Discontent in the Steel City: Pittsburgh's Racial Conflict Over Desegregation

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Introduction

An exploration of the social history of Pittsburgh during the 1970s and 1980s reveals conflict between the Pittsburgh school board and the African American community and their allies due to a lack of a defined desegregation policy. An evaluation of the case study of Pittsburgh illustrates the issue of racism in the Northern United States, thus demonstrating an underlying currant throughout the twentieth century.

Historiography

An assessment of the social atmosphere within Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania after the Civil Rights Era shows a plan of action lacking in both direction and gravity.

Stephanie A. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory*

The emphasis upon relaying a particular image to draw more industry into the city, as well as the marginalization of the legitimacy of the African American community defines the power structures that underline the racial conflicts within both Southern and Northern cities (e.g. Charleston and Pittsburgh, respectively).

W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*

Concentration upon race relations in the American South distinguishes the necessity of evaluating historical identity.

Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America*

The author's framework supplies a historical backbone of economic pressures to promote and make specific economically and socially pleasing images.

Sean Safford, *Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown*

The author's analysis of the social stratification of and its impacts upon the towns of Youngstown, Ohio and Allentown, Pennsylvania establishes a framework within which historians can examine the image-making process and how it is tied to the power structures of a community.

Thesis:

This study will focus upon how Pittsburgh's transition to a white-washed identity ultimately supported a white majority historical memory and identity over the narratives of the African American community.

Sparked 'Freedom Jubilee'— Count Basie, left, his band and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (The 20th Century Messiah), right, sparked the "Freedom Jubilee" at Forbes Field on Sunday. Neither one digs the "Dixie swing," nor the "Dixie cup." Both staunchly support the "Fight for Freedom" behind the "Cotton Curtain."—Al Johnson Photo

Timeline of Events

1954—US Supreme Court overrules "separate but equal" with *Brown v. Board of Education* decision

1976—Pittsburgh attempts to revitalize its image from the "Smoky City" to progressive metropolis

focused on educational and recreational industry

◊ African American parents being to question the image of Pittsburgh: how does one penetrate the image of a place in order to explore the conflicts of the place?

◊ African Americans ask for a definitive time frame for desegregation in Pittsburgh's public schools

1977—African American leaders in Pittsburgh release a joint statement: "Recent decisions by the Pittsburgh Board of Education implicates that the Black community does not exist."

◊ In addition, the release stated that the limited action taken by the school board "reflect[ed] a total disregard for the educational needs of the poor and Black communities of Pittsburgh"

1979-80—Final desegregation policy enacted throughout the public school system

◊ Larry Watson, an African American parent of a seven-year-old, demands his name and issue be placed on the agenda of the April school board meeting. He is refused.

1981—The Penn's Southwest Association, the advertising arm of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, releases a press booklet entitled *Dynamic Pittsburgh*.

◊ Not one African American is represented in the photography of the packet.

◊ Two advertisements recognized Pittsburgh's ethnic heritage, but these ads depict white or Latino populations.

◊ The *Dynamic Pittsburgh* campaign glossed over the importance of African Americans to Pittsburgh's history.

Implications

However, neighborhood civic organizations from Oakland, Wilkinsburg, and other boroughs within Pittsburgh took the city's image into their own hands. Grassroots organizations took pride in recognizing ethnic and cultural heritage, with Jewish and African American communities leading their respective neighborhoods to revitalization and refurbishment.

In addition, the *Strategy 21* advertising campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s acknowledged various ethnicities within Pittsburgh.

Nevertheless, *Strategy 21* was enacted too late. Despite the ACCD's attempt to heal the wounds, the fracturing of social, as well as the economic, community of Pittsburgh went hand in hand, thus, illustrating why the ACCD and PSA focused attention on changing the image of Pittsburgh. Without recognizing the African American community, Pittsburgh portrayed itself as a white-washed place. Thus, the ACCD and PSA negotiated the history and identity of Pittsburgh into a majority group and left out a significantly contributing community.

Opportunities for Future Research

◊ Scholars have long neglected race relations and racism within Northern industrial cities in favor of research in the South. Therefore, further research, similar to Trotter and Penna's *Race and Renaissance*, would be need to fill in existing holes in historiography and history.

◊ Visual culture, especially in terms of understanding its portrayal of a community's historical memory and identity, has focused on economic issues. However, more research must be completed to evaluate the representation (or lack thereof) of marginalized groups, such as women, African Americans, and Latino/Latina Americans.

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