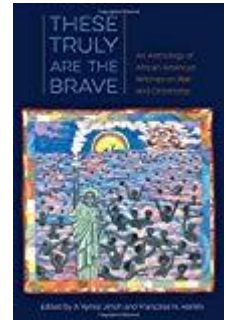


A. Yemisi Jimoh, Françoise N. Hamlin, eds. *These Truly Are the Brave: An Anthology of African American Writings on War and Citizenship*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. 584 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-6022-4.



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“Make way for democracy,” W. E. B. Du Bois editorialized in his 1919 piece, “Returning Soldiers”: “We save it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.”[1] Writing before and during World War I, Du Bois argued that the conflict represented an opportunity for black America to prove its still-contested claim to citizenship by fighting for freedom against the anarchic forces of the Central Powers. He acknowledged this would not be easy; the equality and respect owed the black community still required fighting and perseverance. But Du Bois’s article still rang of optimism, believing that the iconoclastic momentum of conflict could match with the symbolic weight of service to remake the dominant social hierarchy within the United States. By 1920, however, his writing betrayed a darker resonance. Postwar America witnessed a bloody period of unrest defined by the lynching of African American veterans and race riots directed against former sharecroppers who had relocated to northern and midwestern cities looking for work in the

new war industries. Du Bois felt safe in writing, “The World War was primarily the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races.” In fact, the United States’ attempted role as the moral compass in this new postwar world struck him as hollow: “For two or more centuries America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred,—making bonfires of human flesh and laughing at them hideously, and making the insulting of millions more than a matter of dislike.”[2]

Du Bois’s postwar disenchantment speaks to a defining tension within African American civic life: how does one justify military service to protect the stated values of the United States during a time of war when those values often appear misaligned with the reality of your existence? The African American community has wrestled with finding the means to navigate this space since the killing of Crispus Attucks, an African American sailor and dockworker (and possible runaway slave) of a mixed racial background, during the Boston Massacre in 1770. A Yemisi Jimoh and

Françoise N. Hamlin explore this contradiction in their anthology, *These Truly Are the Brave*, a collection of African American writings from throughout America's history that attempt to frame the duality of war service and citizenship within a shared and contradictory experience. As the two write in their introduction, "African American writers have represented war, patriots, and citizenship in ways that have mirrored the history and varied experiences of black people in the United States" (p. 4). By collecting works from throughout the nation's history that seek to address this issue, or facets of it, Jimoh and Hamlin present a diverse set of reactions to America's wars and its perception of citizenship and, ultimately, who is believed to deserve it.

The two editors provide an expansive narrative context to their anthology, claiming that "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" (p. 4). This is particularly evident in the work's first section. Focusing on the long period running from the American Revolution through Reconstruction, the editors collect selections from notable authors and orators like Frederick Douglass and David Walker alongside lesser-known authors, providing a fuller sense of the depth of African American thought in the era. In the process, Jimoh and Hamlin give voice to still under-represented groups in the struggle for full equality—runaway slaves fighting for Loyalists during the Revolution, surgeons and nurses tending wounded soldiers from the United States Army Colored Troops during the Civil War, and mothers penning heartfelt letters to leaders and politicians detailing the sacrifices of their sons. These accounts reveal not just the personal impact of inequality, but also the widely held notion that the crucible of military service bestowed full citizenship rights.

This notion was carried forward into the turn of the twentieth century. As the United States expanded its borders and found itself confronted with diverse polities, it struggled to incorporate them into the republic. The rhetoric of imperial expansion, based on notions of race and democracy, further complicated the civic role of African Americans in the United States. Many white soldiers and officers carried notions of Jim Crow along with ammunition and rations in their haversacks. As an anonymous black soldier fighting in the Philippines in 1900 noted, white soldiers and administrators began to apply "home treatment for colored people" in the new imperial acquisitions: "Expansion is too clean a name for it" (p. 221).

Jimoh and Hamlin show how, in the face of this discordant rhetoric, African American intellectuals began to frame war service and citizenship through gender. Soldiers during the world wars increasingly viewed their service and bravery as qualities of "manliness" that made them deserving of full citizenship rights. In an address titled "Acquit Yourself Like Men," Charles Waddell Chesnutt tried encouraging African American soldiers mustering to fight in World War I by stating, "You young men have a great opportunity. You have really been selected for a superior sort of service" (p. 239). Chesnutt drew parallels between the Slave South and the Kaiser's Germany. Beseaching each man to perform his duties and bring glory back to their hometown of Cleveland, he still noted the deep irony facing African Americans going to Europe to fight for the Allies: "It is a curious fact that black men, whose ancestors were brought across the ocean to this country in slave ships several generations ago to work for white men, are now being sent across in comfortable transports to kill white men. If any of you has a lurking grudge against the white race for its historic attitude to the Negro, let him take it out on the Germans" (p. 243).

After both World War I and II, and later Vietnam, African American veterans often found white society's response to their sacrifices lacking. During the crucible of the civil rights movement, Jimoh and Hamlin show, perceptions of service became counterposed against the Vietnam War. Black Power reversed the previously dominant intellectual trend—manliness and citizenship became identified with notions of opposition to the war and the draft. Commenting on the change this effected, Jimoh and Hamlin note that “these movements radicalized and politicized many young civilians who publicly questioned the structures of power and the character of the national leaders and demanded equal treatment with more vigor than ever before” (p. 401). Whereas in the years prior African Americans had assumed that military service would bestow the privileges of citizenship, they now recognized the gaining of full civil rights as a struggle in and of itself. Military service had conferred a sense of pride, but not full equality.

Jimoh and Hamlin do a good job weaving together a diverse set of authors into one narrative. They stumble somewhat, however, in constructing the chronologies within their various sections, particularly the first portion. Selections from several more modern-day authors appear alongside those contemporary to the period, creating a certain dissonance as readers bounce from 1784 to 1853 to 1972 in the space of twenty pages. The more recent selections would have been better situated within the later periods, providing a modern rendering of past events. More than an editorial oversight, such an ordering probably reflects the difficulty of locating African American writings from the antebellum period. The editors should be applauded for excavating such a rich trove to enliven our discussion of African Americans roles and perception of military service and civic virtue.

These Truly Are the Brave provides a ready and accessible means to access the frustrations of

African Americans trying to reconcile war, American values, and their own place within a racial hierarchy. The expanse of the anthology's selections attests to the pervasive nature of the issue in African American thought, while also demonstrating the depth of passion that both Jimoh and Hamlin bring to this project. It would have been easy to provide snippets from well-known black intellectuals and claim that the work addresses an ever-present theme in African American life. Instead, the two editors chose to let the words of the very people grappling with this contradiction speak for themselves.

Note

[1]. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections from his Writings*, ed. Bob Blaisnell (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2014), 160-161, quotation on 161.

[2]. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folks,” *ibid*, 164-178, quotations on 177.

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