These Truly Are the Brave: An Anthology of African American Writings on War and Citizenship (Revised)

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Introduction

These Truly Are the Brave

The well-known narrative in the United States focusing on the pivotal events that precipitated the Revolutionary War for Independence (1775–1783) places a probable runaway from slavery, Crispus Attucks, at its center. From the founding of the United States in the eighteenth century, the nation’s colonial inheritance of slavery and color circulated in the national narrative as race and operated at the center of economic, social, and political systems in the new nation. Indeed, the subordination and enslavement of African peoples in British colonial North America and the displacement of Indigenous peoples made possible the United States as we currently know it. At the founding of the nation, the writers of its governing documents assigned most persons of African descent a subservient position outside the center of the nation’s governing structures. Later, in 1832 President Andrew Jackson decided to uphold the idea of Georgia’s states’ rights and ignore the Supreme Court’s decision in *Worcester v. Georgia*, which recognized the sovereignty of Native peoples to govern on their traditional lands, and thus the U.S. president similarly confirmed the nation’s policy of subjection of Indigenous peoples. The founders of the United States, however, had written resistance to inequality and subordination into the founding documents of the new nation, making subsequent struggles for justice, liberty, and citizenship consistent with the nation’s ideals.

From the colonial era forward, Africans in North America and their descendants have waged a protracted liberation struggle to secure due rights. The liberatory tactics toward this end have included underground resistance such as insurrections, revolts, and uprisings among enslaved black people, abolitionism, pamphleteering, escape, emigration, marronage, freedom suits (which were especially important for women, who used these suits to free their children as well), literary art, vindicationist history, and public protests (speeches and peaceful resistance) designed to challenge the crafters of the nation’s founding documents and those who had perpetu-
ated policies and practices that excluded black people. Therefore, as 1783 brought the end of the Patriots’ revolution, black people persisted in waging battles for freedom and justice, no longer as marginalized and enslaved colonial subjects but rather now as enslaved Americans in a democratic and ostensibly free society. African Americans’ participation in battles for liberation from slavery, the end of segregation, and equality of rights for all people in the United States combine with military participation to position black people as central to the shaping and reshaping of the nation’s political and social structures. As part of these liberatory actions, black writers in the United States have commented in literature on what it has meant to be black and a soldier and on what it has meant to live in a nation that has unjustly denied citizenship rights to black people.

African American writers have produced an abundance of imaginative literature on citizenship, on wars from the writers’ contemporary moment, and on past conflicts. These writers also have creatively reimagined wars known only through family or social and political history. Often black writers in the United States also have addressed concerns with war, citizenship, and inclusion while reclaiming images of black people from the false representations that frequently had circulated in the United States. Through literature, these writers have positioned African-descended people at the scene of wars and battles or have shown black people experiencing the impact of warfare, thereby claiming a place for African Americans in the country’s heritage. These writers have recovered misplaced history, questioned African Americans’ exclusions from citizenship, and challenged the United States to adhere to its principles of freedom, justice, and equality under the law.

African Americans’ oral and written literature on war, liberation, and citizenship began during the British colonial era with poetry and autobiographical writings of Africans enslaved by colonialists. The earliest known literary response by New World Africans to war in the colonies that later would become the United States is the folk poem “Bars Fight” by African-born Lucy Terry (see part 1). This poem responds to the battle at Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1746, during one of the early Indian conflicts. These battles took place intermittently into the first decade of the twentieth century as the United States expanded westward, dislocating Indigenous peoples. Terry’s poem was part of colonial folk legend, and was published in the History of Western Massachusetts in 1855. In her poem, Terry, whose husband, Abijah Prince, fought in the French and Indian War/Seven Years’
War and whose sons fought in the Revolutionary War for Independence, situates herself at the battle and presents a poetic eyewitness account of the events.\(^4\) The speaker in Terry’s poem shows no particular loyalty to British colonial New England as she graphically portrays the battle. Another young eyewitness to war, Olaudah Equiano, also African born, gives readers an autobiographical description of events during the French and Indian War/Seven Years’ War in his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in 1789 (see part 1). Equiano’s wish to enter the battle, an illustration of bravery, and his desire for liberty are crucial motifs found throughout more than 250 years of African American literature on war and literary responses to calls for patriotism. Equiano and Terry provide rare black voices speaking as eyewitnesses to colonial battles in North America.

Thirty years after Lucy Terry responded in poetry to war on colonial North American soil, Phillis Wheatley wrote that all humanity loves freedom and is “impatient of Oppression.” Wheatley, whose poetry recalls her African childhood, also wrote several letters and poems that reject the unjust position of Africans in the colonial and revolutionary New World. Through their writings, Terry and Wheatley initiated an African American literary heritage of poetic, narrative, and expository responses to war, citizenship, and liberty. Indeed, Wheatley’s representation of these issues is unlike that of other colonial-era black writers such as Olaudah Equiano (who was enslaved primarily at sea and ultimately became a British citizen), who remained silent about the American Revolution; Richard Allen who provided only two sentences on the Revolutionary War in the *Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, published in Philadelphia in 1833; and Jupiter Hammon, the colonial and revolutionary era Christian poet (enslaved in the prominent Lloyd family of New York—Loyalists), whose references to the war occur in 1783 in his essay “An Evening’s Improvement” and in “A Dialogue Entitled the Kind Master and Dutiful Servant: A Line on the Present War,” published together as a pamphlet. Hammon’s writings on the war question whether the “Cruel and unnatural” Revolutionary War for Independence was punishment from God, and they allude to the Bible (Isaiah 2:4) in support of the idea of ending war, calling for nations to “seek for peace.” Some of his other writings challenged people in his society who falsely presented themselves as Christians.\(^5\) Ever since Phillis Wheatley actively (although at times subtly) engaged these issues in her letters and poetry, African American writers, orators, essayists, and
dramatists have made their work a critical site in the struggle for democracy, justice, citizenship, liberty, and equity for all persons in the United States.

These writers provide a variety of perspectives on black people in the wars of the United States and on the protracted battles for liberation from slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and exclusion from citizenship rights. In doing so, African American writers also have rejected attempts to perpetuate the unspoken, albeit impossible, idea that European-descended peoples built and solely owned the new nation. This idea, of course, reflects a nation that never existed, as the presence of Indigenous peoples and the forced emigration of Africans clearly demonstrate. Throughout this literature, African American writers have represented war, patriots, and citizens in ways that have mirrored the history and varied experiences of black people in the United States. To this end, these writers frequently have deployed the power of biting irony through their uses of satire and parody. They have reimagined wars and have creatively reclaimed black images from false representations of cowardice and servility that had circulated at the center of the national narrative, and they have asserted entitlement to citizenship in the United States while adding to the nation’s tradition of literary protest. African American literature on war and citizenship complicates and contests the dominant narratives of democracy in the United States and emphasizes two broad thematic issues: liberation and true citizenship.

Sarah Louisa Forten Purvis is among the numerous black writers whose ironic revisions of patriotic songs, symbols, and pledges have challenged the circulation of false and derogatory images of black people and have questioned the United States on the disjunction between its ideals and its practices of slavery, Jim Crow segregation in the South, and inequity and segregation in the North. In her poem “My Country,” published in 1834 (see part 1), Forten refers to Samuel Francis Smith’s patriotic song “America (My Country ’Tis of Thee)” (1831) and portrays enslaved black people as exiles living without rights and as strangers in their own land. In this poem, Forten’s speaker shows embarrassment because “falsehood” is associated with the flag of the United States. Other such writers who parody Smith’s patriotic song and poetically convey African Americans’ relationship to the nation include Frank Marshall Davis (“To Those Who Sing America”; 1948); W.E.B. Du Bois (“My Country ’Tis of Thee”; 1907; see part 2); and Joshua McCarter Simpson (“Song of the ‘Aliened American’”; 1852; see part 1). Simpson and Du Bois parody Smith’s patriotic song and poetically convey African Americans’ relationship to the nation. In Simpson’s poem, the
United States is a “Dark land of Slavery,” while Du Bois’s poem presents the nation as the “Late land of liberty.” Davis’s poem questions whether the nation has “forgotten / Something?” when people are asked to sing “On patriotic occasions” in a country where poverty, injustice, and inequity persist.7

Roscoe Conkling Jamison’s poem “The Negro Soldiers” (see part 2), published in 1917 as a response to the U.S. entry into World War I, also contributes to the ongoing African American literary heritage of poetic, narrative, dramatic, and expository responses to patriotic iconography and songs. Jamison’s poem echoes “The Star Spangled Banner” (1814), a response to the War of 1812 by Francis Scott Key. Yet Jamison’s “truly brave” and the “truly free” soldiers are those who “cast aside / Old memories” and go to war for “Peace through Brotherhood, lifting glad songs, / Aforetime.” Jamison’s poem exposes once again the inconsistencies in the land of the free and the brave, where black soldiers have fought wars for the United States without the benefit of freedom and full citizenship for themselves. This poem also adds to the literary works that honor the deeds of black soldiers as well as the claims of those soldiers to the nation’s soil through sacrifice overseas and liberatory actions at home. Among later writers, John O. Killens ironically uses the title of Irving Berlin’s patriotic song in the short story “God Bless America” (1952; see part 4) and depicts the continued racialization of African Americans in the newly desegregated military during the Korean War. Similarly, Allia Matta, writing in the twenty-first century, has contributed to the tradition of African American parody with “Mymerica” (2005; see part 4). Matta has imagined white Americans laying exclusive claim to the United States, yet through the force of her poem she has ironically reinscribed in the twenty-first century both W.E.B. Du Bois’s cutting questions from The Souls of Black Folk: “Your Country? How came it yours? . . . Would America have been America without her Negro People?” and Ralph Ellison’s probing essay, “What America Would Be Like without Blacks,” published in Time magazine in 1970.8 Killens in his story and Matta in her poem are among a myriad of black writers, intellectuals, activists, and military personnel who have articulated the complex situation of African American citizenship and military participation.

Along with literary challenges to the values of patriotic songs and symbols that valorize U.S. ideals that have excluded black people, African Americans also have recast the assembly of patriots and drawn upon governing documents of the United States to reflect black life. When writers such as David Walker in the nineteenth century or the founders of the
Niagara Movement early in the twentieth century addressed issues of war, citizenship, and patriotism, they produced writings that were clearly stimulated by black people's relationship to national documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the national anthem, and the Emancipation Proclamation. In David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829; see part 1), for instance, with its preamble and four articles, and in the Niagara Movement's “Address to the Country” (1906; see part 2), which is structured by a preamble and five demands or resolutions, both treatises simulate the nation's founding documents, most notably the Constitution (which is composed of a preamble and seven articles). Additionally, in the Niagara Movement's “Address,” there are clear echoes of the Declaration of Independence along with a demand for black people's “final emancipation,” a reference to the Emancipation Proclamation.9

Likewise, when lending praise to the nation, African American writers have claimed their own celebratory and commemorative days (January 1st Emancipation Day; Pinkster Festivals; July 5th, protesting the hypocrisy of July 4th; various local Emancipation Days; and Juneteenth [19 June 1865], an emancipation celebration commemorating the official end of slavery in the United States once General Order No. 3, announcing the abolition of slavery, finally reached the last group of enslaved people in Texas), patriots, martyrs, and heroes of liberty (Toussaint L'Ouverture, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Madison Washington, John Brown, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and others), as well as symbols such as the Pan-African Liberation flag designed by followers of Marcus Garvey. These acts demonstrate the complicated, entwined tensions associated with definitions of patriotism and national heroes.10 Black writers have focused on the Emancipation Proclamation and Abraham Lincoln for praiseworthy attention rather than on the Constitution or Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. Writers such as James Weldon Johnson, in his poem “Fifty Years” (1913),11 and James Baldwin, in his “Letter to My Nephew” (1963; see part 4), place the Emancipation Proclamation, even with its limitations (which Frederick Douglass had challenged), in an esteemed cultural space of honor as a document that brought the United States closer to its ideals. When the Constitution receives acknowledgement in African American literature, writers focus their praise on the brilliance of its principles, as Ralph Ellison does in *Invisible Man*, while highlighting the nation's uneven implementation of them.

When African American writers focus on heroes and martyrs, they reclaim black images from inaccuracy by their persistent representations of