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PATRIOTUTES, SAINTS, AND RED WOMEN: WOMEN AND VENEREAL DISEASES  
WITHIN US MILITARY CULTURE IN WWII

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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University of California, Riverside

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**Patriotutes, Saints, and Red Women: Women and Venereal Diseases within the US Military Culture in WWII**

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This portion of a larger historical project will examine the sexual depiction of women within the context of venereal disease by the US military to American G.I.s during WWII for the purpose of studying how women's sexuality was commodified and used within American military culture for military gain. By examining the interactions between G.I.s and women through artistic representations, we can observe a discrepancy in how women of different social and national statuses were used within military culture. The three-way conflict of perception between women as the tropes of virgin, whore, and enemy agent can be mapped through the examination of the physical color red in its connections to venereal disease. The sources for this research section consists of propaganda posters on venereal diseases, posters on sexual health for G.I.s, publications in journals such as those produced by the American Social Hygiene Association that focused on venereal diseases and sex work, US military statistics on the health of their servicemen, photographs, court records, and newspaper reports about specific incidents or interactions during the war. Women were not the audience of this media, but they nonetheless became victims of its internalization by US servicemen in the public and private spheres during and after WWII.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Randolph Head for mentoring and inspiring me to pursue this research project within the last four years that I have been at UCR, Dr. Georg Michels for his feedback and constructive criticism on my project within its last stages, and Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship for funding this research and the continued support from faculty and staff throughout COVID-19 to provide me the help and motivation I need to finish this project. This paper was made possible by the emotional support of my Mellon Mays cohorts, and the love and encouragement from my family and friends.

## **Introduction**

This project rests on a visual analysis of the weaponization and villainization of women's bodies within American military culture during World War II. The U.S. military shifted the dynamic of culpability surrounding venereal disease onto women, and to support this shift in dynamic, began depicting women in a way that villainized them in the eyes of GIs. The impact of this attribution of blame can be observed through entertainment and art media. Women had occupied a crucial role in maintaining the morale of troops at home and abroad, but in order to preserve both the fighting spirit and physical condition of the men, such that treating VD took up to two years for men during the war years<sup>1</sup>, the U.S. military sought to control the perception of sexually active women and the dangers they supposedly posed, while also maintaining the concept of "a girl worth fighting for" back home. This need to balance the agendas of morale and health led to the establishment of three distinct tropes: that of the Patriotute<sup>2</sup>, the Saint, and the Red Woman. The US military color coded this propaganda, and the red marker which denotes VD can be found throughout new depictions developed during the war.

## **Background**

As the US entered World War II after the events of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the question of morale was brought into focus as a means of keeping troops combat ready. One adaptation to this concern was to continue discussion of the use of sex and sexuality for maintaining morale from

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<sup>1</sup> John Parascandola, "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Quarantining Women: Venereal Disease Rapid Treatment Centers in World War II America," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (2009): 431-59, Accessed May 4, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44448796>.

<sup>2</sup> The term "patriotute" is described by Marilyn E. Hegarty in *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes* as "a blend of *patriot* and *prostitute* coined by the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) physician Otis Anderson to describe women who entertained the troops in order to maintain morale" and originates from a NAPCSP meeting on November 19, 1943, National Archives, Washington D.C. Record Group 215, Records of the Office of Community War Services, Social Protection Division, Committee Meetings, Box I.

World War I.<sup>3</sup> The US established government ran brothels and venereal disease clinics for the purpose of monitoring the use of sex within their bases.<sup>4</sup> This allowed them to promote safe sex by controlling and offering prostitutes for American soldiers, and as well as a means to treat venereal disease amongst their troops as soon as possible for the front lines to prevent their sickness from putting servicemen in rest-and-recovery.<sup>5</sup>

Still, this promotion of sex for morale allowed a developing mindset among US servicemembers that local women were also available to American men as “war material”, both physically and representationally.<sup>6</sup> As international relations of both the romantic and sexual kinds develop around bases, the US and local governments began to concern themselves with the safety and moral implications of these relationships.<sup>7</sup> American propaganda commonly depicts foreign women as carriers of venereal diseases with the common red coded schemes, as I call them “red women”, and oftentimes includes the message for GIs to remember the christian white woman “back home”, oftentimes a saint-like figure in contrast to their foreign counterparts.

The negative narratives of venereal diseases come largely from a historical bias towards favoring men and villainizing women. The rhetoric used in describing and studying venereal disease only started to change in the mid 1940s as more treatment centers were developed in the US and in military bases. This shift is largely credited by medical historians to the influx of middle class, Christian, White-American women being admitted into these treatment facilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Sexual History of the World War*, (Honolulu, University Press of the Pacific, 2006), 27; and Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Hirschfeld, 141.

<sup>5</sup> Parascandola, 434.

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 128-129.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9.; and Parascandola, 450-454.

Desires from public and medical authorities to salvage the dignity and respect for these women bled into propaganda, as government officials and artists were unwilling to portray white American women under the same scrutiny as foreign and African American women, but still needing to continue the campaign of discouraging servicemen from getting venereal disease.

The research I have conducted is within the constraints of observing how the US government responded to American troops in foreign countries and the legal, medical, and national implications of possible and existing relationships between American men and foreign women. This is a noticeable concern for the US government and governments that were under American occupation because of the emerging concepts of nationalism developed in the first world war and the moral panic that came from the relationships developed in occupation.<sup>9</sup> Legal situations like the trial of Private Eddie Leonski the Brownout Killer in Australia, a serial killer in Australia during mid to late 1941 to early 1942 that specifically targeted Australian women that were openly willing to entertain American men privately, underlines the complex relationship that interpersonal relationships can cause on a global scale as he was noted to specifically enjoy sexually harassing, controlling, and murdering Australian women. The sexual tensions and legality of female residence of axis controlled countries and male American relationships also became a battleground for moral and legal debates between locals and the American government, complicating the stage of international politics and the relations the US government had with other countries.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the limitations of traveling during COVID-19 lockdown, I was unable to conduct my research with an angle on studying the implications of international politics within legal

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<sup>9</sup> Hirschfeld, 141.; and Roberts, 1-3

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

cases regarding the intimate relationships between GIs and foreign women. The work needed to conduct my original project would have required the capability of traveling to Australia to access the National Archive of Australia for the legal case records of Eddie Leonski as well as traveling to Washington to access the National Archive for the government paper trails regarding government-ran brothels overseas. I would also ideally travel to the National Library of Medicine in Maryland as well to access the paperworks of the US surgeon general during WWII and the medical reports on venereal diseases within government-ran clinics on and near bases stationed overseas and in the states. The inability to travel meant that the purpose of this paper had to shift and instead is to now focus on the artistic traces of these conflicts within the sources I have access to online through digital scanning, particularly through the National Library of Medicine and the Venereal Disease Visual History Archive. The national library is ran by the US government, and pertains primarily to records related or were produced within various retired and existing health departments, and the visual history archive is ran by Dr. Erin Wuebker, a history scholar focused on public health and a museum and archive curator.

### **Historiography**

There is a consensus in the scholarly circle that sex and gender are crucial factors in cultural and international politics. The monolithic works in this field of study are Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* and Marilyn E. Hegarty's *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*. Much of the rest of the work done in subsequent years reference these books because they introduced a method of studying American history and international politics through a feminist lens, particularly focused on the experiences of women as historical markers of progress in history and politics. Enloe looked at the relationships between women on a private



and global stage, and how the conditions of women are influenced and influencers of larger themes of politics, history, economics, and culture. It is more remembered as a foundational book for third wave feminism on the ideas of intersectionality and thus is a fundamental book in the development of a feminist pedagogy in my work focused on women in military propaganda. Hegarty, on the other hand, was the first to introduce the concepts of women's sexuality and their role as political commodities in World War II, which encompasses aspects of cultural politics and medical history. She is most often cited in studies on venereal diseases in World War II particularly as a secondary source that focused on women's experiences and directly outlines the ways women were affected by and effected regulations, expectations, and realities of women's sexuality during the war. My research largely calls upon these two authors not just as a template on how to conduct feminist historiography, but also as a way examine how this topic was developed in the 80s and 90s during the height of the third wave feminist movement in academia.

Diving deeper into specific case studies and the particular focus on American relations with specific countries, Mary Louise Roberts' *What Soldiers Do* is a prime example of studying American and French war history in close relation to sex, sexuality, and international politics within the context of WWII. Beyond being an example on how to approach my research as a historical project, the book is a direct representation of modern scholarship on the topic and the evolution of more concise studies of WWII and has become a fundamental source on how to navigate and find government paper trails of military brothels.

However, my research departs from these three scholars because I'm studying these topics in the context of venereal disease in the US and because of that, the book *No Magic Bullet*

by Allan M. Brandt is crucial on the medical and social history of venereal disease in the US. On the medical and sexual history of how the US military behaved in Europe during the World Wars, Magnus Hirschfeld's *The Sexual History of the World War* is an important source on the matter. Hirschfeld conducted his study through interviews across West Europe on the particular sexual relationships people had which included not only the sexual patterns of wartorn Europe, but also the sexual and cultural impacts that American occupation had on Europeans. These two books are fundamental in my understanding of the medical and cultural history that created the conditions observed by the scholars mentioned above in World War II.

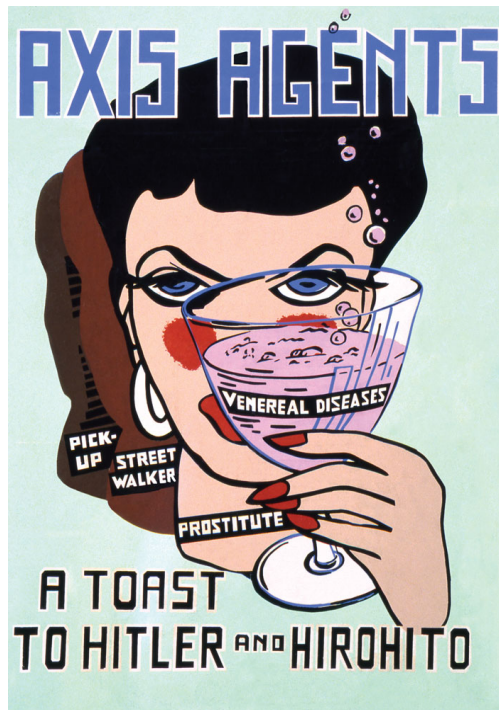
While I am not arguing against anything within the works of these scholars, I am adding into the discussion by observing how propaganda directed at GIs also reflect the ways that women and their sexuality were commodities during the war as well as a representation of an evolving narrative of venereal disease as more studies were done throughout WWII. My research will be a case study focused on specifically art propaganda of venereal disease meant to hide under the guise of being sex education, but still contains the underlying message of sex shaming focused on the menace diseased women had on war efforts and American might.

### **Analysis of art sources**

Through the examination of art posters and comics promoted to GIs, the three categories of the Patriotute, the Saint, and the Red Woman are clearly displayed. The development of where this trope of coding venereal disease with red is not clear, but it can be observed that this coding is also shared with the Axis Powers, oftentimes as a warning symbol of the dangers and evil of the enemy force. Many sex education posters connect GIs getting venereal disease as a win for the enemies, thus making women with venereal diseases as an "axis agent" of the enemy.

Through repetitive use, the artistic depiction of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases began to be coded in red generally.

The propaganda art I have chosen are a selection that I believe encompasses the main characteristics of women and sexuality within military culture that I have observed so far. The characteristics of the dangerous, foreign or foreign-aligned red woman, the naive American woman eager and willing to entertain GIs, and the pure Christian, white woman are common caricatures that appear constantly throughout these art sources I've gathered thus far from the U.S. Public Health Service. Many of the propaganda posters and short comics are made in connection to other departments and outside agencies, including the War Advertising Council and Disney, but their art still carries common tropes used within all these sources. Although some of these may be focused on different branches and factions of the military, all of these artistic propaganda that I have chosen were developed specifically for men overseas. As alluded to above in my background section, the necessity of having women on or near bases as a means of maintaining morale is an important part in the development of these complex relationships between American soldiers and women as depicted below. Even if there are specific instances where these norms were not displayed in relationships abroad between local women and GIs, the overall point of the government purposely displaying a certain message and promoting negative interactions amongst their soldiers with foreign women is an important aspect to consider when understanding and studying the depth of what type of relationship the US had with foreign powers, especially within the framework of American occupation during WWII in allied countries like that of France or England.

Figure 1.<sup>11</sup>Figure 2.<sup>12</sup>

In the “Axis Agent” poster (Figure 1) posted above, it essentially guilted readers into thinking that engaging with any one of the three types of sexual engagement with local women would be symbolic to cheering on the leaders of the Axis Power. The woman is painted with dramatic and bright red cheeks and nail polish, symbolic to being a carrier of sexually transmitted diseases. The association of the woman being an “agent” of the enemy needs to be stressed, as this poster is conveying that spreading and contracting venereal disease plays into a larger sinister plot of weakening the American forces. This notion of conflating women with the enemy forces is further supported by the “Our Carelessness- Their secret Weapon” poster (Figure 2) that blatantly displays the woman as an evil entity posted in a way that depicts the woman as an purposeful agent of the Allied Forces. Although the red is not visually on her, the color is still brightly displayed behind her on the brick wall as if alluding to the uncertainty of knowing if

<sup>11</sup> <https://vdarchive.newmedialab.cuny.edu/items/show/194>

<sup>12</sup> Posters created by the U.S. Surgeon General, U.S. Public Health Service, and the Federal Security Agency Ruben Mungia. Protect Yourself: Venereal Disease Posters of WWII.

certain women have venereal disease or not. These depictions and similar red coding between the danger of women with the Axis Powers is not used in all venereal disease posters, but it is the connotation of danger with foreign women that are continued into other depictions of red-coded women in propaganda that directly attacks their status as potential carriers.

The implications of red could also be in reference also to the connection between red to sex work. The consensus within these posters is to portray these women not only as a potential part of this line of work, but in connection to the diseases they carry as a symbolic connection to the Axis Powers. The differences between sex work, enemy, and foreign women's sexuality gradually becomes unclear as the war progresses, as the color is carried on as a direct implication to venereal disease as more art began to completely merge these three topics.

Figure 3.<sup>13</sup>Figure 4<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "She May Be a Bag of Trouble - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine." Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101584655X21-img>.

<sup>14</sup> "Venereal Disease Covers the Earth - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine." Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101438709-img>.

The implications of all three topics evolve into the depictions of figure 3 and 4, as the red is fully adopted as a direct symbol and reference to venereal disease and foreign women. Foreign women's sexuality and the threat of the supposed disease they carry becomes synonymous in these depictions and merges the concepts into one. The foreigner is the disease, and the disease is the foreigner.

The "She may be a bag of trouble" poster (Figure 3) displayed above is the strongest implication of the red-coded woman trope, used overseas and developed under the US Public Health Service. Often referred to as the sister poster to "Rosie the Riveter", it perfectly embodies the strong early American sentiments towards venereal disease beyond a medical disease but also a moral degradation.<sup>15</sup> The possible French undertones, possibly in reference to the monetary and military exchanges of American might for French women to run government-ran brothels in France,<sup>16</sup> hawks at the connotation that foreign women were a danger to American men. Paired with other foreign posters, the symbolism and the negative sentiment towards sexual relationships among GIs and foreign women becomes clearer. The second poster (Figure 4) directly displays a red-coded woman behind a globe to communicate the idea of foreign women as a direct threat. The beret hat, a fashion mainly popular in France, also gives the idea of the women depicted as foreign and un-American. This combination of the beret and red-coded dress can be further seen in other posters as well, and thus the "She may be a bag of Trouble" poster has become the symbol of venereal disease.

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<sup>15</sup> Brandt, 9.; and Hegarthy, 62-63.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, "The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and the American Military in France, 1944—1946," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (OCTOBER 2010), pp. 1002-1030, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23303211>.

Figure 5.<sup>17</sup>

On the contrary, the pure, “sweetheart” American woman is rarely shown in these poster propagandas for venereal diseases, but when they are used the woman is always used as a beacon of purity and hope. The concepts appealing to deployed men overseas are common in these posters, as the ideas of family, peace back home, and female purity are depicted in a longing, idealistic appearance in these posters. The “Remember” poster (Figure 5) depicts these ideas directly with the pure, physically covered woman at the center of attention while the parents are slightly covered below the woman on top. The color red is still in use here, but it seems as if the color fades as the ideas of the American woman back home is brought into attention. The blocky red font drifts into the grey cursives below, which then leads the eyes to naturally progress downwards to the face of the woman below the words. It is as if the ideas of family and a loving partner back home will keep the threat of venereal disease away. The woman, although depicted in a positive manner compared to previous posters, is still used as an object to maintain morale

<sup>17</sup> “Remember-- They Are Waiting: Avoid V.D - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.” Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101579586-img>.

and discipline amongst GIs. The woman's sexual purity is instead used in this case, as ideas of venereal disease at the time largely believed that it was transmitted only through multiple sexual intercourses.<sup>18</sup>

As the war progressed and concerns for the spread of venereal disease at home bases rose, the common artistic tropes established in the early 1940s for foreign women are used hesitantly when depicting American white women. Research promoted by the widespread development of clinics in the US and overseas began to show that monogamous women and loyal housewives of returned GIs could get venereal disease much easier than previously expected, but the narratives of American women with venereal diseases, for the sake of their dignity and respect, could not be under the same brutal scrutiny as foreign women. In the two comics below, American women were for the first time prominently and obviously displayed as spreaders of venereal diseases. These women were not depicted in the similar wicked fashion as foreign women, and instead were oftentimes shown as being ambiguous in their intent on causing harm. It is also noticeable that these sexual encounters between GI and American women are developed through mutual flirtations, while their foreign counterparts are always displayed as aggressively seducing GIs. The implications of this particular treatment towards American women with venereal disease is worth studying as a direct descendent of the "Red Woman" and "Saint" tropes that I've mentioned above, and instead begins to blur the two together, keeping the innocence of the saints trope when depicting American women with venereal disease, but continuing to carry the red color as an indicator of the disease's danger. Venereal disease in this instance is capable of being separated from the woman with it.

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<sup>18</sup> Parascandola, 436.



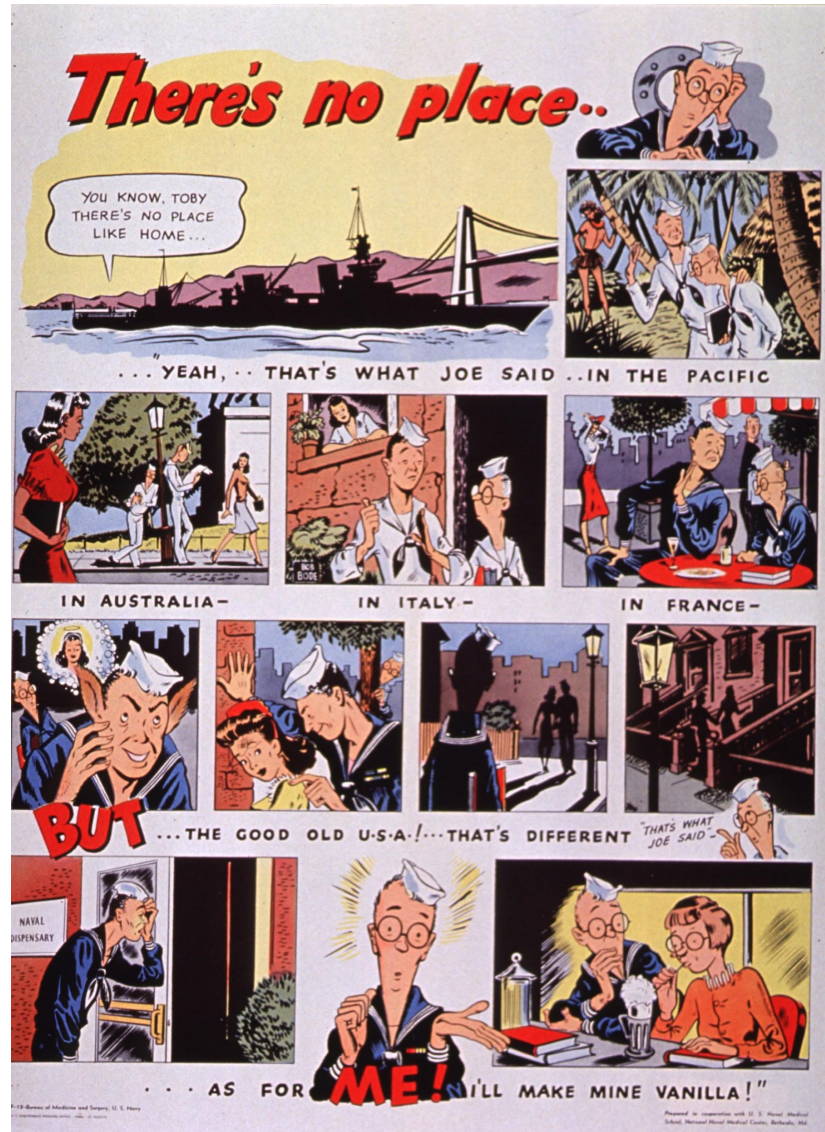


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The first comic “It’s Worth Repeating” reflects on the dangers of sexually entertaining American country girls given the hair, attire, and innocence of the female facial expressions. In panel three, the ticking time bomb held by a similar appearance girl is more obviously coded in the typical venereal disease red but smiles innocently nonetheless. This could be interpreted in connection to medical publications in the mid 1940s that commonly suspected naive, sexually blooming country girls as perpetrators of venereal diseases as they chased after military men.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> “It’s Worth Repeating - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.” Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101438723-img>.

<sup>20</sup> EnLoe, Cynthia. *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II*. New York, US: NYU Press, Ltd., 2010.



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The second comic, focuses on the incorrect belief that American women are “pure”, given panel six shows the donkey-eared sailor thinking of American women with a halo. This comic from the near end of WWII in 1944 depicts a narrative of a man that abstains from sexual pleasures until he returns to the US and still contracts venereal disease when he engages with an American woman on the streets. Like comic one, the woman is not shown as a true menace like their foreign counterparts. The foreign women in this comic looks at the American man as if

<sup>21</sup> “There’s No Place-- - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.” Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101438722-img>.

looking for sexual interactions, while the American girl is facing away from the American man. She is instead brought to attention by the sailor's initiation with his finger tap, a symbol of his part in flirting and enticing the woman into a sexual encounter. Her face and silhouette does not hint at any harmful intent like the first comic as well. The apparent lack of malice in the spread of VD is a deliberate choice, supported by the findings in contemporary medical journals which present narratives of the naive, young American woman as spreaders for venereal disease in and around military bases, but perhaps taking a more conservative belief that mainly focuses on the man as being a part of the problem as more medical studies showed that men could be carriers of the disease as well.

The art I have thus curated in this paper are purposely organized to show the three main tropes I've observed within women and their sexuality within military culture. The dangers of the foreign woman, painted and highlighted oftentimes through the persistent presence of red, in contrast to their saintly, pure counterpart of the clean white American girl, merge in the later half of the war to address the concerns of patriotutes within and near American bases and the possibility of venereal diseases spreading in the US as men return overseas. Foreign women are displayed as villainous forces harming American nationalism, but American girls carrying or having the potential of carrying venereal disease are given the grace of having their intentions ambiguous or innocent within their depictions. These three characteristics are produced throughout US propaganda targeted at their male servicemen.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the travel ban placed on us, the conclusion of this research paper could not expand to the examination of the legal and political implications of

sexual relationships between American GIs and foreign women overseas. The restraints of these conditions made it so that the research could only be conducted on available resources accessible only through the internet, and thus limited the horizon of this project. The angle of engagement thus lies within the visual analysis of propaganda posters and comics produced during WWII and how sex plays into the cultural and political politics involving women's bodies and their sexualities. The development of these arts exists within a rich context of medical history on venereal diseases, the moral and cultural association within that history, and the unique political climate that WWII created. These aspects continue to influence the sex education art that was developed by the US government, and thus acts as a reflection of larger themes compacted into the visual signs depicted within.

The context of artistic symbolism in these posters is closely tied to medical and cultural changes of World War II as ideas of venereal diseases changed through the encouragement of government clinics. The US military's Office of War Information and cooperating agencies used certain stylistic choices in the creation of the three tropes to establish and perpetrate these stereotypes as a way of creating and maintaining an image of women that benefited their overall goal of maintaining morale and promoting combat-readiness amongst GIs. Looking at the way that women's bodies are used and characterized in the US military, this work contributes to a complex analysis within feminist studies and medical history on women and women's sexuality as fundamental parts to studying larger themes of cultural and political history.

Larger versions of comic used in this paper



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<sup>22</sup> "It's Worth Repeating - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine." Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101438723-img>.



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<sup>23</sup> "There's No Place-- - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine." Accessed February 16, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101438722-img>.

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