collective voices in the text of Western letters"—would persist (131). See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 127–69.

4. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes," *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1992), 43–69; Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1991), 2nd ed.

5. Summers argues convincingly that the transition from the producer values of racial uplift began earlier with the generation of black men who came of age after World War I; although I focus on the 1940s, my concern here is to examine how the form of autobiography, with the rise of the black athlete, registered the competing tendencies of this ongoing shift.

6. For the facts of Louis's life, I draw primarily upon two biographies: Mead, *Champion—Joe Louis* (1985), and Bak, *Joe Louis* (1998).

7. See also Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977), 420–21, 433–40.

8. See E. Franklin Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States* (1940), 168–94; Saunders Redding, *The Lonesome Road: The Story of the Negro's Part in America* (1958), 294; Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (1948), 176; "Along the N.A.A.C.P. Battlefront," *The Crisis* (Aug. 1946): 250.

9. Louis's handlers allegedly established a set of "rules" by which he would distinguish himself from Jack Johnson. See Gilmore 258.

10. See David K. Wiggins, "Wendell Smith, the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal* and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933–1945," *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America* (1997), 80–103. The *Courier* first explained its "Double-V Campaign"—"victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on battlefields abroad"—in early 1942. See also "The *Courier*'s Double 'V' for a Double Victory Campaign Gets Country-wide Support," *Pittsburgh Courier* 14 Feb. 1942: 1.

11. "The Life Story of Joe Louis" ran in the *Pittsburgh Courier* between 9 February and 22 June 1935 (Washington's final byline of the series appeared on 1 June); Louis's *New York Post* column ran between 29 September and 27 October 1941.

12. Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996).

13. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (1988): 129–55.

14. Besides Gaines and Summers, see Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Cultures in Babylon*, 22–39; Robert Reid-Pharr, *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American* (1999); and Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (2004).

15. See Charles Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (2002); Randy Roberts and James Olson, *Winning Is the Only Thing: Sports in America since 1945* (1989); Benjamin G. Rader, *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports* (1984).

16. Lowenthal bases his claims on a brief survey of biographies appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's* magazines, c. 1940.

17. See also Ponce de Leon.

18. See also Lizabeth Cohen, "Citizens and Consumers in the United States in the Century of Mass Consumption," *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (2001), ed. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton, 203–21.

19. While Gilroy engages Michel Foucault's influential work on the body, he does not simply replicate Foucault's concept of "biopolitics." Foucault applies "biopolitics" to the range of controls designed to regulate populations and "anatamo-politics" to the range of techniques designed to discipline and organize individual bodies. However, Gilroy's "biopolitics" refers specifically to the equation between cultural representation and political recognition that depends on the celebrated bodies of black athletes, musicians, actors, and so on; for Gilroy, this synecdochic fallacy limits the black political imagination. For Foucault's classic statement on biopolitics, see his *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1978), 135–59.

20. When describing his job at Ford, Louis makes this distinction clearly in his 1978 autobiography: "Eventually, I couldn't stand it anymore. I figured, if I'm going to hurt that much for twenty-five dollars a week, I might as well go back and try fighting" (27).

21. Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (1988), 86–91.

22. See Mead 45–46; Richard Dyer, "The White Man's Muscles," *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (1997), ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, 294.

23. See Mead 92–94, 132–45; Bak 117–18, 159–61; Gilroy, *Against Race*, 165–69.

24. See [Gene] Elderman, "Shadows Before?" *Washington Post* 25 Jun. 1935: 8.

25. In *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture* (1989), Gerald Early writes, "racial contrast gives boxing matches a symbolism, a tawdry, cheap, sensational significance that the sportswriter may understate but never leaves unsaid" (119).

26. This silence in *My Life Story* was strategic since Louis was certainly aware of the fight's allegorical import. In his 1978 autobiography, Louis recalls, "all kinds of noise was being made about this Carnera fight. . . . The whole world was looking. Lots of black groups came up to camp telling me that I represented Ethiopia. They talked to me about Marcus Garvey, who I hadn't even heard of. They told about his plan for black people to go back to Africa. They put a heavy weight on my twenty-year-old shoulders. Now, not only did I have to beat the man, but I had to beat him for a cause" (58).

27. See Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *FDR's Splendid Deception* (1985).

28. In *Cultures in Babylon*, Carby warns against the "illusion of unity" that canons promote, and she calls upon "those of us who work to undermine relations of cultural power and domination to search not for purity but for complexity" (242, 243).

29. While her approach differs, Kwakiutl L. Dreher examines the narratives of Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, and others in *Dancing on the White Page: Black Women Entertainers Writing Autobiography* (2008).

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