

ARTICLE

Depictive Harm in *Little Black Sambo*? The Communicative Role of Comic Caricature

Mary Gregg 

Yonsei University Underwood International College, Songdo, Republic of Korea
Email: mary.gregg@yonsei.ac.kr

Abstract

In Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*, the text describes its main character as witty, brave, and resourceful. The drawings of the story's main character which accompany this text, however, present a unique kind of harm that only becomes clear when the work is read as a collection of single-panel comics rather than an illustrated book. In this chapter, I show what happens when we read drawings in books as textless comics, and, based on how things turn out from this reading, motivate why we have some substantive reason to read both *Little Black Sambo* and other books with drawings-as-comics.

Keywords: comics; caricature; cartooning; representation; illustrated books; stereotypes; stock figures

1. The Case: A Brief Background on *Little Black Sambo*

Helen Bannerman first wrote and illustrated the book, *Little Black Sambo* (LBS), for her children as a bedtime story. Soon after its creation, it was published in the UK in 1899 by Grant Richards. The story tells of a child who, after having his clothes and umbrella taken by tigers, outsmarts them, gets all of his stolen items back, and prompts the tigers to turn themselves into soup. This soup is made into pancakes by the child's mother, and the child and his parents enjoy the pancakes as a meal. The names of the characters in the original edition were as follows: LBS, Black Mumbo (Sambo's mother), and Black Jumbo (Sambo's father).¹ In 1900, it was published in the United States by Frederick Stokes. Upon its publication in the United States, many versions were produced and some bootleg copies revised the story so that the setting was "Darkest Africa" (Bader, 1996). Others, later versions such as *Sam and the Tigers*, set the story in a mythical, American southern town (e.g., in Lester, Bannerman, Pinkney, and Bierhorst, 1996). Subsequent versions either echo

This article will discuss images of minstrelsy and Helen Bannerman's illustrations. This article also mentions racist stereotypes that refer to anti-black racist caricatures stemming from blackface minstrelsy, both in reference to the title of Helen Bannerman's story and in reference to the proper name of the fictional character the textual story is about. I have tried to minimize the use of these terms as much as possible without sacrificing clarity, but I warmly welcome recommendations for further minimization of the use of these and related words and descriptions.

¹Some have tried to defend Bannerman's use of the aforementioned names because she was Scottish and might, therefore, have a different understanding of the term's racist connotations. I will not defend Bannerman's use of the terms. Rather, I want to focus on the influence that these terms had (and still have) on the American viewing public, especially at the time of its release in the United States (in 1900, a year after its release in the United Kingdom). Given the existing social context and stereotypes associated with the infamous anti-black racist terms in the United States by the time Bannerman's book was brought to the U.S., it would be difficult to imagine how the American viewing public would go about divorcing their existing conception and application of the term from the name attributed to Bannerman's character.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Inc. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

the original or create an entirely new set of drawings to accompany the story as in Bannerman and Shinn (1936) and Bannerman and Marcilleno (1996), respectively.

In the United States, the term “Sambo”, both presently and as early as the beginnings of enslavement in the United States, served as a stereotype that referred to a familiar racist caricature, whose identifying features were “a simple-minded docile Black man” (Boskin, 1986; Boskin 1987).² This stereotype spread itself throughout various media platforms: music, television, cartoons, and —of course—children’s books (Goings, 1994).³

The story *itself* describes the titular character as witty and capable of outsmarting a tiger. The story tells us of a character who is smart: he outwits his enemies. More than that, he’s brave. This is a literal *child* and one who has the courage to go against tigers, outwitting them and saving his life with his intellect, convincing the tigers that they’d be admired if they had an item of his clothing, and that that was worth more than eating him as a meal. The story ends with his words to each tiger stirring so much greed in each of them that their tails get knotted together and they swirl until they turn into a soup which the character’s mother makes into tasty pancakes. And he gets all of his clothes back (Bannerman, 1900).

What *does* the text say about our character? As you might be able to tell from the book’s title, even in its most acclamatory moments, the text is harmed by the anti-black naming practices it uses to refer to its characters. So, the text is not purely acclamatory.

But, like most children’s stories, *LBS* has drawings that accompany it, and indeed, we are introduced to the drawings before we even crack the book open, as the cover presents its main character, Sambo.⁴ This and other drawings depict a child who is smiling and wearing a red cloak and purple curved-toe shoes while holding a green umbrella. The mouth of the character is drawn wide and big. The lips are drawn as large and bright red. The teeth are bright white. The hair is curly and black. The eyes are drawn as large and rolling upward, depicted as bright white. The nose is drawn broad and flat. The arms and legs are drawn as long and thin. The complexion of the character is drawn as dark brown (Bannerman, 1900).

This essay is concerned with the harms associated with *LBS* and the ways the book might bring them about. *LBS* has standardly been interpreted and analyzed as an illustrated book. My question is this: should *LBS* *only* be read as an illustrated book or should it *also* be read as a series of single-panel comics? My argument is not that it should *only* be read as a series of single-panel comics rather than an illustrated book. Rather, in addition to the standard reading of *LBS* as an illustrated book, I explore whether it can also be read as a series of single-panel comics, and demonstrate why we have substantial reason for doing so, since there is a vital kind of harm which only comes out *when* we read it as a series of single-panel comics given the nature of the comics medium. Here is my provocative claim: there is a kind of harm done by some drawings in books which is exclusively depictive, which traces to its drawings alone. This harm is usefully understood when we consider the practice of reading the piece as a collection of single-panel comics rather than an illustrated book.⁵

Which books with drawings should count as comics is an issue explored by comics scholars. Answering this question partly concerns the relation between the text and image in illustrated books. Comics often communicate a message in the absence of text (es. via speech balloons or thought bubbles).¹ But since comics can convey a message in the absence of text, what happens

²See also Boskin (1986) and Boskin (1987).

³It’s debated where and whether Bannerman based her fictional depictions on persons from India, Africa, or somewhere else. The complexion, exaggerated nose, bent, and off-kilter body angles of the characters, however, do not belong to these stipulated people groups, nor any other group of persons. Yet those very same attributes meant to be reserved and restricted for and to the fictional characters were the very same markers of the fictional racist caricature, the “picaninny” in “(Sambo)” and its relatives the “mammy” (evident in “Black Mumbo”) and “dandy” (evident in “Black Jumbo”).

⁴See Collins (2002) on anti-black controlling images, which offers an insightful analysis of the pervasive work done by anti-black images targeting Black women.

⁵I reserve the term “illustration” for only drawings that illustrate text in non-comics. With regard to *LBS*, I use the term “drawings” since drawings are a more general category of images that show up in both comics and non-comics.

when what seems to be a comic is part of a work consisting of text and images like a children's book?⁶ In illustrated books, argues Thomas E. Wartenberg, drawings function as "mere illustrations" (Wartenberg, 2012, 95), which are merely visual representations of the text-based story. Rather than communicating a separate or separable message apart from the text, they often act as an extension of the story conveyed by the text. Against Kunzle (1973) who argues for the priority of image over text, Wartenberg argues that comics equally privilege text and image; text and image work together to present a unified story such that the image is not a mere illustration of the text (Wartenberg, 2012, 81). For Wartenberg, there is an asymmetry between text and image in illustrated books, where "the text is ontologically primary...because the text specifies a story-world and the images are to picture the world for us, and, as such, must be faithful to what the text says about it" (Wartenberg, 2012, 87). While I agree with Wartenberg that clear-cut cases of comics and illustrated books operate in the way Wartenberg has argued for, I explore whether the text-image relation in books with drawings could come apart, where the drawings present a message of their own, separate from the text they accompany.

To this end: *if* we read *LBS* as a series of single-panel comics, a powerful message reveals itself. But *whether* *LBS*' images *are in fact* comics is another matter and beyond the scope of this article whose sole aim is to motivate why we might have some incentive *to* read them as comics, given the message that comes out on this reading rather than other readings which merely take the images to reflect or otherwise run complementary to the textual story.

2. Anti-Black Characters of Blackface and Minstrelsy

To understand *LBS* and its impact, especially as it pertains to the book's North American viewership, we'll need to make a brief detour into the history of blackface, which makes its entrance through the history of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface minstrel theater began in Europe but it made its first appearance in America by way of a struggling actor, Thomas Rice, a white man who, in 1830, gained immediate popularity when he "blackened his face with burnt cork and danced a jig while singing the lyrics to the song, 'Jump Jim Crow'" (Clark, 2019, as cited in Mbowe, 2020). The performance by Rice is the earliest recorded performance of blackface in the United States, and it was the origin of the term and character, "Jim Crow", characterized by "dark, jet black skin, white lips, shining eyes, nonstandard speech, feeble movements, and a dirty, ragged outfit" (Ibid). This character then gave rise to an entire cast of anti-black stage characters, including the ones under discussion: "Sambo" and "picaninny" which were manifested in the form of cartoon characters, comic strips, animations, film characters, and merchandise (Pilgrim, 2000).⁷ These anti-black characters quickly became universally familiar to American audiences and remain well-known among American audiences to this day.⁸

The title of *LBS* carries the name "Sambo", so I'll briefly mention its use during the height of its appearance and early prevalence in the United States. According to Pilgrim (2000), the anti-black racist character "Sambo" is characterized as follows: "Sambo was depicted as a *perpetual child*, not capable of living as an independent adult." This character then gave rise to the character known as "picaninny" (hereafter, "p"), applied in various degrading, dehumanizing and overtly racist forms to Black children in the United States since the character's first occurrence in blackface minstrel theater. The "p" characters were typified by laziness, "invitations of violence, dirtiness, and

⁶Some authors, for example, leave their work's classification status open. See for example Mo Willems' *Pigeon Series*, where the work's covers label themselves as "words and pictures," distinguishing them from another series by the same author, *Elephant and Piggie*, labeled by Willems as "books" (Willems (2007) and Willems (2014)).

⁷Some refer to characters (with names and distinct personas and appearances) as "caricatures", especially when those characters present distorted representations of people or groups they purport to represent. Since "caricature" carries a narrower meaning in aesthetics, I reserve the term for a way of *presenting* these characters.

⁸Additionally, these racist figures are still employed in contemporary settings under the phenomenon now known as "digital blackface" which deploys these figures in the form of memes, gifs, and short-form videos (Jackson, 2017; Wong, 2019).

stupidity” (Fredrickson, 1971; Pilgrim, 2000; Smith, 1905; Turner, 1994). In terms of their visual appearance, notes Pilgrim, “[P] had bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths... They were routinely shown on postcards, posters, and other ephemera being chased or eaten” (Pilgrim, 2000). They were also typified by a broad, exaggerated nose, large, red lips, wide large smile with bright white teeth, matted dark hair (or bald), large, “bright, rolling eyes”, and placed in the form of a young child (Dunkling, 1990).

These traits should sound familiar to the reader. *LBS*’ drawings feature a child with a broad, exaggerated nose, large, red lips, wide large smile with bright white teeth, matted dark hair, had large, bright rolling eyes (Bannerman, 1900). Additionally, the child is made the prey of a tiger, so that they are visually placed in the same circumstances as the racist character which was perpetually made as one “chased or eaten” (Pilgrim, 2000) by some kind of predatory animal. Moreover, these traits were not just common to the character but were, in America, *the* identifying markers used by illustrators and identified by viewers as marking out the “p” character. These attributes— in this combination, styled in this particular way—were invariably used and taken to indicate the presence of the “p” character (Turner, 1994; Lester, 1997; Pilgrim, 2000; Bernstein, 2011).

While artworks can convey nonverbal messages, drawings featured in comics often rely on a kind of visual shorthand in stock figures and stereotypes to convey their message. Paul C. Taylor presents a vital distinction between characters, stock figures, and stereotypes in anti-black visual representations. As a subset of characters, Taylor defines *stock figures* as “...characters that play character-istic roles in the world of the narrative or image by means of an indirect relationship, if that, to the distinctive traits required by anti-black prejudices” (Taylor, 2016, 53). On the other hand, Taylor holds that *stereotypes* are

characters that exist principally to embody some smallish proper subset of the features that modern racialism conventionally links to blackness. Here we have the toms, coons, tragic mulattoes, mammies, jezebels, buck, dandies, pickaninnies, and other racial types... These are archetypal personifications of anti-black prejudices, defined by single, characteristic traits... rather than by the complex configurations that make for unique personalities... (Taylor, 2016, 53)

In the case of both stock figures and stereotypes, we have a shared result: “Stock figures and stereotypes tend to obscure the character’s individual personality rather completely, depending of course on the quality of the writing or acting” (Ibid 54).

As later versions of *LBS* like Bannerman and Marcellino (1996) and Lester (1997) demonstrate, depicting the text’s main character does not require its depicter to pull from anti-black stock figures of blackface minstrelsy in order to retain the character’s salient features, even when these drawings function as pure illustrations of the textual story rather than as single-panel, textless comics. Although the drawing styles differ between the two depictions, some traits relevant to our character are retained: his red cloak, his green umbrella, and so forth But his visage has been humanized in both cases in a way that Bannerman’s drawings did not afford their characters.

It is, however, one thing to create and purvey an anti-black stock figure. It is another to get an audience to recognize it and its connotations. So how do *LBS*’ drawings reliably convey their message in the absence of text? As I’ll now argue, one means of communicating in purely visual contexts is through pictorial caricature, which is importantly tied to the comics medium.

3. The How: Pictorial Caricature and Cartooning

Textless, single-panel comics tend to partly rely on what the viewer brings to the image. Often, this is a familiarity with a stock figure, stereotypes, and the traits these figures are meant to typify. Derek Parker Royal notes that “Because [comics] use picture texts to guide our understanding of narrative, comics can have a more direct effect than that dictated by prose, eliciting a reaction that takes relatively little time to process” (Royal, 2010, x). Accordingly, in the case of *LBS*, once the “p”

character type had been identified, the relevant stereotypes and character traits affiliated with the “p” character could be and are likely intended to be inferred: stupidity, laziness, and a disposition toward violence, among other traits.

According to Uidhir (2013), pictorial caricature which is operative in many comics has the unique power to communicate an idea more powerfully and clearly than its realistic counterpart by isolating an idea and pulling on existing stereotypes, conceptions, and beliefs in its viewership. However, unlike other kinds of depictions which purport to give viewers epistemic access to truths about the depiction’s subject which are nontrivial (informative), and especially truths about the subject’s appearance, the clearly unrealistic way which caricature depicts its subject makes it, all things considered, something which cannot give its viewers access to nontrivial truths about its subject’s appearance.⁹

So understood, what we are inferring in an engagement with caricature is not merely a character type but a way of treating and understanding that character type. When we identify Beetle of *Beetle Bailey* as lazy, it’s not merely descriptive: we infer that his character is lacking, or admirable, or despicable because of the character type he instantiates. But how does this general understanding caricature bear upon the case of racial caricature relevant to understanding *LBS*? Andrew J. Kunka argues that.

A caricature exaggerates a figure’s features for a variety of purposes. “Racial caricature,” involves the exaggeration of the visual indicators of racial identity and serves to render an entire group as subhuman or inferior. These images may be understood by readers as part of an illustrative tradition (See Barker, 1989, 196) but their net effect is negative or diminishing. These indicators are often rendered in an abstract or iconic style: simian features, large lips, and saucer eyes for African Americans, etc. (Kunka, 2023, 277)

Since *LBS*’ drawings present an anti-black character through their particular use of caricature, viewers did not merely notice that the drawings visually resembled the anti-black characters, the depictive presence of the visual character comes with and indicates its own set of character traits. In turn, these character traits are not traits that audiences could easily feel apathetic or neutral about. Their function is not only to add detail to the characters but to use those details to dehumanize them, to call their very humanity into question. This association between character, character traits, and their depictive subject, relies on familiarity with certain stereotypes.

The relationship between caricature and the deployment of cartooning in comics provides another route for investigating inferences from characters to traits. A typical feature of cartooning in comics and other drawings is the simplification of certain visual, physical features and the warping or visual exaggeration of other visual traits (Cohn, 2013; McCloud, 1993; Walker, (1980) 2000). Some drawings which contain exaggerated and/or simplified features do not use this stylistic form to say something beyond the appearance of their depictive subject or the figure depicted. The message in these cases often resides in text—e.g., speech balloons, thought bubbles, or narrative captions. However, other comics, especially those without text, do employ cartooning to say something about the subjects they depict. For John Holbo, “a caricature refers us to its real-world subject. A comics character refers us to other appearances of that character...Cartoon/comics characters are auto-iconic, hence do not seem caricaturish. Thus, although in one sense caricature and comics are always together, in another sense these forms tend to exclude each other” (Holbo, 2017, 374–75). For example, as Mort Walker notes in *Lexicon of Comicana*, there are certain visual tropes in cartooning that cartoonists reliably call on to indicate a character feature (or flaw): American cartoonists use glasses to indicate the “smarty pants” trope to visually convey the point that the character is smart, buck teeth are used to indicate the “lame

⁹John Holbo offers a complementary account of caricature focused on its role in art history in his piece, “Caricature and Comics”. Here he notes that “Caricature is not a style, genre or distinguishing mark of comics. But it may be a conceptual window, opening up a view of the place of comics in art history as a whole” (Holbo, 2017, 367).

brain” trope to visually convey the idea that the character in possession of these buck teeth is not smart, covered or drowsy eyes are meant to indicate laziness (as in the case Walker’s own character, Beetle, of the comic strip *Beetle Bailey*), a halo indicates innocence, horns indicate an evil character, and the list goes on. But in comics like *Beetle Bailey* and elsewhere, the function of the traits are not used to tell us something about the character’s visual appearance but something about who the character is, or what they are like. The “covered” eyes of Beetle and his protruding nose are not meant to tell us that Beetle has no eyes (because they are not visually apparent) nor that Beetle’s nose is truly prominent and large. The latter is a function of Walker’s particular cartooning style: many of his characters possess equally exaggerated noses, and this feature is not used to say something about the character’s appearance or personality. But other cartooning features are salient—e.g., the covered eyes in the case of Beetle put him into the “lazy” visual trope category (Walker, (1980) 2000).

In Walker’s *Beetle Bailey*, nothing in text is said about his perpetually “covered” eyes—but for most viewers, these visual cues indicate that Beetle is lazy, or at least that he enjoys sleeping quite a lot. There are then certain visual conventions in cartooning that can indicate anything from superficial points about appearance to more substantive claims about the characters, i.e., whether and what kind of person they are. So the function of these visually absent body parts and the warped presence or addition of others can be used to reliably convey a message to viewers about who the character is rather than what the character looks like. Here, cartooning is employed for the purposes of showing rather than telling, using the appearance to say something about the character rather than the appearance itself by *using* the features of appearance to tell us about something *beyond* the appearance. So: what are Sambo’s cartoony features saying about Sambo *in the fiction*?

As Mag Uidhir and others have noted, what is conveyed to the viewer depends, in part, on what the viewer brings to the depiction. Correspondingly, what is conveyed to a viewer familiar with anti-black racist stock figures like “p” may differ from those who have no familiarity with the “p” stock figure, and factors involving a viewer’s ethnic, racialized, gendered, and social identity will also play a part in the drawing’s variability.

This conception of cartooning as a practice endemic to comics is useful for understanding how visual traits convey something about the character beyond what is “strictly” depicted. Moreover, the visual traits of “Sambo” do not point back to the textual character but prompt or point to the anti-black character whose attributes they visually take on.

Cartooning allows the visibly apparent features to point to an additional set of traits having to do with nonvisual attributes: personhood, personality, aptitude, emotional state, etc. —to tell us which character, character type, emotional state, or additional, nonvisual feature—our depictive subject possesses in virtue of the comic panel’s visual attributes. As such, cartooning *simpliciter* does not harm. It depends, as Uidhir and others note, on how we use it and what we use it to accomplish. Visual conventions like the ones described above can convey their message reliably, consistently, and successfully thanks to the norms of interaction its viewership ties to these visual conventions. For example, when we see these exaggerated features often typified by google eyes and other balloonish or otherwise disproportionate physical features, we are aware that it is a caricature of at least *some* aspect of the drawing’s subject, though we might not know which.

4. The Indicated and the Inferable

So where is the harm? Whether they are abided by or broken, the norms of cartooning are informed (and often restricted) by broader societal norms that inform both what kind of contents are conveyed visually and how those contents can be conveyed. But there’s more to it than that. Even when *the what*—namely, traits of “filthiness”, laziness, stupidity, and invocations of violence—are conveyed to viewers of LBS’ drawings by the visual character “p”, the message is not restricted to the character and its traits. When we judge that someone is dirty, it is not often a purely descriptive, observational point. We standardly make a kind of normative judgment about the person, taking them as, say “filthy” which does not just tell us about their appearance but about the *quality* of their

character and values. Since “filthy” carries a negative connotation, we might take their values or character to be “bad”. But notice the difference between this mode of attribution and other attributes of dirtiness. There are plenty of cartoon characters in comics that are dirty which, unlike the “p” character, do not have their humanity denied on the basis of this dirtiness. Pig Pen of Charles M. Shultz’s *Peanuts* cartoon, for instance, is perpetually cloaked in a cloud of dirt, but his humanity is never called into question because of it, though he may be frowned upon for being a dirty *person*.

But for the “p” character presented via the visual attributes of *LBS*’ series of drawings, these visual, physical attributes do not merely demonstrate their identity as a “p” but convey a point about their status as a person. The personhood status for those marked as “p” was denied in virtue of this marker. There is then, a connection that such drawings promote for viewers: one to make between the drawings’ particular set of features and the features of the “p” character.

Cartooning provides us such extensive flexibility in how we depict some subject and demonstrates one very worrisome aspect of *LBS*’ drawings. The issue is not just that the same *kinds* of features were exaggerated but that they were exaggerated *in the same way* that the exaggerated features of the “p” character were.¹⁰ What matters in our *LBS* illustration is not that any *particular* feature is exaggerated, but both the unique combination of the traits exaggerated and the particular, depictive style with which those features were exaggerated. Plenty of comics and editorial cartoons and comics use cartooning to exaggerate noses, lips, eyes, teeth, and hair, but we do not liken those to the “p” character. In the original *LBS* drawings, however, the very same combination and set of identifying features—lips, eyes, hair, teeth, nose, smile—were exaggerated in the very same way that those of the “p” character were. Rather than making the nose bent, balloon-like, or beak-like, the nose was made large and flat. Rather than making the eyes small, dark, beady, and focused, they were made large, white and rolling. Rather than drawing the mouth small with blue, tiny lips and missing or off-white teeth, the mouth was drawn large, framed by large red lips containing a big, white-toothed smile. And the list goes on.

One important point about these traits is not just that they pick out *which* character it is we are seeing, but that those traits *indicate* tropes of the character. They indicate what our character is *like*. By linking the *LBS* drawings to “p”, *LBS*’ drawings did not need to make these tropes explicit through its illustration, since the mere presence of its physical identifying traits successfully *indicated* the identity of the “p” character, and by extension, the character traits (in Kunka’s terms, stereotypes) associated with it. While *LBS*’ viewers may recognize that the people group picked out by *LBS*’ drawings do not literally embody the “p” character and its real-world depictive referent, the “p” character itself conveys something the viewer is meant to take as true of its real-world referent and infer and applied way of the comic to its real-world referent beyond the comic.

5. The Harm: Damage to Viewers

A virtue of reading *LBS* as a single-panel comic rather than merely a text-image work is that a strategy for disarming claims of harm produced by *LBS* can be addressed. If one claims that “it’s just an image of the fictional character, not a harmful image which attempts to pick out an entire people group by way of dehumanizing depiction.” Such a claim now seems much harder to defend, because the drawings’ reliance on anti-black characters can be understood independently of the text-specified character “Sambo” and solely in terms of the visually indicated anti-black characters of blackface minstrelsy.

This is an important feature of attending to *LBS* as a comic rather than as a species of children’s illustrated books whose pictures merely add details beyond the text to the textual character. When

¹⁰While it’s up for debate whether Bannerman was privy to later illustrations of Sambo, there proved to be visually enough in common between the copies that the American viewers were able to infer the “picaninny” character trope from the original 1899–1900 copies.

read as textless comics *LBS*' drawings do not function as illustrations which add a visual proposition to the text-specified character. Instead, *LBS*' drawings present anti-black characters that affirm racist and otherwise harmful anti-black stereotypes and propositions about the Black community beyond the book. And, since we are reading it as just a series of single-panel comics, such concerns are independent of the anti-Black racism of the story presented by the text.

In the case of *LBS*' drawings, the set of exaggerated visual features in their particular combination reliably cued up the "p" style character type in its American viewers. But the character is more than its visual appearance. The "p" character, as we have discussed, came with a distinct set of character attributes typified by laziness, "invitations of violence, dirtiness, and stupidity" (Fredrickson, 1971; Pilgrim, 2000; Smith, 1905; Turner, 1994). So the visual features of *LBS*' series of panels not only visually present the overtly anti-black racist "p" character, but, by way of this visual presentation, indicate the stereotypes affiliated with it.

In assessing the putative harms of *LBS*, we can and should further inquire: what do things look like to the viewer-as-depictive referent? In *The Souls of Black Folks*, WEB DuBois discusses the phenomenon faced by those who are racialized as Black; the issue of "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others". DuBois makes a point here that is powerfully relevant to nonverbal communication of the visual variety: we need to understand that, depending on the angle of observation, the effects on viewers will differ. Namely, we cannot (and should not) treat the viewer as a neutral, objective perspective whose role is entirely unaffected by their status and identity.

In the case of the racist drawings of *LBS*, members of the Black community in America who viewed the illustration recall having something akin to *de se* imaginings of themselves as the object of imagining "from the inside", where one takes oneself to be the object of one's imaginings and imagining the feeling of it—e.g., Fred's feeling of *himself* winning the lottery rather than Ted's imagining that Fred won the lottery (Walton, 1990, 29). The harm to the viewer qua member of the group harmed occurs when the depictive subject viewing the illustration imagines themselves as the character and receives the kind of response that the illustrated character receives from its intended audience—e.g., disgust, laughter, humor, and humiliation.

As viewers who were also members of the group identified by the anti-black figures of the drawings, Black viewers did not see themselves accurately or correctly reflected in the depiction but rightly recognized the false and degrading way they were perceived and represented by *LBS*' depicter, Bannerman, and how this representation subsequently informed the general public's conception of Black people in America. Julius Lester, author of *Sam and the Tigers* (Lester et al. 1996), comments on this phenomenon:

When I read *Little Black Sambo* as a child, I had no choice but to identify with him because I am Black and so was he. Even as I sit here and write the feelings of shame, embarrassment and hurt come back. And there was a bit of confusion because I liked the story and I especially liked all those pancakes, but the illustrations exaggerated the racial features society had made it clear to me represented my racial inferiority—the Black, Black skin, the eyes shining white, the red protruding lips. I did not feel good about myself as a Black child looking at those pictures. (Lester, 1997)

In Lester's statement, he makes a clear distinction between what the depiction does and what the story does. The person responsible for depicting the subject in a way that influences the viewer to see the subject as the depiction tells them to. This plays an active role in the restriction and denigration of the subject's identity, producing identity-restricting consequences regardless of any allegedly nonrestrictive intentions.

Here's where this *de se* imagining is important for our purposes: the viewers who constituted the group victimized did not just imagine a character divorced from themselves on whom racist suppositions and demeaning treatment were launched but felt what such a character would feel.

In what Walton calls “the fiction”, this feeling is *de se* imagined. If the viewer is compelled to *de se* imagine themselves as the character, the harm admits of analysis: although imagining oneself as possessing the text-specified traits of heroism and wit belonging to the text’s main character may not be harmful, we saw in Lester’s account that the text’s main character was not what was *de se* imagined. What was imagined was rather the identity of the racist “p” character recognized in *LBS*’ drawings by its viewers. So the “p” character read off of the drawings was the character which many viewers-as-depictive-subjects report being cued to imagine, *de se*. We’ve discussed which traits—appearance, character attributes, and norms of engagement—were associated with the “p” character. As such, the experience of imagining what it is to embody the racist “p” character came with a variety of harms: humiliation, violence, and harassment, among a host of others.

Lester and others who are part of the viewership harmed by the cartoon imagine themselves as the drawing and the character it instantiates (not merely as “p” but as the particular instantiation of “p” in *LBS*’ drawings, which situate them in a particular, visually-specified set of circumstances). This is not a given, and I do not claim that all viewers who were made the depictive referent of *LBS*’ drawings will imagine themselves as the drawings specify. The viewership may occupy any number of imaginative roles. Lester’s imaginative stance illustrates *at least one* clear case of harm to viewership. When reading a story, for example, we may sometimes imagine ourselves as the main character doing what that character does, and sometimes not. Lester, for example, was pulled in two mutually independent ways: toward shame by the illustrations but toward pride, empowerment and so forth by the story. It’s not that Lester took the illustrations to be an adequate depiction of Black people but that he, as the object of imagining, was prompted by *LBS*’ drawings to *de se* imagine himself in the position of the depiction—imagining how he as a racialized Black person is seen because of the sort of imaginings the cartoon image prompts in the minds of its non-Black viewers. But there’s an important *directional* difference here between two different kinds of imagining projects. Lester imagining himself to be the illustrated “Sambo” is very different from him imagining that “Sambo” is him.

Kendall Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe* describes this as the act of accepting the “fictional truths” of the fiction we enter into as true, “in the fiction”—e.g., that Sherlock Holmes really is a detective). But, in typical cases, once we exit the fiction, we do not then go about applying these “fictional truths” out in the real world (say, by believing that there really is a detective Sherlock Holmes out in the world because we saw it in the fictional story). But herein lies the issue for the viewer in cases of cartoon harm: applying “fictional truths” to the world and persons beyond the fiction, taking the “fictional truths” of, say, Sherlock Holmes, out into the world and allowing them to inform our conception of the real persons which the cartoon fictionally depicted.

Note that viewers on the whole inferred that the referent of *LBS*’ visual depictions were Black Americans, indicated *by* the visual representation which bears no visual or behavioral similarity to its apparent referent but near-identical resemblance to the racist visual character it used to pick out its apparent subject. What’s striking about our *LBS* case is that in the utter absence of resemblance to its referent, we recognize (with ease) that the object of representation to which this depiction is intended to refer to (by denotation) is Black persons, and (at least) offensively so. This is not a peculiar phenomenon. For example, when reading a comic where we see a person depicted as a virus, we may not only accept that the cartoon contains a fictional truth but says something true beyond the fiction about the subject, the group which the fiction is allegedly about rather than the fictional virus-headed entity literally depicted in frame.

As Mag Uidhir notes, it is a common feature of pictorial caricature to *unrealistically* depict its subject. While unrealistic depiction is often assumed to indicate an epistemic defect, Mag Uidhir notes that pictorial caricature is able to achieve certain “cognitive goals” as well.

[C]aricature can be employed to exploit to great effect certain cognitive biases such as the tendency to confirm, independent of their truth, pre-formed beliefs, attitudes, and judgements, and reinforce pre-held beliefs by selectively interpreting and collecting evidence—confirmation

“myside” bias (Chapman and Chapman, 1967; Nickerson 1998; Wason, 1960)...when illicitly employed in service to some epistemic uptake (best exemplified by the editorial cartoon), pictorial caricature so employed can easily become nothing short of an epistemic menace. (Uidhir, 2013, 139)

In the case of *LBS*, the viewer does not just fail to take the subject seriously by *correctly* identifying what group the subject belongs to in a racist or degrading way. They are invited to *falsely* assign them to a constructed group the subject never belonged to in the first place—namely, the racist stereotype depicted in the cartoon.

So the harm to viewers of these drawings, read as single-panel comics, is not determined by whether the viewer identifies some subject as the referent of the comic on the basis of the comic’s visual features but the fact that it is *this particular set of features* that we are using to pick out some subject. After all these visual traits, in this particular combination belong to the “p” character, and this “p” character has been used to refer to an entire group of people by racist and otherwise dehumanizing means. In other words, the harm to viewers is not about *whether* we recognize the subject of the depiction but what we are *using it* to do. In this case, it is to present the anti-black racist characters of blackface minstrelsy.

LBS’ drawings do not convey a point about their depictive subject’s physical appearance but instead use these physical traits to convey a point about what kind of person the subject is. Especially in the case of ignorant or sympathetic viewers, there is a risk that they may not merely draw the connection between a comic and its subject: their conceptions of the subject may be created, informed, or revised on the basis of these depictions. For viewers who already possess not merely a familiarity with the anti-black visual characters but also hold anti-black conceptions, the comic may affirm their existing misconceptions (i.e., an anti-black figure is recognized and the relevant, racist conceptions are inferred by way of the audience’s familiarity with these figures and what they have been reliably used to say about their intended referent). For viewers who possess no familiarity with anti-black visual representations, it may be unclear which traits to take as a function of visual convention (i.e., exaggerated features that are not literally or figuratively ascribed to any subject in particular but as a standard visual convention of cartooning) and which traits to take as literally or figuratively true of the depictive subject.¹¹

Especially in the case of purely visual, or “textless” comics (Wartenberg, 2012), we interpret the comics, conventional symbolism to tell us how to understand and treat the depictive subject on the basis of the comic’s visual depiction. We then learn from our comic not *who* to pick out but what to *infer* about who’s picked out by the comic. This is often accomplished by introducing or reacquainting the viewer with visual symbols of some set of cultural vocabulary about the comic’s depictive subject and what those symbols indicate about their depictive subject.¹²

Echoing Uidhir (2013), I focus on what the caricature’s distortion does—it is not merely an unrealistic depiction of some people group but, by caricature, a set of drawings which offer a realistic portrayal of anti-black *characters* which *themselves* are distortions, caricatures, of the Black community they purport to represent. The drawings are spot-on, realistic depictions of the *characters* of minstrelsy (a form of blackface in minstrel theater, an inherently anti-black performance type in the United States and Canada at the turn of the 19th century whose characters persist in various horrendous forms to this day). So the focus is not on the visual features themselves but on what

¹¹See Gregg (2023) for a discussion of the role of political cartoons on ignorant audiences.

¹²Paul C. Taylor notes discusses this kind of cultural vocabulary phenomena as it relates to DuBois’ concept of “inner compulsion” and “outer compulsion”, respectively, where the former is “just the presumptive force assigned to the store of shared meanings and commitments that constitute a culture” (96) while the latter depends on the intentions of individual persons, “inviting individuals to imagine themselves and their prospects in light of, perhaps in opposition to, the resources that they provide. These individuals in turn revise these public meanings, creating a kind of feedback loop of ongoing modification and adjustment of both subject and discourse” (Taylor, 2016, 97).

these unrealistic visual attributes are used to *say* to their audiences beyond these visual attributes. In other words, what is depicted is a visual representation of the anti-black ideology of its creator. If Wartenberg is right that drawings in books carry with them a “faithfulness condition” to the story they are used to illustrate (Wartenberg, 2012), then, in this sense, *LBS*’ drawings-as-comics are faithful to Bannerman’s anti-black ideology which so powerfully informed her drawings: we get a clear impression of Bannerman’s conception of Black persons by her depictive style and clear use of anti-black imagery.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have not attempted to make an exhaustive account of all the racist underpinnings of *LBS*, nor have I tried to offer an exhaustive account of what the relevant harms might be. I have only tried to explore one instance of harm which is illuminated when read as an illustrated book or when it is *also* be read as a series of single-panel comics.

Mary Gregg is a lecturer in Philosophy at Yonsei University and an adjunct faculty of philosophy at SUNY Korea. They received their PhD from the University of Connecticut. They study the epistemic, semantic, ethical, and aesthetic aspects of harmful jokes with a recent focus on the redemptive epistemic aspects of drag readings and ritual insults among in-group members, as well as how this mode of representation can combat oppressive de-contextualization. They have published a book and some articles on the topic and are continuing to explore the harm of harmful humor and the help of harmful humor in socio-political contexts.

References

- Bader, B. 1996. “Sambo, Babaji, and Sam.” *The Horn Book Magazine* 72 (5), 536–547.
- Bannerman, H. 1900. *The story of little black sambo*. Manhattan: F. A. Stokes.
- Bannerman, H. & Shinn, Cobb X. 1936. *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Morton Grove: Albert Whitman & Company.
- Bannerman, H., & Marcellino, F. 1996. *The story of little Babaji*. Palatine: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Barker, M. 1989. *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*. Oxford: Manchester University Press.
- Bernstein, R. 2011. *Racial innocence: performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights*. New York: New York University Press.
- Boskin, J. 1986. *Sambo: The rise and demise of an American jester*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boskin, J. 1987. “The complicity of humor: The life and death of Sambo.” In J. Morreall (Ed.), *The philosophy of laughter and humor*, 250–263. New York: State University of New York Press. Originally published in *Philosophical Forum*, 9, 371–382.
- Chapman, Loren J., and Jean P. Chapman. 1967. “genesis of Popular but Erroneous Psychodiagnostic Observations.” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 72 (3), 193–204.
- Clark, A.. “How the History of Blackface is Rooted in Racism” History, February 13, 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/blackface-history-racism-origins>.
- Cohn, N. 2013. *The visual language of comics: Introduction to the structure and cognition of sequential images*. Bloomsbury.
- Collins, P. H. 2002. “Mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images.” In *Black feminist thought: 30th anniversary edition*, 69–96. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Fredrickson, G. M. 1971. *The Black image in the white mind: The debate on Afro-American character and destiny, 1817–1914*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Goings, K. W. 1994. *Mammy and uncle Mose: Black collectibles and American stereotyping*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gregg, M. 2023. “The unique depictive damage of Gombrichian schemata in cartoons.” *Philosophia*, no. 51: 1309–1331. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-022-00608-7>.
- Holbo, J. 2017. Caricature and comics. In A. Meskin, F. Bramlett, & R. Cook (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, 221–229. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Jackson, L. M. 2017. “We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs: Why is it so common?” *Teen Vogue*. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-GIFs>.
- Kunka, A. J. 2023. How else could I have created a black boy in that era?: Racial caricature and will Eisner’s legacy. In Q. Whitted (Ed.), *Desegregating comics: Debating blackness in the golden age of American comics*, 61–76. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Kunzle, D. 1973. *The early comic strip: Narrative strips and picture stories in the european broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*. University of California Press.

- Lester, J. 1997. Little Black Sambo discussion from *Child-Lit Listserv*, November, 1997. Interview by Sharyn November. Audio-to-text. <http://ruby.fgcu.edu/courses/spillman/sambo.htm>.
- Lester, J., Bannerman, H., Pinkney, J., & Bierhorst, J. B. 1996. *Sam and the tigers: A new telling of Little Black Sambo*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Mbowe, K. 2020. Digital Blackface...is complicated...kind of... *Youtube*, December 24, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfcYnswbybM>.
- McCloud, S. 1993. *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. Kitchen Sink Press.
- Nickerson, Raymond S. 1998. "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many guises." *Review of General Psychology* 11 (2), 175–220.
- Pilgrim, D. 2000. The pickanniny caricature. *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. Ferris State University. March 30, 2012. <https://ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>.
- Royal, Derek P. 2010. *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle (Cognitive Approaches to Literature and Culture Series)*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Smith, W. B. 1905. *The color line: A brief on behalf of the unborn*. McClure, Phillips & Co.
- Taylor, P. C. 2016. *Black is beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Turner, P. A. 1994. *Ceramic uncles & celluloid mummies: Black images and their influence on culture*. Anchor Books.
- Uidhir, M. 2013. "Epistemic misuse and abuse of pictorial caricature." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50(2): 137–151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23460787>.
- Walker, Mort. (1980) 2000. *The Lexicon of Comicana*. San Francisco: Museum of Cartoon Art.
- Walton, K. 1990. *Mimesis as make-believe: On the foundations of the representational arts*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Wartenberg, T. E. 2012. "Wordy Pictures: Theorizing the Relationship Between Image and Text in Comics." In *The Art of Comics: 12 (New Directions in Aesthetics)*, edited by Aaron Meskin, 87–104.
- Wason, Peter Cathcart. 1960. "On the failure to Eliminate Hypotheses in a Conceptual Task." *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 12: 129–140.
- Willems, Mo. 2014. *Pigeon series: "The pigeon needs a bath!"* Westport: Hyperion.
- Willems, M. 2007. *Elephant and Piggie: "Today I Will Fly!"*. Westport: Hyperion.
- Wong, E. 2019. "Digital Blackface: How 21st Century Internet Language Reinforces Racism." PhD Diss., UC Berkeley.