

Pictures of the Harlem Hellfighters: Trade Books and Visual Primary Sources in the 6th Grade U.S. History Classroom

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THE LATER PART of the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century has many monikers in U.S. history textbooks, such as the “Gilded Age,” the “Progressive Era,” and the “Second Industrial Age.” What it is rarely called, but should be known as, is the “Nadir of Race Relations.”¹ This time period saw the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan, when membership to this group dramatically increased nationwide.² Jim Crow segregation laws were the norm, codified by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling.³ The omnipresence of lynching and violence was a constant fear for African Americans, as chronicled in the writings of Ida B. Wells.⁴

One topic in this time period that is underexplored in middle-school social studies classrooms is the Harlem Hellfighters—African Americans that, despite their treatment on the home front, volunteered to fight in Europe during World War I. The journey undertaken by the Harlem Hellfighters—from their struggles to be accepted as a fighting unit, to their success on the battlefields of Europe, and the violence they experienced on their return to the United States—reflects the realities of race relations in the early twentieth century. Their stories also include the struggles for African Americans’ civil

rights. The story of the Harlem Hellfighters offers case studies of the achievements of African Americans in the face of degradation, dismissal, discrimination, and violent racism.

The Harlem Hellfighters are rarely discussed in middle-school U.S. history classes, although their story is an ideal subject to address both the Nadir of Race Relations and the history of World War I. Lessons on World War I typically focus on imperialism, the emergence of Germany as a world power, and trench warfare. This is a missed opportunity. With the project discussed in this article, sixth-grade students in an urban middle school located in a medium-size Southern city used visual primary sources and the trade book *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* by Walter Dean Myers and Bill Miles to explore the history of this fighting unit.⁵ Students engaged in textual analysis of selected trade book excerpts, analyzed the visual documents within the trade books, and created their own visual depiction of the Harlem Hellfighters in World War I with paintings in the style of Horace Pippin, a folk artist and Harlem Hellfighter.

We start this article by providing a historical overview of the Harlem Hellfighters, followed by an overview of best teaching practices with analyzing visual primary sources. Next, we provide demographic information about the participating students and teacher, the steps of the project, and our data analysis techniques. We then discuss the themes that emerged from analyzing student paintings and written work. Finally, we provide a discussion of the findings and future research.

Historical Overview of the Harlem Hellfighters

African Americans were hopeful in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War that with the destruction of the slavery system, they would actualize the rights of being democratic citizens. However, their hopes were quickly dashed in the wake of the Reconstruction era. Southern whites took calculated steps to disenfranchise African Americans through the creation of Jim Crow segregation laws and the use of poll taxes and literacy tests to prevent voting. The Supreme Court reaffirmed African Americans' lack of rights with the seminal *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that upheld separate but equal laws in Southern states. These "separate but equal laws" were designed to

prevent blacks and whites from sharing the same schools and public facilities.⁶ All of these political tools and laws worked in concert with each other to perpetuate African Americans' second-class status in U.S. society.

The outbreak of World War I and potential U.S. entry into this military conflict posed a vexing question within the African American community. Should African Americans volunteer to serve if the U.S. entered World War I? Some saw the national hypocrisy that African Americans could volunteer to serve a country that denied them basic democratic rights and freedoms at home that the U.S. claimed to fight to preserve abroad. There were also some that felt Germany had done nothing to African Americans to cause them to go to war.⁷ However, these sentiments failed to outweigh the potential benefits that many contemporaneous scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois saw if African Americans served in World War I. In a 1918 editorial in *The Crisis*, Du Bois argued that African Americans should "close ranks" and temporarily set aside their grievances to serve their country and vanquish U.S. democracy's foes, especially considering the larger threat he saw posed by Germany's racist worldview. Du Bois would later regret and attempt to justify his support for U.S. involvement in World War I.⁸

Many argued that African Americans' military service would reflect positively on their community as a whole and potentially lead to economic, cultural, social, and political gains at the conclusion of World War I. After all, how could the United States advocate and fight for democratic rights abroad while denying those freedoms to African Americans at home? This argument carried much weight and caused many African Americans to sign up once the U.S. entered World War I.⁹

A vexing question at the start of America's entry into the war was connected to African Americans in the U.S. armed forces. What role should African Americans play in the U.S. military? Ultimately, segregated units were constructed, and the arguably most well known was the unit that would be dubbed the "Harlem Hellfighters." While the origin of this nickname is uncertain—whether from Europeans engaged with or against the unit, or from a black press looking for positive stories about African American soldiers' military service abroad—the 15th New York National Guard Regiment would eventually gain recognition for its wartime service. It was

reorganized into the 369th Infantry Regiment and commanded by William Hayward. The Harlem Hellfighters would eventually gain fame for their service fighting for the U.S. even though they took a very circuitous path toward this eventual success.¹⁰

From the start of America's entry into World War I, General John J. Pershing and senior U.S. military officers were hesitant about African Americans' military service abroad.¹¹ Many African Americans eagerly signed up for military service to show their courage and bravery with aspirations of active combat duty abroad. For many, this was not the reality that awaited them in Europe. Even before they were shipped to France, the soldiers in the 369th Infantry Regiment had difficulty when they were assigned to different parts of the U.S. for training due to the racial discrimination that they encountered.¹² Few African American officers were promoted, as typified by the U.S. Army's refusal to promote Charles Young. This failure to promote African Americans resulted in white officers being placed in command of African American units. Many African Americans were forced to serve as manual laborers, which stripped them of the potential for honor and glory through combat. Racist sentiments of executive officers in the American Expeditionary Forces were manifest in the belief that the only use for African Americans in World War I was as labor. Some white U.S. officers and soldiers also tried to get allies to reinforce segregation laws abroad. In this way, the American Expeditionary Forces tried to replicate the racial hierarchy found within the United States.¹³

Perhaps, the most telling example where the American Expeditionary Forces tried to preserve the racial hierarchy of the U.S. abroad was in African American soldiers' interactions with civilians of allied countries—most notably, French civilians. The U.S. Army was concerned with African American soldiers coming into close contact with French women and romantic relationships developing from these interactions. French civilians, soldiers, and officers treated African American soldiers differently from what the soldiers were accustomed to in the United States. African Americans were not degraded by French civilians, army officers, and soldiers because they were performing a vital service to support France. Some white U.S. soldiers and officers attempted to spread rumors about inappropriate actions by African American soldiers so that French civilians and soldiers would perpetuate the racial hierarchy of the

U.S. abroad. The fear by many in the white U.S. Army was that African Americans would expect the same treatment at home after the war that they had received abroad during the war. The racial hierarchy in the U.S. at the time to some degree was predicated on maintaining the “purity” of the white race by restricting romantic relationships between white women and minority groups, especially African American men. It is for this reason that once the armistice was declared, the Harlem Hellfighters were removed from France quickly to minimize their interactions with French women.¹⁴

The Harlem Hellfighters would eventually escape the menial tasks abroad that the American Expeditionary Forces had consigned them to when General Pershing offered the service of the 369th Infantry Regiment to the French army. This step of assistance to a U.S. ally helped Pershing accomplish two goals. First, he was relieved of what to do with some of the African American soldiers abroad. Second, the Harlem Hellfighters reinforced a French army decimated by that point after several years of war. However winding the path, the Harlem Hellfighters now had an opportunity to show their valor in combat.

The Harlem Hellfighters distinguished themselves during their service under the command of the French army. They served 191 consecutive days in combat, the longest consistent service by any American regiment in World War I. None of the Harlem Hellfighters were taken prisoner. They never lost a foot of ground in combat. The Harlem Hellfighters played an extensive role in the Second Battle of the Marne, capturing the strategic village Séchault and becoming the first U.S. division to reach the Rhine.¹⁵

However, the most well-known story about the Harlem Hellfighters involves Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts. During sentry duty one night, they were attacked. Johnson was shot three times, but refused to let Roberts be taken prisoner by German soldiers, holding his ground and eventually repelling an estimated two dozen German soldiers. In the process, Johnson killed four German soldiers and wounded many others. Johnson’s story earned him the nickname “Black Death” for his heroism, and he was the first American to be awarded the French decoration, the *Croix de Guerre*.¹⁶ The actions and service of the Harlem Hellfighters showed a contrasting reality to the racist stereotypes held by the American Expeditionary Forces and by many on the U.S. home front of what African Americans could do in service to their country.

The military service of the Harlem Hellfighters, and African American soldiers as a whole in World War I, kindled new hopes for their lives in the United States after the war. It was easy to lose oneself in the pageantry and fervor of the parades thrown for returning African American servicemen. Many African American writers used black soldiers' accomplished records in combat to make the case for the larger African American community actualizing the rights and privileges of democratic citizenship. W. E. B. Du Bois argued for just such a sentiment:

But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.¹⁷

African Americans in the post-World War I society had a political consciousness reawakening, as the contradictions of segregation laws were in stark contrast to the lofty political goals and ideas fought for in World War I. The taste of freedom abroad fueled African Americans to attempt to replicate these realities on the U.S. home front through actions both small and large. For many, World War I had helped to create a "New Negro" that was willing to directly—and unapologetically—challenge the existing social, cultural, political, and economic structures in U.S. society.¹⁸

This swelling of pride and hope in the potential for a new U.S. society was quickly dashed for many by white segregationists' responses to returning African American servicemen. White segregationists responded forcefully to attempts by African Americans to alter the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of the United States. One quote that reflects the prevailing mood by many whites in the aftermath of World War I was recorded in Joshua Blanton's "Men in the Making" article in the *Southern Workman*:

You n—— [n word] are wondering how you are going to be treated after the war. Well, I'll tell you, you are going to be treated exactly like you were before the war, this is a white man's country and we expect to rule it.¹⁹

White segregationists saw any action taken by African Americans, especially returning black veterans, as a challenge to white hegemony. As Carter G. Woodson described, "The very uniform on a Negro

was to the reactionary like a red rag thrown in the face of a bull.”²⁰ This helps to explain why the summer of 1919 was dubbed “Red Summer”—there were over thirty of what were labeled “race riots” that broke out throughout the United States. We are hesitant to use the term “race riots” since, in many cases, white Americans attacked black communities where African Americans were defending their homes and local neighborhoods.²¹ It is hard to speak in too many generalities since these “race riots” were connected to local factors particular to a city. However, it is fair to say that whites responded to both real and imaginary slights by African Americans and, in particular, attacked returning black veterans with lynchings and violence, especially with charges of violence against white women. This pattern can be seen in the Tulsa Race Massacre.²² Violence was a tool used by white segregationists to preserve the existing social, cultural, and political structure of U.S. society. In this way, violence against African Americans was also utilized to curb the spread of democracy within the United States.²³

Trends in History-Based Pedagogy with Analyzing Visual Primary Sources

State and national education initiatives over the last decade in social studies education are grounded in disciplinary literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills in history, geography, civics, and economics.²⁴ Both the Common Core State Standards and the C3 Framework by the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) are grounded in the notions of having students replicate the heuristics of historians through classroom activities and assessments.²⁵ For history education, most herald this as a positive step, as students are more engaged in analyzing different types of primary and secondary sources and deconstructing an author’s messages, values, and biases. Historians also work to contextualize how a primary source captures the broader beliefs, messages, and perspectives of a time period.²⁶ The application of the heuristics of a historian can be a little more challenging when students encounter visual primary sources.

Visual primary sources have been an integral way that humans have expressed their values, beliefs, prejudices, and knowledge

throughout history.²⁷ By “visual primary sources,” we refer to photographs, lithographs, paintings, political cartoons, propaganda posters, and maps, to name a few. Visual primary sources convey information and the author’s values using different mechanisms compared to a text-based primary source. In visual primary sources, an author uses imagery, facial expressions, angles of an image, and colors to capture a certain mood and convey certain emotions.²⁸ The ability to deconstruct these more abstract messages do not come easy for students. Students often take a visual primary source at face value without scrutinizing how the author is trying to convey his or her often hidden messages.²⁹ Therefore, the teacher must scaffold for students how to analyze and deconstruct the components within a visual primary source.

The scaffolding used to help students deconstruct visual primary sources must be tailored to specifically target the mechanisms employed to convey meaning within a photograph, painting, map, or political cartoon. Since our project focuses on paintings, we will discuss ways to deconstruct this type of visual primary source with students. First, the teacher should provide some background about the author of the source. The teacher should then offer basic questions to analyze the contents of the painting, such as asking students first what they see before moving to more targeted questions that get at the inclusion of certain images within the source. These questions help students unpack the context clues for possible symbolic meaning within the source.³⁰ As students gain more experience and knowledge deconstructing the elements of a visual primary source, the teacher can ask more nuanced questions to engage students to more critically analyze the source. Students can make inferences on the artist’s choice to capture certain angles in an image and what subtly is being implied.³¹ The use of questioning a visual primary source can alter the classroom dynamics to more fully engage the students.³²

Through the process of class discussions articulated above, students’ historical thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills are strengthened. Students can discuss how a visual primary source captures a person’s emotions, thoughts, and feelings. The process of analyzing visual primary sources in this manner helps to strengthen students’ interpretation skills as they utilize evidence with the imagery and colors to draw conclusions about the author’s message.³³

History-Based Sources and Strategies for the Harlem Hellfighters

This guided inquiry was implemented in a sixth-grade U.S. history teacher's classes in a mid-size Southern city. There were 100 students in the teacher's four classes. Of the 100 students, 93% identified as African Americans. The remaining 7% of the students identified as Latinx, white, or Asian. The researchers were given codes for each student to maintain student confidentiality; therefore, demographic information about gender was not provided. As a result, we assigned gender neutral names as pseudonyms for students' graphic organizers and paintings. The school would be described as an urban middle school serving many students that live in poverty. The social studies teacher, Mrs. Janeway (a pseudonym), identifies as white and has more than ten years of teaching experience.

Day 1

On the first day of the project, the teacher gave students an overview of the Harlem Hellfighters, as well as the racial discrimination that African Americans faced before and during World War I. Students watched a short video created by the U.S. National Guard designed to provide an overview about the Harlem Hellfighters.³⁴ To conclude Day 1, the teacher and students debriefed on this video.

Day 2

On the second day, the teacher started by having students answer questions to check their understanding of content covered on Day 1, followed by viewing a video focused on how racism in U.S. society impacted the Harlem Hellfighters during World War I.³⁵ Working in pairs, the students read excerpts from the trade book, *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage*. Informational trade books are frequently multi-faceted in that they may integrate visual and text-based primary sources into the narrative. The format of a trade book adds more credibility and veracity to an author's claims about historical figures and events by integrating primary sources to support arguments in the text.³⁶ *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* is an engaging narrative that contains various

Handout 1: Trade Book Analysis Prompts

Read the pages listed below in *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* and then answer the following questions.

Answer the following analysis prompt after reading Page 39:

1. What opportunities were there for African Americans in this newly formed unit of the National Guard? Use at least one sentence from the 3rd paragraph.

Answer the following analysis prompt after reading Page 59:

2. What types of jobs did the men in the 15th have before joining the National Guard?

Answer the following analysis prompts after reading Page 110 through the top paragraph on Page 112 in pairs:

- 3a. How does the trade book describe the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters?
- 3b. Use evidence from the trade book to support your answer.
- 4a. How were the Harlem Hellfighters' actions positively representing the African American community?
- 4b. Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.

Figure 1: Handout 1: Trade Book Analysis Prompts

primary sources about the Harlem Hellfighters, including numerous visual documents and paraphrasing of text-based documents. The selected excerpts from this trade book focused on the formation of the Harlem Hellfighters, as well as their accomplishments in World War I. After pairs read these excerpts, they completed Handout 1: Trade Book Analysis Prompts (**Figure 1**). Given the students' inexperience analyzing primary and secondary sources, we designed analysis prompts in this handout to strengthen their ability to make evidence-based claims from the text. The teacher walked around the classroom to help students working in pairs to complete this handout. Each student pairing worked on this handout for the remainder of the class period.

Day 3

Students started Day 3 by finishing Handout 1, followed by a short writing activity to articulate their comprehension of material covered up to this point. The purpose of this short writing activity was to make sure students had a foundational knowledge of who the Harlem Hellfighters were, as well as their accomplishments during World War I. This short writing activity concluded Day 3.

Day 4

The focus of Day 4 was to explore one member of the Harlem Hellfighters, Horace Pippin, in more depth. To accomplish this goal, the teacher did a read aloud of the trade book, *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin*.³⁷ This trade book provides a good overview of Horace Pippin's life before serving in World War I, as well as how he struggled to become a folk painter after the end of the war due to losing the use of his right arm from an injury sustained in combat. After the read aloud, students in the same pairs from Days 2 and 3 answered the following analysis prompts:

1. How do the pages of the trade book show Horace Pippin's experiences in World War I? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.
2. How was Horace Pippin's life impacted after serving in World War I? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.
3. How did Horace manage to be a successful artist in spite of the injury to his arm? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.

Similar to the questions in Handout 1, these analysis prompts were designed to strengthen students' skills to make evidence-based claims as they read the trade book about Horace Pippin and used evidence from it to support their arguments. Students were able to articulate the historical significance of Horace Pippin's military service and how he struggled to be a painter from an injury suffered in World War I. The completion of these analysis prompts took the rest of Day 4.



Figure 2: *The End of the War, Starting Home* (1930-1933). Oil on canvas by Horace Pippin. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Accession No. 1941-2-1, gift of Robert Carlen, 1941, <<https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/46280>>.

Day 5

Day 5 began with the student pairs completing the analysis prompts from Day 4. It took the students the first half of Day 5 to complete these three analysis prompts. Following the analysis prompts, the teacher modeled for students how to deconstruct the contents in Horace Pippin's 1930s painting, *The End of the War, Starting Home* (Figure 2), which captures Pippin's wartime experiences.³⁸ Students need opportunities for the teacher to scaffold how to deconstruct mechanisms such as symbolic imagery and color selection used in visual primary sources to master these skills.³⁹ The teacher projected this painting on the smartboard from the website of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and asked the following questions to help students begin to see how Horace Pippin used imagery and

colors to capture his experiences as a Harlem Hellfighter serving in World War I:

1. What colors did Horace Pippin include in the painting, and why did he include these colors?
2. What images did Horace Pippin include in the painting, and how do these images capture his perspective about serving in World War I?
3. How does Horace Pippin's message in the painting connect to broader themes that the Harlem Hellfighters experienced with their military service in World War I?
4. What is the overall message of this painting that Horace Pippin is trying to convey? What evidence in the painting helps you to know this is the overall message?

As noted, it is important for students to gain experience with how artists use imagery and colors to convey messages and feelings about a topic.⁴⁰ This activity provided the students with this knowledge and practice, as well as an understanding of how a painting is a product of a time period. Students used this knowledge in later days to create their own paintings about the impact the Harlem Hellfighters made through their military service. The Pippin painting analysis activity concluded Day 5.

Days 6 and 7

The focus of Days 6 and 7 was for students to create their own painting to convey the accomplishments of Harlem Hellfighters' service in World War I and their fight for civil rights issues. By creating a painting, in this case about the Harlem Hellfighters, students conveyed their content knowledge about a topic as well as people's values, biases, and beliefs from a historical era.⁴¹ The teacher gave students the following prompt for their painting activity:

Assume the role of Horace Pippin and create a painting to honor the impact and courage of the Harlem Hellfighters. Use evidence from the videos we watched and trade books we read to create your painting.

First, students sketched a rough draft of their painting. Students worked the remainder of Day 6 on the painting, and it took them the rest of Day 7 to complete their painting. The role playing aspect of this prompt for the student painting assignment helps them to better capture historical figures' perspectives.⁴² After students completed

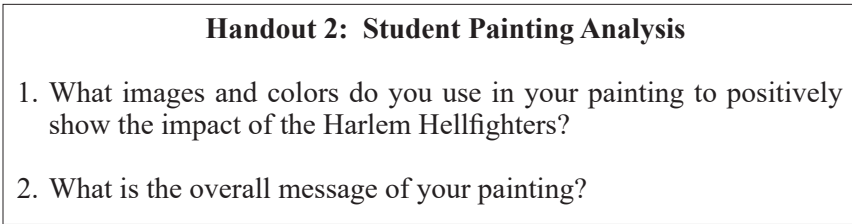


Figure 3: Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis

their paintings on Day 7, they answered two analysis prompts in Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis (**Figure 3**) to discuss how their painting connected to the Harlem Hellfighters. These analysis prompts allowed students to communicate knowledge gained about the Harlem Hellfighters, reflecting how they applied the knowledge from analyzing Horace Pippin’s painting, reading the two trade books, and watching videos that discussed both Horace Pippin and the Harlem Hellfighters to construct their own painting. Their paintings conveyed the historical significance and context of Harlem Hellfighters’ service and obstacles due to racial discrimination during World War I.⁴³

Data Analysis Techniques

Students’ graphic organizers and paintings were coded using qualitative content analysis with inductive and deductive elements.⁴⁴ One of the researchers reviewed all of the students’ graphic organizers and paintings looking for themes that were repeated. Qualitative methods are appropriate for this project because our goal was to learn more about the ways students communicated the impact of the Harlem Hellfighters through words and images.⁴⁵ During open coding, observations of and outliers to patterns that emerged were created and synthesized into testable codes for axial coding. During axial coding or deductive analysis, all students’ graphic organizers and paintings were used to look for the presence, absence, and frequency of the codes. The resulting data were collected and analyzed.

Our approach was to focus on the most reoccurring trends that we noticed from students’ graphic organizers and paintings. Patterns are discussed, and their significance is extrapolated in the following two sections, which contain excerpts from students’ responses from the graphic organizers, as well as some of the student paintings.

Responses to Handout 1: Trade Book Analysis Prompts

There were notable trends that emerged from analyzing students' responses to Handout 1: Trade Book Analysis Prompts. First, while questions on the handout were designed to ease students into the analysis process, the students demonstrated the ability to use evidence from *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* to answer the analysis prompts. Students consistently employed evidence from the trade book, and some even made inferences as to why African Americans should be actively involved and take ownership of their military service in World War I. This can best be seen with Emery's response to the first question ("What opportunities were there for African Americans in this newly formed unit of the National Guard? Use at least one sentence from the 3rd paragraph."). Emery argued that "The opportunity was for them [black servicemen] to make World War I Black America's war." While Emery did not expand on this argument, it can be inferred that the student believed that African Americans should be actively involved in the war effort.

The third prompt on the handout was split into two parts for a couple of reasons. For the first part ("How does the trade book describe the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters?"), we wanted students to focus specifically on the traits that caused the Harlem Hellfighters to be successful in World War I. This helps students to better relate to the historical figures that they were studying. For the second part ("Use evidence from the trade book to support your answer."), we thought this emphasis would ensure that they did indeed provide evidence rather than skipping this step.

In fact, students consistently used language to discuss the courage and bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters during World War I. Blake stated, "It [the trade book] shows what they [the Harlem Hellfighters] have been through and how they fought in the war." Several students focused on specific aspects of World War I in which the Harlem Hellfighters participated. Bellamy said, "Horace Pippin went in no man's land and got shot in the arm." Bellamy's evidence was a paraphrased excerpt from the trade book that explains how Pippin was wounded while in combat. Likewise, several students used the way that Pippin was wounded to show the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters.

Other students discussed the Harlem Hellfighters' bravery in engaging in trench warfare. Charlie said, "They [the Harlem Hellfighters] were relentless and didn't back down," with several students echoing similar sentiments. Charlie added, "It [the trade book] described how war turned cities into killing zones, and the Harlem Hellfighters struggled toward the heavily fortified places. The Harlem Hellfighters fought from night to morning." The students' comments show how they thought the Harlem Hellfighters were brave for their actions through combat, and demonstrate how the students captured the context for warfare during World War I.

The fourth prompt similarly was divided into two parts ("How were the Harlem Hellfighters' actions positively representing the African American community?" and "Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.>"). The answer is not directly stated in the book, so students had to reflect on what they read and make an inference based on the content covered.

There were a couple of students that responded to African Americans' military service despite their treatment. This sentiment is reflected in Denver's response: "The Harlem Hellfighters were fighting for their country, despite segregation." As evidence to support this argument, Denver offered, "They [the Harlem Hellfighters] decided to join the war knowing they wouldn't get treated well, but they represented African Americans and showed that black people could fight in war." Several students made similar arguments to Denver. Ryan even went so far to say, "They [the Harlem Hellfighters] chose to fight for a country that did not care about them." It can be inferred that Ryan was making this argument based on the poor treatment due to racism that the Harlem Hellfighters encountered.

Some students argued that the admirable military service record of the Harlem Hellfighters reflected well on the African American community. Stevie believed that "They [the Harlem Hellfighters] fought in the war courageously, bravely, and never gave up." Stevie said that this can be seen based on the Harlem Hellfighters fighting in trenches and no man's land. Some students took the argument made by Stevie a step further. There were a couple of students that said the distinguished record of the Harlem Hellfighters challenged many in white America's worldview. This argument is best captured in one of Blake's responses: "They [the Harlem Hellfighters] proved to white people that black people can fight for war." There were

only a couple of students that reflected this sentiment, yet these statements illustrate that some students articulated a perspective held by many in the African American community about their service during World War I.

Responses to Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis

From reviewing and coding students' paintings, four themes stood out: 1) the warfare associated with World War I, 2) the Harlem Hellfighters fighting in World War I, 3) the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters, and 4) the parade in New York to celebrate the return of the Harlem Hellfighters at the end of the war. In the following sections, we discuss students' paintings and their responses to the Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis prompts ("What images and colors do you use in your painting to positively show the impact of the Harlem Hellfighters?" and "What is the overall message of your painting?") relating to each of these themes.

Theme 1: Warfare in World War I

There were several students that focused on the horror of warfare in World War I. These students focused on either trench warfare or no man's land. For example, Zion's painting (**Figure 4**) contains two images. The left side of the painting shows Europe in a state of peace, while the right side of the painting illustrates Europe engulfed in World War I. On the left side, the painting shows an image of a flower with a bright sun. This side of the painting also uses bright and warm colors to show Europe in peace. These colors and images contrast greatly with the images on the right side of the painting, which uses darker colors to represent Europe in war. Barbed wire and a trench are immediately visible, accompanied by grenades being thrown. These items capture the changing nature of warfare introduced in World War I.

Zion's responses to the two analysis prompts in the Student Painting Analysis handout were short, but did demonstrate that the student was able to discuss the symbolic imagery used. Zion said that the dark colors were used "for war," while the bright colors were meant to show "happiness" in the images. These comments demonstrate that Zion grasped how World War I impacted the



Figure 4: Zion's Painting

European landscape. Zion argued that the message of the painting is to show “what soldiers think at night sleeping or fighting” based on their surroundings. Zion’s argument was that Horace Pippin showed courage by fighting in World War I and because “when Horace got shot, he couldn’t paint (with his right hand) but he did it anyways.” Zion’s painting represents how some students conveyed with imagery the combat of World War I.

In a similar fashion, Sutton focused exclusively on the scars inflicted upon the European landscape during World War I. Sutton’s painting (**Figure 5**) features darker and duller colors to convey the harshness and sadness of warfare. The images of no man’s land are bleak, with several dead people in the painting. Trees are depicted as being bare. The viewer is left with the desolation caused in World War I.

Sutton’s responses to the two analysis prompts in the Student Painting Analysis handout are also short. To capture the mood, Sutton responded that mainly “red, black, and grey were used.”



Figure 5: Sutton’s Painting

The message of Sutton’s painting is to show “what happens in no man’s land and how sad it is.” In regards to the Harlem Hellfighters, Sutton said that “they were courageous because it must have been very scary and difficult to go through war” based on the conditions described in the trade books and as depicted in Sutton’s painting. Another one of Sutton’s statements argued that “They [the Harlem Hellfighters] were determined to survive and make sure others did as well.” Sutton’s arguments made the connection that the Harlem Hellfighters had to be brave in order to survive the dangerous conditions in World War I.

Theme 2: Harlem Hellfighters Fighting in World War I

Most of the students focused their paintings specifically on the Harlem Hellfighters locked in combat during World War I. Shiloh’s painting (**Figure 6**) captures the Harlem Hellfighters engaged in war. The middle of Shiloh’s painting has a Harlem Hellfighter.



Figure 6: Shiloh's Painting

The soldier is surrounded by chaos and what can be presumed to be explosions and daily life in war. In spite of these harsh realities, the Harlem Hellfighter is depicted as determined and unafraid of his surroundings based on his facial expression.

Shiloh was also very brief in responding to the two analysis prompts in the Student Painting Analysis handout. Shiloh simply stated the colors used in the painting and argued that the message of the painting is to show the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters: "The message of my painting is when the Harlem Hellfighter gets hit he got back up and kept moving." This statement about the message of the painting is most likely referencing the courage of Henry Johnson in repelling the German nightly raid as discussed in *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage*. A reader can infer this based on the one detail that Shiloh provided in an analysis prompt: "He got shot while fighting a group of soldiers." Shiloh's response to the second analysis prompt, coupled with the facial expression conveying grit and determination in his painting, reinforced the reputation earned by the Harlem Hellfighters.



Figure 7: Sawyer’s Painting

In a similar vein, Sawyer’s painting (**Figure 7**) depicts the courage of the Harlem Hellfighters. In the left side of the painting, the Harlem Hellfighters are shown engaged in trench warfare with the phrase, “what the trenches were like,” along with people wounded or dead in no man’s land. In the right side of the painting, the Harlem Hellfighters are receiving medals for showing “what bravery was like” for their military service in World War I. Sawyer accurately conveyed that the Harlem Hellfighters received numerous awards from the French army.

Sawyer’s responses to the two analysis prompts in the Student Painting Analysis handout were also short, but did unpack the colors and messages of the painting. Sawyer stated that the green stick men represent “members of the Harlem Hellfighters.” The overall message of Sawyer’s painting is twofold: “I wanted to show the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters along with what the trenches were like.” In fact, there are multiple messages within Sawyer’s painting, which shows warfare in World War I, the Harlem Hellfighters engaged in combat, and “their bravery” being acknowledged at the conclusion of war with various awards.

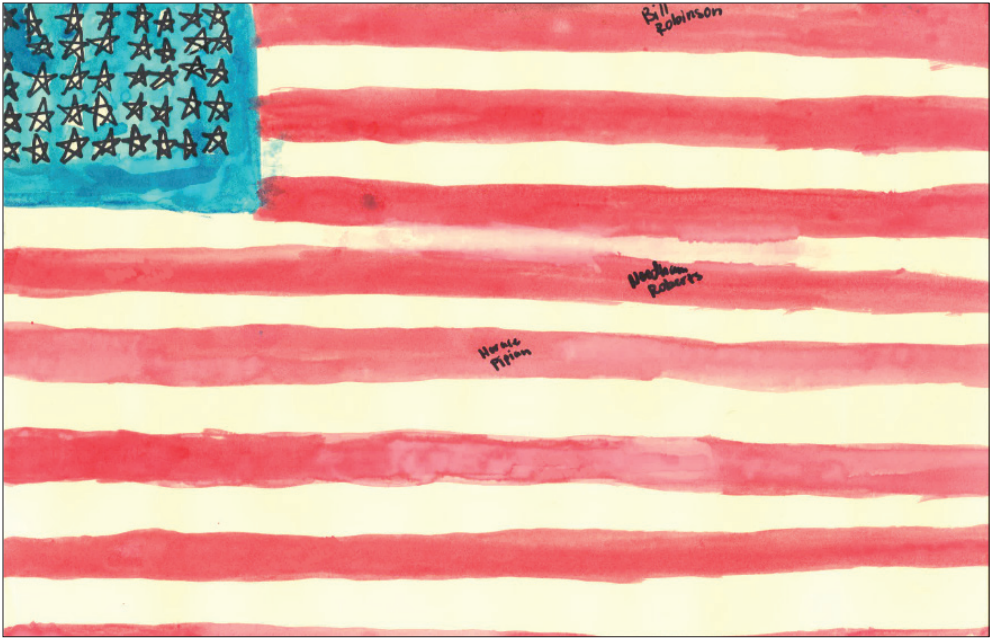


Figure 8: Salem's Painting

Theme 3: Bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters

Tying in with Sawyer's observations, the second most common type of student painting focused on the bravery of the Harlem Hellfighters. Salem's painting (**Figure 8**) represents this theme well. The main image in Salem's painting is the U.S. flag. The names of Harlem Hellfighters mentioned in *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* and *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin* are listed on the flag, including Bill Robinson, Needham Roberts, Horace Pippin, Henry Johnson, William Butler, and James Reese Europe.

While not clearly stated in Salem's Student Painting Analysis handout, it can be inferred that Salem used the image of the American flag with the names of Harlem Hellfighters to show their patriotism. The U.S. flag is often used in connection to more abstract concepts like courage, bravery, and patriotism. Salem argued that the contributions of the Harlem Hellfighters in World War I need to be acknowledged: "The overall message of my painting was to



Figure 9: Rory's Painting

give the Harlem Hellfighters the credit they deserve.” Both trade books focus on the Harlem Hellfighters’ bravery and contributions to the U.S. war effort, so it is not surprising that Salem would argue that these traits should be honored. Salem further argued for the Harlem Hellfighters being worthy of praise through their actions: “Some of the Harlem Hellfighters went into no man’s land knowing it was dangerous.” Salem’s responses to the two analysis prompts connect to why the student would relate the U.S. flag to the Harlem Hellfighters’ actions during World War I.

In a similar vein, Rory’s painting (**Figure 9**) focuses on Horace Pippin’s service during World War I. Pippin is shown in the center of the painting in a green uniform and holding an American flag. To the right of Pippin, there are two medals shown: the French Medal of Honor (which is written into the painting) and the Purple Heart (which is identified in Rory’s analysis prompts). The viewer is left with the idea that the solemn duty performed by Horace Pippin to his country resulted in the military accolades honoring his service.

In the two analysis prompts for the Student Painting Analysis handout, Rory clarified that the Harlem Hellfighter represented is Horace Pippin and that the medal below the French Medal of Honor is supposed to be the Purple Heart, which Pippin was awarded in the 1940s. Rory’s message of the painting is that “you can do anything if you try.” It can be assumed that Rory was referencing the determination of Horace Pippin to become a famous painter after being wounded in combat, as discussed in *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin*. Rory stated that Horace Pippin and other Harlem Hellfighters won medals because “they saved other soldiers, they died for their country, and they risked their lives”—arguments that show reasons the Harlem Hellfighters were decorated veterans.

Theme 4: Parade in New York to Celebrate the Return of the Harlem Hellfighters

There was one student, Robin, that focused on the parade in New York when the Harlem Hellfighters returned after the end of World War I. Robin’s painting (**Figure 10**) and analysis prompts stood out for their singular focus on the parade. In the upper left corner of Robin’s painting, the phrase, “Harlem New York 1919,” tells the viewer the date and location of the painting. The viewer knows that



Figure 10: Robin's Painting

music is being played at the parade with the musical notes in the center of Robin's painting. People are shown cheering on the sides. At the bottom of the painting, viewers can see the tops of Harlem Hellfighters' green helmets and rifles, led by someone holding the U.S. flag. The painting's warm and bright colors capture the happy occasion of the Harlem Hellfighters returning to New York as discussed in *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage*.

Robin did a better job than most students at unpacking the inclusion of certain items in the painting through the responses to the prompts in the Student Painting Analysis handout. Robin's choices of images and words were done to capture the context of the parade in New York: "I used bright and happy colors because it is a parade, and everyone is happy they [the Harlem Hellfighters] are back." This emotional feeling about the returning Harlem Hellfighters is reinforced with Robin's statement about the message of the painting: "My painting represents how hard they [the Harlem Hellfighters] worked, and how happy we [civilians in New York] were that they came back. We were so happy that we led a parade to celebrate." Robin implied that the

Harlem Hellfighters' courage connects to the reason for the parade: "They never gave up even through trench warfare and also when Horace got shot." There is also the argument implying that the Harlem Hellfighters faced racial discrimination, though not expounded upon in Robin's statement: "They [the Harlem Hellfighters] were all mistreated, which made them stronger." Again, Robin did not directly state that the parade was because of the Harlem Hellfighters' bravery, but this can be implied given this student's responses.

Discussion

Modeling Analysis Skills

For teachers wishing to replicate our project, we encourage adding more debriefing sessions with students after completing the analysis prompts. Due to time constraints, the teacher did not debrief with students after the completion of both handouts. Such class discussions would allow the teacher to better model for students how to answer the analysis prompts throughout the project. History education scholars have argued that teachers need to model for students how to deconstruct the contents of primary and secondary sources.⁴⁶

A similar approach can be employed with writing. The teacher could create her own painting and show the students her painting while answering the two analysis prompts in the Student Painting Analysis handout before the students start their own painting. Then, students can do a quick write in a couple of sentences to answer the prompts in this handout. The teacher should stress that students answer both prompts in a couple of sentences to fully unpack their arguments. Next, students can share their responses to both prompts, providing students practice in constructing historical arguments.

Adjustments to Improve Student Writing

There are several notable findings from the project that should be highlighted. The sixth-grade students were able to analyze visual and text-based sources. However, their writing was typically terse. That said, the sixth graders were able to create a visual representation of the Harlem Hellfighters' experiences either on the home front or on European battlefields during World War I.

Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis (Revised)

Read the pages listed below in *The Harlem Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* and then answer the following questions.

- 1a. What images do you use in your painting to positively show about the impact of the Harlem Hellfighters?
- 1b. What meaning did you want these images to show about the impact of the Harlem Hellfighters?
- 2a. What colors do you use in your painting to positively show about the impact of the Harlem Hellfighters?
- 2b. What meaning did you want these colors to show about the impact of the Harlem Hellfighters?
- 3a. What is the overall message of your painting connected to the service of the Harlem Hellfighters?
- 3b. How did the colors and images used in your painting convey the overall message of your painting?

Figure 11: Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis (Revised)

The students were able to place the Harlem Hellfighters within the context of the racism that typified the World War I era. Several of the students noted that the Harlem Hellfighters fought for their country despite the numerous roadblocks put in front of them. Several students were able to articulate how the Harlem Hellfighters' successes as a fighting unit contradicted the long-held assumptions of many white Americans.

The students' writing in both Handout 1: Trade Book Analysis Prompts and Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis have room for improvement. First, it is important to note that over 90% of the sixth graders did not write in complete sentences at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year. Therefore, the fact that the overwhelming majority of students accurately conveyed content material about the Harlem Hellfighters in the two handouts in a couple of short sentences was a big improvement. The 2021-2022 academic year was the first time these students had done classroom activities employing basic analysis and writing activities connected

to historical thinking. This lack of experience in analyzing primary and secondary sources no doubt impacted their ability to utilize evidence to make historical arguments.

There is also room to improve Handout 2: Student Painting Analysis. We recommend modifications to the questions as shown in the revised version of Handout 2 (**Figure 11**). The revised questions help students better articulate the messages within their painting. This approach to structuring the questions helps students to initially answer the question, and then make evidence-based claims to support their arguments with the second part of each prompt.

Exploring African Americans' Political Identity in the Aftermath of World War I

The Black Freedom Movement in U.S. society during and directly after World War I is not usually explored in as much depth in middle schools. Blacks' military service in World War I reignited political aspirations of the African American community to actualize the democratic principles espoused in the U.S. Constitution. As such, there are numerous areas for future scholarship that can build on this article to explore the Black Freedom Movement in U.S. society during and directly after World War I. One ideal topic is Red Summer and subsequent "race riots" during the 1920s.

African American servicemen returning from war pushed back against social, cultural, political, and economic norms in U.S. society. It is not a coincidence that African American servicemen were often linked to black communities that challenged the status quo, which caused whites in different cities to employ violence to maintain white hegemony. One such example that could be studied is the Tulsa Race Massacre.

The Tulsa Race Massacre has received more national coverage with its recent centennial anniversary. The teacher could use the trade book *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* and primary sources from the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum to examine this topic in depth.⁴⁷ Students can analyze how white Tulsans' simmering resentments of blacks' economic successes in the segregated Greenwood District led to the Tulsa Race Massacre. Like the project focusing on the Harlem Hellfighters discussed in this article, the Tulsa Race Massacre is another underexplored topic in the middle-

school social studies classroom. The examination of both the Harlem Hellfighters and the Tulsa Race Massacre helps students grasp the connections across time of how African Americans' aspirations of a more equitable U.S. society have been met with resistance. Furthermore, students can grasp how African American servicemen returning from World War I entered into conflict with whites that wanted to maintain white hegemony.

Conclusion

Our project focused on developing foundational blocks of students' historical thinking skills. When our project was implemented, these students were not ready for activities with more advanced historical thinking skills such as corroborating parallel arguments across numerous sources. Therefore, our goal was to move the needle a little bit on developing students' historical thinking, which we believe can be seen in their paintings and the follow-up analysis of their paintings. These improvements include consistently making evidence-based claims in their writing by drawing on primary and secondary sources, capturing commonly held beliefs by Harlem Hellfighters about the significance of their military service, and accurately contextualizing the daily life of warfare during World War I. It is important to acknowledge that COVID-19 disrupted student learning over the last few academic years, from which we have still not fully recovered. The structure and findings from our study provide one model for ways that teachers can restart learning processes on how to develop students' historical thinking skills.

This project is also an initial step in helping to address an understudied topic in U.S. history: the Harlem Hellfighters' impact on civil rights issues during the World War I era. The primary sources and trade books used in our research project help students contextualize the racial discrimination within U.S. society at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as how the Harlem Hellfighters' bravery countered racist stereotypes of the era. Projects like the one discussed here need to be developed in other underexplored eras, like the example of the Tulsa Race Massacre. These projects not only shine a light on the ever-present racial discrimination in U.S. society, but also highlight the agency exercised by African Americans to create a more equitable society.

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