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Home of the Brave, Land of the Not-Entirely Free: The Politicization of Black Bodies

Veterans have often been lauded for their heroic sacrifices in the face of fear and mutiny. They return, alive or dead, to parades, medals, and all other sorts of celebrations. This is the impression we have of returned soldiers thanks to our childhood history books, however, even glory is not equal among all. While white soldiers returned home a hero of elevated status, African American men often returned to the same racism and white supremacy ruling that they had left behind (Holloway 45). In Mary P. Burrill's piece, *Aftermath*, the topic of grievous acts against African American people in the face of African American men returning from combat in WW1 exhibits the relentlessness of racism despite the reverence held for white war veterans.

Despite the increased need for soldiers in WW1, African American citizens were not permitted to serve in the army until 1917. Many would wonder why these men would even bother to go fight for the freedom and liberties that they could not equally enjoy. The thought process behind signing up was that through their service, government bodies would have no choice but to reject Jim Crow law and award equality to African American citizens (Sammons 02:02-02:16). However, this would not be the case. During the course of the first World War, crime against the Black community greatly increased. From 1917 to 1918, reported lynchings in the American South increased from 38 to 63 individuals (Mjagkij 115-116). This dramatic increase encouraged President Woodrow Wilson to publicly condemn the act of lynching, and even went so far as to appoint several African American individuals to advisory positions in an effort to uplift the community (Mjagkij 115). This was seen as a victory in the Black community, but unfortunately, would be one that was short-lived.

Upon the soldiers' return at the end of WW1, the Wilson administration made it known that the Black men who had left to fight for their country would not be the same ones that returned. Rather, they would be emboldened. It was rightly presumed that returning soldiers would be expectant of racial equality such as that which they had experienced in France (Mjaagkij 135). In Burrill's play, this expectation is outlined when John discovers that in his absence his father was lynched without sound reason or trial, saying, "I'm sick 'o these w'ite folks doin's-- we're "fine, trus'worthy feller citizuns" when they're handin' us out guns, an' Liberty Bonds, an' chuckin' us off to die; but we ain't a damn thing when it comes to handin' us the rights we done fought an' bled fu'! I'm sick o' this sort o' life-- and I'm goin' put an' end to it" (Burrill 102). Despite the promise of peace and freedom that these men agreed to uphold when they enlisted, their return saw them faced with the reality that the rule of the Land of the Free was that of white supremacy.

Burrill deals with all of these tensions and more in her compact, yet impactful, play *Aftermath*. By taking such a strong stand in the face of these egregious attitudes and acts, Burrill was able to stir within her audience a call to action that was not often portrayed in the arts. She exemplified the sort of spirit that she felt her fellow African American brethren needed to uphold through the use of a strong, dignified, fast-acting Black male character in order to strike back against the racial hold on America. In doing so, she solidified herself as an activist and artist willing to speak up despite her socially dictated position in life.

Works Cited

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