

Living Contraband:

The Transition of Racial Attitudes During and After The American Civil War

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Introduction:

In an age of modern media it is important to understand its influence on societal attitudes, in particular to class and racial stereotyping. For the purpose of this study I draw upon the 1967 Kerner Report which criticised America's mass media for its inadequate coverage of racial events (Balkaran, 1999). The Civil War was the first war to be extensively photographed, influencing attitudes in the immediate aftermath and contemporary social memory. Reconstruction was a transition plagued by entrenched values, political rhetoric and a battle to be represented as an equal citizen. Analysing racial attitudes in the aftermath of the Civil War is not only crucial to understand the racial issues that still plague the US, but the contested landscape she grapples with.

Aims & Objectives:

- To examine the changing representation of African Americans in popular cultural publications
- To provide a contextual depth for political problems that freed slaves encountered during reconstruction.
- To contribute to the decolonisation of historiographical debate

Methods:

- Research into the excavations of POW and Refugee Camps for the treatment, social position, and perception by those in positions of power of freed slaves and 'contraband'
- Slave narratives for self-representation analysis
- Digitized newspaper database for key terms and public perception
- Library of Congress' image archive search to map cultural manifestations
- Exploration of other publications (poetry/post-war films)
- Comparison of personal perceptions using Soldiers private letters
- Evaluation of material culture and racial connotations in America's changing landscape and representation of the period.

Results 1. From Slave to Soldier



Fig.1 Harpers Weekly. (1861-1865) Bvt. Maj. Gen. A. T. A. Torbert and staff

Early Civil War photographs place African Americans in the background or in positions reflecting their perceived stance in society and hierarchy within the regiment, or as a 'rebel slave' / 'contraband'. Photographs here suggest African Americans are still being perceived as not only inferior but as property, which can be taken as contraband during war.

Later photography and positioning reflects a shift in language of soldiers private letters. After the emancipation proclamation the Civil War became overtly about slavery. Black soldiers were allowed to be armed March 1865 after which soldiers letters talk of black regiments 'earning respect' through battle and images reflect this shift in perception.

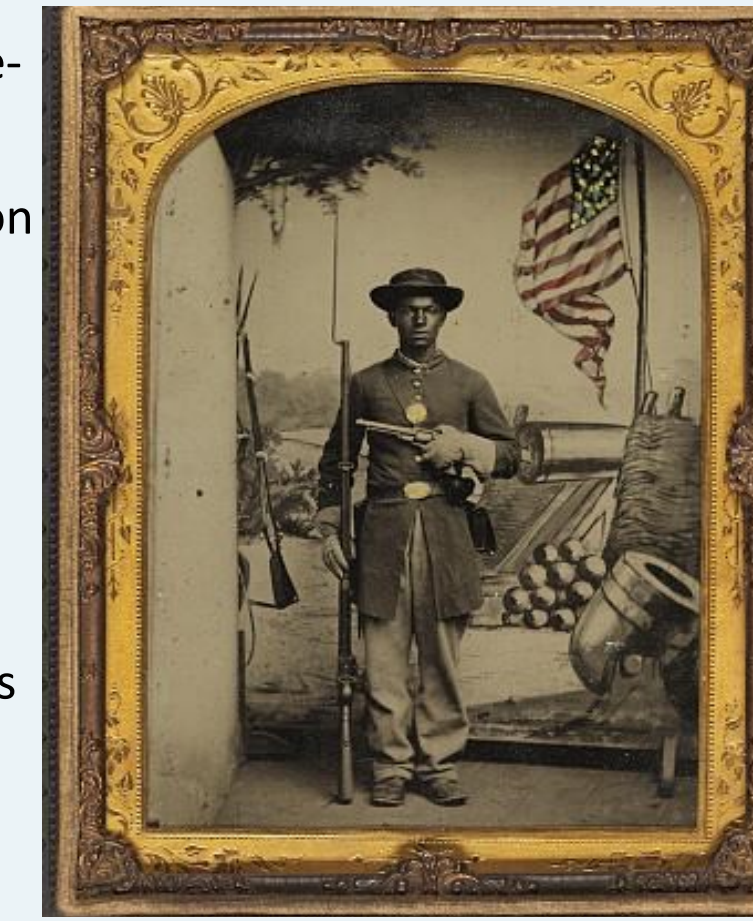


Fig.2 Library of Congress (1863-1865) Unidentified African American soldier in Union uniform

Results 2. The Body as Symbolic Rhetoric

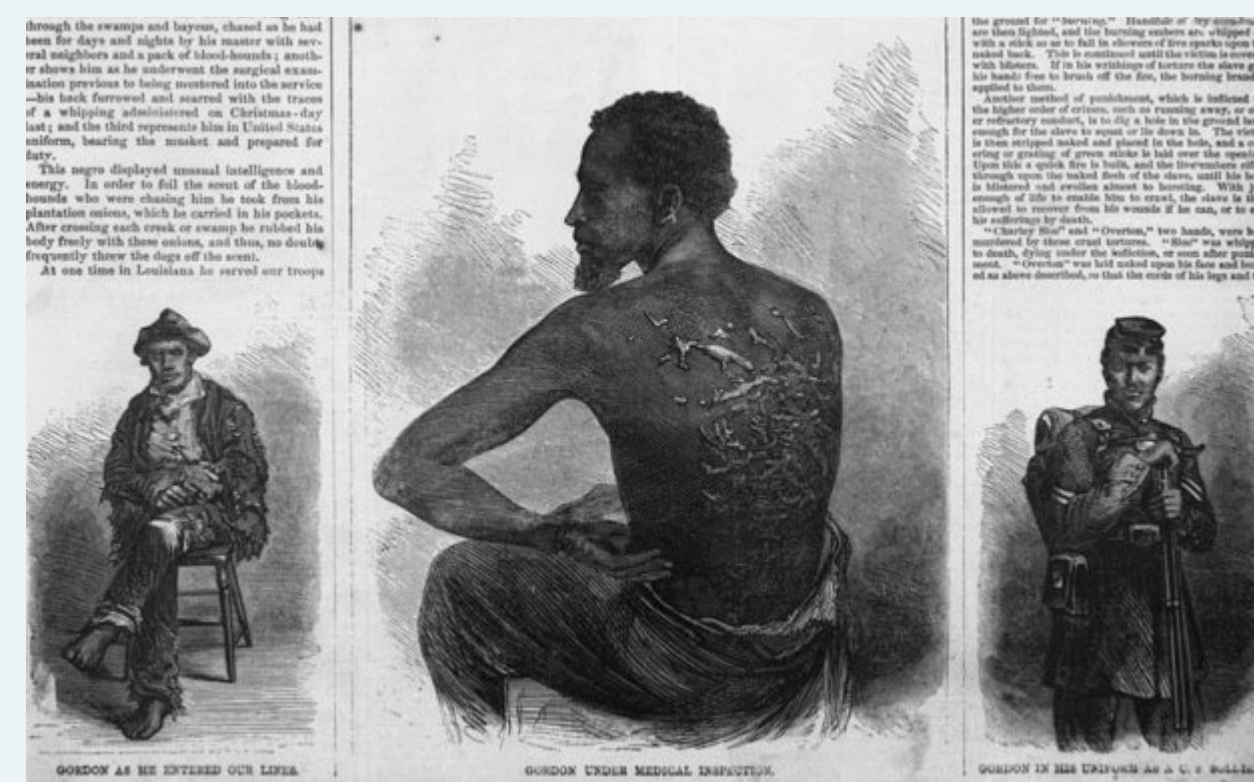


Fig.3 Silkenat, D. (2014) Slavery's Most Famous Photograph

There was a clear underlying theme of the body being used as a symbol across all sides of the debate. Both African American and abolitionist authors show the body of the slave transforming into a body demanding respect and citizenship. The battle to be portrayed as a 'man' however was often contradicted by white sympathisers with an underlying patronising and paternalistic nature. Suggesting African Americans to be helpless and in need of salvation -contradicting efforts by African Americans to be seen and strong, independent, and capable.

On the confederate side, although not entirely exclusively so, the symbolic use of the body is significant. We first see the depictions as 'contraband', de-humanising African Americans often for self-justification. During Reconstruction there was, albeit for a brief time, opportunity for African American political participation. Opposing this there were cartoons in periodicals showing the former slave to be unintelligent and ignorant to the political process. These images used the body in attempt to shape and reflect a wider public perception.

Results 3. A Forgotten Past

The issues of representation during the Civil War and Reconstruction are not confined to these periods. Such representations have effected public memory. Until recently in Kentucky, the home of the site of Camp Nelson, there was limited representation of African Americans, but a highway marker for the contentious figure William 'Bull' Nelson. The 1992 effort to create a park to balance this reflects the beginning of a shift in how America is representing this era.

Although as shown by fig. 4 the contentious marker has now been replaced by one acknowledging the presence of African American soldiers there is still a significant lack of representation of their strife during this turbulent time. America's landscape remains largely a vanished one. As Gregory P. Downs so perfectly summarises, "it took a lot of time and effort to establish the myths of Reconstruction [...] it's going to take a lot of time and effort to tear down those myths." (New York Times, 2015)

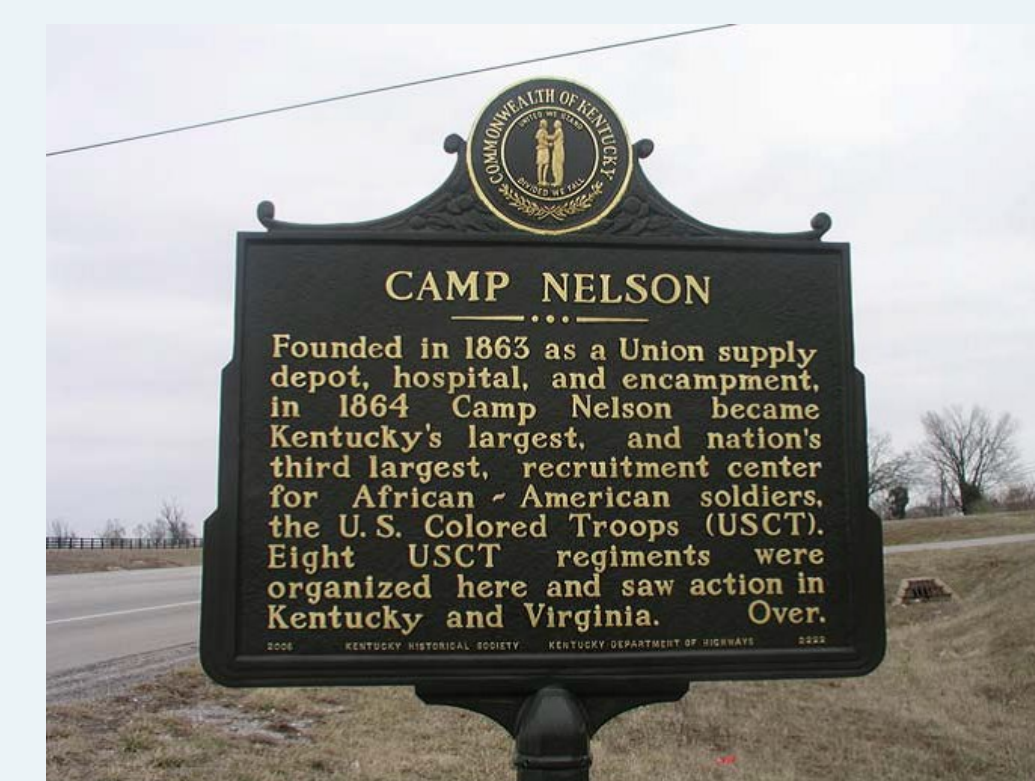


Fig. 4 McBride, S. (2010) Camp Nelson Highway Marker

Conclusions & Implications:

Taking a simple glance at the current state of American society proves just how relevant these results are. With the recent removal of the confederate flag to the KKK protesting against Memphis' park re-naming. The issue of African American representation is not only confined to the past, but continues to be subject of controversy.



Fig. 5 Rehm, D. (2015) The Confederate Flag

The question as to why such hate groups as the KKK are still allowed to operate remains for future work into the functionality of the constitution, but is an interesting concept to keep in mind when thinking about how America remembers such a racially turbulent period.

Representation of African Americans is still an issue being fought today. Although not as striking as 'Gone With the Wind' recent film and TV media still continue to portray blacks in negative stereotypes. Recent research has suggested this could effect social positioning and prison populations. This research suggests that the changing representation during and after the Civil War not only shaped perceptions at the time but has continuing influence on how the era is remembered and how blacks are currently presented in the media.

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