

A Freedom Bought With Blood (Book Review)

Daniel L. Hartley

Published in 1855, William Cooper Nell's *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* exists as an invaluable contribution to American letters and history. In *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II*, literary scholar Jennifer C. James states the significance of Nell's *Colored Patriots* lies not simply in the fact that it is the "first full-length treatment of black participation in American warfare" (3), but also in that it clarifies the centrality of African Americans in the nascence of nation. With both a textual description and a visual reinscription of Crispus Attucks's blackness and heroism during the Boston Massacre – seen as the opening salvo to the American Revolution – Nell's work seeks to restore America's "historical landscape" that diminished, dismissed, or deleted Attucks's singular act of bold patriotism and active resistance rendered by and through his body. James argues that *Colored Patriots*, deploying the very rhetoric that expressed rights conferred by nature was moored to the language that affirmed and justified violent insurrection against British rule, utilizes the lexicon of the nation's founding scribes to articulate nuanced arguments for full citizenship for African Americans. If, Nell suggests, blacks as "self-imagined" citizens offered support for and participation in the promising republic's international (and later intranational) interventions, then whites should display the courage and the commitment to freedom's cause, logically leading to respected, equal membership in the country's daily life for African Americans.

A Freedom Bought proceeds from a seemingly simple question: why would

African American writers, given their historically troubled and tenuous relations to nation, consistently chronicle or narrativize war experience for nearly two centuries? Undeterred by the nebulous concept of war and the complexities of its representations, James advances theories of African American war literature that primarily center on the “domestication of warfare” (27). Ultimately, James views Nell’s work as a “passport,” historical papers that provide Blacks permission into the constructed province of nation. What happens when contested, conflicted corporeality intersects with the exigencies of nation-building where violence and war are necessary contextual constants? It results, James surmises, in a civic conundrum where the aspiring member of an emerging nation – imperial in its impulses and actions – must embrace that requisite admixture while simultaneously occupying the status of abject and subject. Sorting through the entanglements of embodiment discourse, James explores the dynamics of “corporeal representation of the body and the nation body politic” that has resonated throughout African American letters since its inception (10). She argues that war narratives must be filtered through an alembic of physiology, calling attention to the surprising paucity of scholarship on African American war literature. By establishing a capacious definition of warfare narratives that qualifies any number of literary works previously underappreciated or insufficiently analyzed, James’s expansive work addresses a plethora of genres within the African American literary tradition. James deftly balances familiar texts such as William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* with lesser-known or anomalous works like F. Grant Gilmore’s “*The Problem*”: *A Military Novel* and Susie King Taylor’s *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers*. The “construction of war as a solely masculine domain,” in reality and in its literary engagements, disintegrates under James’s critical observations, as she examines works by Taylor, Frances Harper, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Indeed, her brief yet trenchant analysis of Alice Dunbar Nelson’s “I Sit and I Sew” hollows out such a construction and exposes problematic masculine/feminine dichotomies upon which male-centered war rhetoric relies. *Freedom Bought* recontextualizes nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, as James routinely explores nuanced historical context to buttress close readings that support her well-organized theories that elucidate “why Blacks repeatedly assert their voices on the subject of war” (9).

James presents a compelling argument for reading with this framework through an examination of Claude McKay’s oft-studied *Home to Harlem*. Pivoting easily away from traditional academic readings that privilege *Home* as an emblematic yet enigmatic text of the Harlem Renaissance, she challenges notions of black involvement in American conflict to assess the presence and implications of war, specifically World War I, in the narrative. Revisiting McKay’s well-chronicled proclivity for travel and his morphing interest in socialism, James posits that the novel has a marked international bent, arguing for African Diasporic experiences as necessary lenses with which to read America’s imperialism in the early 20th century.

Three novels that James addresses in the fourth chapter, Victor Daly’s *Not Only War*, Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, and William Gardner Smith’s *Last of the Conquerors*, illustrate complex notions of nationalism that compelled African

American males to serve during World War I and World War II. The military regimentation and augmentation of the African American male body into a pure, incorruptible site give rise to the seemingly contradictory notion of black male innocence. Throughout the chapter, she demonstrates how the novels of Himes, Daly, and Smith cohere around this discursive construction of innocence mediated vis-à-vis the white female body. Recognizing the yearning for inclusion within the republic that these novels thematically represent, James articulates that “black male citizenship” is a “violent intrusion” when the white female body is literarily constructed as a metonym of nation. The texts in this chapter re-emphasize this point initially offered in her discussions on the profit of Crispus Attucks’s violent declaration of inclusion as his body was fatally violated as a result of his courage to align himself with a budding spirit of citizenry.

Aside from intimating a convoluted violator/violated dialectic in the introduction, James also establishes her theory regarding the abject body and war through a cogent analysis of Paul Revere’s 1770 engraving of the Boston Massacre. According to James, Revere’s engraving that phenotypically deracializes Attucks constitutes an initial violation of the integrity of early American history and African American instauration of nation. By highlighting Nell’s *Colored Patriots* as a bridge across the chasm produced by the easy dialectic of master narrative/counternarrative, *A Freedom Bought* connects an inclusive perspective of American history with the articulations of African American experience set against the ever-present backdrop of war. In doing so, James’s singular work serves as a passport of its own to textual spaces heretofore seldom traveled in African American literary criticism.

Daniel L. Hartley attends the University of Maryland, College Park.

Works Cited

A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II. By Jennifer C. James. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.