



HAL
open science

Women through the lens of World War II Propaganda in the United States: Discourses on White and African American Women

Christine Dualé

► **To cite this version:**

Christine Dualé. Women through the lens of World War II Propaganda in the United States: Discourses on White and African American Women. *Miroirs : Revue des civilisations anglophone, ibérique et ibéro-américaine*, 2016, Vol.1 (4), pp.14-30. hal-03639136

HAL Id: hal-03639136

<https://hal.science/hal-03639136v1>

Submitted on 13 Apr 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Women through the lens of World War II Propaganda in the United States: Discourses on White and African American Women

Christine Dualé, Université Toulouse I Capitole

Résumé

L'expérience des Américaines de la classe moyenne et leur histoire durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale contrastent avec celles des Africaines Américaines qui demeurèrent des femmes et des combattantes invisibles pour la presse blanche. Pourtant, les photographies de cette époque, et mises à la disposition du public par la bibliothèque du Congrès américain, témoignent d'une autre histoire et révèlent, sans trop de surprise, à quel point les Africaines-Américaines furent autant impliquées pendant la guerre que les femmes blanches. Cet article propose d'analyser la propagande de guerre aux États-Unis destinée aux femmes (entre 1941 et la fin de la guerre) afin de comprendre la réalité des femmes blanches et noires durant cette période. Quel fut le rôle des Américaines blanches de la classe moyenne ? Pourquoi l'implication des femmes noires fut-elle invisible dans la presse nationale ? Nous verrons à quel point la propagande de guerre permit de formater le discours dominant des années 1940 sur les femmes en général tout en maintenant l'expérience des Africaines-Américaines inaperçue.

Mots-clés : Seconde Guerre mondiale – Américaines de la classe moyenne – Noires américaines – Propagande de guerre – Guerrières invisibles – Monde du travail – Espace privé

Abstract

The largely surveyed experiences of white American middle-class women during World War II contrast sharply with the experiences of African American women. A look at home-front propaganda campaigns highlights the absence of Black women from mainstream propaganda. Yet, photos by and about black women during the war that can be consulted at the archives of the Library of Congress in Washington provide quite a different image and reveal, with no surprise, the extent to which these women were invisible warriors. In this article, American home-front propaganda specifically targeting women will be used as a grid to decipher and interpret the reality of the war for both white and African American women. What was the experience of white middle-class women? Why were black women rendered invisible? We will see that war propaganda helped shape the discourse on white American women in the 1940s and maintained the experience of African American women invisible.

Key-words: World War II - American middle-class women - African American women - mainstream propaganda – Home front propaganda – Invisible warriors – Domestic sphere – Workforce

During World War II, when American men began to fight overseas, the United States government realized manpower was needed to produce war goods at home. To mobilize the home front and entice women into war jobs, the government asked the Office of War Information (OWI) to launch home-front propaganda campaigns to urge women fill the voids in the labor market. War propaganda exclusively portrayed and was aimed at white middle-class women. Their largely surveyed experiences contrasted sharply with the experiences of African American women who were absent from propaganda campaigns and mainstream propaganda. Yet, photos by and about black women during the war provide quite a different image and reveal, with no surprise, the extent to which these women were rendered invisible by their race and gender. This aspect marked war propaganda and, by extension, it marked the image of American women at large. War propaganda portrayed a monolithic vision of American women, which eventually contributed to the elaboration of the discourse on national identity in the US. The common assumption that women achieved significant breakthroughs during the war and were able to cross gender barriers is largely true of white American women. For African American women, race complicated gender issues as they did not enjoy the same benefits as white women, or at least to the same degree. True enough, women crafted their own destiny and became subjects during that period but they were considered mere objects in their own society.

By focusing on war propaganda targeting American women, this article will show the impact and significance of home-front propaganda on the image of white middle-class women and of African American women during the war. To that end, home-front propaganda (such as advertising and recruitment posters) specifically targeting women and focusing on food and war work will be used as a grid to decipher and interpret the reality of the war for white middle-class women. As for African American women, they will be placed in the context of the Double V campaign to highlight a central contradiction, namely their fight for freedom abroad and also in their home country. Why was women's involvement encouraged? What did they gain from it? And why were African American women "invisible warriors" in mainstream media? Such are the questions we will try to address in this article.

White women and the domestic sphere

The national effort to get American women into wartime activities started in the 1940s as the country was engaged in the fight against the Nazi ideology. Ads and magazines were favored dissemination tools, especially women's magazines as they were aimed at housewives. To communicate with citizens and to provide information, the United States used posters that both focused on patriotism and conveyed positive messages. The government also used different strategies to gain support from citizens and to make them realize American ideals were at risk. These

very same ideals were used as useful weapons at home and abroad. Indeed, the use of food in advertising expressed the image of "the land of plenty". The government wanted to show the country was almost untouched by the war and that American citizens enjoyed healthy eating habits. Food became a weapon thanks to which the war could be won.

As early as 1941, the rhetoric of ads and posters linked the reality of the war with domestic consumer lifestyles. By "grow[ing] vitamins at [their] kitchen door", which was one of the slogans coined by advertisers, women could contribute to the health of their family and of the nation. Therefore, a healthier future was ahead for them. At the same time, these ideals shaped American consumers' culture and consciousness; the praise of the American way of life grew during the same period. Food propaganda marked the beginning of the government's focus on women to gain their involvement into the war effort. White women, who were the primary figures on the home-front, were targeted to accomplish their wartime duties: "help win the war on the kitchen front. Above all avoid waste" was a slogan that could be read in women's magazines. Victory gardens became part of the public effort to support patriotism in the United States and the involvement of the nation in the war: "Plant a victory garden. Our food is fighting", a slogan claimed. "Pitch in and help! Join the women's land army" said another. Women were targeted in many ways. Sacrifice, unity and the defense of freedom were among the main themes that encouraged them to accomplish their patriotic duty. Propaganda thus showed them how to cope with limited supplies, rationing, and conservation. Women were encouraged to save and plant victory gardens to prevent food shortages. During the war, Americans planted 50 million victory gardens (Witkowski 73) and a slogan read as follows: "eat what you can and can what you can't". Another one said: "grow your own, can your own." Preaching frugality to American consumers¹ and teaching it to daughters was essential in this program since women were supposed to cook for their family and for American soldiers "to speed the boys home". Women became symbols of the home-front because their involvement meant bringing their men back home more quickly. Female patriotism became the backbone of American values.²

¹ I borrow this expression to Witkowski. See his work entitled: "World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers."

² Recruitment propaganda narrowed the ideal woman's role that Betty Friedan described about 20 years later in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). When the study came out, millions of American women felt the constraints of the post-war culture, which confined them to the home or to low-paying, dead end jobs. At the same time, another group of women were emerging from the anti-war and civil rights movement determined to achieve their own revolution.

Such ads, which helped idealize the American way of life, placed white middle-class housewives at the centre of an ideology which was subtly advocated: by being assigned the responsibility for managing the nation's home-front consumption, women were not only doing their duty of perfect housewives and homemakers, they also accomplished their patriotic duty. Needless to say such messages restricted women to their most traditional roles and inscribed their nature solely in the domestic sphere. Helped by the *Saturday Evening Post* with three million subscribers, at the time, food propaganda conveyed white middle-class American beliefs. Indeed, propaganda gradually led to the model of the suburban housewife in the whole country. It also participated to the construction of gender and fostered class and gender bias. Little by little, however, their commitment and wartime sacrifices were shown as affecting the war as their heroic roles were regularly depicted in magazines. Fictions in women's magazines and ads shaped attitudes and promoted active women participating to the war effort: "The more WOMEN at work, the sooner we WIN!" Women whose husbands were at war were very much likely to work. Financial motives also justified their entering the labor force. These ideas were gradually supported by the government and accepted by society.

Women in the workforce

During the war, the traditional gender division of labor changed. The public sphere, which was the male domain, was redefined as the international stage of military action evolved. Thus, propaganda adapted to the situation as women were more and more needed and manpower was in severe shortage. Because of the pressing needs for nurses in the army, for aircraft and industrial workers, the federal government's Office of War Information (OWI) helped by mass-circulation periodicals launched a campaign to recruit women into the labor force. As Amy Snyder observes:

Companies which had manufactured domestic products in peacetime devoted precious advertising space to reminding women of their commitment to the war effort, while enforcing the notion that women's involvement in war work was also crucial to the nation's victory. (Snyder 2)

Between 1943 and 1945 companies no longer producing consumer products devoted between 75 and 100% of their advertising space to the war campaign (Snyder 1)³. At the beginning of the campaign, the *Saturday Evening Post*, a mass-circulation magazine, dedicated 16% of its advertising space to ads aimed at attracting women to war work (Snyder 2). Maureen Honey in *Remembering Rosie* discovered that the actual proportion of ads aimed at recruiting women reached 55% in the *Post* (Honey, 1995, 83, 106).

³ Many producers of consumer goods converted to manufacturing war goods (aircraft, ships, and weapons) to help the nation win the war. With no products to sell to the public, advertisers faced a business loss of 80%.

Despite the continuing 20th century trend of women entering the workforce, publicity campaigns were aimed at those women who had never before held jobs and who evolved in a paternalistic society. Contrary to black American women, white middle-class women who were targeted by the federal government did not need to work for money and corresponded to the traditional portrait of dedicated homemakers, wives and mothers. Advertising campaign officials took care to protect such images and values as men and society at large were not ready to see white middle-class women gain their economic and social independence. The strategy was clear: first home-front propaganda was to reassure the American public, second these women would work solely for the benefit of the country and for the duration of the war.

Female involvement outside the domestic sphere was not immediately accepted by society. Early propaganda emphasized the traditional virtues which had been essential before the war in women's magazines: community values, hard work, and home-making were recurrent themes and the family was a sacred institution. Women were encouraged to raise their children and to take care of their home. The plots of magazines stories always revealed hostility to working women who were portrayed as ambitious, selfish, and unable to take care of their family. Ads which represented working women showed that it was totally impossible to combine paid work, family life and happiness. With the war, fictions changed and stories focused on the need for women to join the workforce. Now that women were needed and that they served their country, they became totally able to work and maintain their home at the same time and nevertheless enjoyed happiness. The ad entitled: "I'm Proud ... my husband wants me to do my part" showed how acceptable it was for married women to work and to engage in male jobs. By intertwining images of the domestic, submitted and yet independent woman, the OWI fostered national acceptance of the working woman but also reminded the public that these women would return to the domestic sphere at the end of the war.

To convince women to work and men too, several strategies were used. The "glamour strategy" was one of the tactics to attract young women. For example, the United States Coast Guard Women's Reserve which was created in 1942 insisted on dynamism and novelty. Its slogan read as follows: "You can be a SPAR⁴. New faces, new places, a new job!" By glamorizing war work and the image of the female war worker at the same time, participating to the war effort appeared exciting. Femininity was another strategy to attract women and convince them to join the war effort. Make-up, hairstyles and clothes always enhanced their femininity; lipsticks, pocket mirrors, and perfect polished finger nails were appreciated props. The OWI run ads that proved women who worked hard could remain attractive, glamorous

⁴ SPAR: nickname for the United States Coast Guard Women's Reserve created in 1942. Contraction of the Coast Guard motto: Semper Paratus and its English translation: Always Ready.

and feminine. Ads portrayed women fundamentally ladylike and whether industrial or farm workers, ads always insisted that women in overalls or work clothes looked very attractive. A Linit Laundry Starch ad of 1943⁵ promoting women's involvement in farm work read: "a woman can do anything if she knows she looks beautiful doing it" (Snyder 8).

When General George Marshall supported the idea of introducing a women's service branch into the Army in 1942⁶, uniforms became the most visible sign of women's contribution to the war effort. Uniforms conveyed the message that winning the war was also a female duty. Such strategy of glamorization of war work subtly insinuated that physical appearance and beauty were the sole powers of women and that these aspects presided over their decision to accomplish their patriotic duty. They were trapped by stereotyped images and whether domestic or feminine, the representations in ads narrowed women's vision. The vision slightly changed with the evolution of the war-front. As women took on war jobs in addition to their family obligations they became national heroines and models of American womanhood. Joining the workforce was tantamount to establishing a bright and prosperous future at home and to becoming a symbol of resistance on the home-front. The posters: « Do the job HE left behind » and « Rosie the Riveter » helped convey such ideas. As a matter of fact, the American government glorified the capabilities of women.

Interestingly enough, women took work defined as "male work" and were thanked for that. A slogan read: "Good work sister. We never figured you could do a man-size job!" The more valorized women's participation to the war effort was, the more hyper-masculine male soldiers were. During the same period, Mrs Casey Jones and Rosie the riveter became icons and the very symbols of woman strength. Through them, stories and ads proved the American nation women could support their country in doing men's jobs:

Casey's gone to war... So Mrs Jones is working on the railroad. [...] In fact, she is doing scores of different jobs on the Pennsylvania Railroad and doing them well. So the men in the armed forces whom she has replaced can take comfort in the fact Mrs Casey Jones is « carrying on » in fine style. [...] We feel sure the American public will take pride in the way American womanhood has pitched in to keep the Victory trains rolling!⁷

⁵ Linit. Advertisement. *McCall's*, August 1943, p. 62.

⁶ In May 1942, Congress instituted the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. The female members were called WACs.

⁷ *Meet MRS. Casey Jones*, Pennsylvania Railroad, Serving the Nation, 1943. Available at: <http://prths-ne.org/art/mrs-jones.html> [consulted, January 28, 2016]

Though women were supposed to do men's jobs, their tasks were adapted to their skills. Work was thus advertised as an extension of domesticity and slogans helped reinforce this idea. For instance, one slogan quoted: "The ladies have shown they can operate drill presses as well as egg beaters".⁸ Another one asked women: "Can you use an electric mixer? If so, you can learn to operate a drill."⁹ These slogans subtly questioned the capability of women: were they well-suited to the job?

The American government did not sincerely believe women could work permanently in positions previously held by men and only anticipated keeping women in the work force "for the duration" of the war, as it was made clear with the very first campaigns. By returning home, women would be able "to begin a home-centered quintessentially American way of life" (Honey, 1999, 11), which was the main objective of the government. Thus, war propaganda continued to trap American women in their traditional roles. Women were shown confident and determined, so their contribution would help win the war, but by drawing a parallel between war work and domestic work, ads always implied that women only possessed skills as homemakers and that their place was at home. It is interesting to note that they were not always shown in action (action was a male thing). Women were also portrayed in static roles anxiously waiting for the return of their soldier home. American male soldiers were the absent breadwinners without whom the American family could not function. With their return, American women could resume their lives as housekeepers which was essentially expected from them.

The home-centered American way of life that developed in the 1940s through war propaganda was synonymous with American ideals that were praised and deserved to be fought for. In the 1940s, American housewives, perfect cooks and homemakers, became the very symbol of the American nation. Their homes were the symbolic places of the American way of life and of happiness. The association of women (but a select portion of female population since middle-class white women were the only ones targeted by the government and mainstream media) and the home embodied the victorious nation and provided a means by which Americans achieved happiness. After the war these images were used to embody the victorious nation and were at the heart of the anti-communist ideology which was fully developed throughout the 1950s. Staging American happiness, we should say "White American happiness", was an effective tool to oppose communism and to impose the triumph of capitalism. Such images kept aside the contribution of minority women in general and of African American women in particular. It was in the early 1960s that the dominant discourse began to be questioned and put to the test and that African American women started to fight on the grounds of gender,

⁸ For more on this, see Milkman, 1987.

⁹ For more on this see Lee, 1985.

As Amy Chovan mentions in her study: "National Youth Administration also organized training programs to prepare young men and women to work in plants and produce war materials."

race and class. During the war, African American women, who were not asked to sacrifice themselves for their country, remained invisible warriors and almost nonexistent in mainstream media.

Black women and war propaganda: invisible warriors

For black people and black women in particular, the war certainly provided an opportunity to insist upon their social and civil rights while they committed themselves to the war effort. “The war presented special challenges to African Americans, especially after they heard about the goal of the Four Freedoms that President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced in January 1941: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear” (Sullivan Harper, 23). Africans Americans wondered, however, if these freedoms would apply to them. So, led by the black press, Blacks fought for democracy abroad and at home. The 1940s was the age of Double V (V for victory) since African Americans were fighting for freedom abroad and for equality at home. As they went to war, black men not only wanted to prove their patriotism but also their manhood and expected to reach equal rights. Greater opportunity reached black women too as “the war provided an opportunity to accelerate their demands for equality” (Griffin, 5-6).

The double V campaign started in 1942 when *the Pittsburgh Courier*¹⁰ published a letter to the editor from James G. Thompson entitled “Should I Sacrifice to Live ‘Half American?’” The author questioned American democracy. Thompson proposed what he called “the double V”, V for a double victory: victory over the enemies from without and victory over the enemies from within. The paper had already denounced the American Red Cross’ refusal to accept black blood in donor drives, but nothing could prepare the editors for the enthusiastic response of the public and the subsequent double V campaign that was launched. The double V campaign promoted patriotism. Double V girls regularly appeared in the black press and a double V hairstyle (the doubler) soon became popular. Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates describes the double V campaign in those terms:

The Double V Campaign ran weekly into 1943. To promote patriotism, the Pittsburgh Courier included an American flag with every subscription and encouraged its readers to buy war bonds. Double V clubs spread around the country. Among the campaign’s features, the paper published a weekly photo of a new “Double V Girl” frequently lifting two fingers in a “v” sign; celebrity and political endorsements followed, including Lana Turner (who, in a bit of cross-promotion, mentioned that her movie *Slightly Dangerous* featured blacks in the cast) and former presidential

¹⁰ *The Pittsburgh Courier* was the most widely read black newspaper during the war, with a national circulation well above 200,000.

candidate Wendell Willkie, wearing a Double V pin, which the *Courier* sold for five cents, as William F. Yurasko reports. A Double V hairstyle called “the Doubler” also became popular, historian Patrick Washburn recalls, as did Double V gardens and Double V baseball games. Other black newspapers soon joined the *Courier*’s campaign. (Gates, online)

Black women were totally absent from the advertising and recruitment landscapes and their contribution to the home-front war on racism was completely erased. Invisible in mainstream media, black magazines like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* but also newspapers such as *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Chicago Defender*, *the Kansas City Call*, and *the Michigan Chronicle*, which all achieved wide circulation during the war, offered counter alternatives to the discourse on women presented in mainstream media. These periodicals were essential in recognizing African American women’s contribution to the war, and in conveying other portraits than the black maid devoted to her white family. The black press performed specialized functions in segregated America like: “(1) protesting injustices to black Americans and helping to fight their battles; (2) stimulating black achievement by publicizing Negro success stories; and (3) providing information about events affecting the personal interests of blacks [...]. The Negro newspaper [was] regarded as an additional newspaper” (Sullivan Harper, 26).

Black female images and rhetoric

Central to the war and the depiction of black women was the role of black writers and poets (males and females alike) who subverted dominant stereotypes, positioned women as social activists, be they mothers, domestic workers or entertainers. War time black poetry and writing erased the emblematic mammy figure entirely devoted to white people and placed the black child at the center of African American maternal attention. With the black rhetoric, “the black mother’s role was not conceptualized as a homebound figure in African American discourses; rather, she [the black mother] was expected to take up the banner for racial justice in society at large laid down by a martyred child” (Honey, 1999, 25). Maternal devotion, attention, and activism challenged the dominant culture portrayal of black mothers’ role and empowered black women. The black press used maternal and feminine strength to show black women could also help fight racism, make a better world for their children, and enjoy the benefits of American citizenship. Poems like “Mother’s Hope” by Valerie Ethelyn Parks, “Our Love Was a War Baby” by Tomi Carolyn Tinsley, “Colored Mother’s Prayer” by Walter Arnold, “Negro Mother to Her Soldier Son” by Cora Ball Moten, “A Mother’s Faith”, by the editor of *Opportunity*, were published either in *The Crisis* or *Opportunity*, or *Negro Story* between 1943 and 1945, and all brought to light “black mothers as compassionate figures who could lead as well as nurture, inspire to action as well as grieve” (Honey, 1999, 259). Poems like the following one had a significant impact on Black women and gave them hope for real changes:

“Our Love Was a War Baby”

Our love was a war baby –
born shortly after Pearl Harbor,
nurtured on furloughs, and cutting
its teeth on envelopes marked “free.”
Despite the label “free”, we paid
plenty in the way of absence, lonely
nights, longing, empty arms, and the like.
Its advent was not planned – nor was it
an accident. For Fate has decreed it.

When you went away, the baby seemed such
a small, wee thing; but to me it was already
large, full grown – and with each day has grown
stronger and more beautiful.
And as I watch it mature into a sturdy, fine child,
I wonder – when all the war is done,
when the iron’s birds last song is sung,
the steel cobras have spat their last bit of fire,
and you are home again – if you will have
forgot this child... Or if recognition
will light your eyes, and you will take
this, which you begot, to your heart? (Tomi Carolyn Tinsley)¹¹

Unlike white women, who were described as brave mothers and perfect managers of the domestic sphere as we mentioned earlier, the black press portrayed black women as independent and autonomous, combining paid work with family life and fighting against racism. The black press gave encouragements, provided women with information to find well-paid jobs and provided models. These periodicals also opened doors to black women writers such as Ann Petry, Pauli Murray, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks who then achieved distinguished careers. These women confronted World War II and informed of “the home-front battles they had yet to win against racial discrimination in employment, transportation, restaurants, and housing, and sexism in the home” (Honey, 1999, 6). In short, these periodicals showed who these women really were and what they wanted to become.

11 Poem published in *Negro Story*, March-April 1945.

Black women in the workforce

Employment was one of the differences separating black women from white middle-class women on the home-front. Contrary to most white women targeted by war propaganda, black women already combined paid work with family life when the war started as they generally were not in an economic position to be full-time homemakers. In her study on African American women during World War II, Maureen Honey observes that 40% of all black women were already in the labor force when the war broke out, against 25% of white women (Honey, 1999, 12)¹². Paid work was a normal part of life for African American women and being employed was central to middle-class status. When they appeared in mainstream media, Black working women were not portrayed as housewives and their commitment to the war effort was not disruptive of their domestic life and work. When the war broke out, domestic employment was their primary occupation and even in the military, it was difficult for them to escape low-skilled assignments. They were relegated to the most menial tasks in the war industry¹³.

Another study by Karen Anderson (1981, 85) reports that in 1943, “nonwhites held only one thousand of the ninety-six thousand positions filled by women in Detroit war industries, and that black men and women never accounted for more than 6 percent of all employees in aircraft, whereas white women constituted nearly 40 percent of all aircraft workers. African Americans made their biggest gains in heavily male-employing industrial fields: foundries, shipbuilding, blast furnaces, and steel mills. Black women went into dangerous munitions factories, did heavy labor for the railroads, or were hired as washroom attendants and cleaning women in war plants. Most clerical work, many public service positions, and sales jobs were unavailable to African American women” (Anderson 85). Anderson goes on: “Although they [African American women] achieved significant breakthroughs, African American women made such negligible occupational progress during the war that their relative position in the labor force remained the same at the height of wartime employment in 1944 as it was in 1940” (85). Even in the midst of severe labor shortages racial bars in the workforce persisted. Black nurses, who were particularly needed in the Army and Navy, were refused in hospitals except to treat black soldiers. In February 1942, Elmer Carter, the editor of *Opportunity* wrote:

12 Honey quotes her source from Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage, African American Migrant Women, and the East Bay Community*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996, p. 16. Honey also mentions Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984 to support her findings.

13 The resources provided by the Library of Congress (which include photographs from different government agencies) bear testimony to the difficulties and low-skilled tasks assigned to black women during the war.

The United States Army, after a fervid plea for 50,000 young women to enter nursing schools in order to fill a pressing need which exists in the Army and Navy, has refused to accept Negro nurses for service except in "hospitals or wards devoted exclusively to the treatment of Negro soldiers." The inference is, of course, that wounded white soldiers would refuse to accept the ministrations of colored nurses. [...] There are hundreds of young colored women who are graduate nurses. They are eager to serve in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps. They have the same patience, the same devotion, the same gentleness as their grandmothers, and in addition they possess scientific knowledge of modern medical and surgical practice, and skills acquired through long apprenticeship in recognized hospitals. (Carter, *in*, Honey, 112-114)

Such accounts were numerous and were aggravated by discriminatory practices and instances of violence against black male soldiers. During the war, gender quickly merged with race issues on the home-front. Black women were the victims and observers of racist aggressions. Like white women, they were portrayed as vulnerable and innocent targets but the difference in the African American treatment was that the enemy was at their door, on the home-front. In August 1943, following the Detroit race riot of June 1943 where 24 black people were killed, future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall denounced police action in *The Crisis* under the title *The Gestapo in Detroit* and suggested that tensions were caused by police attitude and action:

All these crimes are matters of record. Many were committed in the presence of police officers, several on the pavement around the City Hall. Yet the record remains: Negroes killed by police – 17; white persons killed by police – none. The entire record, both of the riot killings and of previous disturbances, reads like the story of the Nazi Gestapo. Evidence of tension in Detroit has been apparent for months. [...] This weak-kneed policy of the police commissioner coupled with the anti-Negro attitude of many members of the force helped to make a riot inevitable. (Marshall *in*, Honey, 193-201)

Black women writers reflected on gender and racial issues in their short-stories published in the African American press. Fictions illustrated home-front conditions. Ann Petry's short-story "In Darkness and Confusion", Pearl Fisher's "Riot Gold" and Lila Marshall's "Sticks and Stones" focused on the racial clashes in 1943. Although black women were equally hurt by racism in the military and on the home-front, black male soldiers were the only symbols of besieged black America in the African American press.

Black role models and female icons

War propaganda functioned differently for African American women and the arts made also a significant impact. The success of black women serving in the Women's Army Corps (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps), but also of black singers, actresses and dancers was largely advertised in black magazines. Attractive black women appeared regularly on most covers of *Opportunity*. If mainstream media ignored black men and women, black writers and editors testified of their commitment and placed them at the forefront of "Double V" rhetoric to break down racism on the home-front and counter widespread stereotypes. Although the OWI conducted a campaign to break down racism, very few articles on Blacks appeared in national magazines. Between 1942 and 1945, the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature reports that 64 articles on Blacks were published.

Singers Lena Horne, Hazel Scott, opera singer Marian Anderson, actress Dorothy Dandridge, to name a few, were featured as glamorous black stars. The black press also emphasized on their beauty and success and they were portrayed as elegant, attractive and sexy black women. The black press praised these women who heralded a new era for African American women: "the most positive mass media depictions of African American women were of singers on the stage or in movie musicals" (Honey, 317). The press certainly put to the fore their beauty and talent but never failed to mention the racial obstacles these women faced despite their position and success. Black female performers not only challenged racism they also became models of pride and resistance for black women and gave them hope and confidence. The success and stories of these women empowered black women during the war even though their celebrity did not prevent them from racist attitudes in society. In *The New York Post* of November 1943, the columnist Elsa Maxwell wrote "Glamorous vs. Prejudice" which appeared a year later in *The Negro Digest* of January 1944:

The glamorous and great artists of the Negro race are gradually turning the whole race "problem" - which is not, and never was a problem - into a glorious absurdity. When stiff-necked whites are faced with the beauty and charm of a Katherine Dunham¹⁴ or a Lena Horne, or nettled by the magnificent talent and intellect of Paul Robeson, the idea of "prejudice" seems a matter for concern only in lunatic asylums.

This extract clearly shows the predominant themes in African American magazines which regularly showed how "female performers coming to the fore during the war years were challenging in profound ways the racism that for decades had denied their beauty, power, and courage" (Honey, 320). These examples and illustrations

14 Katherine Dunham was an anthropologist and a dancer.

also indicate how the black press reinforced autonomous images of black women. Their protests against racism, along with men and soldiers, enabled a most effective interrogation of segregation at home.

By the end of the war ads targeting white women changed. As previously mentioned, American women were encouraged to leave war jobs and were pushed back home to return to their domestic pursuits. Most of them did not want to. Black women were the last hired and the first fired and faced severe limitations. The Federal government prepared the glorification of suburban postwar ideal and placed white middle-class women at the center of this ideal: "government officials and advertisers realized the necessity of making preparations for postwar society, laying off women after the war and restoring them to their previous positions as housewives and mothers" (Rupp, 160). War propaganda continued to play upon preconceived images and ads were conceived to encourage women to leave their war jobs by insinuating they could not tolerate home and work duties simultaneously. The ad: "Mother, when will you stay home again?" dramatized the unhappiness of the child and also conveyed the OWI's belief about the expected roles of women in postwar society. The ad commanded women to return home for the benefit of their families, for their happiness, and for their own satisfaction.

War propaganda marked major differences between black and white women. The war propelled black women into the civil rights battle of the 1950s and 1960s, and allowed white women to cross gender lines. For both of them, the war represented a watershed even though white women were restored to their former positions as housewives and mothers and black women did not progress in the wartime labor force. By re-inscribing white women in the domestic sphere and creating a maternal mission for them, war propaganda laid the groundwork of battles to come in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1960s, the white feminists deconstructed the suburban family-oriented ideology which was exacerbated during and after the war and which was totally irrelevant to black women. Meanwhile black feminists concentrated on the battle against sexism outside and mainly within their own community. Women profoundly reshaped the central institutions of American life and culture during and after the war. These invisible warriors not only empowered themselves, they also opened doors for others.

References

- Advertising. Consulted online at: http://www.arts.cornell.edu/knight_institute/publicationsprizes/discoveries/discoveriesfall1997/11amysnyder.pdf
- Anderson K., 1981, *Wartime Women: Sew Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II*. Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press.
- Chovan A., 2011, "Women Answer the Call in Wartime", January 2011 <http://www.peoriomagazines.com/ibi/2011/jan/women-answer-call-wartime>, Consulted in July 2014.
- Gates H.L., 2013, "The Root-Amazing Fact About the Negro No. 33: How was black support enlisted for World War II when the armed services were segregated and racial oppression was rampant at home?" Posted: May 24 2013 1:27 PM http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2013/05/double_v_campaign_during_world_war_ii_what_was_it.i.html Consulted in July 2014.
- Giddings P., 1984, *When and Where I Enter: The impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York, Bantam Books.
- Honey M., 1995, "Remembering Rosie: Advertising Images of Women in World War II." *The Home-Front War: World War II and American Society*. Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parson, ed., Westport, Greenwood.
- , 1999, *Bitter Fruit*. Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press.
- Lee K., 1985, *For the duration...: the United States goes to war, Pearl Harbor-1942*. New York, Scribner.
- Lemke-Santangelo, 1996, *Abiding Courage, African American Migrant Women, and the East Bay Community*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- Milkman R., 1987, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Jo Segregation by Sex During World War II*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.
- Rupp L., 1978, *Mobilizing Women for War*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Sullivan Harper, Donna Akiba, *Not So Simple. The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes*. Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Witkowski T.H., "World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers." *Journal of Advertising*, Vol 32 n°1 (Spring 2003), 69-82.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

DUALÉ, Christine, « Women through the lens of World War II Propaganda in the United States: Discourses on White and African American Women », *Revue Miroirs* [En ligne], 4 Vol.1 |2016, mis en ligne le 1 avril, 2016, <http://www.revuemiroirs.fr/links/femmes/volume1/article2.pdf>

Auteur

Christine DUALÉ
Université Toulouse 1 Capitole
CAS - Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes (EA 801): Littératures et civilisation américaine,
Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès.
CELIS – Centres de Recherches sur les Littératures et la Socio-poétique (EA
1002): Écritures et interactions sociales, Université Blaise Pascal,
Clermont-Ferrand. Membre associé.
christine.duale@ut-capitole.fr

Droits d'auteur

© RevueMiroirs.fr