

# Teaching the Literatures of the American Civil War

Edited by

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**Tess Chakkalakal**

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## Complicating the Relation between Literature and History: Slave Participation in Fact and Fiction

The 1989 film *Glory* brought considerable attention to the story of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Based, in part, upon the letters of Robert Gould Shaw and the 1973 book *Lay This Laurel*, by Richard Benson and Lincoln Kirstein, *Glory* celebrates the role abolitionists, former slaves, and free blacks played in the Civil War. Though Shaw emerges as the film's hero, it is the black troops—played by Denzel Washington (Private Trip), Andre Braugher (Thomas Searles), and Morgan Freeman (Captain John Rawlins)—whom *Glory* celebrates. Unlike the role of Shaw, played by Matthew Broderick, the black characters are not based on actual historical figures but drawn instead from historical imagination.

What is the relation between the imagined historical narrative and the real historical narrative? Is it possible to distinguish between the two? While *Glory* and more recent efforts to uncover the real story of the Civil War have brought into sharper focus the significance of the role played by former slaves, we still need to grapple with the ways in which fictional representations of black soldiers have shaped and even distorted our understanding of the war. *Glory* concludes with the statement, "President Lincoln credited slave-soldiers with turning the tide of the war." Should we accept this statement as true? Did "slave-soldiers" turn the tide of

the war? Would the Union have lost without their participation? Possibly. There is no accurate way of measuring their contribution. But the image of slaves fighting for their freedom is powerful. It was this image—perhaps more than their actual participation—that turned the Civil War into a war for freedom. Where did this image come from? It was produced largely by Civil War literature (rather than history), and tracing its origins helps our students understand how literary representations of “slave-soldiers” did, in fact, turn the tide of the war.

In my undergraduate course Literature of the Civil War Era, I devote several sessions to exploring works of nineteenth-century literature that present the history of the black troops: the role they played in the war and in constructing a northern narrative about the victory of the Union. Complicating the Civil War thus serves as a metaphor for presenting it from many different perspectives; such a multifaceted approach is essential to evaluating and interpreting the ways in which this story, once singular, is told today. As teachers of literature, we need to recall the political contexts out of which Civil War accounts originally arose and how they and sectional prejudices were transformed by art and literature, as Ralph Ellison reminds us, “into something deeper and more meaningful than its surface violence” (xvii). For Ellison in the mid-twentieth century, the story of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Negro Regiment, as imagined by Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s monument, provides an ideal image of black-and-white fraternity so essential to his novel *Invisible Man*.

For nineteenth-century American authors, the story of the black troops served a different, but related, function: to give the Civil War a purpose after the South surrendered in 1865, a purpose that was nowhere in sight when the war began four years earlier. In particular, by presenting white and black stories about black troops side by side, we can show our students the role literature played in creating a history of the Civil War that helps us come to terms with, perhaps even justify, the vast number of dead, which was, as Drew Gilpin Faust recently reminds us, its primary result (xiii). This essay invites students and instructors to consider a deceptively simple question: What role did slavery, and slaves, play in the Civil War? Answering that question gives us profound insights into how historical fact and historical fiction intersect and inform our understanding or understandings of the Civil War.

To this end, I would encourage instructors to highlight the connections between four nineteenth-century works of Civil War literature that are rarely read together: Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s *Army Life in a*

*Black Regiment* (1869) and William Wells Brown's *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and Fidelity* (1867); Anna E. Dickinson's *What Answer?* (1868) and Frances E. W. Harper's better-known novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Higginson's and Brown's texts are explicitly histories of the black troops, while Dickinson's and Harper's texts, speaking primarily though not exclusively to female audiences, are fictional accounts of particular black soldiers. Though the generic differences among these four narratives allow readers to view the war and the role black troops played in it from multiple perspectives, the similarities among the narratives are striking. Taken together, they show students the role individual authors played in placing former slaves and free blacks at the center of the Civil War. The story of the black troops remains a vital aspect of histories of the Civil War. The texts I consider here enable students to understand the ways in which literature has influenced, even shaped, the historical record.

The role of slave labor in the Civil War was, as historians have long recognized, a crucial aspect of both the political and military campaigns. Slave labor enabled an astonishing eighty percent conscription rate among the Confederacy's white male population. Yet this resource proved unreliable. Over time, slaves became increasingly identified with the Union campaign when emancipation was embraced as its purpose. Frederick Douglass had predicted this development in 1861: "The American people and the Government at Washington may refuse to recognize it for a time, but the 'inexorable logic of events' will force it upon them in the end; that the war now being waged in this land is a war for and against slavery" (*Douglass' Monthly*).

On 1 January 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, a measure that resulted in a major escalation of what had been a limited conflict. Ulysses S. Grant called it "the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy" (*Papers* 195). In all, over 180,000 blacks served in the Union army. Nearly 40,000 were killed as a result of their participation in the war. The number of black men who fought and died in the war is even more remarkable when we consider how little is actually known about the men who served, their lives and deaths, and even what became of them following their service.<sup>1</sup>

Though Douglass has been heralded by historians as crucial in the effort to recruit black men to serve in the Union army, no text provides as detailed and yet as vexed an account of the former slaves who enlisted

to fight as does Higginson's *Army Life*. Two reasons why Higginson's account of black soldiers has received less attention by historians are its inherent contradictions and its decidedly literary features. *Army Life* is riddled with sweeping generalizations of black men, whom Higginson admires for their "capacity of honor and fidelity" while marveling at "the childish nature of this people" (37). He provides the names and backstories of several black soldiers that help support assertions that might otherwise be attributed to the author's Romantic and racist tendencies.

Higginson was an abolitionist and commander of the First South Carolina Volunteers, and his perspective of the war, and of the black troops, reflects both his political bias and position. The scholar who has done the most valuable work on Higginson's life and work, Christopher Looby, has emphasized the literary rather than the historical quality of his writings about camp life. Branding Higginson as "a literary colonel," Looby highlights his ambition in writing *Army Life*: to provide readers with "real and vivid" access to the mission he undertook and the experience he underwent (5). Looby's introduction emphasizes Higginson's unique role in the war. Though a white commanding officer, Higginson saw himself as "cast altogether with the black troops." Though cast with them, he was not, as he repeatedly states throughout the text, one of them. "Camp-life," he explains, "was a wonderfully strange sensation to almost all volunteer officers, and mine lay among eight hundred men suddenly transformed from slaves into soldiers, and representing a race affectionate, enthusiastic, grotesque, and dramatic beyond all others" (3).

Higginson's role in the war may have been, as Looby suggests, primarily literary, but Higginson was also a colonel in the army who fought in the Civil War. Rather than separate his experience from his writing, I invite my students to consider ways in which we might understand how the one speaks to the other: just as Higginson's experiences were shaped by his narrative, so, too, were his experiences of the war shaped by literature. Whereas today we tend to separate fact and fiction, experience and representation, I help my students understand how for nineteenth-century writers the two often went together.

Viewed from the perspective of students (and twentieth-century critics, most notably Edmund Wilson), Higginson's experience of the war and his relationship with the black troops can be easily dismissed as racist, colonialist, and arrogant. These assessments of Higginson's work are difficult obstacles to overcome in the classroom. Some students try to counter them with an apology. As one student insisted, "Higginson was a

product of his time! We can't judge him by the terms we use today!" Instead of closing off debate, I actively encourage students to examine how Higginson's experiences of the war were shaped by his prior political and aesthetic commitments.

Though written primarily in the form of a diary that simply records what Higginson did and saw during the seventeen months he served as commander of the First South Carolina Voluntary Infantry, this diary includes an account of his particular form of abolitionism as well as an account of the books he read both during and before his wartime experiences. I require students to use the Penguin edition (*Army Life*) because it includes an appendix of his other writings and a brief introduction placing his work in the political-cultural context in which it was written. This supplementary material provides students with a better sense of Higginson's politics. It is important for students to interrogate the diary form, to read the diary as a literary genre regulated by a set of conventions. This genre is important to our more general understanding of Civil War literature.

No other writer of the period provides students with such an unequivocal defense of the form: "There is nothing like a diary for freshness,—at least so I think,—and I shall keep to the diary through the days of camp-life, and throw the later experience into another form" (4). The other form Higginson chose to narrate his experiences of the war was the personal essay, and in it he makes plain his argument concerning the centrality of his troops to providing the war with its proper cause. His brief "Conclusion" to *Army Life* constitutes the text's most controversial chapter. It is here that he lays out the purpose of his narrative:

But the peculiar privilege of associating with an outcast race, of training it to defend its rights, and to perform its duties, this was our especial meed. The vacillating policy of the Government sometimes filled other officers with doubt and shame; until the negro had justice, they were but defending liberty with one hand and crushing it with the other. From this inconsistency, we were free. (206)

I have students compose a response to this conclusion. How were Higginson and his fellow commanders free from inconsistency? What were the material consequences of his work with the black troops? Leaving his personal approach to recording the history of the black troops, I have students turn to Brown's narrative, which is based, in his words, on "historical research" (*Negro* v) and which picks up on several themes introduced by Higginson.

Extending the political work of Higginson's diaries into the post-Civil War era, Brown, a former Kentucky slave and novelist, penned *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, the first novel by an African American, in 1853, and published *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (1867), the first military history of African Americans, a work that is generally ignored by scholars today. John David Smith's introduction to the 2003 edition provides a fine overview of the role Brown's text plays in African American historiography. The work was well received in its own time, reviewed by major newspapers and journals and seen as a necessary recognition of the rights of freemen. In *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, Brown presented the earliest assessment of the contributions of African Americans in the Civil War. Like Higginson, he emphasizes the black soldier's "heroism and fidelity," but by "collecting facts connected with the rebellion" instead of through personal observation. After reading *Army Life*, students will find Brown's use of Higginson of particular interest. I have them look closely at the passages from Higginson that Brown incorporates into his history to understand the connection between these texts and authors. Like Higginson, Brown remained unforgiving toward Lincoln's administration and extolled slave rebels such as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Higginson was among the first to write a history of Turner's insurrection in 1861. But Brown, having never joined the army, provides no personal account of the war. Instead, he offers a secondhand account largely based upon his reading of "newspaper correspondents" and his conversation with "officers and privates of several of the colored regiments" (xliii).

"The gallantry and loyalty of the blacks during the Rebellion is a matter of history," he wrote proudly, "and volumes might be written upon that subject" (178). He condemns slavery, documents anti-Negro sentiment among Southerners and white Northerners, champions the role of the United States Colored Troops, interprets the war as a struggle for blacks to attain social equality, and assails those who oppressed blacks after Appomattox. Brown believed passionately that the almost 180,000 African Americans who fought in the Union army should share equally in the civil rights and liberties that white Americans enjoyed. Through his history of the black troops, he sought to recognize publicly the contribution of African Americans to the nation's Constitution in order to ensure that they no longer be "deceived" out of their rights (5). Above all, he gave faces and names to the otherwise anonymous mass of black troops—by

employing literary figures and conventions in a work that purported to be based on facts.

Brown's extensive quotations from newspapers of the period as well as from works by Higginson and other authorities can be wearisome for undergraduates. His tendency to quote other authors, with or without proper citation, is the subject of lively debate among critics today (see Sanborne). What is the value of his method of documentation? What are its costs? Though his historical account of black soldiers opens with the "Revolutionary War and 1812," our reading begins with chapter 8, "The Union and Slavery Both to Be Preserved" and concludes with chapter 40, "Fall of the Confederacy, and Death of President Lincoln." These chapters dealing specifically with the Civil War offer students a bird's-eye perspective of the black troops that broadens yet in many ways supports Higginson's personal view of the war by lending it the authority of an exceptionally well-read and eloquent former slave.

From these explicitly historical and male accounts of the black troops we move to two novels by women: one white, Dickinson, the other black, Harper. Like Brown, neither Dickinson nor Harper participated directly in the Civil War, but both made the story of the black troops central to their novels. There are obvious differences between Dickinson's *What Answer?* and Harper's *Iola Leroy*, but I ask students to consider the similarities instead. Both novels are written in the mode of romance and center on a mulatta heroine. Though Dickinson's and Harper's heroines are shaped by familiar sentimental conventions, embedded within both novels is a decidedly unconventional historical narrative, that of the black troops, through which the novels' politics can be clearly discerned. Our reading considers the interplay between the novels' literary and historical plots. Whereas Higginson and Brown are committed to including the black troops in the historical narrative of the Civil War and the nation more generally, Dickinson's and Harper's fictional renderings of the black troops teaches readers what to feel about the black troops. Both novelists celebrate the tremendous sacrifice of black soldiers who fought bravely though without the recompense of the white soldiers.

*What Answer?* first appeared in the fall of 1868. At the heart of the novel is a love story between a wealthy white businessman and a free African American woman. Between the pages of that melodramatic love story is the story of the heroic but failed attempt of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Negro Regiment to capture Fort Wagner. The novel's purpose,

as Dickinson so eloquently puts it, is “to write in glowing characters the record of their deeds” (243).

Dickinson came as close as was possible for a woman of her time to being a politician. Though unable to cast a vote herself, she was hired by the Republican Party to campaign on its behalf in the 1863 and 1864 elections. She was later invited to speak in the hall of the House of Representatives, the first woman ever to do so. Though she was generally sympathetic to the Republican Party’s platform, her personal politics concentrated on the rights of women and African Americans. Her novel exemplifies the ways in which literature can be a passionate voice for the right to vote that women and African Americans were denied at the time.

Though the novel centers on a fictional romance between the light-skinned Francesca Ercildoune and the wealthy young New Yorker Willie Surrey, Dickinson insists in the concluding note that “every scene in this book is copied from life, and that the incidents of battle and camp are part of the history of the great context.” Like Brown, she makes a point of revealing her sources and underlining their reliability:

From the *New York Tribune* and the *Providence Journal* were taken the accounts of the finding of Hunt, the coming of the slaves into a South Carolina camp, and the voluntary carrying, by black men, ere they were enlisted, of a schooner into the fight at Newbern. Than these two papers, none were considered more reliable and trustworthy in their war record. (313)

In other words, the scenes of war and the draft riots depicted are true, despite the far-fetched love story, making the novel more history than literature. What are the stakes of such a claim? How are students to read this novel when its author insists that she has “necessarily used a somewhat free pencil, but the main incident of each [scene] has been faithfully preserved” (314)?

By having students pay close attention to the novel’s form, we can begin to understand the role that sentiment plays in recording the history of the Civil War and the role that the slaves played in the war. Chapters 15 and 16 provide detailed descriptions of particular slaves who assisted Union soldiers. Though the story of Fort Wagner is ostensibly told through the perspective of one of her minor white characters, Dickinson departs from the plot of her novel to narrate the events at Fort Wagner and the activities of “the famous Fifty-Fourth” without the intrusion of any of her characters. She narrates the story as if she were present at the attack:

The evening, or rather the afternoon, was a lurid and sultry one. Great masses of clouds, heavy and black, were piled in the western sky, fringed here and there by an angry red, and torn by vivid streams of lightning. Not a breath of wind shook the leaves or stirred the high, rank grass by the water-side; a portentous and awful stillness filled the air,—the stillness felt by nature before a devastating storm. Quiet, with the like awful and portentous calm, the black regiment, headed by its young, fair-haired, knightly colonel, marched to its destined place and action. (241)

While Dickinson emphasizes the “knightly colonel,” Harper uses the story of the famous Fifty-Fourth to glorify the black troops rather than Shaw: “After Colonel Shaw led his charge at Fort Wagner, and died in the conflict, he got bravely over his prejudices. . . . I suppose any white soldier would rather have his black substitute receive the bullets than himself” (*Iola Leroy* 43). Shaw is no hero here. Indeed, Harper holds all whites to task for their “prejudices.” And it is against such prejudices that her novel of the Civil War and its aftermath is directed. We begin our reading of the novel by dwelling on its introduction, in which William Still reveals his “doubts” about Harper’s “story.” He admits that he prefers a history by Harper, given that there is “no other woman, white or colored, anywhere, who has come so intimately in contact with the colored people in the South as Harper” (5). Intimate contact with the “colored people” made her a suitable representative of the colored troops.

Harper’s depiction of the colored troops revolves around the character of Robert Johnson, with which the novel opens. Having been “reared by his mistress as a favorite slave,” Robert escapes from slavery as “a contraband of war.” Prior to the introduction of the novel’s heroine, he occupies a central role in the novel’s plot. Equipped “with his intelligence, courage, and prompt obedience, he rose from the ranks and became lieutenant of a colored company” (43). Though his status in the novel is eventually eclipsed by the more conventional love story of the tragic mulatta heroine, we focus on Harper’s portrayal of this slave-soldier.

Robert Johnson, not Colonel Shaw, is the leader of the colored troops Harper presents in her novel. Robert tells us “the truth,” though it is not based on history, about the colored troops: “To silence a battery, to capture a flag, to take a fortification, they will rush into the jaws of death” (44). He provides eyewitness accounts of colored soldiers and their exceptional bravery; they, unlike their white counterparts, are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty. Through Harper’s Robert, black

soldiers become symbols of unequivocal American patriotism, and it is an image that is captured by the film *Glory*. By introducing Robert in this romance, Harper shows readers the glory of the colored troops. He is not the only black soldier in the novel; there is also Tom Anderson, who dies saving the lives of his fellow men, and Iola's brother, Harry, who joins a colored regiment upon discovering that his mother was a slave. Like his Uncle Robert, Harry turns "his back upon his chances of promotion" to join the colored troops (127). Both men are not only American patriots; they are also, paradoxically, loyal to their race. I draw students' attention to the paradoxes of this romance, which concludes with a black marriage, a happy reunion of former slaves and their progeny in the reconstructed South. Through a close reading of Harper's fictional black heroes, we come to understand that, without men like them, white war heroes like General Grant and Colonel Shaw would have been lost.

By comparing and contrasting Dickinson and Harper's fictional histories, students begin to understand the formal differences between the writing of an American history and the writing of an African American history. While both rely on the story of the black troops to persuade their audiences to grant black men voting rights and provide former slaves and their descendants with a decent education, Dickinson's and Harper's novels diverge sharply in their visions of a United States of America after the abolition of slavery. Our reading of these fictions with Brown's and Higginson's nonfictions allows students to understand the role these literary accounts of the black troops play in the "new birth of freedom" Lincoln declared on 19 November 1863 at Gettysburg (*Gettysburg Address*).

### Note

1. Students will find of considerable interest the online resource offered by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. The project's Web site addresses this absence in the historical record by providing online access to thousands of documents that convey "with first-person immediacy" the experiences of black soldiers and liberated slaves during and after the Civil War ([www.freedmen.umd.edu](http://www.freedmen.umd.edu)).