

The Chicago Defender: Its Representations & Uplift Project During the First World War

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The same American war narrative has been repeated to students for generations. In studying the world wars, we learn about the young, white male soldiers training in American camps before being shipped overseas to Europe. We learn about the young white females in the Red Cross, working in hospitals at home and distributing donuts to the soldiers abroad. We learn about the mobilization efforts in America--the food conservation campaigns and the patriotic anthems. These are the stories that show up on the covers of American history textbooks--the ones that have remained prominent in the American narrative. In order to find alternative narratives, one must look to sources that have gone unnoticed by the majority. One must look to the histories not just about the people on the margins of society, but also to the histories told by marginal and minority folk. With this purpose in mind, I have set out to researching an unsung narrative of American history during World War I.

The Chicago Defender, the most popular black American newspaper by the first world war, was founded in 1905 by Robert S. Abbott.¹ The weekly paper was not just read by black Americans in Chicago, but throughout the United States, with most of its copies delivered to the South.² Communications scholar Alan D. DeSantis and historian James R. Grossman argue that the *Defender* was an agent in driving people from the

South to the North during the period of flight known today as the "Great Migration." In 1900, black Americans began to leave the southern states for the North.³ From 1900 to 1910 alone, 170,000 black Americans departed the South.⁴ It was not until 1916, though, that the Great Migration really soared,⁵ prompted by poor agricultural conditions⁶ and the extreme violence at the hands of the white citizenry.⁷ In describing the state of the South during this period, journalist Isabel Wilkerson notes in *The Warmth of Other Suns* that, "southern state legislatures began devising with inventiveness and precision laws that would regulate every aspect of black people's lives, solidify the southern caste system, and prohibit even the most casual and incidental contact between the races. They would come to be called Jim Crow laws."⁸ Passed from hand to hand in the rural South,⁹ the *Defender* helped to mobilize black Americans away from

³ Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration*, in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 22.

⁴ Tolnay and Beck, *Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration*, in *Black Exodus*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 20.

⁵ Carole Marks, *The Social and Economic Life of Southern Blacks During the Migration*, in *Black Exodus*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 36.

⁶ Tolnay and Beck, *Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration*, in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 23.

⁷ Tolnay and Beck, *Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration*, in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 26.

⁸ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 40.

⁹ DeSantis, "Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners," *Western Journal of Communication* 62:4 (1998): 478.

¹ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 74.

Charlene Regester, *Robert S. Abbott*, in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 17.

² Alan D. DeSantis, "Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners: The Chicago *Defender* and the Great Migration of 1915-1919," *Western Journal of Communication* 62:4 (1998): 477-478.

these conditions.¹⁰ It is with this framework that I have researched and analyzed *The Chicago Defender* in the year 1918, searching for the impact that it had on black Americans who, at the time, were the most degraded citizens in the United States. In chronicling the worst of white brutality while, at the same time, endeavoring to elevate black America, *The Chicago Defender* disseminated a new black identity. Far beyond printing the news, this newspaper envisioned black Americans as occupying a more dignified position in society.

***The Chicago Defender* and the Mutilation of the Black Body**

1918 was a formidable time for black Americans, especially in the South, and *The Chicago Defender* did not shy away from reporting case after case of white-on-black brutality. In doing so, it informed its readers that whites threatened both black men and women, albeit sometimes in different ways. As Wilkerson writes, “Across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889-1929.”¹¹ White southern newspapers at the time promoted mob lynchings as thrilling public events wherein “festive crowds of as many as several thousand white citizens” would gather to watch black folks hang from trees or burn right in front of their eyes.¹² In contrast, the *Defender* displayed these brutalities for the horrors that they were. In the first week of February, 1918, the front page of the *Defender* reads in big letters, “Man’s Head and Foot Found.” In the subsequent story relating the death of Herbert Brown of Orange, Texas, one learns that a pair of white men had dismembered Brown’s body because Brown happened to witness a previous crime of theirs. Additionally, the paper reported that these perpetrators have attacked black females before, such as when one “seized a young woman...and kissed her.” In this extra detail, the *Defender* illustrates how not only “Race”—as the *Defender* typically called black Americans—men are in danger, but also how “Race” women are equally in danger. Additionally, the man who attempts to

guard his sister in this supplementary anecdote is “severely beaten and cut about the body with a razor.” While the black female body is sexually assaulted and the black male body is mutilated, the *Defender* illustrates that both genders are at risk of attacks by barbaric white men.¹³ In doing so, it presents how white America viewed and treated black bodies.

In printing shocking articles related to white brutality, the *Defender* makes it clear that white violence also affects young people of “the Race.” In a short piece from August 30th entitled, “Body of 15-Year-Old Girl Found Mutilated in Swamp,” another case of bodily mutilation is represented. Similar to Brown who was taken from his home, Eva Roy, aged fifteen, was “dragged over rough surfaces to the woods” in Burke county, Virginia, and then “terribly mutilated in the swamps and tied to a tree.”¹⁴ This story only takes up a small section of a middle section of the paper, displaying the unfortunate prevalence of these brutal cases. On the other hand, on September 28th, it is the front page of the paper that features a picture of a young boy, James Manous, who was “hurled...from his bed” in Chicago when white residents set a bomb to an apartment building in an effort to force the newly-arrived black residents from their homes. The photo of Manous, encircled under the headline, “Belgium Line Extends to Vincennes Avenue” incites fury in the humane reader.¹⁵ These cases, although one in the South and one in the North, portray hate crimes inflicted upon young members of the Race. In featuring one as a side story and the other as a main article, the *Defender* reveals both its horror over the cases and its numbness to them. The newspaper thus acts as a medium to warn black America of the frequent danger that even its young people are in. With the youngest black Americans in peril, the *Defender* shows how “the Race” itself is vulnerable to collapse.

¹⁰ DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62:4 (1998): 476-477.

¹¹ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 39.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Man’s Head and Foot Found: Two White Men Jailed, Charged With Crime,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 1, 1918, late ed., 1.

¹⁴ “Body of 15-Year-Old Girl Found Mutilated in Swamp,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1918, late ed..

¹⁵ “Belgium Line Extends to Vincennes Avenue,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 28, 1918, late ed., 1.

The depiction of white American savagery continues when the *Defender*, in an editorial article from the end of February entitled, “And a Lady Applauds” comments on the state of white “civilization” today in detailing the un-ladylike qualities of white southern women. The article tells the story of the burning of an unnamed black man in Tennessee, but the journalist chooses to focus on describing the white crowd who has come to watch. The journalist, also unnamed, writes, “The crowd has gathered to see the fun...the ladies (?) present makes a speech requesting that the torch be applied.” While the word “fun” adds a layer of sarcasm to the horrifying text, the question mark demonstrates the journalist’s view that these white southern belles are anything but “ladies” as they participate in the monstrous murder of a human being. The journalist then goes on to note how “these highest examples of modern American civilization watch a fellow creature writhe in agony and cry out in despair till hushed in death, without a dissenting voice.” Here again, sarcasm is used to note how absurd it is that these ruthless people view themselves as the some of the most advanced members of society. With the words “modern savages,” the journalist clearly states his opinion on the event and on the present state of American society.¹⁶ In depicting this savagery, the *Defender* presents the horrifying world in which black America finds itself. This is a world in which white brutes rule and horrific acts like human burnings occur--without a hint of remorse--on a weekly basis.

The *Defender* frequently presented how black Americans were lynched under false accusations. As Wilkerson notes in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, these “alleged crimes” that black southerners were too often accused of included ““stealing hogs”” and ““trying to act like a white person.””¹⁷ In November, a small article entitled “Boy’s Failure to Aid in Crop Harvest Causes Lynching” details the death of yet another young person, Sandy Ray of Blackbear, Georgia. Taken from prison by a white mob and hung “to a tree,” Ray had at first been sentenced for “criminally assaulting a 3-year-old white girl.” These charges, though, according to the *Defender*, were false.

Instead, Ray’s offense was his unwillingness to “to help a white farmer harvest his crop” due to threats he received with a whip. The fear of black male violations of white women was pervasive in the South at this time, especially within “the planter class,”¹⁸ and so this accusation does not come as a surprise. The article goes on to describe how Ray was “dragged from his cell,” noting that some of his clothes were later discovered along the road along which he was taken to hung. These details imply that Ray was stripped by the mob after being stolen from jail, and thus, the occurrence of more white brutality. In addition to these horrific facts, the mob gets away with the deed, and ““unknown parties”” are reported by the jury to be responsible. The facts of the case, though, suggest instead that the state was involved with the lynching of the victim, for the mob had the keys to the prison from which they took Ray. Whether or not this hypothesis is true, the important matter is that a black person was once again mutilated--this time, under a false accusation--and no justice was brought to his death by the law.¹⁹ In this way, the *Defender* demonstrates the complete humiliation of black bodies and the disregard of black rights in the country.

Along these lines, the *Defender* points to the prevalence of Southern states failing to punish lynchers and mobs in an article from the end of March entitled, “Louisiana’s Unpunished Lynchings.” The journalist (unnamed) asserts that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) would like to know ““what steps Louisiana proposes to take to vindicate her law in face of the fact that five Negroes have been lynched in Louisiana within seven weeks.”” This statement indicates that this state has not taken steps at all in seeking justice for these citizens.²⁰ Time and time again, the law does not seem to exist when these white individuals and mobs participate in the barbarous killing of black Americans, and the *Defender* displays this lawlessness without hesitation. For instance, in an article from April entitled “Widow and Daughters Brutally Beaten by

¹⁸ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 40.

¹⁹ “Boy’s Failure to Aid in Crop Harvest Causes Lynching,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1918, late ed..

²⁰ “Louisiana’s Unpunished Lynchings,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1918, late ed..

¹⁶ “And a Lady Applauds,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 26, 1918, late ed..

¹⁷ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 39.

Whites,” the attack of “white hoodlums” on an entire family in Turnbull, Mississippi is reported. The family consists of a twelve year old girl, two teenage girls, and their mother. Although these citizens have been “whipped...unmercifully” and “terribly beaten over the head with sticks,” it is apparent that no legal justice has been taken against the white criminals. The journalist (unnamed) describes that the white people acted in this uncivilized manner because of the “progress” that the black family had achieved in renting a large plantation. The brutality inflicted on them was thus an expression of resentment towards their advancement.²¹ The journalist employs a number of tactics here. By noting the savagery of the perpetrators, he raises an emotional reaction in the reader. By failing to mention any legal consequences of the act, the journalist demonstrates that such justice is hopeless for black Americans in the deep South. Finally, by mentioning the cause of the crime, he provides a chilling example of the white attempt to pull the black American away from progress. In displaying the lack of state response in the face of white brutality, the *Defender* demonstrates how blacks were constantly dehumanized. In so doing, white America is demonized and black America is portrayed as occupying a vulnerable position, one in which advancement in white society was difficult.

In addition to the mutilation of the black body that the *Defender* represented, the newspaper displayed the rampant discrimination occurring all over the country, especially within the workplace and in the military. For instance, in an article from February entitled “Segregation of Race Patients is Ordered,” a journalist relates how a hospital ward in Texas is now to be segregated.²² The absurdity displayed here is that black and white soldiers are expected to fight together in Europe, but when they are sent back home to recover, they must remain apart. Similarly, in an early November editorial called, “Help Wanted--White,” the paper points out the kind of “dementia” that is occurring in the United States, as the Chicago Telephone Company will not accept black female employees. One

unnamed journalist states, “If the fathers and brothers of our young women are good enough to fight and die for the country surely their children are good enough to be employed.”²³ However, this is not the case, and black Americans continue to be denigrated, barred from “white” employment and segregated in hospitals. In detailing these various and frequent occurrences, the *Defender* adds to its depiction of the ways that white Americans view black Americans. In mutilating them in public burnings and hangings, in setting fire to their places of residency, and in refusing them at doors of employment, it is clear that black Americans are regarded by the majority of the country as non-citizens without freedom or rights of any variety.

The Chicago Defender and the War Abroad

As is evident above, *The Chicago Defender* time and time again represented the defeat and humiliation of black America. If the stories of lynchings, burnings, and lack of state intervention made up the entirety of the newspaper, the *Defender* would most likely not have been as successful as it was. What, then, caused such excitement for the paper that 250,000 copies each week during the late 1910s were distributed?²⁴ Where did this interest come from, and what was the *Defender* trying to do if not incite sadness in the hearts of its readers all over America? The newspaper’s purpose more clearly manifests itself when one looks to the non-violent news stories--most significantly, to the news of the war abroad and the political climate of the age. These aspects of the paper, when paired with the above depiction of black mutilation and vulnerability, drive home the *Defender*’s objective as “the world’s greatest weekly.”²⁵

Newspapers often take political stances in order to reel in their audiences. When reading the first pages of *The Chicago Defender*, one might be surprised to find that the paper was a strong proponent of World War I. In fact, an air of patriotism emits from many of its pages, and as 1918 goes on, the patriotic articles and

²³ “Help Wanted--White,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 1918, late ed..

²⁴ DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62:4 (1998): 477.

²⁵ Regester, Robert S. Abbott, in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 18.

²¹ “Widow and Daughters Brutally Beaten by Whites,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1918, late ed..

²² “Segregation of Race Patients is Ordered,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 1, 1918, late ed..

advertisements seem to increase. With the exception of a few outliers, the *Defender* makes clear that it supports the war because of the members of “the Race” who are participating in the fight abroad, for these black American soldiers were a source of pride for the entire African American community.

When the Selective Service Act in June 1917 ordered all young, “able-bodied men” to enlist, black Americans could no longer be denied access to the front lines as they had been before. Within the next month, African Americans constituted “13 percent of all U.S. draftees.” While the all-black 92nd Division of the Army was an American division, the all-black 93rd Division was, instead, led by the French.²⁶ Despite these differences in nationality, *The Chicago Defender* equally supported both divisions. Fortunately for these troops, in October of 1917, Emmett J. Scott became the “special assistant for Negro affairs to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker.”²⁷ Even with a governmentally-appointed advocate for enlisted black men, though, racial inequality still affected American participants of war. As demonstrated above with the segregation of soldier hospitals in Texas, the black soldier faced discrimination daily. In November 1917, Secretary of War Baker stated, “As you know it has been my policy to discourage discrimination against any persons by reason of their race...At the same time...there is no intention on the part of the War Department to undertake at this time to settle the so-called race question.”²⁸ Thus, by putting blacks in its ranks, the War Department was not trying to advocate black equality. Such is the war setting in which *The Chicago Defender* finds itself in by 1918. As will be expounded on in the pages to come, the newspaper’s patriotic stance and support of black Americans in the European war was, in many ways, a refutation of Baker’s statement, for indeed the war and the “race question” were very much intertwined.

Contrasting the harshness of white brutality representations throughout the *Defender*, generally positive sentiments about the war in Europe were presented. One of the most prevalent narratives here

was the newspaper’s constant reminder to their readers of the success of “our boys over there.”²⁹ Throughout the paper, this word “our” is employed. When related to the war, the word brings the reader closer to the task at hand, speaking to the entire black American community. For instance, in the article “Send the Defender to Our Boys Over There,” the *Defender* urges the reader to support not just the paper, but also their friends and family members who are fighting overseas.³⁰ Similarly, black soldiers are constantly featured for their bravery and their accomplishments. Entire pages titled “What Your Boy is Doing at the Training Camp” cover general information about Army training as well as individual stories of soldiers who have proven their worth. One story, on the college athlete Binga Dismond, the paper states, “the greatest runner that Chicago University has ever seen, has been promoted to a lieutenancy in the Three Hundred and Seventieth infantry.”³¹ Under a smaller heading and photograph, a journalist proudly reports, “The whites of this section are marvelling at the record made by one of Nashville’s young Race men who left the city several months ago a private and returned a captain in the United States army.”³² Although whites were not reading this paper, to mention how the success of these black soldiers would be viewed by the white constituency must have been an incredible source of pride for the newspaper. And indeed, such advances for black soldiers were occurring. In October 1917, over 600 black officers were brought into the Army, making history for the African American divisions.³³ Thus, pointing to Dismond’s and other promotions carried weight at this time, for their accomplishments spoke for the advance of black America. To place photographs and descriptions like these on a page following articles detailing the mutilation of the black body was to show that uplift of the “Race” was possible--that despite all of the

²⁹ “Send the Defender to Our Boys Over There,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1918, late ed..

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Binga Dismond Is Now An Officer in the U.S.A.,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 18, 1918, late ed..

³² “Captain H.H. Walker a Nashville Visitor,” Jan 18

³³ Buckley, *American Patriots* (New York: Random House, 2001), 178.

²⁶ Buckley, *American Patriots* (New York: Random House, 2001), 166.

²⁷ Buckley, *American Patriots* (New York: Random House, 2001), 178-179.

²⁸ Ibid.

horror, the black community could advance to a higher and more dignified level of society.

Like the soldier success stories in the “What Your Boy Is Doing at the Training Camp,” sections of the paper, the *Defender* would also print long articles about African American soldiers who had excelled in the line of duty. One of the most memorable recognitions in 1918 is displayed on the front page of a November newspaper with big letters, “New York Honors Neadham Roberts, Famous Hero.” The article relates the homecoming story of Roberts, a French “Croix de Guerre Medal Winner” who has been furloughed on account of battle wounds. In offering the utmost praise of the soldier, the article speaks of the banquets thrown for Roberts in New York, one of which the *Defender* contributed to. Roberts, called “our hero,” was responsible for beating “off 24 Germans alone,” along with another black soldier. Author Gail Buckley points out that Needham Roberts and Henry Johnson “were the first American enlisted men to win” this honorable French war award.³⁴ After singing the soldier’s many praises, the newspaper presents the discrimination that he has met with. Roberts has not been promoted to captaincy, even though “nearly every wounded white hero” who comes back to the United States wounded has been honored in this way. Finally--and the statement of the article that holds the most weight, is when the journalist asserts, “Our people should and must rally around in some concrete manner to make this hero--our hero--what he should be.” That is, despite the race barrier that prevents Roberts from attaining an official degree of dignity at home, the *Defender* calls upon its readers--and in general, all members of “the Race”--to honor this man.³⁵ In this manner, the newspaper acts as a call to action for black America to help elevate their soldiers. The country may dishonor even the best of “our” black soldiers, but in fighting for his dignity--perhaps by advocating for his promotion, but the journalist does not say--the reader will help to uplift the entire black American community. In using the word “our” once again to make its readers feel a

part of a collective group, the *Defender* is successful in asserting itself an advocate for the dignifying of black America.

In addition to the individual praising of African American soldiers in the war, the patriotic advertisements that praised the African American troops as a whole point to the *Defender*’s uplift agenda. These advertisements mostly came from publishing companies that printed posters of black soldiers in the war. For instance, an advertisement by the Art Publishing Company is a common one. With the title, “Colored Troops in a Hand to Hand Battle,” this advertises the different kinds of Colored troop photographs that are for sale. The advertisement proudly proclaims, “You have heard and read of the Colored Heroes...but you have never seen the pictures. These pictures give a vivid idea of what our boys are doing in the great war. You will want these pictures because this war is an end, also a beginning.”³⁶ Displaying an advertisement of this sentiment, the *Defender* is, too, stating that World War I is a beginning--that is, a beginning for black America. Fighting bravely on the battlefield, the black soldier proves his worth to his country. When his image is then printed on a poster for people to purchase and to display, “the Race” has made a statement of its beauty, bravery, and general advancement. Additionally, in featuring these advertisements, the *Defender* calls again for action by the African American community by encouraging them to display these posters in their homes. To do this is to uphold “the Race” by flaunting its bravery and heroism for all to see.

In a similar advertisement that same month, the publishing company asserts that, “Every card [is] an inspiration to those who have the Race at heart.”³⁷ Thus, to buy this item is to show one’s loyalty to the entire black American community. Each one of these advertisements sings pride, and does not just praise the young black men abroad, but also the young women--although less frequently than the men. This gendered aspect of the advertisements can be read in a number of ways, but I view it as the companies’--and thus, the *Defender* that is displaying their advertisements--utilization of

³⁴ Buckley, *American Patriots* (New York: Random House, 2001), xvii.

³⁵ “New York Honors Neadham Roberts, Famous Hero: Croix de Guerre Medal Winner Is Here on a Furlough; Expects Discharge,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 9, 1918, late ed., 1.

³⁶ “Colored Troops in a Hand to Hand Battle,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 9, 1918, late ed..

³⁷ “Charge of the Colored Divisions ‘Somewhere in France,’” *The Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1918, late ed..

their available resources to uplift black America. That is, with black men fighting in the trenches just as white men were doing--an act that symbolizes the greatest patriotism and bravery--the companies, and thus, the *Defender*, harnessed these images to promote the honor of black Americans. In advertisement after advertisement asking people to buy posters featuring "our boys," the *Defender* closed the door on negative images of black Americans in proclaiming that "the Race" was strong enough to kill Germans and honorable enough to be displayed on picture posters.³⁸ Through this tactic of racial uplift, the *Defender* proclaimed how worthy it was of equality with white America.

In articles that displayed the work of the Colored divisions in the training camps, the *Defender* also bestowed honor upon African American soldiers. In a March article entitled "Camp Funston Men and Officers Making History for the Race," the happenings of a training camp in Kansas are described. Camp Funston, home to both a Colored division (the 9nd) and a white division (the 89th), discusses the improvement of the young men. Although it does not, at first, refer to black soldiers in particular, the reference to them is implied with the words, "You can fairly see the change which has been wrought from the slow ungainly farmer, the swaggering callow dude, or the ordinary chap whom we all know into the soldier, erect, soldiers thrown back, an air of purpose on his face." In using the word "we," the article employs the same inclusive tactic as when it employs "our." Additionally, with the journalist's (unnamed) note of the soldier as a newly-made "fighting machine," the progress of the African American is displayed. It is also important to note that the article notes the segregation of the camp. For instance, the "amusement zone" in the 89th's area of the camp is off-limits to the men of the 92nd. However, the journalist does not let this information stand without opposition, and he counters this discrimination with words of uplift by noting the achievement of the new black officers. The article reads, "Their bearing, their efficiency, their perfect poise, the respect which they command from their men and yet the helpful friendly spirit...merits only the

highest praise."³⁹ When soldiers are dishonored by whites in the training camps, the *Defender* challenged these injustices by noting how noteworthy and honorable these men in fact are. In holding up these Colored troops for its readers, the newspaper asserts the dignity of the entire African American community.

By featuring the accomplishments of African American soldiers throughout 1918, *The Chicago Defender* presented its own version of patriotism. In its nearly unfaltered support of the black soldiers both in training at home and in the trenches abroad, it urged its readers to also support the Colored troops. Doing so would not exactly support the total American effort in the war, but instead, the black American effort in the war. In this way, the *Defender* demonstrated a kind of black nationalism. To assert the black American as a war hero through poster advertisements and front page images of, for instance, an infantry training was to demonstrate the accomplishment of the African American community.⁴⁰ Furthermore, by encouraging its readers to support their fellow black citizens in the war by purchasing Colored troop posters or attending a "Patriotic Evening" in honor of their troops overseas, the *Defender* acted as a promoter of "Race" pride.⁴¹ In a late November article, the speech of the activist Roscoe Simmons at the Eighth Regiment Armory of Chicago is given in-full. Praising the African American effort in the war throughout, his words share the sentiments of the *Defender* and its patriotic agenda. With the skills of a great orator, he states, "'Permit me to forget my chains. Permit me to forget for a moment the torch and the mob. Let me find repose for the briefest hour in the thought that as men have risen I, too, shall rise.'"⁴² Through the *Defender*'s constant

³⁹ "Camp Funston Men and Officers Making History for the Race," *The Chicago Defender*, March 15, 1918, late ed..

⁴⁰ "The Buffaloes (367th Infantry) Preparing for 'Over There,'" *The Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1918, late ed., 1.

⁴¹ "Patriotic Evening: For the Benefit of the Circle for Negro War Relief, Inc.," *The Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1918, late ed..

⁴² Roscoe, Speaking to Thousands, Defines Hopes: Great Spokesman Thrills Big Crowd at Eighth Regiment Armory," *The Chicago Defender*, November 1918, late ed..

³⁸ "A New Picture: Our Boys," *The Chicago Defender*, July 5, 1918, late ed..

commendation of the black troops in the war and its appeal to its readers to in turn, support them, the newspaper raises the black American community. By extolling these men--and at times, the women--of the war effort, African Americans are marked for their bravery. In the face of such oppression and dehumanization at home, to present its readers with patriotism and devotion to the black soldier was to uplift the African American community as a whole.

***The Chicago Defender* and Representations of Politics and Political Participation**

In line with its objective to elevate the African American community, *The Chicago Defender* promoted the political participation of its readers. As a staunch advocate of the Republican Party, the newspaper endorsed certain candidates for office and denounced others. In fact, the *Defender's* political statements were so frequent that one can easily forget the political circumstances of the many southerners who were reading the paper. That is, although the Fifteenth Amendment was to protect every man's voting rights, the South bypassed it⁴³ with various measures that "effectively curtailed the black vote."⁴⁴ Many African Americans south of the Mason-Dixon line were thus disenfranchised, and in this light, the black community was set back politically. In allowing politics to play a significant role in its weekly papers, the *Defender* responded to this disenfranchisement by raising the political awareness of its northern and southern readers alike and by encouraging its Chicago readers to vote properly along the Republican Party line. In doing so, the theme of African American citizenship filled the paper, and members of "the Race" became politically involved no matter where they resided. Thus, the newspaper's resolve to uplift the entire black community continued.

Throughout 1918, the *Defender* participates in criticizing Oscar DePriest, a black Chicago politician. In its anti-DePriest rhetoric, asserting that

the politician did not support "the Race" properly, the *Defender* increases the political awareness of its readership while at the same time emphasizing how important it is to keep the African American community in mind whilst voting. In explaining how DePriest did not consider the needs of his fellow African Americans, the newspaper condemns him of cheating black Americans in his Chicago real estate business. In this way, he has exhibited "poor Race friendship." Similarly, the newspaper presents examples of how DePriest has rejected his African American identity while in white company. In response to one of these disloyal instances, a journalist (unnamed) writes, "This is how this shifty politician, DePriest, loves his Race."⁴⁵ In expressing the importance of politician race loyalty, the *Defender* declares that for its readers—that is, those who can vote--to be proper voters, they must be aware of politicians' backgrounds and motives, and they also must vote with "the Race" in mind. In this manner, the paper promotes the advance of the African American community, for when its members vote intelligently, the needs of the community will be more thoroughly met. The condemnation of this politician, too, perhaps encouraged more African Americans to go out and vote in order that such a man would not be elected to represent Chicago's Second Ward. In these ways, black America is elevated by becoming more politically aware and active.

While denouncing DePriest, the *Defender* also discourages its readers from voting solely along "the color line."⁴⁶ Although this idea may seem counterintuitive at first glance, it becomes clear in the various anti-DePriest articles that to vote for only black candidates will detriment the black community, for politicians such as DePriest would be elected. Additionally, in backing the Republican Party through political candidates like Robert R. Jackson, the newspaper asserts the need for black Americans to fully assume their positions as citizens.⁴⁷ For instance, in an advertisement from November entitled "To Colored Men of Tennessee," readers of Tennessee are called to vote

⁴³ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 38.

⁴⁴ Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration*, in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 25.

⁴⁵ "DePriest's Race Loyalty Set Forth," *The Chicago Defender*, February 1918, late ed..

⁴⁶ "Ignoring the Color Line," *The Chicago Defender*, April 1918, late ed..

⁴⁷ "Mayor Jackson Wins," *The Chicago Defender*, February 26, 1918, late ed..

for specific Republican candidates for Governor, U.S. Senator, and Congress. Although the advertisement surprisingly disregards the state of black voting rights in Tennessee, it is important to note that the Republican ticket is vouched for here. In stating, "Nothing is more important in the present than breaking our political chains," the *Defender* stresses that by voting along party lines and voting in general, black Americans will help emancipate themselves.⁴⁸ Likewise, in one of the main editorial articles from April entitled "Ignoring the Color Line," the journalist asserts that to merely vote for a black American candidate because of his race "is unwise, mischievous, and dangerous," because then this kind of voting would also be acceptable for white persons.⁴⁹ This would result in the faltering of the American democratic system. Rather, in voting the true American way along party lines, black Americans will elevate themselves and assert their citizenship in the process. The assertion of a Republican Party ticket and voting without regard to race represents the *Defender's* promotion of black citizenship in response to white America's undermining of that citizenship.

In promoting both the importance of race loyalty and telling its readers to not vote along the "color line," the *Defender* seems, at first, to contradict itself. However, when analyzed more closely, one can see that both tactics have the same end-goal in mind. In asking that African Americans remain aware of candidate attitudes towards "the Race"--no matter what the candidate's race himself--the newspaper represents its concern for the treatment of the black community by politicians, but it also advocates smart voting. If one is a smart voter, a candidate's race should not hold importance over his policies and past actions. By consistently presenting this idea of being an aware and intelligent voter, the *Defender* treats its readers as politically-active citizens. It cannot be forgotten that no American woman had the right to vote in 1918 and many black men were barred from voting in the South. In this context, the *Defender* not only encouraged its readers to be full-fledged citizens, but also treated them as such--no matter where they resided. In presenting political responsibility as one

of its major themes, the *Defender* contributed to its mission of racial uplift.

***The Chicago Defender* and the Whitening of the Black Body**

Perhaps the most jarring thing that a contemporary reader experiences when reading *The Chicago Defender* is the incredible number of skin whitening and hair straightening advertisements that each weekly paper features. Whilst upholding the African American community through patriotic articles and political participation, the *Defender* presented a standard of beauty on multiple pages each week that seemed to contradict its entire agenda. While this section of my research paper is perhaps the one most confusing and unclear, I believe that some advertisements in particular offer an explanation for the frequent attempts by the paper to whiten the black body. As the *Defender* has consistently demonstrated its goals for black America, I believe that these advertisements have not merely been placed here for funding purposes. With the other themes of my research in mind, I have made my way through pages of advertisements to find a reason for this incredible amount of whitening in the most popular black American newspaper of the day.

In general, the advertisements for skin whiteners and hair relaxers publicized the idea of beauty for both men and women, but more frequently for women. For instance, in a blatant advertisement in which the words "Girls, Be Pretty! Men, Be Handsome!" jump off the page, "Black and White Ointment" is promoted. This product enables one to bleach "Dark or Sallow Skin," in addition to its more useful functions of healing acne and other skin issues.⁵⁰ With these words, the company sells the idea of beauty in a jar. Although it claims to be for both black and white folks, the advertisement is certainly not aimed toward people with pale skin, for white skin is the beauty feature that it is attempting to market. Similarly, a common advertisement for "Plough's Dressing" states that its product will work on hair "No matter how coarse, kinky, snarly, ugly or unmanageable" it is. In other words, natural black American hair is ugly, and straight, flowing caucasian hair is beautiful.⁵¹

⁴⁸ "To Colored Men of Tennessee," *The Chicago Defender*, November 1918, late ed..

⁴⁹ "Ignoring the Color Line," *The Chicago Defender*, April 1918, late ed..

⁵⁰ "Girls, Be Pretty! Men, Be Handsome!," *The Chicago Defender*, April 18, 1918, late ed..

⁵¹ "Plough's Dressing," *The Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1918, late ed..

Finally, in an advertisement by Kashmir appearing in November, affluent black American women are pictured alongside black American captains in the war, and the margins read, “‘The best looking women in America’ would be a fitting title for these clear skinned, pretty haired Colored women who use Kashmir.”⁵² This image of successful black Americans and the description of their attractiveness represents the core of the *Defender*’s purpose with these advertisements. While the women look prosperous, the men look honorable--thus, this is the kind of advancement that the black American community should strive for. While these advertisements, in many ways, encourage black Americans to acquire white physical features, the beauty theme here also suggests that ability of “the Race” to attain a level of sophistication and attractiveness that white America understands. In other words, the standard of beauty at this time includes flowing hair and pale skin--as it remains today--and thus, these advertisements create an avenue for African Americans to achieve it. In placing these advertisements on its pages, then, the *Defender* asserts black refinement—or what was viewed by white America as refinement--in opposition to the white degradation and humiliation of black America.

In addressing the ability of the consumer to make physical changes by simply purchasing these products, these advertisements asserted African American agency. A Madam C.J. Walker advertisement, for instance, states, “Every Woman Can Have Beautiful Hair,” meaning that no matter who you are or where you come from, a woman can improve her beauty.⁵³ Another, entitled, “Bleach Your Skin,” points to the ability of the consumer to take control her appearance. This do-it-yourself theme can be persuading in the power that it puts in the individual. One has to simply, “Apply as directed on label,” and all her hair and skin imperfections will be solved.⁵⁴ During an era in which agency for black Americans was slim, to put forth advertisements that granted them individual

power was significant. In doing so, the *Defender* contributed to its uplift purpose.

While these skin bleachers and hair products were already on the market, they were not the only products around, and so their appearance on multiple pages of each weekly paper seems, to me, to carry other purposes. Despite their racist implications of beauty, when viewed with a more contextual lens, these products and their advertisements can be viewed as instruments of advance and individual power. In writing about the manner in which the *Defender* brought black Americans to the North, Professor of Communication at the University of Kentucky, Alan D. DeSantis, claims that these whitening advertisements demonstrated how “Chicago was ‘sold’...[as a] a place where blacks could transform themselves.”⁵⁵ Indeed, transformation is depicted in these ads that at first seem--to the twenty-first century eye, at least--to offer nothing but derision. However, if we view these advertisements as presenting African Americans with the option to mold themselves to fit the standard idea of beauty--and on their own terms--*The Chicago Defender*’s whitening theme is more justifiable. Although the disturbance brought on by this plethora of beautification advertisements remains, perhaps I have--by drawing connections to the newspaper’s overall purpose--begun to help explain the *Defender*’s greatest perplexity.

Conclusion

What began as a quest to discover how *The Chicago Defender* brought black Americans to the North ended as an in-depth analysis of the newspaper’s function during both a world war and a more turbulent war at home. In printing for an all-black American readership, the *Defender* had unique goals, especially during a period in which African Americans were not catered to by the white media. The “policy of veiled slurring against the Race” that editorialist Ben Baker notes regarding the white newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*, did not make white newspapers suitable for black Americans. “We, too, have a home and a country,” he writes, but in the white media, black Americans

⁵² “Kashmir Preparations: For Hair and Skin,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1918, late ed..

⁵³ “MME. C. J. Walker’s Hair Grower,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 1918, late ed..

⁵⁴ “Bleach Your Skin,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 1918, late ed..

⁵⁵ DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62:4 (1998): 493.

were not recognized as citizens of that country.⁵⁶ Hence, black media intervention became necessary, and this is the context in which *The Chicago Defender* of 1918 finds itself.

In employing the terms “the Race” and “our” frequently, the *Defender* helped tell its readers that no matter their place of residence, they had a national community to which they could turn to and a medium that would voice its concerns. In connecting people from North to South, the *Defender* created, in many ways, a black national identity. In its content, it was able to reinforce this identity.

By detailing white brutality and the downtrodden condition of the black American community, the *Defender* presented its readers with the reality of their present state. In representing white southerners as utterly cruel beings and a threat to black America, the newspaper sought not to sadden or frighten “the Race,” but to put forth--without censorship--how disgraced the black community was by whites.⁵⁷ By both uplifting “the Race” through its images and words and calling upon “the Race” to take various measures in elevating itself, *The Chicago Defender* responded with force to the shame that white America bestowed upon it.

Professor of African American Studies at the University of North Carolina, Charlene Regester, writes how in “working to prevent the moral decay and decline of the community,”⁵⁸ Robert S. Abbott, the paper’s founder and editor,⁵⁹ “recognized that his paper had become a vehicle of empowerment.”⁶⁰

Indeed, this power has been displayed in the above uplift and demonstration of black American progress. In its patriotic fervor for the Colored troops, its promotion of complete black citizenship through politics, and its constant display of whitening possibilities for “the Race,” Abbott and his *Defender* team raised and empowered black America.

I believe it is wise that we look to *The Chicago Defender* today as a way to make our study of the American past more inclusive. While the story of black America has been told, it has too often not been told by black American voices. In an age in which white power continues to trump minority groups, this hidden history is necessary. In listening to the various voices of *The Chicago Defender*, we can bring meaning to silenced American history.

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⁵⁷ DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62:4 (1998): 487.

⁵⁸ Charlene Regester, *Robert S. Abbott*, in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 18.

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