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ENGL 4803-01

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20 Sept. 2018

The Black Poster: Discussing Race in World War I Propaganda

Artistic mediums have the power to define generations or periods of time, regardless of whether social, cultural, or political connotations are the driving force behind their creation. For the ‘Lost Generation,’ World War I defines their history but with this most tragic of occurrences came the medium with which their society became synonymous. War propaganda in the form of posters became the norm for this generation, as world powers scrambled for support. The propaganda poster was a cheap vehicle for the movement needed to fund and support the military efforts required for international conflict. However, these posters offered a different opportunity for disenfranchised minorities. For example, “African Americans had additional goals…many saw the war as a chance to advance the civil rights agenda” (Keene, 207). Knowing the opportunity presented to them, African American owned companies, newspapers, and artists took the initiative and produced war posters that spread influential messages to the African American community. The goal of disseminating these posters was simple, “in return for their wartime service African Americans expected to receive long-overdue recognition of their civic and social rights, namely a dismantling of Jim Crow and an end to disenfranchisement” (207). While war posters, for the white majority, represented an effort to win the war, the African American community used these posters to facilitate discussions related to racial intolerance and call for national policy reforms focused on civil rights.

In contrast to mass-produced corporate posters, which attempted to evoke nationalistic pride or guilt individuals into supporting the war effort, “privately produced posters went to great lengths to underscore for viewers the link between the present war and the future of civil rights in the United States” (218). The 1918 poster *True Sons of Freedom*, which was created and produced by Charles Gustrine, is emblematic of Keene’s description of privately produced posters. This poster depicts African American soldiers engaging in combat with Imperial German soldiers, whose appearances resemble that of Confederates from the American Civil War. With the presence of an enlarged Abraham Lincoln looking on, it is apparent that Gustrine intended this image to harken back to the Civil War, as a method of invoking memories of the last great civil rights policy change. This poster fits into a group of African American rights posters that used the American Civil War to frame World War I and convey the message that African American participation in the war effort could have similar benefits as the Federal victory in the Civil War. Posters of this nature argue that “the achievements of black soldiers on the battlefield would translate into a stronger case for full recognition as American citizens at home…contributing in their own way both to the greater cause of winning the war and to ending Jim Crow” (219).

Aesthetically, *True Sons of Freedom* can be overwhelming to view due to the crowded image presented, but, while some argue that this is a consequence of the amateurism of the artist, it is a result of a common propaganda tactic employed by the African American community to insure their posters appealed to as many viewers as possible. “Crowded posters reflect the array of competing strategies for the advancement circulating within the black community, an attempt to appeal to all spectrums of political opinion” (217). In the foreground of this poster, there is a substantial amount of action occurring, as we have this hypothetical battle between African American troops and Imperial German troops. In the depiction of battle, numerous separate actions comprise the much larger scene; for example, there are images of dead and dying soldiers, several German troops surrendering, and aerial dogfights occurring in the background. This battle scene intends to arouse masculinity in African American men, while the surrendering Germans show the African American community their unified power and deservedness of equal rights. Beyond the battle scene, Gustrine has chosen to include a rather mundane image of Lincoln in the upper right corner. The presence of Lincoln provides historical context and evokes a sense of responsibility, in that the United States military won African Americans their freedom from slavery and it is now their turn to serve. By producing such a crowded piece, Gustrine used this one poster to convey numerous messages, thus increasing the possibility of the poster resonating with a larger spectrum of viewers.

While *True Sons of Freedom* intended to appeal to African Americans, the presentation of an all-black military unit was likely viewed negatively by the black community. A modern viewer, caught up in the pro-black message, sees the presence of African American soldiers in a positive light and subconsciously congratulates them for their bravery and willingness to serve their country. However, a contemporary African American audience likely had fundamental issues with this poster because of its valorous depiction of one of the institutions African Americans were attempting to destroy, segregation. War posters were often used by African Americans to combat the concept of segregation, which was widely used within the United States military. For the majority of World War I, African American troops were unable to enlist in the military and were forced to wait until conscription began. Even with conscription, these black soldiers still faced segregation and racial tension, as they traveled, trained, and fought with only black soldiers. The African American community at home was aware of this military segregation and understood that their troops were under French command and were never fully accepted into American units, which would have affected the way they interpreted Gustrine’s message. “While the poster was clearly intended to arouse pride in the achievements of black soldiers, there was little chance of it convincing black civilians that their troops were being given opportunities to excel in the military” (220). By using this image of an all-black military unit, Gustrine diluted the impact his message had on the African American community and may have put off the black viewer entirely, which resulted in his message resonating with the wrong audience or simply falling on deaf ears.

Charles Gustrine’s 1918 poster, *True Sons of Freedom,* was one of thousands of posters created during World War I; however, beyond simply evoking support for the war effort, it attempted to facilitate a national discussion and create a platform for national reform. Typical mass-produced corporate posters were the first true public advertisements; they evoked nationalism, championed enlistment, pleaded with families to ration food, and sold support for the war effort. While these typical war posters promoted causes with the majority in mind, marginalized groups sensed an opportunity to use this medium as a conversation starter. The African American community began producing posters as a challenge to segregation and Jim Crow, with the hopes of putting an end to both. Gustrine’s poster is an example of the use of mass propaganda to facilitate these discussions related to race and equal rights. However, these pro-African American posters did not always have the intended effect due to issues related with interpretation and competing agendas. After all, the United States military “received the support it desired from the African American community with African Americans seemingly receiving little” (237). The black poster movement failed to facilitate the desired discussions and, in the years following Armistice, faded in obscurity. “Rather than ushering in an era of improvised racial justice, the postwar years developed into one of the worst periods of racial violence in American history” (237). However, failures as they were, these posters stimulated minority communities, sowed the seeds of rebellion, and set the stage for the civil rights movement.

Bibliography

Keene, Jennifer D. “Images of Racial Pride: African American Propaganda Posters in the First World War.” *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture*, by Pearl James, University of Nebraska Press, 2009, pp. 207–240.

An American military recruitment poster, which attempts to evoke nationalism and bolster recruitment numbers within the African American community. The poster presents an image of African American soldiers, proudly displaying the flag of the United States, engaging in battle with the German military, while an enlarged image of President Abraham Lincoln looks on. Framing this image is the title “True Sons of Freedom” and the quotes “Liberty And Freedom Shall Not Parish” and “COLORED MEN The First Americans Who Planted Our Flag on the Firing Line.” This poster and the imagery within attempts to appeal to the African American community as it harkens back to the Federal victory in the American Civil War, which secured an end to slavery within the borders of the United States. With German soldiers resembling stereotypical images of Confederate men and African American soldiers standing above said men, this image also promotes the idea that the battlefields of World War I were a location in which all men were truly equal, and one in which African Americans could once and for all put an end to segregation and Jim Crow. The concept presented in this poster goes far beyond simply evoking African American nationalism and convincing young black men to join the war effort, it attempts to break down social stereotypes and contributes to a much larger conversation pertaining to equal rights for African Americans.