

“Men of Bronze”: Reflecting on Legacy of the Hellfighters of Harlem

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Overview

Rationale

Objectives and Standards

Anchor Text

Historical Background

Strategies

Classroom Activities

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Overview

In this unit the United States 369th Infantry is showcased as a vehicle for teaching a sliver of political and social history in the first quarter of the 20th Century. Max Brooks’ graphic novel, *The Harlem Hellfighters*, serves as an anchor text for this unit. The graphic novel will be supplemented with selections from primary and secondary sources on the 369th to create a context and illustrate key moments for African Americans before, during and immediately after World War I.

This unit seeks to explore an approach to educate students about historical military discrimination, as well as the significance of the unit’s valor during The Great War. Most importantly, students will be asked to interrogate the complex ideas of double consciousness and the paradox of enlistment for African Americans in the early parts of the 20th century. This unit seeks to provide students with a variety of mediums (graphic novel, video, podcast and informational text) to interpret history, toward an answer to an essential question: Why would one who is oppressed and denied citizenship want so badly to defend that nation?

This unit can serve a variety of purposes, dependent on implementation choices and emphasis/de-emphasis of particular topics. Though designed for an African American History course, this unit could be easily modified for use in any other type of History, English Language Arts or Sociology courses.

Rationale

I teach African American History, a mandated high school course in the School District of Philadelphia. While the course is required for high school graduation, there is no set curriculum or much content direction, outside of a lackluster textbook the district has provides. I have taken it as my charge to create an engaging curriculum full of relevant and high-quality topics, texts and historical personae.

Over time I embarked upon a project to create units utilizing graphic novels or historical novels to teach about specific periods of African American history. Max Brooks' graphic novel hides a wealth of connections to historical events, people and movements behind a deceptively simple presentation. From this text, the history of the First Great Migration, Jim Crow segregation, legacies of African American enlistment and service, the Harlem Renaissance, New Negro Arts and others can be explored and connected to tangentially.

Connection of these topics to the larger socio-political history of the United States brings further relevancy to the study of African Americans in our nations history. It is my hope that through this entry point the voices of these soldiers will open up a space in the curriculum to explore a pluralism of historical American experiences.

Objectives and Standards

Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Identify and connect elements of historical events and movements in fictional and informational texts
- Compare and evaluate multiple modalities of storytelling for function and success in communication
- Gain specific content knowledge of the U.S. 369th Infantry units triumphs, tribulations and notable members
- Examine the concept of double consciousness and the paradox of enlistment of African Americans in World War I

A Note on Standards

In terms of national Common Core history standards, as no Pennsylvania State Standards yet exist for African American History, this unit satisfies RH.9-10.1-3, which focus on reading a variety of informational texts for key details, as well as RH.9-10.4-6, focusing on craft and structure of informational writing and RH.9-10.9, which calls for compare

and contrast of sources as a method of demonstration integration of knowledge and ideas. The readings in this unit also satiate the requirement for the increased complexity of texts, a hallmark of the Common Core standards.

Pennsylvania adopted the PA Common Core Standards, which for English Language Arts requires increased focus on close textual analysis, persuasive writing and reading informational texts. The standards also put emphasis on not only reading and writing, but also listening and speaking. This unit satisfies these stipulations through the requirement of students to read texts comparatively, write arguments using textual evidence to prepare for the final assessment, present their findings orally and, finally, listen to others and evaluate their work.

Anchor Text

The Harlem Hellfighters Graphic Novel: Exploring Legacy and Contemporary Historical Revision

The graphic novel, *The Harlem Hellfighters*, is written and researched by Max Brooks, son of comedy legend Mel Brooks. This Brooks, however, does not take his subject lightly. In the “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel, Brooks describes his long-term quest to celebrate the Men of Bronze that began in school when he was eleven years old (239). Brooks wants to publicize the story of the valiant men of the 369th and he does so in an informed and technically researched way. Supported by a comprehensive bibliography and a section of Historical Notes the graphic novel provides a cogent and tightly wound historical narrative, overlaid with nuances of racial tensions and issues of patriotism, equality and pride. Canaan White, a celebrated African American comic artist, illustrates the text. White is known for his detailed and expressive drawings.

The graphic novel opens in medias res rapidly rattling off figures and facts about the Great War, interspersed among the richly complex black and white drawings of scenes of the European theater of war. On page eight, the narrator helps to situate the readers understanding of the brutality and total destruction of the war: “I hear it’s easier if you break it down. Say...about ten thousand. That’s like a small town. That’s how many people died per day. A whole town gone, every day, for four years” (Brooks). Hitting the reader with the magnitude of casualties helps to ground the text in the extreme nature and horrific advancements and also the ailments of the war’s effect.

The narrator, Mark, explains his desire to protect his country and a response to the appeal to nationalism and democratic ideals (Brooks 11-12). At no time does the text shy away from areas of tension particularly race. In this manner, the text serves as an excellent avenue into difficult, but necessary, discussions in the classroom about privilege, stereotyping and agency. It is recommended that the teacher selects some of these areas of tension as specific foci. A single page, or even a single panel, can serve as

a moment to pause and consider the issues. The author raises interesting points about the real affects of prejudice and the toll it took on the men in the 369th, from the beginning interactions with other white soliders in Texas at Fort Hood to the last page of the text.

Brooks' characters become spaces of interpretation of issues such as discrimination, inferior living conditions and rations, as well as the psychological effects of war. Understanding the mentality and motivations of enlisted men, and the subsequent effects of war on their psyche is an engaging point of entry into the unique presentation of the character narratives in this text. Interestingly, the characters reflect and meditate on the psychological confusion of a suppressed rage of black men set out to kill white European enemies, such as on page 153. Additionally, the scene where Mark sees *Birth of a Nation* in the theater and is filled with a similar rage is another example from which direct illumination and discussion with students about the implications of the suppression of emotion for black soldiers.

This tug at the psyche is clearly differentiated from ideas about “shell shock”, more commonly understood today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD (Brooks 101). This different psychological disruption is expressed as a reaction to the double consciousness inflicted upon African Americans back home and, to their dismay, in the ranks of the military as well. Discrimination, from inferior uniforms, arms and facilities, to the lowest and most dangerous assignments of black soldiers, created an environment for the Harlem Hellfighters in which the rage of double consciousness could no longer be suppressed. This, perhaps, is what many of the members cite as a driving motivator for their incredible performance: despite the odds stacked against them, an African American soldier would prevail.

Double consciousness is a term popularized by W.E.B. Du Bois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. The concepts expresses the conflict of identity that is felt by African Americans as identifying as black and as American struggle to be joined into a monolithic identity, particularly in a society that continually relegates them as second-class citizens. This idea is very much at the heart of *Hellfighters*. The separate nature of being black and being American is echoed in every decision that is made for these men. Poor black soldiers were relegated to jobs as labors or grunt soldiers, which in turn reflects the attitude of the bureaucracy toward their status as separate and unequal. This psychological trauma, which resounds through the beginning, middle and end of the graphic novel, is different from the “shock” of war that white soldiers were traumatized by in the gruesome reality of the First War. For African Americans, as Brooks illuminates in his novel, theirs was a different reaction to a different set of circumstances both before and after the war. Perhaps discounting shell shock all together for soldiers so consistently under fire is not entirely accurate, however, I argue that Brooks' interpretation is intentionally hyperbolic and discussion of the choice of the author to focus on one and not both traumas is a beneficial consideration to direct students to contemplate.

It is as if the act of war becomes also an act of aggression toward the oppressive racial climate of the Post-Reconstruction era of the early 20th century. Therefore fighting against Europeans in the trenches takes on a duality related in parallelism to the Du Bois' conception of double consciousness. The assertion is supported by frequent recurrence of theme, including a passage, relying heavily on themes of Du Bois' ideas of the burden of memory on page 77, the reflection of a black soldier on page 153, and also the framing of the text with opening and closing quotes by Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, respectively.

The graphic novel ends with a slap of acerbic realism, stating through the voice of the narrator:

It'd be a nice story if I could say that our parade or even our victories change the world overnight, but truth's got an ugly way of killin' nice stories. The truth is that we came home to ignorance, bitterness, and somethin' called 'The Red Summer of 1919,' some of the worse racial violence America's ever seen. The truth is that our fight, and the fight of those who looked up to use a heroes, didn't end with the 'The War to End All Wars. (Brooks 235)

This ending to the text leaves the reader at a precipice of simultaneous hope and hopelessness. The men returned to an even more violent racial political climate and many more years of discrimination and prejudicial policy. While the 369th were recognized as American heroes in France, at home they were a quickly forgotten flash in the pan. Despite their outstanding achievements as a unit, they could not be promoted and were denied or offered limited employment and experienced increasingly discrimination because of their race upon return home.

It was not until 2003 that public recognition in the renaming of Harlem River Drive as "Harlem Hellfighters Drive" and the erecting of a monument to the unit in 2006 that this piece of history was publicly recognized to the same laud and appreciation as other non-colored units received after the War; even then the idea that posting a monument and renaming a street almost a century after the fact calls into the question the actual efficacy of the action. Again, this is another point that should be openly acknowledged and discussed with students for reinforcement.

The ending of the novel on this point of bleakness helps position the historical moment in African American history. Having students discuss and consider the why and how of the ending of Brooks' novel should provide a solid foundation for continued discourse of a variety of issues the book raises: military discrimination, double consciousness, black rage and the long term effects of racism on American culture. The text also dialogues on a meta level with our contemporary moment, asking for pause to celebrate and acknowledge moments of greatness and pride, but is also firmly rooted in the assertion that there is still much more progress that needs to be achieved.

Historical Background

The Paradox of Enlistment

African Americans have a long and proud history of serving and defending the United State of America, despite active denial of service by the government since the assembly of the Continental Congress. Crispus Attucks, the oft-unmentioned first casualty of the Revolutionary War was a black man. The 54th Massachusetts Infantry – most recently depicted in the star studded Hollywood film, *Glory* – valiantly fought to defend the sanctity of the Union until the bitter end. The history of African Americans in the Armed Forces is a long-standing legacy of courage and self-sacrifice. It is also necessary to note that this turbulent history is an intricate and nuanced struggle for civil rights, response to civic need and the failure our countries policies. While many brave men fought and earned respect as not African Americans, but just Americans, many more were systemically denied autonomy, promotion, equal pay or proper recognition. All the same, black men, and eventually black women, choose to selflessly protect our nation despite these discriminatory practices.

One historian suggests, “some saw military service as an opportunity” (Nelson 21). Many who enlisted viewed their enlistment as an optimistic chance to reach toward enfranchisement and equality in the social climate upon return home. Alternately, another suggestion that black soldiers felt the motivation to enlist in attempt to prove the self as worthy of citizenship (Nelson 21). Nelson describes that this issue was one that was not taken lightly, debated and discussed in various public forums where men gather, such as saloons, barbershops and in churches (20-21). The paradox of enlistment was one that had potential but at an ultimate cost: the willingness to sacrifice one’s life, and individual identity, for the collective cause, as insular and exclusive as it may be to a man of color. As described in the Anchor Text section above, Max Brooks’ graphic novel weighs these issues and the reasons for enlistment that the men considered as well.

The contradictory issue of African American’s willful participation in the defense of a nation that was formed under the premise that they were less than human (via the 3/5th clause in the Constitution), as well as a country that continued turn a blind eye to social atrocities such as lynching and systematic, deliberate segregation and disenfranchisement, is one worthy of careful consideration. Historically, since founding of this country, African American’s have volunteered to serve and safeguard their nation despite constant suppression and denial their personhood. Students should carefully read and annotate Chapter Two of Peter Nelson’s text to send home this point and draw conclusions as to why soldiers made this choice.

In a recent scholarly revision, Peter Nelson examines the 369th’s enlistment through a social-critical lens in which he explores many of these above described tensions. Additionally, Nelson identifies a “considerable resistance in white society as well as

within the military to the idea of arming large numbers of colored American men, training them, and giving them permission to kill, Huns” (22). The idea of an armed black man strikes fear into the heart of white Americans, eliciting historically traumatic memories such as Nat Turner’s Rebellion or slave rebellions in the West Indies. The military, despite its own desperate need for bodies, enforced regulation from a perspective of fear and reinforced negative stereotyping. This idea is one that continues up through the Second World War and military desegregation occurs only in 1948.

Despite all of these issues and obstacles, there is a long and proud legacy of participation in the armed forces by people of color. It is important to acknowledge the stories of heroism and bravery resound high above the lull of oppressive policy and rhetoric. It is as if regardless of the acknowledgement given by the general population, these enlistees who fight to defend our nation are American by choice of participation and are of the truest colors, which shine brighter than those more easily doled by out the distinction of American privilege.

A Brief History of the United States 369th Infantry Regiment

The United States 369th Infantry Regiment is also known as The Black Rattlers, The Men of Bronze and the Harlem Hellfighters. Absolutely embodying all of these titles, the 369th was given inferior supplies and training, passed off to the French and sent to the front line of World War I, and shocked the military administration when they came back so lauded and decorated. In addition to the achievements as a regiment, the men who made up this group were one of the most individually accomplished colored battalions in the history of the United States Armed Forces. Though detached and returned, the men saw themselves as “Americans on the battle field”, garnered reputation as the Hellfighters from Harlem and maintained a sense of nationalistic pride, all while fighting under the title of another army (Brooks). This insistence of American identity on the battlefield seems to run parallel to the struggles of the insistence on identity as an American with equal capability in the armed services as well.

Upon arrival in France, the black regiment was relegated to the role of stevedore. Stevedores were production brawn for the French army. One historian describes this assignment as “part of an army about which little is said because it does the rough, unskilled work; yet no group renders a more valiant service or contributes more to the success of an army than do these men” (Williams 138). Williams points out that the grunt work is the work which most directly contribute to military victory but is often the most mundane and gritty.

However, despite Williams effusive nod to the “valiant service” of this type of soldier, he goes on the mention that in France the word historically refers to “those who were physically or mentally unfit to be fighting men and they were looked upon as inferior to other soldiers” (139). There is extensive military documentation to support this

assignment as calculated and deliberate. This was common practice for colored battalions, directing them either to the factories or the front line.

The men were assigned as stevedores because the army needed “common hired hands” (S. Harris 157). Commander of the U.S. Forces, General John J. Pershing committed to a policy that included keeping black soldiers separate from white soldiers to abate any racial tension and keeping black soldiers off the battle field because “he simply did not trust their fighting ability” (S. Harris 157). Therefore, it was Pershing’s solution that the U.S. forces could “use them as laborers, and he wouldn’t have to worry about them. Muscle and blood, toil and sweat. Strong backs, weak minds.” (S. Harris 158). In a decision characteristic of the racial misconceptions and fear of the period, Pershing dissolved a unit that would become a significant contributor to the eventual successful summation of the war.

White soldiers bitterly resented the idea of integration with black soldiers, as Nelson discusses and is also illustrated in Brooks’ graphic novel in a vignette scene when the Hellfighters are posted in Texas. Intolerance and bigotry aided in Pershing’s release of the unit, which he planned only to work as menial task workers, and unwittingly opened an avenue for the Black Rattlers of Harlem to showcase their brute determination.

Pershing’s misstep was to the benefit of his allies in the French Armed Forces. Historian Bill Harris remarks: “Although the Americans were ambivalent about their black soldiers, the French knew exactly what they were getting, and they were pleased by the prospect” (32). The French had a long-standing history of using troops recruited from Africa, specifically Senegal and Sudan (B. Harris 32). The recruitment of black soldiers was commonplace in France and many of these units had garnered the dauntless reputation of being “in the thick of the toughest fighting in Europe since 1914” (B. Harris 32). The French were not blinded by the same deeply engrained institutionalized racism.

In a secretive turn over, described in Major Little’s battle memoir as a necessity to maintain covert locations of troops and keep information out of the hands of spies, the United State 369th Infantry Regiment became the Trois Cent Soixante Neuvieme, R. I. U.S. (143). The unit had been detached from the U.S. Army and renamed them “the 16th Division of the French Army” (Little 144). Little provides the following reflections:

We had no idea of any such state of affairs. We believed we were going to find our regiment in camp, waiting for us to complete its happiness...The commanding officer of the detachment, with an air of nonchalance which he did not feel, stepped to the front on to do his part, looked about, and found nothing there but – France. (143)

Upon being detached, the newly formed 16th Division began a series of battles in which their tenacity and unyielding brutal force helped the unit to be distinguished during and

after the war. Little also poetically describes this transfer of the unit in the hopeful terms of renewal: “Like the Phoenix of mythology it [the 369th] had risen again in greater glory from the ashes of its pyre” (143). Unbeknownst to the top military officials promulgating segregation and stereotyping, the unit the administrators saw fit only for laboring would muster their character to become one of the most decorated units in the entire war. The Hellfighters proved themselves again and again in stories of sacrifice and valor. A number of lives were lost from the unit, however, each man fought on for those who perished with renewed vigor.

The unit is memorialized as having never lost a foot of ground or a soldier taken as prisoner; the first battalion to reach and hold down the Rhine River (a strategic stronghold); and, by way of exemplary resilience, Little notes that the Hellfighters had been “under fire for 191 days” (349). The U.S. forces abandoned the 369th, only to reappear in the end days of their reassignment. Major Little recounts: “In our period of service in France, until this time at Le Mans, when we were preparing to go home to be mustered out of the military service to return to civil life, we had had no instructor from the American Army visit us” (349). In France during a ceremony of epic proportions, the officers were decorated with the Croix de Guerre, 170 men total, including a unit citation (Nelson 205). It is remarked that this ceremony served as an authentic validation; he states: “Our men had tried to make history of honor of their race; and their efforts had been recognized” (Little 341). Similarly, France recognized the Men of Bronze as exemplary soldiers; would their country do the same?

Upon return to the U.S. the unit joined in on a massive parade on February 17, 1919. The parade began at 5th Avenue and proceeded all the way up into Harlem. Little gleefully recounts a change in formation upon entering the streets of Harlem, followed by chaotic reunions with friends and family in which “for the final mile or more of our parade about every fourth soldier of the ranks had a girl upon his arm --- and we marched through Harlem signing and laughing” (362). In *Men of Bronze*, those Hellfighters who were still living at the time of the filming of the documentary recount similarly fond memories of camaraderie and nationalistic pride. While this break in decorum and formation may have been unprecedented and certainly not in line with the strict adherence to order of the United States Army, the major rightfully points out: “It may not have been good military business, but it was great human business” (362). In this moment of celebration and admiration, the human spirit triumphs even the most deeply engrained etiquettes. Historian Bill Harris notes:

The triumphal return of the 369th Regiment to New York in 1919 was the first time in American history that nearly the whole country sat up and took notice for what African Americans could accomplish on the battlefield. The Hellfighters had been denied the right to fight together under their own American flag, and that, too, was a first in American’s military history, although the fact is that many

hundred of Negroes had fought and died for their country long before the American flag existed. (133)

The Harlem Hellfighters joined the ranks of men before then that fought for freedom and equality and were then forgotten by the country they sought to defend. Brooks' graphic novel, historical revisions of military history, such as Nelson's and Bill Harris' books and teacher tools such as this unit seek to provide access to the pluralism of American experiences, however, it is necessary to posit to students the lack of immediacy and the effects of that legacy as well. This information can be used by students to interrogate military practices, social norms and expectations of the era as well as the continued idea of conflicting intersectionality of identity that, even in our contemporary era, is an ongoing point of contention for many African Americans.

Outside of the victory parade in which the 369th were among a multitude of participants, no special recognition or aid was provided for any of the soldiers upon return home. In fact, the summer follow their return was filled with racial violence and veterans, both black and white, were largely forgotten, left unemployed, and many with injuries, both physical and psychological on a scale that had never before been realized. The unfortunate reality of the return for most Hellfighters was to a country still inherently bound in systemic racial tensions. Sentiments of exclusion and blatant segregation in many parts of the country still haunted the African American soldier. Despite these struggles, many of members of the Infantry Unit became notable in their own right.

Notable Figures in the 369th

Lieutenant James Reese Europe

Lieutenant James Europe used music to uplift the spirits of New York's 15th, later the U.S. 369th. Before enlisting, Europe moved North from Alabama with his brother to look for work in New York during the first wave of population shift of African Americans after Emancipation, which became known as The Great Migration.

Upon his arrival, Europe found success, participating in contests at the infamous Savoy Ballroom, before gaining notice of the wealthy, entertaining types looking for exciting or exotic performances at their highbrow events. Quickly assembling a quartet to play at upper class events such as birthdays and private dances, Europe and his band became staple at the most affluent New York society events.

Europe was a pioneer in his time, attempting to "discover and create authentic African American music" (Nelson 10). Europe's decision to join the army during World War I was fueled by "a belief that Harlem needed a strong institution for the training of young men" (Nelson 12). Perhaps Europe's idealism and the reality of his assignment upon enlistment are not congruent, however, in his own life Europe had navigated himself

toward success in a society where bigotry prevailed and still he thrived. The same would be the case when Europe felt the touch of nationalistic pride that led him to enlist. A leader by example, Europe enrolled, bringing much of his meticulous nature (most notable in his standards for grooming of his band) and love of entertaining others to the ranks of the Harlem Hellfighters. He believed in playing music that his fellow soldiers would enjoy and connect with, most notably ragtime and jazz.

Europe dissolved color lines with his music and his band, helping soldiers and people of many races to bond of the joy his music brought. Killed in a knife fight shortly after his return to New York, Europe was the first black man to be given a public funeral in New York City (B. Harris, Nelson).

Horace Pippin

Horace Pippin is a self-taught painter, originally born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, but raised in Goshen, New York by his mother (Nelson 16). Pippin was recruited to attend art school at the age of fifteen but declined the scholarship because he needed to work in order to help support his mother (Nelson 16). His talent and love of creation followed him throughout his childhood, and when he enlisted, he brought with him “notebooks, pencils and crayons” (Nelson 16). As a painter, Pippin’s works focus on themes such as racial injustice, peace and equality. His paintings are on display around the world and Pippin is included in collections showcasing American voices.

Additionally, Pippin kept a journal and sketched frequently during his time with the Hellfighters and his writings are an excellent source of primary source documentation of African American voices from the war. Several of these diaries and some of his letters are available for view the Smithsonian website. Because Pippin is from a suburb of Philadelphia, many of his works can be found in and around the Philadelphia metropolitan region, however, for those in further reaches of the globe, many of his works are available for viewing electronically online through various museums’ holdings.

Henry “Black Death” Johnson

Henry Johnson famously fought off an onslaught of dozens of German soldiers in the trenches using only a knife. He was awarded France’s highest military honor and this honor was the first ever given to any American service man (Little 20). Max Brooks, Major Little and Bill Harris both describe Johnson’s harrowing victory, losing his partner at the outset, being shot in the arm and wounded twice more, while fending off Germans (B. Harris 201). In interviews and essays after his heroism, Johnson repeatedly stressed the idea of American identity as unifying and a base from which all citizens can share and find common ground. Johnson’s assertions indirectly address the melding of the double consciousness, described above, and it seems, that at least in his public persona, he believed himself to be a patriotic American. Detachment of the unit was a formality in the

engagement of war, the men, by their accounts were still fighting as American soldiers (*Men of Bronze*).

Commanding Colonel Hayward wrote a letter detailing Johnson's heroism, which was read into congressional record, and for a fleeting moment, "African Americans now had their hero" (B. Harris 201). For some people in his community, in that moment Johnson helped to realize the dream of equal recognition that enlistment promised.

Strategies

Analyzing Academic Sources – Primary and Secondary Readings

Students will be provided with selected informational chapters, NPR podcasts, general articles and primary source documents such as military records, letters and photos to establish historical context and interpretation of the events described in the graphic novel.

This multimedia approach works in an effort to appeal to students who learn via different modalities. Students will be guided to connect the documents provided toward identification of bias or partiality in the narrative structure and analysis of the accuracy of depiction of the primary and secondary source evidence in the presentation of the graphic novel anchor text and the documentary, *Men of Bronze*, in their summative assessment, the essay. Students will also use this compendium of information to inform reflection journal responses and participant in a writing workshop in order to write an argumentative essay described in Classroom Activities below.

Graphic Novels in the Classroom

Since their introduction into society almost a century ago, comics are often considered children's reading material. However, in the increasingly multi-sensory world we live in, standard black-and-white typewritten text is not necessarily the best available way to express a concept or narrative. Since 1987, graphic novels have slowly crept into realm of possibility within a mainstream curriculum. It is a well-known fact that Art Spiegelman's *Maus* changed what comics were. The publication of *Maus* 1987 signaled the public recognition of a genre that was alive, albeit underground, for decades prior.

Literary devices, theme, plot and other hallmarks of "English Class" are present in the same capacity as a standard novel and often the pictures lend to an additional level of complexity that must be deciphered. *The Harlem Hellfighters* revisits and retells the complicated history and politics of our country in a way that is understandable to middle-school students and above. Because the content is accessible to young adults means only that it is written in such a manner that it is universally understandable, not that the text is not appropriate for adult or college readers. Instead the appeal of the graphic novel form is

that the content counterbalances the simplicity of the language and “help” the reader receives from the pictures.

Teaching graphic novels in conjunction with other various texts provides students with the best possible type of humanities education. The more modalities of content students are prepared to decode and figure out in different shapes and sizes, the more success students will be a problem-solving in future classes as well as in life. The use of graphic novels in classroom supports this non-traditional approach to literature.

Literacy through Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking

The Pennsylvania Common Core Standards have four categories: (1) Reading, (2) Writing, (3) Listening and (4) Speaking. This unit endeavors to satisfy all four with a diversity of activities described below. Students will practice reading through investigation of the graphic novel, *The Harlem Hell Fighters*, and a secondary informational source: Chapter 2 “The Argument” of Peter Nelson’s *A More Unbending Battle*. Students will practice writing through reading logs, text to world/self/text reflection journals, and an argumentative paper, created during a writing workshop, described below in Classroom Activities. Additionally, students will listen to a NPR podcast and screen the documentary, *Men of Bronze*, which includes footage of interviews with some of the soldiers of the 369th. Lastly, speaking will be reinforced in the peer-editing sessions that are part of the writing workshop.

Classroom Activities

In order to teach this graphic novel and achieve the objectives effectively, I recommend the teacher introduce students to the historical period and the direction of inquiry first through a brief introductory lecture using the Historical Background information provide above. Then students will continue the anticipatory set with either individual or entire group listening of the podcast, followed by diving into reading the graphic novel (independently or in literature circles) through the segmentation suggested below. After students read the sections and answer the connection journal, the teacher can provide further point of inquiry, as students need direction via further questioning, discussion, journaling or other preferred modalities.

Before beginning the Writing Workshop, students will view the *Men in Bronze* documentary for further perspective. Each teacher should best determine the level of engagement and note-taking students should perform while viewing the film. For older students, simply watching and/or jotting information about key terms is more than sufficient, whereas younger students may benefit from more structured note taking or direct questions in order to focus their energy and comprehension.

The two activity sets below are by no means comprehensive teaching lesson plans, but rather, suggested activities to bookend the work students will complete during the course of this unit of study. Additionally, in an African American History classroom, Du Bois' concept of double consciousness should be one that students understand well prior to the outset of this unit. If this is not the case, the teacher should carve out a day or so to present a mini-lesson or lecture on the idea to guide students through unpacking many of the ideas that connect the themes of this unit.

Activity Set One: Reading Logs and Connection Journals

Students will engage in two types of writing tasks while reading the graphic novel text that is the center of this unit. These activities help students to improve comprehension and retain character and narrative details in order to strengthen their analysis and evaluation of the text. Rigor is a result of moving students in their thinking from identification such as who/what to critical thinking domains, which instead respond to why or how. These activities seek to create this type of rigor while students are reading, as a direct push back to the standard chapter response questions that promote very little higher-order thinking.

For each of the activities, I envision that the book would be divided into five assigned reading sections: (1) pages 1-60; (2) 61-130; (3) 131-187; (4) 188 - 235; (5) Author's Note and Historical Background. These sections have been selected because maximize natural breaks in the narrative to make reading over multiple days feel seamless.

Depending on the number of books available and the type of students one teaches, reading could be completed in class, either independently or with a partner, or, alternately, students could read at home in preparation for extended writing and discussion time in class. Regardless if students read and home or in class, each will complete a series of reading logs and least one reflection journal for each of the sections

Activity A: Reading Logs

Reading logs are a simple strategy to help students track plot and character progress, important details and unfamiliar vocabulary. The most basic way to assemble these charts is to have students fold a sheet of notebook paper in half and label two columns with appropriate focus topics such as: event/importance; new word/definition sentence example; character/flaws and strengths. Depending on time available and learning level of the student, I may ask students to complete one, two or all three of the topics outlined as they read. This is a useful for strategic skill focus and also differentiation for above or below grade level learners. For those teachers with access to technology, this activity can be augmented by the use of Google Docs and the use of Google Classroom to create chart templates and record evidence electronically.

Activity B: Connection Journals

Connection journals encourage higher-order thinking skills by requiring students to evaluate, analyze and connect the text to their life, the world or another text. I suggest one journal per assigned chunk of text, outlined above. The journal prompts for each of the five sections are as follows:

Section One – In a few paragraphs, examine the motivations and conflicting issues of African Americans enlisting in the Armed Services. Use evidence from the graphic novel and also the informational text chapter by Nelson.

Section Two – What are the “rules” of war that the Hellfighters begin to understand as they arrived in Europe? How are the engagements of war and the engagements of racial etiquette entangled here? Explain with text detail.

Section Three – In a paragraph or two, discuss the tensions of race that runs through this section. Give analysis of specific evidence from the graphic novel.

Section Four – What emotions/feelings does the final section elicit in the reader? How does the text attempt to achieve this response? Reflect on how the ideal versus the reality of military enlistment for African Americans.

Section Five – After reviewing the end sections, Author’s Note and Historical Background, how do these documents increase the depth of your knowledge about the U.S. 369th? Do you believe the graphic novel provides an accurate portrayal of the raw facts presented in the Historical Background? Why or why not?

Activity Set Two: Writing Workshop

The writing workshop is a method to encourage students slow down and focus on writing for a set number of days. In my classroom a complete writing workshop, from brainstorming to final submission, typically takes about seven 45-minute class periods. Described below are the phases of the writing workshop: drafting, peer editing and final submission.

For this unit, the writing workshop student will choose from two prompts. The prompts are as follows:

Using at least three of the resources presented in class, discuss one of the following topics -

a) The paradox of enlistment and military discrimination in World War I

OR

b) The struggle to form a cohesive American identity for African Americans during this time period

Activity A: Drafting from an Outline

After introducing the prompt and writing expectations, students will briefly brainstorm their own ideas, text examples, connections, etc. Then, students should be presented with a model outline. Picking a similar type of text and using examples to complete and outline and model essay for students to work from, as an exemplar, is effective. Paragraph guidelines, breakdowns and formatting depend on the teacher's writing instruction method/curriculum. The most important skill in this activity is the idea that writing should be planned and then draft from implementation of that plan, followed by review and revision.

Activity B: Peer Editing

In the last few years I have actively reflected on my practice of teaching writing to my ninth-grade students and have given many different techniques trial runs to find the most comprehensive way to reach all of my students. This style of peer editing has become a standard in my classroom and an activity that students regularly recall to be helpful to them and a task that they find engaging and enjoyable.

After walking students through the drafting process with model topic sentences and paragraphs, students receive a round of feedback from their peers to improve any elements of their writing before the instructor assesses it. Peer-editing can last one or two days, depending on both the number of days available within each teacher's school demands and also the needs and achievement levels of the students. During this period, while students are conferencing with one another, the teacher can pull out any students who are particularly struggling for some personalization instruction.

Procedurally, students come to class prepared with a revised rough draft of their essay. In timed rounds of 10 minutes, students will read each one another's work and provide feedback on a teacher-generated checklist of focus areas. I usually vary the points of focus depending on what stage of the year we are in and what issues I have seen repeatedly recur in students writing recently. If the instructor has access to technology, the ideal way to do this type of work is by having students share documents with one another and provide comments electronically within Google Docs. The low-tech option is as simple as a handwritten copy of the essay and a supply of post-it notes for students to adhere onto their peers work.

This method gives students a chance to get feedback in a low-risk interaction, allows students to see multiple examples of others writing and also satiates the need for socialization that students genuinely yearn for and need in an academic and meaningful way.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Brooks, Max, and Caanan White. *The Harlem Hellfighters*. 1st ed. NY: Broadway, NY.

This graphic novel presents an exquisitely illustrated fictionalized first-person account of the valor and skill of the Harlem Hellfighters. Commentary on the racial tension and connection to the larger social movements for liberty and equality at home provide a nuanced presentation of a emerging class of narratives on the plurality of the soldiers that serve and defense the United States.

Harris, Bill. *The Hellfighters of Harlem: African American Soldiers Who Fought for the Right to Fight for Their Country*. New York: Carroll & Graf Pub., 2002.

Harris' text traces the interwoven histories of the 369th and the fight for civil rights in the U. S. The history of the men after they returned is given particular attention and the text provides a full picture of the people and public climate of the era.

Harris, Stephen L. *Harlem's Hell Fighters: The African American 369th Infantry in World War I*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2003.

Stephen Harris provides a well-researched and comprehensive contemporary history of the regiment and its men. Of the books listed in this bibliography this is the most densely packed with fact and meticulous detail.

Lewis, J. Patrick, and Gary Kelley. *Harlem Hellfighters*.

An illustrated children's book narrating the valor of the Harlem Hellfighters. Illustrations are interspersed with significant dates and poetic treatment of events and movements of the 369th. Useful for differentiation.

Little, Arthur West. *From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers*. New York: Covici Friede, 1936.

One of the first publications about the bravery of the 369th, this sometimes dated text provides an useful snapshot into the attitudes and presentation of African Americans within a decade of the Hellfighters victory and decoration in France.

Men of Bronze. Dir. William Miles. Films Inc., 1978.

A documentary film highlighting the men and their triumphs during World War I, including interview with members of the 369th still living at the time of filming. Available for free to stream and download via Internet Archive.

Nelson, Peter. *A More Unbending Battle: The Harlem Hellfighters' Struggle for Freedom in WWI and Equality at Home*. Basic Civitas, 2009.

Nelson, like Bill Harris, connects the themes of racial inequity at home and military superiority abroad. Nelson's second Chapter, "The Argument", provides an excellent breakdown of the metaphorical dual-edged sword that is black involvement in U.S. Military pursuits, as well as political voices from both sides during the First World War.

Williams, Charles H. *Negro Soldiers in World War I: The Human Side*. New York: AMS, 1970.

Charles H. Williams, more famous for his creation of the first traveling dance team from Hampton Institute, is also the writer of a handful of histories of black people during the first half of the 20th century. Originally published in 1923, this quasi-scientific investigation provides insight more into the attitudes of society at the time. Williams attempts to preempt and address issue of racial misconceptions and stereotypes in order to provide an accurate and through picture of the treatment of black forces in the military.

Wang, Hansi Lo. "The Harlem Hellfighters: Fighting Racism In The Trenches of WWI". *Code Switch*. NPR. Retrieved 1 Mar 2016.

This NPR program is an informative under 5 minute summary of the Harlem Hellfighters. This resource is ideal for struggling readers or as a teaser/preface to unit. Transcript of interview and audio are provided on the website.