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or perseverance from his vantage point. I only hope that my ailing mother, Agnes Greene, will be as proud of this book as she was of my first, oh so many years ago.

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I thank my colleague and friend Jeff Sammons, professor of history at New York University, for inviting me to join him in writing the history of the 15th/369th Regiment. The book has certainly benefited from our complementary research foci in African American and military history and our consequent exchange of ideas. Jeff essentially did most of the research for the book based on sources in American archives, whereas I added the research in French archives. The result is a study of the famed Regiment that is based on more extensive archival research in the United States and France than previous histories of the 15th/369th.

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## HARLEM'S RATTLETS AND THE GREAT WAR



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## *Introduction*

It is only fitting that this book begins and essentially ends with the first combat hero of the 369th Regiment, Henry Johnson, for no single member is more closely identified with its history and reputation and also its mythology. Shortly after the war, a reporter for the *New York Age* asked the little sergeant to describe the events of May 15, 1918, in which he and Neadom Roberts repelled an attack by a German raiding party.<sup>1</sup> According to the article, Johnson recalled that a French lieutenant had warned him to move back from his outpost because of a possible enemy raid. In response, he proclaimed, "I'm an American, and I never retreat." These words bear a striking similarity to those attributed earlier to Col. William Hayward, the Regiment's first commander, a white man. As reported by the same paper, when ordered to retreat by a French general during an assault, Hayward instead led a charge and defiantly replied, "My men never retire. They go forward or they die."<sup>2</sup>

Whether either man really said what has been ascribed to him can never be known for sure. In Johnson's case, the *Age* more than likely embellished or fabricated a story and unquestionably intended to contribute to the race's newest and perhaps greatest icon by representing him as a quintessential lone hero. Yet, by appropriating the pithy retort of his white leader and by fixing his identity as "American," the paper used Johnson to signify black leadership of the Regiment, in deed if not in rank, as yet more justification for black people's claim to martial valor as a prerequisite to full and unqualified citizenship.<sup>3</sup> For better or worse and certainly beyond Johnson's control, serving as an instrument for others' voices and

purposes became the ultimate statement of this seemingly reticent man's life and death.

However, the usefulness of these utterances and the identity of their sources transcend concerns with factual accuracy. These mythic pronouncements reportedly out of those heroic mouths speak to a larger representation of a Regiment that by most accounts never lost a man to capture or a foot of ground that it had taken. Its adopted symbol, the rattlesnake, reinforced that record and simultaneously reflected and contributed to the standard the Regiment set for undaunted courage and tenacity. "The Rattlers" was the appellation the men gave themselves and embraced. The rattlesnake identified these citizen-soldiers with a Revolutionary War icon of indigenous power, defiance, and independence frequently associated with Benjamin Franklin's attacks on the Crown and indelibly captured in the motto of the Gadsden flag, "Don't Tread on Me." No one could provoke it with impunity: "Nemo me impune lacesset." The men clearly adopted the meaning and power of the symbol and understood its relation to their self-identification and role. By appropriating *the* American snake, they indicated their readiness to fight battles against internal as well as external foes.

Thus, joining the Regiment did not signal loyalty to country as much as it served as a means to an end, namely, full citizenship for self and, by extension, the "race." These men did not fight the war to make the world safe for democracy; instead, they fought to convince America to live up to its democratic promise. The nickname that endures, however, is "Harlem Hellfighters," probably because it was alliterative, more sensational, otherworldly, and assigned from without, not by the French or Germans but most likely by the American press. Still, like most myths, ideas that stand over facts, the name survives as the result of its racial value and its frequent reinforcement by scholars, popularizers, politicians, and especially those associated with the Regiment today. The absence of this nickname in this book's title signals our commitment to telling the story right even at the risk of alienating those who have embraced the term and associated the Regiment with it as part of a mythmaking and/or tradition-preserving practice. Our purpose is not to invoke the familiar or to confirm conventional wisdom and certainly not to perpetuate and reinforce myths.

Moreover, the book's subtitle gestures to far more than the Regiment's combat experience because the word *undaunted* conveys the idea of moving forward and never giving up, thereby capturing the essence of the organization's protracted and difficult struggle for recognition and survival. Before the end of the nineteenth century, New York's citizens had initiated and pressed the fight for an all-black National Guard infantry unit. Against

overwhelming odds, they succeeded. Even in its long gestation period, the 15th/369th Regiment had been nourished and tempered by the fierce determination of its proponents to secure an institution that would counter the horrendous stereotypes of blacks, especially men, as indolent, ignorant, immoral, violent, and cowardly “coons” and instead signify them as ready for and deserving of full and equal citizenship. Thus, a never say die/never give up spirit and record have always marked the Regiment and its first real hero, Charles Ward Fillmore, who overcame personal disgrace, internecine power struggles, and fierce external opposition to keep the regiment campaign alive for six long and torturous years, from his initial involvement in 1910 to official authorization in 1916.

The history of the 15th New York National Guard/369th Regiment in the pages that follow is largely a World War I-era narrative. Yet, as will become clear, this Regiment’s story begins well before the war, and its influence and impact continue to resonate, albeit in modulated tones, to this very day. A ride up the Harlem River Drive reveals a relatively new exit sign at 135th and Madison reading “369th Harlem Hellfighters’ Drive,” courtesy of a New York State Department of Transportation ceremonial redesignation of the parkway stretching from 131st Street north to 145th Street. A few blocks west at Fifth Avenue and 142nd and 143rd Streets stands the massive 369th Armory, a stunning, living monument to the men and women who campaigned for an all-black National Guard regiment and to those who fought and died in the service of their country. The armory, built in stages between 1921 and 1933, houses a hall of fame dedicated to the history of this proud unit.<sup>4</sup> The centerpiece of that hall is a replica of the monument erected in 1997 in Séchault, France, honoring the Regiment’s successful assault on the German stronghold in that tiny village in the Champagne region.

Each year in May, the 369th Veterans Association marches up Fifth Avenue to honor the memory of the Regiment and to remind the community of the treasure it helped to supply and support.<sup>5</sup> This lasting significance has found added reinforcement in a recent spate of books, essays, documentaries, and Internet representations as well as in the activities of the 369th Historical Society and in ongoing efforts to secure the Medal of Honor for Henry Johnson. Perhaps no finer tribute to the Regiment’s lasting significance could be given than that by Toni Morrison in her 1992 novel *Jazz*, in which the homecoming parade of the fighting “three six nine” filled protagonist Joe Trace with so much pride that it “split his heart in two.”<sup>6</sup>

Possibly the most revealing measure of the Old 15th’s lasting appeal and value, however, can be found in its symbolic call to service in 1943. Almost twenty-five years after the Regiment triumphantly returned home and

marched up Fifth Avenue and at the same time that its successor, the 369th, returned from action in the Pacific theater of war, Hollywood released *Stormy Weather*, a film that reprised some of that notable occasion for the ostensible viewing pleasure of thousands. The Regiment's role in the film may have done more to etch the 15th/369th in popular memory than any other treatment. Yet, even that seemingly innocuous portrayal almost failed to materialize, as social and political turmoil gave pause to Hollywood executives and federal officials.<sup>7</sup> Sad to say, had the decision to withhold release prevailed, the memory of the Regiment might have been the better for it. Despite much contemporary and more recent critical commentary about the film, short shrift has been given to the film's (mis)treatment of the 15th/369th Infantry and how it failed to do justice to a deserving organization and, by extension, to all blacks. The film trivialized the performance and role of the individual soldier of the 15th, and it almost certainly contributed to a distorted history of the Regiment that has influenced significantly many subsequent treatments of it to this day. There can be little doubt that it and other war films of the time were meant to correspond to the War Department's visions of and policies toward black combatants. World War II for blacks, irrespective of the Double V campaign, was like déjà vu, which points to how connected these events were and how significant the first was to all that followed as part of the long freedom struggle. Only recently has World War I received historical justice and an effective counternarrative emerged, yet it resides most forcefully and successfully in works that address the broader context of blacks in the Great War, as will be discussed.

The summer of 1943 was an extraordinarily troubled time in America. While United States and its Allies battled the Axis powers for world dominance and perhaps humanity's future, palpable racial tension threatened to tear the nation apart from within. For example, the national defense industry's discrimination against blacks provoked a march on Washington movement in the middle of a war campaign that targeted fascism and nazism. Some suggested, in jest, that Adolf Hitler was giving racism a bad name and making Americans look like hypocrites. Race riots erupted in Detroit, Harlem, and Los Angeles, but they were only the most visible expressions of smoldering discontent on the part of blacks, who responded forcefully to the massive oppression and repression meted out by white individuals and government authorities.

The domestic press reported racially inflected and motivated lynchings, shootings, and labor disputes throughout the country. Black soldiers occupied the center of many such encounters—mostly as victims, sometimes as defenders, and rarely as aggressors. Civil rights activists protested Jim Crow policies and conditions within the nation's military bases. In fact,

Robert Weaver, one member of Franklin Roosevelt's so-called black cabinet, concluded that resentment toward discrimination in the armed services was the "primary, fundamental cause" of the Harlem riot.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, not long before that event, the 369th, according to political scientist Daniel Kryder, contributed to the Camp Stewart, Georgia, incident on June 9 in which black soldiers ambushed white military police (MPs), killing one and wounding four, in response to horrible physical conditions, the segregation of the unit's officers, and military police brutality.<sup>9</sup>

In the midst of these threats to "national unity," executives at 20th Century Fox apparently agonized over a decision to release the all-black musical *Stormy Weather* in part because of a clash between zoot-suit-wearing Mexican youths and American sailors that exploded into a full-fledged battle as young black males, who also sported the contraband fashion, joined the fight. The large-scale violence that followed in Los Angeles became known as the Zoot Suit Riot, named for a signifier of disloyal and disruptive excess, the zoot suit, when the national mood and government authorities and their deputies demanded blind obedience and severe material sacrifice. This particular event most certainly alarmed studio executives, who saw the potential for subversion in the scenes featuring a zoot-suited and jive-talking Cab Calloway, a personification of that transgressive style. They may even have feared that this intended tribute to William "Bojangles" Robinson, known most for his safe on-screen appearances with Shirley Temple, and the showcasing of the greatest black talent in a patriotic salute might be received unfavorably by a seemingly restless and volatile black population, demanding changes to the status quo.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, black leaders, especially Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had been pressuring Hollywood and the government to employ more blacks in the movie industry and give them more "dignified," even "human," roles. Despite his opposition to the musical as the appropriate genre for properly changing the image of blacks in film and, by extension, in the larger society, White, as well as blacks from all political sectors, praised the studio for resisting pressure to withdraw the film. Wanting better from motion picture executives in the future, White curried favor with the image makers by claiming that such conflicts required "affirmative prevention" and not the elimination of blacks from the screen to avoid giving offense. Unfortunately, only the film's beginning and end seemed to have held much promise for contributing to the improvement of the black image and then ever so briefly.<sup>11</sup>

The film opens with its view of adoring and lovable children dancing with an avuncular black man on the porch of a spacious and supposedly

charming country home. Everything about the imagery, from the bucolic setting to the neatly dressed and coiffed children to the debonair yet kindly “Uncle Bill” (Bojangles Robinson), is intended to suggest material and transcendent success. The man and the children seem to embody the availability of the American dream for all even amid rigid racial segregation. The children are not just willing and attentive listeners to a revered man’s tales, they also play a pivotal role in the film’s message. They represent the future, they validate the film as family entertainment, and their presence underscores the absence of Bill’s own children. The time is the early 1940s, and the scene implies that the only missing piece to complete this utopian and perhaps unintentionally artificial existence is not an integrated society but a female companion for Uncle Bill.<sup>12</sup>

As the children clamor for the popular and respected uncle figure to regale them with tales of his life, we soon learn why such an attractive and well-to-do man lives alone. Nonetheless, it is what that man was and did some quarter century before that supposedly has profound historical significance for the children and untold observers. That story unfolds through the pages of a magazine recognizing “the magnificent contribution of the colored race to the entertainment of the world.” Numerous dedications grace the publication, one of which reads: “‘Jim Europe would have been proud of you.’ Signed: Noble Sissle, Ex-Drum Major.”<sup>13</sup>

Predictably, the children want to know about Jim Europe, whose untimely death shortly after the war goes unmentioned. Uncle Bill tells them that Jim led the greatest band in the greatest regiment in the world. As proof of the latter’s greatness, he cites the 191 days the Regiment served “under fire” and the regimental Croix de Guerre it earned. As Uncle Bill nostalgically recalls the cheering crowds and waving flags during the victory parade in 1918 (the year of the parade was incorrectly cited), a flashback, the objectified memory of the man filtered through the children’s mind’s eye, transports the film audience to the awe-inspiring event in which hundreds of armed men march, in tight formation and lockstep, up Fifth Avenue in New York City. This impressive scene comes from actual footage of the unprecedented and historic victory parade of February 17, 1919, by the 369th Regimental Infantry United States—the moment that, David Levering Lewis maintains, heralded the start of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> Suddenly, this magnificent sight gives way to jarring cuts in visuals and mood from a panoramic documentary cinematography to studio-shot images of the band, especially two drummers, Bill Williamson (an imperceptibly younger Uncle Bill) and his “promoting” friend Gabriel Tucker (Dooley Wilson). During a break in marching, Gabe casts aside military discipline



and plans postparade activities by searching through an address book for contact information on desirable women he should invite to and impress at the gala dance later that night. The huge drum, which requires two men to carry it and which seems more appropriate for a circus than a military band, reads: "Jim Europe's 15th New York Infantry Band." Among other things, it marks Bill and Gabe, central figures of the film, as noncombat soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

The next scene cuts to the site of the evening's festivities, where a large banner on a public hall announces, "Welcome Home 15th Regiment." A chauffeur-driven limousine arrives and catches the attention of two young black male onlookers. Obviously impressed by the style and class of such an entrance, one of them speculates that "it must be General Pershing." The other replies, "Can't be; General Pershing is a blond." Then, Bill Williamson and his "running buddy" from the band, Gabriel Tucker, exit the car. The veiled racial reference to Pershing is as close as the film comes to showing or mentioning whiteness in this all-black pseudofantasy.<sup>16</sup>

Inside, Lt. Jim Europe (Ernest Whitman) leads a dance band as soldiers and their awestruck dates "cut the rug." When Selina Rogers (Lena Horne) greets Lieutenant Europe and asks to meet her brother's friend, Bill Williamson, Europe quickly locates him and calls his subordinate to attention; he introduces Bill to Selina, the sister of his war-hero buddy Clem Rogers, who is the conveniently missing member of the "Three Musketeers of the AEF." Bill presents Selina with a Croix de Guerre that Clem was awarded for "bravery"—something he wanted her to have. Before he can explain its meaning, the scene quickly shifts to the comic relief and distraction provided by the trivial interplay of Gabe with his date. When the scene returns to Bill and Selina, she thanks him for telling her about Clem. Effortlessly, this seemingly lighthearted musical reveals nothing about how Clem fought and presumably died.

Selina then pins the medal to her dress, just above the heart, and wears it while dancing with Bill and then singing "No Two Ways about Love." Had the medal been American, its wearing by Selina would have been a violation of military regulations. Instead, her action, which seemingly honors the award, actually undermines its value.<sup>17</sup> First, it transforms or reduces a medal for bravery into a shining symbol of sibling bonding. Second, it shows how a foreign medal can have different treatment and consequently different meaning and worth than an American equivalent. Moreover, the decision to display the medal on a black woman's chest suggests an intentional displacement of ownership out of a black male frame. Last, Selina's unselfconscious wearing of the medal, which most "respectable" women would have considered inappropriate and presumptuous, possibly marks

her as a usurper of masculine prerogatives—a transgression that requires eventual correction.

Meanwhile, Gabe, who has barely more than \$5 to his name, tries to impress the film's obligatory Sapphire figure—an overweight, opportunistic, gaudy, garrulous, shallow, and overbearing female character—with his pseudocosmopolitanism and affected savoir faire, which he supposedly acquired in France. The transforming effect of foreign service for him entails a fondness for the finest French champagne, big cigars, and excessive pretense—none of which he can sustain adequately as a bootblack (his not yet revealed occupation). Yet, the film's blatant misogyny and play to black female stereotypes even elevates Gabe, a lovable rogue, above a female character who manages to reveal him for what he is but who cannot discern what she has uncovered through her incredible denseness, gullibility, and loquacity.

The much more reserved, modest, and unambitious Bill, instantly smitten and inspired by Selina, has only two desires: to make this nubile beauty his wife and to achieve money and fame as a dancer. He vows not to return to New York until “he gets to be somebody,” which, in the film's logic, suggests his service with the 15th counted for nothing more than the “three square meals a day” it afforded him. All of this imagery and representation appears unmistakably similar to the white press's coverage of the real parade and the subsequent festivities, as will be detailed in chapter 13.

Bill returns to his native South, where he bales cotton, works and dances on riverboats, and plays any role he can, from dancer to waiter to cook to bartender, in a small Memphis nightclub while looking for the big break. After much spatial, comedic, dramatic, romantic, and aesthetic movement, Bill, in a happy-ever-after ending, becomes an international stage and screen star and eventually wins back his distant, strong-willed, fiercely independent, hard-to-keep woman, who—after taking the “city of sin” by storm, à la Josephine Baker, and retracing Bill's steps in France—finally realizes that without her man, “there is no sun up in the sky,” only *Stormy Weather*. In one fell swoop, the film has the distant, urbane, and career-oriented Selina realize her errant ways and apparently agree to accept the rightful place of a woman as helpmate to the man and mother of his children in the comfort of a country/suburban dream house. The film's ending suggests that, together, they will perpetuate both the cult of domesticity and the antebellum idyllic that Bill, the ideal black man, personifies. Thus, the film deftly steers the audience from the rightful place of blacks to that of women.

This bewildering and bothering, if not bewitching, thinly veiled biopic of Robinson and backstage musical more than anything reveals Holly-



wood's conflicted efforts to respond to pressures from blacks, especially the NAACP, as well as the Office of War Information to represent black actors and entertainers more favorably. That these pressures peaked at the start of World War II explains, in part, the film's multiple and fragmented plotting, to say nothing, according to cinema scholar Thomas Cripps, of the incompatibility of the propagandists' visions in Washington and Hollywood with those of black leadership.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, most black contemporary critics welcomed the film. A headline in the *Amsterdam News* read 'STORMY WEATHER' SIGNALS NEW ERA. The paper touted the movie as proof that nothing was wrong "with Negro pictures or Negroes in pictures that money can't cure."<sup>19</sup> Ted Yates, entertainment writer for the *New York Age*, called *Stormy Weather* "S" for superb and "a crowning success" for the cinema capital. Still, even one of the film's biggest supporters had to admit that it "positively does not offer an exhibition of great acting, not even good acting."<sup>20</sup> Despite these shortcomings, the film's superior production quality and huge entertainment value recommended it as a popular attraction. The production's showcasing of the greatest black talents, including Horne, Robinson, Fats Waller, Ada Mae Brown, Katherine Dunham and the incomparable Nicholas Brothers, certainly made for spectacular entertainment. The black embrace of the film, however, could only be truly understood in the context of films that preceded it. Yates, from a typically masculine perspective, explained that the black man "has been depicted as a clown, a servant, or minstrel man. He has almost never existed on the script except to provoke laughter. Yes Siree, it is about time Uncle Tom gave way to a genuine portrayal of the Negro, showing him as he really is—a human being."<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, that human being, except for soldiering, serving, and bailing cotton, is limited to the role of entertainer.<sup>22</sup>

When *Stormy Weather* is compared to *This Is the Army*, whose black production number featured zoot-suited black soldiers made up for a minstrel show and singing "That's What the Well-Dressed Man in Harlem Will Wear," one can better understand the views of contemporary black critics. According to film scholar Cripps, this scene and others featuring soldiers often "revealed the tension between old and new black imagery." Other scholars have concluded more critically that "the movie's racial themes were a throwback to the painful era of the first war" with white soldiers in black face and drag, to say nothing of a half-naked, crossed-dressed black man who evokes images of natives in Tarzan movies.<sup>23</sup>

Even in relative terms, *Stormy Weather* did not escape harsh appraisal from white film critics. A review in *Time* concluded that the film only

showed how Hollywood apparently regarded black performers “less as artists (despite their very high potential of artistry) than as picturesque, Sambo-style performers.” Denis Preston, a well-known British radio writer and producer, called it a hodgepodge “of comico-pathetic ‘nigger characterisation,’” presenting the “vital functional art” of blacks “in its most de-based form.” African American composer William Grant Still, who quit the movie because of film executives’ assumptions about his musical capacity and assaults on his work as not authentically black, must have agreed with these characterizations.<sup>24</sup>

Without the lived experience, emotional investment, and practical concerns of contemporary observers, current scholars of black film, being more critically distant, have been far less kind to *Stormy Weather*. To Donald Bogle, it “represented wartime escapist entertainment at its peak” and was “no major departure from past movie depictions of African Americans as gentle folks.”<sup>25</sup> Like Al Jolson’s “My Mammy,” it pretended to the absence of conflict between blacks and whites. Others have criticized the film for its miscasting of Horne and Robinson as love interests, its shameless illogicality, and its devolution into outright minstrelsy.<sup>26</sup>

*Stormy Weather* represents just one of Hollywood’s many missed opportunities to give black soldiers proper credit where due, in the interest of playing it safe at best. Even the serious, contemporary war films—such as *Bataan*, *Sahara*, *Crash Dive*, and *Lifeboat*, which included a black soldier as a central character—“used the war to thrust a black figure into a small white circle” and in the end, according to Thomas Cripps, reassured whites that they had nothing to fear from “an enhanced black status.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the mere referencing of the 15th Regiment did not necessarily serve a positive purpose. In fact, the content and context of that representation appear regressive and disabling.

Perhaps fearing a negative reaction by veterans and soldiers, 20th Century Fox, the movie theater where *Stormy Weather* was to debut, and the Interstate United Newspapers acted preemptively and extended a formal invitation to the executive staff and other officers of the 15th New York Guard to attend the film’s premier at the Roxy on Broadway. Such an association lent considerable authenticity and legitimacy to the film’s military message, positively identified it with the Regiment, and facilitated invaluable photo opportunities for the promoters. That the organization had no official relationship to the Old 15th or its successor, the 369th, did not seem to matter. Even the black press downplayed the fact that these men were home guard replacements for those serving overseas. That the event took place at the Roxy and not the Alhambra in Harlem suggests that the

promoters sought a maximum return on their investment while advancing some form of materialist interracialism for an all-black film that avoided any serious engagement with race relations and integration.<sup>28</sup>

This tactical move could not, though, hide the fact that the production, like so many media and official representations, merely sought to ensure black loyalty while protecting the racial status quo. In other words, even black soldiers could be represented only to the extent that they did not seriously threaten the prescribed roles for blacks as contented, fun-loving, and musically talented folks. As Cripps astutely observes, *Stormy Weather* “brought into play the tension between integration and cultural uniqueness and produced in the minds of black activists no end to anxiety over the implied retreat from integration.”<sup>29</sup>

No doubt, the film foregrounds some of the Regiment’s important achievements, such as the regimental citation and its record length of service on the front. Such revelations, however, leave unanswered questions as to why the unit received a French award and not an American honor. Moreover, the film associates the award with only 1 of 171 individual recipients, and he is conveniently “absent” and presumably dead, so as not to complicate or impede the film’s rapid departure from the merest mention of bravery in combat to its exclusive treatment of the black soldier as entertainer. The absence of explicit death in the film avoids tragedy and also clearly subverts the combat experiences (hence potential violence against whites) of the soldiers. Consequently, the only actual member referenced, other than Noble Sissle, is James Reese Europe in his position as bandleader, and there is absolutely no hint that he served in the Regiment’s machine-gun company and took great pride in his combat role, albeit a brief one. The film seems to have accepted the commonly held notion that black officers were much too threatening and problematic to highlight and justified such avoidance and devaluing as respect for the Negro masses’ putative rejection of condescending and elitist black men with commissions.<sup>30</sup> Europe as a bandleader does not challenge prevailing assumptions about black officers despite the acknowledgment of his rank in the film by Selina and Bill, whom he addressed as private and called to attention. The stand-in for the black officer is Bill’s foil, the light-skinned, arrogant, and controlling impresario and romantic rival Chick Bailey.

Not only does the film undermine and trivialize the black military experience, it also produces endless confusion in distinguishing between the real and the imagined, as film images of actual events, for instance, merge with the imaginary. The actual scenes occupy a very prominent place but quickly vanish, thus creating an interesting tension between “the known”

and “the staged.” As such, the staging attempts to confine or displace “the real,” of which we catch a brief but revealing glimpse. Likewise, a few actors play themselves, others have roles closely based on self, and some represent characters likely to be taken as real. To this day, many sources, some official, insist that Bojangles Robinson, whose generosity earned him the ceremonial title “Mayor of Harlem,” served as the Regiment’s drum major. Remarkably, Rudi Williams of the American Forces Press Service, a publication arm of the Department of Defense, wrote in 2002 that James Reese Europe “recruited the best drum major he could find—Harlem dancer Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson.” In actuality, Noble Sissle performed that function until being replaced by Sgt. Gillard Thompson. Robinson never even served in the Regiment.<sup>31</sup> The fact that his funeral in 1949 was held in the 369th Armory certainly has contributed to his association with the unit.<sup>32</sup>

To grasp the extent, duration, and resilience of the film’s factual inaccuracies and conflation, even contemporary cinema scholar Paula Massood refers to the 15th as “Jim Europe’s . . . (African American) Regiment.” Thus, the bandleader, as a result of the film’s confusing representation, the author’s academic shorthand, inattention to detail, or some combination thereof, becomes the signifier of not just the band but also the whole Regiment.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that the film refers to the Regiment as the 15th and not the 369th also raises significant questions. Without doubt, the 15th was the name of choice for most members of the Regiment who went to Europe under that designation. Influenced by pride of ownership and the need for exclusivity, the local community embraced the appellation and the institution it identified long after the war. These realities notwithstanding, even at the time of the parade the designation was inaccurate. Preferences and sentiments aside, many of the soldiers who marched that glorious day in February 1919 never ever belonged to the Old 15th New York National Guard. More than half were replacements who joined the outfit in France, many long after the change in designation. Although the War Department forced that unwanted and inappropriate number on the Regiment, for reasons that will be detailed subsequently, the war actually transformed the unit in size and composition and also in character and experience. Indeed, the transformation began long before the Regiment arrived in France.

Regrettably, by using the original designation of the Regiment, the film simultaneously distances itself from the present (and an existing 369th) and avoids difficult and complicated questions about the change in name and its significance. This strategy by the filmmakers enables a return to a less troubled time and fixes the Regiment forever in a romanticized past. It carefully avoids the transforming effects of war and the individual’s role

as an agent of social transformation. However, the real members of the Regiment were men who learned French, saw the world, fought and died in trenches, and experienced freedom and enjoyed respect as never before. The resultant changes in them raised frightening and threatening questions in others who expected the men to remain the same or at least accept the status quo ante.

When Bill Williamson tells the children that the Regiment marched in 1918, the scriptwriters probably made no simple dating error. More than likely, the intent was to have the film avoid the mere mention of another troubled time in the recent past—1919, the year of the Red Summer and Red Scare when race riots broke out across the nation and the Bolshevik threat loomed large in people's minds, if not on the ground. Likewise, the only reference to the current war comes during a United Service Organization (USO) show in which the Cab Calloway, Jr., character emerges backstage in an officer's uniform and meets Bill Williamson. Thus, Cab Calloway, the zoot-wearing, jive-talking hepcat, affirms his patriotism vicariously through his "son" and also states that he wishes to join him. The film stays as far away as it can from the current reality of racial strife within the military and a larger black seething over "Jim Crow blood-banks, discrimination in industry and housing, and the circumscribed role for blacks in the war."<sup>34</sup> Instead, it ends with tens of black officers contentedly dancing with their proud dates.

Therefore, one must not casually dismiss the film's abbreviated and light-hearted, comedic and musical portrayal of the Regiment as insignificant or harmless. Even its omissions speak volumes. One should not lose sight of the fact that Bill and Gabe, though sans uniform after the opening scenes, are forever veterans of the 15th. Thus, *Stormy Weather* is both a complex and a highly flawed representation.

Unfortunately, no other single source of information about the Regiment was likely to have reached more people in 1943 (and for many years to come) than *Stormy Weather*. Although not a great box office success, it drew audiences three times larger than *Cabin in the Sky* did and found a niche.<sup>35</sup> Lena Horne noted that the film's all-black cast allowed for wide distribution, including in the South and on military bases. As such, it helped make her a star and a black sex symbol.<sup>36</sup>

Before the film, most treatments of the 15th/369th were limited to newspapers, public speeches, and word-of-mouth accounts, as well as in the few contemporary publications on black soldiers during the war written by Emmett J. Scott (1919), W. Allison Sweeney (1919), Madame Touissant Welcome (1919), and Charles H. Williams (1923).<sup>37</sup> None of these, however, would

ever find an audience the size of *Stormy Weather* or reach people in the same way.

Additional evidence of how *Stormy Weather* carried on a tradition, rather than breaking from past representations of blacks, can be found in Irvin Cobb's *Glory of the Coming: What Mine Eyes Have Seen of Americans in Action in This Year of Grace and Allied Endeavor* (1918), as well as in subsequent, less flattering treatments of black soldiers. Cobb's racist reputation had long preceded him, and a chapter titled "Young Black Joe," dedicated to the black soldier in the aforementioned book, probably did little to enhance his standing with blacks but certainly honored the style of his times. As an "embedded" journalist with the 369th, Cobb witnessed firsthand the performance of the black soldier and gained a favorable impression.

In his works, Cobb touts the exploits of Henry Johnson and Needham (Nedom) Roberts, the Regiment's first two heroes, and confesses that the black soldier had made him reconsider his racist southern ways. Yet, Cobb's treatment still reeks of paternalism and stereotype and features the N word despite his admission that no matter its context or meaning, the term "never fell on black ears" without leaving behind "a sting for the heart." That consideration notwithstanding, Cobb confidently predicts that the black soldier would give that word new meaning, for "hereafter n-i-g-g-e-r will merely be another way of spelling the word American."<sup>38</sup>

Only two dedicated treatments of the Regiment existed before *Stormy Weather*—a 1920 documentary film entitled *From Harlem to the Rhine* and a book of the same name by Arthur W. Little, published in 1936. The first was a motion picture and slide show "depicting the old Fifteenth Regiment 'over here' and 'over there.'" Accompanied by vaudeville acts, the multimedia presentation reportedly was "a big screen hit," playing to capacity crowds at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. According to *New York Age* entertainment critic Lester Walton, the "colored public is hungry for moving pictures in which race soldiers appear on the screen in a favorable and complimentary light." The production consisted of five reels of film and over fifty slides, including images of Bert Williams in uniform, soldiers training at Peekskill and on the front lines in France, the triumphal march into Germany, Jim Europe's band entertaining Teutonic civilians, and the march up Fifth Avenue. The show particularly impressed the *Age* because it featured the colored soldier in the world war "without attempt to disparage." For that result, Walton reminded the public that it owed a debt of gratitude to William Hayward, the Regiment's first commander.<sup>39</sup>

The extent of the production's reach and influence cannot be measured accurately. Although organizers scheduled a screening in Brooklyn, the *Age*



ominously suggested that it was a film for the veterans and their friends and relatives.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps cost and limited entertainment value, not level of interest, militated against the show's appeal to larger audiences. In any event, the *Age's* measured endorsement unwittingly raised doubts about the extent of the hunger of blacks for the subject, at least as conveyed in its current vehicle.

Eight years before Little's book-length treatment appeared in print, the story of the Regiment found condensed and embellished expression and wide circulation in *Rank and File: True Stories of the Great War*, by Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. (1928). Roosevelt, son of the former president, borrowing heavily from Little's unpublished manuscript, immortalized the incident involving Johnson and Roberts in a chapter titled "The Battle of Henry Johnson." Although error ridden and melodramatic, the chapter prominently covered the history of the Regiment from its inception in 1916. Reflective of his time, Roosevelt, sometimes channeling Little, revealed how even the most well meaning and supportive whites could not avoid racial essentialism in their explanations and observations of black character and behavior, as he reminded readers that "colored People are emotional under any circumstances, and the strain and excitement of war did not lessen this trait. In many ways these days in New York suggested a revivalist meeting rather than a military mobilization." When it came to narrating Johnson's feat, Roosevelt resorted to the worst of essentialist tendencies in describing how the black hero responded to the jamming of his gun and the simultaneous charge of a German soldier with pistol in hand: "The colored boy's fighting blood was up. The spirit of ancestors who fought to the death in the tribal wars of the forest-choked Congo surged up in him."<sup>41</sup>

In 1936, Little, who had led the 1st Battalion during the war and commanded the entire Regiment from 1921 to 1925, finally published *From Harlem to the Rhine*, a book based on many official documents, contemporary notes, and firsthand observations. Although he was once considered a great friend of the Regiment, Little seemed completely comfortable with racialist assumptions of his time. He naturalized Negro dialect and darky humor in his self-professed sympathetic but full treatment of these men, whom he had seen transformed by their experiences, turning from boys to soldiers. Although told mostly from his personal vantage point as a regimental adjutant and officer in the Brooklyn battalion before the war and the 1st Battalion during the war, Little's account remains invaluable, and it stood alone until Reid Badger's fine biography (1995) of James Reese Europe.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, Noble Sissle's rather hagiographic but nonetheless revealing firsthand account of Europe and the Regiment (1942) has never been

published. Arthur W. Davis, brother of Sgt. Hannibal “Spats” Davis, contributed a short account in 1979, *Here and There with the Rattlers*, based on his own brief experience with the 15th and what he learned in interviews with and letters from his combat-experienced brother.<sup>43</sup>

Not even those works, including Badger’s, could possibly rival the reach and influence of *Stormy Weather*. Only William Miles’s *Men of Bronze*, through public screenings, video rentals and sales, and school and library adoption, has found a comparable audience. This 1977 documentary features extensive film footage of the soldiers—their weaponless exercises in Harlem, their combat and occupation experiences in Europe, the concerts performed by the great band, and their triumphal march and overwhelming reception in New York. Moreover, the film has the benefit of first-person accounts from three veterans: Hamilton Fish, Frederick Williams, and Melville Miller. The last, Miller, was a marvelous raconteur and quintessential New York character, somewhat in the manner and style of Congressman Charles Rangel. In sum, *Men of Bronze* rescues a largely lost or forgotten history and frames it in a tale of triumph over adversity and a lesson in the value of interracial cooperation and open-mindedness. A 1998 History Channel documentary, *Harlem Hellfighters*, which, among other things, addresses some of the postwar adjustment problems for the men, repeats some of Miles’s treatment but at the same time pales in comparison to the original in visual and narrative effect.<sup>44</sup>

None of these works, however, discusses the pre-1916 history of the Regiment and its context. The first study to explore the unit prior to 1916 is Charles Johnson’s 1976 dissertation on blacks and the National Guard, published in 1992 as *African American Soldiers in the National Guard*. Johnson’s pathbreaking scholarship makes us all indebted to its insights and discoveries. Stephen Harris’s *Harlem’s Hell Fighters* (2003) also treats the pre-1916 history of the Regiment and links it to Charles Fillmore but even more to James Reese Europe, his Clef Club Orchestra, and eventually the regimental band.<sup>45</sup> Yet, Harris, even with the best of intentions, might not have heeded the criticisms of contemporaries concerning the “undue prominence given the jazz band.” Instead, they wished for the men of the unit to be remembered as they were described by Colonel Hayward: “They are American men. They fought for their country. They did not know how to quit. Not one was taken prisoner. That tells it to those who ask.” To Hayward’s call, a black woman, reportedly voicing Harlem’s sentiment with homage to Julius Caesar’s “veni, vidi, vici,” responded: “They have been; they done it, they’ve come back.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, Stephen Harris’s work is a significant improvement upon William Harris’s *The Hellfighters of Har-*



lem (2002) and holds up well against Peter Nelson's *A More Unbending Battle* (2009).<sup>47</sup> Still, none of these works makes much, if any, use of French military sources, and the latter three works lack sufficient historical context beyond the unit. The most sophisticated and engaging treatment thus far is Richard Slotkin's far-reaching and imaginative *Lost Battalions* (2005), which compares the experiences of the 308th and the 369th Regiments of infantry, the former as part of the "Melting Pot" 77th Division. Both units, according to Slotkin, symbolize the unresolved dilemma of the actual purpose of the war to make the world safe for democracy or to determine who counts as American and what civil rights citizenship guarantees. Slotkin's basis for comparison is that both were lost in the war and in history, and his mission is to recover and relate them in collective memory.<sup>48</sup> *Lost Battalions* is beautifully written, wonderfully crafted, and seriously contextualized in its treatment of politics and myth and popular culture. Yet, for all its contribution to our understanding of the 369th and its larger significance on and off the battlefield, the work has divided loyalties and still begs the question of a dedicated treatment of the 15th/369th that shows the Regiment standing alone, as it most characteristically was.

*Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War* departs from all of the works mentioned here in its insistence that the subject of this narrative be represented in at least four critical dimensions. First, this volume ensures that the prehistory of the Regiment is carefully and fully explored in order to demonstrate the unit's significance to larger issues, including its prominent role in city, state, and even national politics. Previous treatments have paid far too little attention to the prolonged and complex struggle of black New Yorkers to force the state to authorize and recognize a black National Guard unit, which had deep and widespread implications for manhood, community, and citizenship. Yet, serving was one thing, leading another. Thus, continuous demands for black officers, even black leadership, spoke to the need of blacks to demonstrate "manly" capacity in perhaps the nation's most critical mission of all—its own defense.

Second, this book explores how, from the beginning, those associated with the campaign insisted on being a combat regiment of infantry. They knew the history of the black soldier and had every intention of upholding that proud tradition. Although there was some minimal backing off from that demand in the interest of survival, no one publicly expressed such a sentiment, perhaps in fear of the terrible consequences befalling anyone identified with such betrayal. Consequently, *Harlem's Rattlers* attributes far less importance to James Reese Europe and the band in the Regiment's birth and development than do Little, Badger, Harris, or Miles. Access to and careful

exploration of French as well as American military documents distinguish this book from all others in its attention to the details of everyday life and the heat and fog of battle on the front. At the same time, that emphasis on the foreign experience has allowed us to heed historian Thomas Holt's injunction "to elaborate the nexus between the remote or global levels of that experience and its immediate or micro-local expressions."<sup>49</sup> The men's reaction to and characterization of African colonial troops is a classic case in point. So is the soldier who wrote home that "these French people don't bother with no color-line business. They treat us so good that the only time I ever knows I'm colored is when I looks in the glass."<sup>50</sup>

Third, *Harlem's Rattlers* strives to capture the complexity of a regiment campaign and its resultant organization as shaped by all the vagaries of human nature and interaction. One should keep in mind that the 15th/369th came into being under the most tangled of circumstances. The very organization that championed the cause of a black regiment, the Equity Congress, was made up of black Republicans and Democrats. More frequently than not, partisan politics and personal differences influenced the pace and shape of progress. This is to say nothing of the ultraconservative, elitist, and exclusionary leadership of the National Guard, which fancied itself a social club as much as a military organization and did all that it could to defeat efforts for an all-black regiment. In time of war, the Guard's reputation preceded it and provoked nothing but contempt and ridicule from the regular army. Thus, black National Guard troops suffered compound stigmatization as "weekend warriors" and as members of a despised and devalued "race."

Yet, the internal dynamics of the 15th/369th demand as much attention as any external ones. The presence of black and white officers in the Regiment was extremely rare, and it created a special internal environment. Indeed, two murders in the Regiment, one committed by a black sergeant and the other by a white officer, exposed not only interracial tensions within but also intraracial conflicts between old-timers and newcomers, between officers and men, and between northern- and southern-born men of color. Like no other treatment, however, *Harlem's Rattlers* reveals the strained relations among white officers, many of whom put personal advancement ahead of institutional loyalty. They understood better than most the lowly position on the totem pole of a predominantly black National Guard unit with a mixed officer corps, and some, including Hamilton Fish, did all that they could to extricate themselves from that predicament.

Fourth, informed by recent feminist scholarship on war, *Harlem's Rattlers* attempts to complicate the role of gender in the story and contribute to the

ongoing revision of the widely held view that military matters are strictly masculine. Indeed, James Reese Europe was far from alone in characterizing the Regiment as an instrument in developing the “moral and physical negro manhood of Harlem.”<sup>51</sup> Such a sentiment makes clear, as the editors of *Behind the Lines* have argued, that “war must be understood as a gendering activity itself, which ritually marks the gender of all members of society.”<sup>52</sup> Black women recognized this fact all too well and strived to play their part and to shape the discourse of participation. Thus, members of the Women’s Auxiliary of the 15th/369th defined themselves, through word and deed, as more than aides to the Regiment: they were partners in a struggle for full citizenship.

In the end, *Harlem’s Rattlers* attempts to show the Regiment, for better or worse, in all its manifestations and implications. We have tried to avoid the easy and inaccurate binaries that have so often marked studies of black institutions. This book is not simply about victimization, agency, and heroism. It seeks to do justice to the well-known fact that individuals embody a range of characteristics that emerge in relation to impulses and circumstances. We hope to avoid contributing to the production and reinforcement of underdeveloped and unsatisfying one-dimensional characters who often reside at the center of disabling myths.

Yet, no matter how much one might try to exercise caution in representing the Regiment, its connection to so many important individuals, institutions, events, and issues of the day resists the best attempts to moderate its significance. The list of individuals with ties to the Regiment or the movement to establish it includes, to name a few: President William Howard Taft, Henry L. Stimson, Newton D. Baker, W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Col. Charles Young, Charles W. Anderson, William H. Lewis, Oswald Garrison Villard, Joel Spingarn, Edward M. House, Madam C. J. Walker, Hamilton Fish, and Egbert “Bert” Williams. The growth and development of Harlem, the rise of the NAACP, the colored officer training camps, the riots of Houston and East St. Louis, the debates about black officers, the suitability of blacks as combatants, black soldiers in southern camps, concerns about patriotism and loyalty, the role of the black press, military justice, and notions of respectable black manhood and womanhood all involve or relate to the Regiment.

What we have discovered about the Regiment is this: the more one finds, the more one becomes convinced that the full story of the 369th has only begun to be told. Indeed, the certainty with which someone knows the Regiment is more than likely directly proportional to his or her ignorance of it. With respect to an individual such as Henry Johnson, the more we

have learned about him as a person, the less we really know. Johnson has become, more than anything, the projection of others' desires, hopes, and aspirations. In fact, as a former officer in the Regiment, W. O. Waters, once wrote: "The story of the regiment is such a strange epic—so fantastic, comic, absurd, heroic, tragic and sentimental—that I once believed that all its essential elements never could be adequately put between the cover of several volumes." Although Waters implied that Little's *From Harlem to the Rhine* had proved him wrong, we beg to disagree with that assessment and hope that what follows contributes to a fuller and richer telling of the truly epic tale of this Regiment.<sup>53</sup>

Above all else, we can arrive at but one overriding conclusion about this story—to ignore the relationship of blacks to the military is to deny oneself a vital perspective on understanding the black experience in America in all its richness and complexity. By exploring a discrete but representative subject in intense and exact detail in *Harlem's Rattlers*, we hope to establish that scholarly concern with the franchise, education, the church, and even civil rights broadly defined must be joined with a careful consideration and inclusion of blacks and the military, for without that, the others cannot be truly understood nor can there be a full appreciation of the black experience.

Although the notion of going forward and persevering tenaciously characterizes the Regiment and speaks to its history explicitly, it also captures the essence of a larger mood and spirit among black people—an understanding that they too could not go back to the days and ways before the Great War. Far from a lost cause in which blacks blindly and mindlessly embraced patriotism, the war, together with their support for it and service in it, allowed them to distinguish themselves individually and collectively. The repression and violence and the denigration and disparagement, official and unofficial, that followed the war certainly caused much harm. What mattered more, however, was that blacks had internalized the positive values gained from the war, and no amount of persecution, discrimination, and disparagement could erase them.

What the war made clear to all, especially blacks, was that "character is more fundamental than reputation," and the character of black Americans, according to contemporary scholar and activist William Pickens, shone clearly "in the light of war" caused by "the all-exposing fires of a burning world." Suddenly, "the most undesirable element in the United States" became "the most reliable element," as symbolized and recognized by the calling out of black National Guard troops to protect the White House. That the war had allowed blacks from Africa and America the opportunity

to make their “first great record as a modern international factor and a positive world influence” was a lesson never to be lost on blacks.<sup>54</sup> World War I helped to produce a self-confident New Negro, and all change that came later owes much to the forward-looking and forward-moving people of the time.

In the end, we hope that *Harlem's Rattlers* will be the in-depth institutional study that starts inward and looks outward, complementing and reinforcing the more recent macrolevel studies of the black experience in World War I that have addressed its scholarly neglect or elision and established its continuing significance. Among these fine works are Mark Whalan's *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (2008), Adriane Lentz-Smith's *Freedom Struggles* (2009), Chad Williams's *Torchbearers of Democracy* (2010), and Nina Mjagkij's *Loyalty in Time of Trial* (2011). Unlike these works, however, *Harlem's Rattlers* tells a story not only *through* war but also *of* war, paying near-equal attention and consideration to both perspectives.<sup>55</sup>

