

The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship.

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Recommended Citation

Wallace, Maurice (2021) "The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/7>

Review

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Spring 2021

Willis, Deborah. *The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship.* New York University Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$35.00. ISBN 9781479809004 pp. 256

No one who knows anything about the history of African American photographic practice does not know the name Deborah Willis. Willis, Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at New York University, is the leading scholar of Black photographic history in the US. A MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellow and author of *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present*, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers - 1840 to the Present*, *Let Your Motto be Resistance: African American Portraits*, and *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (with Barbara Krauthamer), Willis is a near singular mind in Black photographic history. The study of African Americans' cultural and aesthetic relationship to photographic image-making would be significantly diminished without her. And yet, vital as Willis is to an informed interpretation of the cultural style and political stakes involved in Black picture-making, her importance to Black scholarship is farther-reaching still. Her recent book, *The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship*, approaches a people's history of the sacrifices, sufferings and manhood of the men of the US Colored Troops. Methodologically, it enacts a visual curation of black Civil War history as few besides Willis are so expertly capable of. As deeply reflective about the telling of African American history using images, and given to a conception of African American men *and* women as "soldiers" within a strenuous physical and moral campaign against slavery, *The Black Civil War Soldier* is the handsomest picture book and more.

Comprised of five chapters organized chronologically from 1860-61 to 1865-66, *The Black Civil War Soldier* offers up a striking cache of antique images from public and private collections, arranging them to convey a vivid narrative of bondage, battle and freedom. Curated to represent the diverse involvements of Black men and women in the struggle between the southern and northern states, Willis's text shimmers under that light. And yet, to represent *The*

Black Civil War Soldier as singularly photographic without mention of the print archives—letters, most notably—that also stretch across its pages, to say nothing of the doubly historical and documentary text of Willis’s own hand narrating this heavily visual history of war, is to misrepresent what makes Willis’s book the elegantly hybrid genre it is. Gilt-framed daguerreotypes, exotic tintypes, hand-colored ambrotypes, aged cartes-de-visite, and miniaturized albumen prints, for example, do not so much decorate Willis’s art book as index the breadth of early photographic technologies and forms inhering to the Black gentleman-soldier as a discursive construction, iconic figure and would-be American type. What’s more these varied visual projections of Black military and civil respectability rarely appear in *The Black Civil War Soldier* in conventional two-dimensional style. Instead, in very nearly every case, they are reproduced as *photographic objects*. By this I mean that they give the appearance of photo-historical artifacts, items whose original condition in paper or glass is recalled by the material suggestion of three-dimensionality their visibly faded or frayed paper edges, and ornate wood and leather casings (lightly shadowed on the page to depict depth), visually intimate. Personal notations handwritten in the empty border-spaces and blank back sides of select cartes-de-visite also lend to Willis’s curation this selfsame artifactual feel. These, too, are included in the repertoire of images *The Black Civil War Soldier* relies on to tell the history of America’s first reckoning with race, internecine conflict and Black freedom dreams.

Despite its pictorial power, however, *The Black Civil War Soldier* is hardly reducible to the historical force of its pictures, however. Reproduced letters and diary pages which also “hold the legacy of African American resilience,” as Willis says, are amply highlighted, too (9). “Black soldiers wrote to and received letters from black nurses and teachers, wives and mothers, girlfriends and daughters, and doctors (who supported and protested the war), as well as white officers and their wives” (Ibid). Not infrequently did these letters provide a context for the picture accompanying them and the means for their circulation far from the camps or studios where they were made. Though a few letters written to Black soldiers by family members struggling both to master written expression and survive apart from their husbands’ and sons’ nominal protection and provisions are also copied here in their original hand, the vast majority of dozens helping to make up Willis’s study are transcribed into a contemporary type not distinctly different from that in which Willis’s own words are set. This typographical difference is no trivial observation, though it may sound like one. Rather, by it I mean to note how Willis’s habit

of transcribing so many letters in their entirety not only expands the range of text-based pages making up *The Black Civil War Soldier*—thus straining, but not misapplying, “visual history” in its subtitle—but affords the work a property as patently archival as it does visual. In other words, missives like that from Sergeant Major Lewis Henry Douglass (son of Frederick) to his fiancée, Helen Amelia Loguen, in which he acclaimed his own Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry “a fighting regiment, [for] not a man flinched” and longed for “a hundred thousand colored troops, ...[to] put an end to this war” are as key to the history Willis has set out to tell as the dozens of images she’s culled from major collections at Howard, Yale, Emory, Library of Congress, National Archives, and other important repositories (113). *The Black Civil War Soldier* gives students of Civil War history more than the darker face of Black courage and martial heroism so often overlooked, I mean to say. The letters, affidavits, and eyewitness dispatches that help compose Willis’s *written* history, fully a third of the book, give this “visual history” a voice as well.

Voice is no meaningless metaphor here. One hears many of them across the pages of *The Black Civil War Soldier* and the sound of them is richly heard. While Willis’s method is not oral history—to use such a phrase would be misleading—*The Black Civil War Soldier* is a visual history begging to be heard nonetheless. The epistolary voices of Black soldiers bravely resigned to their death on the battlefield and those of anxious Black mothers and disgruntled wives alike certain they will not survive plantation life without help from their sons and husbands inevitably aid our “listening when we view photographs,” as Willis suggests pictures now allow (vii). One might say then that the beauty and brilliance of Willis’s project both follow from an archival impulse that is neither visual entirely (despite its own claim to be “a visual history”) nor oral exactly (again, that would be misleading) but hybridly and coincidentally *phono-visual* for those sensitive enough to read this way. If this was not the design of *The Black Civil War Soldier*, it would be the effect of this work in any case and a provocative intervention in Civil War studies all the same. In Willis, images present as aesthetic objects and subalterns “speak” as subjects and citizens. “This book returns the voices of [the] men and women [in it]” (18) even as the portraits it studies bear more specific testimony to “[h]ow...black male identity was formed by images of soldiers in uniform” (vii).

My modest theorizing notwithstanding, *The Black Civil War Soldier* is an eminently accessible work and available to the nonacademic equally as much the professional academic.

But for the academic historian, especially, the suggestiveness of Willis's design to have us not only "see and hear the world of the black soldiers" but of *the Black wives and mothers left behind* moreover, could be her most compelling (and enduring) proposition (9). Exceeded only by Thavolia Glymph's *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom and Nation* in this framing of (Black) women as "soldiers," too, *The Black Civil War Soldier* lets us "see and hear" distinctly both the possibility of another class of Black soldierly subjects, those without uniforms but not without political and moral interests all their own, and, on the other hand, material for a new account of the Civil War, one like Glymph's told by Black women at war with sexual violence, penury, and the political terrors of the plantation at wartime. Although *The Black Civil War Soldier* is more centrally concerned with the production of Black manliness than it is with Black women's unique wartime experiences, in Willis this latter consideration is not invisible or unheard. Clearly, manhood wasn't the only issue at stake in the Black soldier's participation in the Civil War, Willis shows.

Even narrowly and phallically gendered, though, the Black civil war soldier was never one thing, Willis reveals. In pictures and letters, he was figured as property as often as he was a person. On occasion, he was impressively educated, though he was more often unlearned and only semi-literate. He was a martyr and a deserter, an enlisted man and, rarely, an officer. In virtually all of the extant photographs of him, he wore blue. But gray—a misleading association that mistakes camp slaves for Black Confederates, as Kevin M. Levin has recently demonstrated—was not unheard of. That he was all of these things and not a little more, Willis's colorful history helps us see not too dimly but clearly, as through a lens.

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