

Soldiers of Democracy: The Great War and African American Culture

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MAKE way for democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.¹ So said the great African American intellectual, editor, sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois in welcoming home black America's "soldiers of democracy," the name he gave to the 200,000 African American troops returning to the USA in 1919 after winning the Great War with the American Expeditionary Force. Over 387,000 African Americans served in the military during the conflict, yet as Du Bois's editorial made clear, this was under the colours of a nation which routinely treated its black inhabitants as second-class citizens. Disenfranchisement, segregation, and discrimination in all aspects of life were inescapable facts for African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, and following their wartime patriotism many black Americans hoped to be rewarded with a post-war 'reconstruction' that addressed their many grievances. This optimism was evident in the heroes' welcome black America gave its returning soldiers: in New York and Chicago hundreds of thousands of people lined the streets in February 1919 to watch the veterans' parade, and to listen to the jazz-playing military bands that had astonished European ears in 1918. Yet those troops were barely home before a bitter summer of white reaction set in to make those postwar hopes seem fanciful or even utopian. A wave of race riots swept the USA in 1919 – in Washington, Chicago, Longview Texas and Knoxville Tennessee – and lynchings increased to claim 87 black victims, some of them returning soldiers murdered whilst still in their uniforms. Faced with this 'red summer' and a post-war economic depression, the political momentum the war had given to African American demands for reform of US racial politics was effectively dissipated by the early 1920s.

Turn the clock forward eight years and black America was in the midst of the New Negro Renaissance, a cultural flourishing that saw black artists pursuing bold new directions in fiction, poetry, fine art, photography, and music. Harlem had become a notorious and celebrated entertainment district for white New Yorkers, as well as home to the largest black urban population in the world, and its style, sounds and sights were inextricable from the aesthetics and preoccupations of American modernism in the jazz age. In music, it was the decade when Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Fletcher Henderson came to prominence. In literature, writers such as Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston began their careers in the 1920s, and new magazines and a new generation of New York publishers supported black literary talent to an unprecedented degree. Cultural and literary histories have often treated this as one of the most fruitful and pivotal moments in African American culture in the twentieth century, yet they have often been surprisingly quiet about its connections to the Great War. Supported by a British Academy Small Research Grant, my research at the New York Public Library Main Branch and Harlem's Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture in 2005 aimed to investigate the relation between these two events, to look at the numerous short stories, poems, novels, photographs and songs produced by black Americans that deal with the Great War. In particular, I hoped to discover both how the experiences of the Great War had shaped the culture of the New Negro Renaissance, and how the innovations of the New Negro Renaissance had provided a language for thinking about the war.

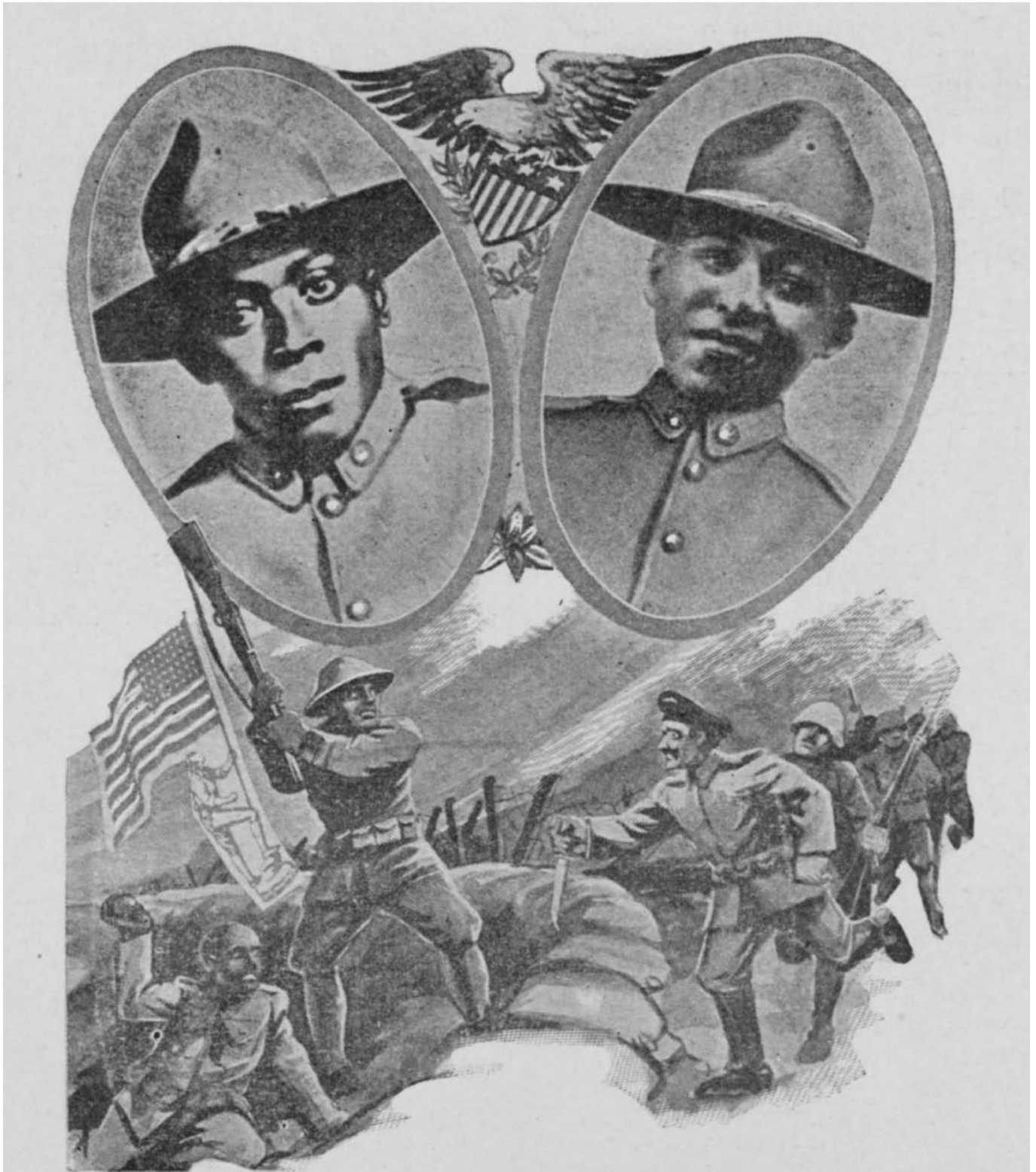
One theme that cropped up repeatedly was the astonishment that black servicemen felt at being welcomed and treated with dignity by white French people. Ravaged by four years of war, and delighted to see fresh new

Allied soldiers, the French ignored US Military advice that black American troops were not worthy of respect or any kind of treatment approaching equality. Consequently, many African American writers and journalists enthused about 'colour-blind France' (often ignoring its vast colonial holdings in Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean). Sometimes this was the occasion for sly humour poking fun at white American hypersensitivity over black soldiers' relationships with French women, as in this short poem by Robert Wolf:

"Tres gentils – les noirs,"
So the French girl said;
How the phrase did jar
My friend! Flushing red.
"We at home don't go
With those – colored men."
Quoth the French maid, "Oh,
Don't they like you, then?"²

In several other stories and poems from the New Negro Renaissance, writers use the motif of black Americans speaking French as a way of considering the possibilities – but also the limitations – of how overseas travel and experience might provide a tool for challenging racist domination in the USA. Black writers were also drawn to descriptions of combat, and particularly the battleground terrain so closely associated with the First World War – No-Man's Land. Freed from the absolute racial designation of space, which governed the principle of segregation in American society at the time, African American writers repeatedly imagined encounters between black and white American soldiers in No-Man's Land as occasions for cross-racial comradeship and fraternity. Rather than the hellish, lifeless terrain described by writers such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, or Henri Barbusse,

Opposite – An early poster celebrating the actions of Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts in repelling a German raiding party



TWO HEROES.



Members of New York's 369th Infantry (the 'Harlem Hellfighters') returning from France in 1919.

in African American writing No-Man's Land paradoxically also becomes a terrain where (racial) conflict can be resolved or reduced. For example, this scene takes place between a mortally wounded white American officer and a similarly-afflicted black officer in No-Man's Land in Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr.'s short play 'On the Fields of France':

White officer: I thought I was gone then. My strength is going fast. Hold my hand. It won't seem so lonesome dying way over here in France.

Colored Officer: (*takes his hand*) I feel much better – myself. After all – it isn't so hard – to die when – you are dying – for Liberty.

White officer: Do you feel that way too? I've often wondered how your people felt. We've treated you so badly mean over home and I've wondered if you could feel that way. I've been as guilty as the rest, maybe more so than some. But that was yesterday.³

My research also looked at African American responses to the memorials produced to remember the American war dead. In particular, African American writers were interested in the Unknown Soldier, a new type of memorial adopted by all the combatant nations of World War I. The American Unknown Soldier, buried at Arlington in 1921, interred one soldier whose remains were anonymous as a way of commemorating all those fatalities whose bodies had not been either recovered or identified. Yet at the same

time as America's Unknown Soldier was being buried with great pomp and ceremony, the US Government refused to fund memorials to the black casualties of America's wars, or to record black soldiers' participation in all American conflicts from the Revolutionary war onwards. In this situation the emotive and imaginative power of the memorial to the Unknown Soldier, which rested on his anonymity, seemed to many African Americans to resonate with their own feelings of anonymity within the USA – the position of being, to paraphrase Ralph Ellison, invisible men. Accordingly, several writers dramatised the situation of the Unknown Soldier being black, and how – in the words of a white politician in May Miller's play 'Stragglers in the Dust' – 'what a terrible joke on America' that would be.⁴ Other artists adopted less ironic strategies of memorialising African American casualties of the War, most notably in portrait photography. The great Harlem photographer James VanDerZee, who photographed such African American celebrities as Marcus Garvey, Florence Mills, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson (and also later figures such as Bill Cosby, Muhammad Ali, and Jean-Michel Basquiat), also made a number of portraits of war veterans. These included two arresting portraits of the most famous black heroes of the war – Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts. VanDerZee's war portraits were frequently posed with emblems of memorial, including tombstones, national flags, medals,

or vacant chairs. Often, these were produced by 'combination printing' one image on top of another, a technique which gives a narrative quality to his photographs and thereby presents an arresting visual analogue to the action of memory. His photos are just one example of how African American artists frequently used vernacular or popular forms to counterbalance more official and respected types of historical record, official records that nonetheless tended to exclude African Americans from accounts of the national past.

In recent years writers such as Toni Morrison, Rita Dove and Philip Roth have all included African American World War I veterans in their work; even the 2005 remake of King Kong added in a black former Great War sergeant. The Great War experiences of African American soldiers in 1917 and 1918 did have a thorough and long-lasting effect on African American culture; they made it more alive to cosmopolitan exchanges, provided models of manhood for the next generation, and raised important questions about the relation of black Americans to national history and memorial. Du Bois's 'soldiers of democracy' may not have won the fight against racial injustice in the USA, but they left a powerful legacy to an African American culture which played such a crucial role in that fight in the years to come.

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois. 'Returning Soldiers.' *The Crisis* May 1919. Rpt. in *W.E.B. Du Bois: An A.B.C. of Color*. International Publishers: New York, 1969, 107-109.

² Robert L. Wolf, 'Les Noirs.' *The Messenger* Jan. 1923: 578.

³ Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr. 'On the Fields of France.' *The Crisis* June 1920: 77.

⁴ May Miller. 'Stragglers in the Dust.' *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*. Ed. Kathy A. Perkins. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990: 148.

Soldiers of Democracy: The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro by Mark Whalan is forthcoming, published by the University Press of Florida.

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