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Beyond Double Consciousness: Black Veteranality as a Framework for Military History

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Abstract

Despite decades of groundbreaking scholarship on Black military service, the category of the veteran remains undertheorized as a racialized historical actor in military history. Existing studies trace patterns of discrimination, valor, and protest across America's wars, yet the field still lacks a portable, analytic vocabulary that travels across archives, wars, and commemorative practices. This article introduces Black veteranality as a historian's tool—a framework that names the historically produced condition where Blackness, military service, and claims to citizenship converge within institutions that demand patriotic sacrifice while distributing recognition, protection, and benefits unequally. Building from W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, Emma Murray's concept of veteranality, Veteran Critical Theory, and the rich scholarship of Black military history, the framework highlights three recurrent dynamics: tripartite consciousness (the intersection of Black, American, and veteran identities), racialized moral injury (the political and ethical damage when sacrifice meets abandonment), and contested patriotism (critique as a demanding form of love of country). Black veteranality is especially useful for reperiodizing military history—extending analysis from battlefield to pension board, veterans' organizing, benefit administration, and public memory. A review of the American Historical Association's discourse demonstrates that the profession is prepared for a framework that joins military history to race, citizenship, and memory. For Black veterans, critique has often been not the negation of patriotism but one of its most exacting forms.

Keywords: Black veteranality; military history; Black veterans; citizenship; patriotism; veteran studies; Du Bois; AHA discourse

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Military history has expanded far beyond operational narratives. Historians now examine war and society, citizenship struggles, demobilization politics, occupation regimes, and the afterlives of conflict. Yet one category remains undertheorized: the veteran as a racialized historical actor. For Black Americans, military service never suspended race. Uniformed service and veteran status became recurring tests of citizenship, manhood, loyalty, and public worth across every American war, from the American Revolution forward. The field of military history possesses a rich body of case studies documenting these dynamics, but it still lacks a concise analytic vocabulary that travels across wars, archives, and commemorative sites.[1]

Black veteranality offers that vocabulary. By "Black veteranality," I mean the historically produced condition in which Blackness, military service, and claims to American citizenship converge within institutions that demand sacrifice while distributing honor, safety, and benefits unequally. The term functions less as an identity label than as a method of historical analysis. It asks how service members became veterans in the eyes of the state, their communities, and themselves; how Black veterans used service to press claims on the republic; and how those claims were resisted, deferred, or selectively recognized.[2]

Reframed for historians, Black veteranality has three advantages:

- It treats veteranhood as a process rather than a static status.
- It links battlefield service to demobilization, benefits, and memory.
- It makes patriotism a historical problem rather than an assumed virtue.

The framework, therefore, is best understood not as a replacement for operational, political, or institutional military history, but as a complement to them. It clarifies what changes when the archive is read simultaneously through race, veteran status, and citizenship. For Black veterans, critique has often been not the negation of patriotism but one of its most exacting forms.

Historiography: Black Military Service and the Veteran as Historical Actor

The historiographical foundation for Black veteranality is substantial and growing. This section surveys the scholarship that establishes the terrain on which the framework stands, paying particular attention to recent work that extends Black military history into gender, contemporary conflicts, and transnational contexts.

Foundational Studies: Service, Citizenship, and the Long Aftermath

Donald R. Shaffer's *After the Glory* (2004) remains essential for understanding how Black Civil War veterans navigated the decades following Appomattox.[3] Shaffer follows veterans through pension applications, Grand Army of the Republic posts, property acquisition, violence, and political organizing, demonstrating that the meaning of service unfolded in struggles over recognition and rights long after discharge. Jennifer E. Brooks's *Defining the Peace* (2004) extends this insight into the twentieth century, showing how Black and white World War II veterans reshaped Georgia politics after 1945.[4] Military service did not quiet democratic demands; it sharpened them.

Le'Trice Donaldson's *Duty Beyond the Battlefield* (2020) traces how Black soldiers in the post-Reconstruction Army linked military service explicitly to racial uplift, citizenship, and manhood.[5] Her work demonstrates that even in the racially stratified institution of the late-nineteenth-century military, Black soldiers understood their service as part of a larger freedom struggle. Kimberley L. Phillips's *War! What Is It Good For?* (2012) situates the U.S. military squarely inside the long Black freedom struggle from World War II through Iraq, arguing that military institutions have been sites of both oppression and organized Black resistance.[6] Stephen Kantrowitz's *More Than Freedom* (2012) demonstrates how Black citizenship claims were forged not in isolation but through sustained, strategic encounters with state power—a dynamic clearly visible in Black veterans' organizing.[7]

World War I and the Du Boisian Archive

Chad Williams's *Torchbearers of Democracy* (2010) and *The Wounded World* (2023) bring W. E. B. Du Bois's own veteran-centered research into sharp historiographical focus.[8] Williams shows how Du Bois understood World War I as a crucible for Black citizenship claims, and how that hope turned to disillusionment when Black veterans returned to racial terror rather than democratic recognition. Du Bois's unfinished manuscript on Black soldiers revealed his conviction that military service exposed, rather than resolved, the fundamental contradictions of American democracy. Adriane Lentz-Smith's *Freedom Struggles* (2009) complements Williams by narrating how African American soldiers and activists deployed military service to demand full citizenship rights, illuminating how World War I mobilized a generation toward New Negro activism.[9]

Gender, Intersectionality, and Black Women's Military Service

Black military history has historically centered men, but recent scholarship corrects that imbalance. While comprehensive monographs on Black women veterans remain emerging, pathbreaking work documents their presence and contributions. Megan Thiele's research on Black women's traumatic brain injury experiences in post-9/11 conflicts reveals how race and gender compound within military medical systems.[10] The National Association of Black Military Women (NABMW) documents that approximately 40 percent of women deployed during Operation Desert Storm were Black, and officers like Lt. Phoebe Jeter commanded Patriot missile batteries under fire—demonstrating Black women's combat leadership in modern warfare.[11]

Keisha Blain's *Until I Am Free* (2021) and *Without Fear* (2025), though focused on broader human rights activism, trace how Black women connected military service—including their own and their male relatives'—to anti-racist organizing and global solidarity work.[12] Black women veterans occupy a distinct position within Black veteranality: They navigate tripartite consciousness while also confronting gendered exclusions within both military institutions and veteran commemorative culture. Their veteranhood has been simultaneously hypervisible (as tokens) and structurally erased (in policy and memory).

Contemporary Conflicts and the Post-9/11 Generation

Black veteranality extends beyond historical conflicts into the contemporary moment. Post-9/11 scholarship on Black veterans remains underdeveloped compared to earlier wars, but emerging

research reveals persistent patterns. The Department of Labor's *Black Veterans and Employment* literature review (2023) documents systemic employment disparities for Black veterans despite ostensibly "race-neutral" transition programs.[13] The Equal Justice Initiative's *Targeting Black Veterans* (2017) traces continuities from post-World War I racial terror through contemporary police violence against Black veterans, demonstrating how veteranhood has failed to shield Black Americans from racialized state violence.[14]

Chad Williams's historical analysis shows Black service members in Iraq and Afghanistan confronting the same contradictions Du Bois identified a century earlier: fighting for "freedom" abroad while facing structural racism at home.[15] Contemporary Black veterans increasingly frame their critiques through both civil rights and human rights vocabularies, linking their service to broader struggles against mass incarceration, police violence, and educational inequity.

AHA Discourse and Professional Readiness

American Historical Association (AHA) discourse over the past decade demonstrates the profession's readiness for frameworks like Black veteranality. *Perspectives on History* has argued directly that the discipline has a race problem, with political, diplomatic, and military history long imagined as white male domains even as those subfields have diversified.[16] The AHA's *Racist Hist*ories and the AHA initiative acknowledge the profession's complicity in legitimating racist scholarship—a reminder that methodological questions carry institutional weight.[17]

David Varel's account of Lawrence Reddick underscores a related point: Black historians built archives, interpretive traditions, and source bases long before mainstream gatekeepers recognized them.[18] For historians of Black military life, that lesson is foundational. The archive extends beyond official military records to encompass Black newspapers, veterans' organizations, commemorations, family papers, and community memory. Ernie Price's reinterpretation of Appomattox demonstrates this principle in practice. Close attention to United States Colored Troops records and partnership with Black public historians transformed a white commemorative narrative into a fuller history of emancipation, service, and local memory.[19] Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove argue similarly that the Emancipation Memorial cannot be understood apart from freedpeople and Black veterans who used it to claim public space and democratic meaning.[20]

Eladio Bobadilla's work on student veterans and Ty Seidule's essay on teaching history at West Point both position veteran experience as inseparable from questions of citizenship, race, and historical thinking.[21] The AHA's spotlight on Le'Trice Donaldson and the emerging field of Black military studies signals a profession now prepared for conceptual tools equal to its empirical richness.[22] The University of Virginia Press's *The Black Soldier in War and Society: New Narratives and Critical Perspectives* series, co-edited by Donaldson and george white jr., provides institutional infrastructure for precisely the kind of scholarship Black veteranality seeks to advance.[23] These AHA interventions establish the professional conversation into which Black veteranality enters: a conversation about racist historiography, the authority of Black archives, the politics of public memory, and the place of military subjects inside a more capacious discipline.

Conceptual Genealogy and Adjacent Frameworks

At the framework's base lies Du Bois's double consciousness—the insight that Black life in the United States has been shaped by continual negotiation between self-understanding and a racialized public gaze.[24] For Black veterans, however, a third term matters: veteran status. Military service generated expectations of earned belonging—through pay, pensions, suffrage, public honor, or simple bodily security—that the state and white society repeatedly frustrated. Black veteranality therefore recasts double consciousness as tripartite consciousness: consciousness as Black, as American, and as a veteran claimant to citizenship.

Emma Murray's concept of veteranality is indispensable because it treats the veteran not as a natural category but as a social and political construction.[25] Veteran Critical Theory likewise insists that institutions and dominant narratives shape veteran experience, often through deficit models that obscure veterans' own knowledge and agency.[26] Yet neither framework fully theorizes how race structures veteranhood in United States history. Black veteranality extends these insights by specifying that veteran identity has been produced differently across racial lines—through unequal discipline, benefits, symbolic recognition, and exposure to violence.

Studies of citizenship and patriotism provide a third point of comparison. Stephen Nathanson's defense of moderate patriotism remains useful for thinking about attachment to the nation, but such debates often presume a citizen whose belonging is already secure.[27] Black veteranality begins from the opposite premise. For Black service members and veterans, patriotism has often been practiced under conditions of partial citizenship. That is why patriotic service and democratic critique appear together so frequently in Black veteran history. For Black veterans, critique has been not the negation of patriotism but one of its most exacting forms.

Finally, the framework draws on critical race methodology and counter-storytelling, particularly the insistence that subordinate archives reveal not merely additional data but alternative ways of knowing the past.[28] For historians, counter-narrative must remain evidence-based reconstruction. Its purpose is not to substitute assertion for archive but to read military records against the grain and place them alongside Black-produced sources, oral histories, monuments, church records, and community memory.

The relationship among these adjacent approaches is clarified in Table 1.

Defining Black Veteranality

Black veteranality is best defined as a historical formation produced where Blackness, military service, and claims to citizenship meet within institutions that demand sacrifice while distributing recognition unequally. It directs historians to veteranhood as a process rather than a single legal status. Veteranhood emerges through enlistment contracts, battlefield experience, discharge papers, pension boards, veterans' organizations, benefit regimes, local politics, family memory, and commemorative practice. Three analytic features are central.

Tripartite Consciousness

The first feature is tripartite consciousness. Black veterans did not merely navigate a Du Boisian

Table 1. *Conceptual Genealogy and Contributions of Black Veteranality*

Framework	Primary insight	Limitation for military history	What Black veteranality adds
Du Boisian double consciousness	Explains racial self-making under white supremacy.	Not specific to veteran status, the state, or benefits.	Links racial self-consciousness to service, demobilization, and earned claims on citizenship.
Veteranality (Murray)	Shows that veteran identity is socially produced and contested.	Underdeveloped on race in the United States context.	Specifies how Blackness and unequal citizenship shape veteran identity.
Veteran Critical Theory	Centers institutions, power, and veteran-centered critique.	Privileges the civilian-veteran divide more than race.	Shows that race reorganizes veteran experience inside and outside military institutions.
Citizenship and patriotism studies	Clarifies how national attachment and civic obligation are imagined.	Often assumes a citizen whose belonging is already secure.	Explains contested patriotism and why service can intensify critique.
Black military history and public memory	Recovers Black service, activism, and commemorative practice.	Evidence is often dispersed by era, war, or site.	Provides a portable vocabulary that travels across wars, archives, and commemorations.

Source: Author's synthesis of sources cited in the text.

split between Blackness and Americanness. They also carried the expectation that service had earned them an enforceable place in the polity. That expectation animated petitions for pensions, voting rights, anti-lynching protections, equal promotion, hospital care, and access to education. It is this third dimension—veteranhood as a claim-making status—that makes the framework especially useful for historians. The concept helps explain why service so often intensified Black veterans' engagement with the state rather than ending it. Tripartite consciousness explains the recurring pattern whereby Black veterans simultaneously affirmed their military service, critiqued the nation's failures, and demanded that their sacrifice be honored through tangible policy changes.

Racialized Moral Injury

The second feature is racialized moral injury. Borrowing cautiously from recent moral injury literature, the term identifies the wound created when military ideals of honor, reciprocity, and collective purpose collide with racist practice or postservice abandonment.[29] Historians should use the term as a heuristic, not as a retroactive clinical diagnosis. The evidence may appear in letters, memoirs, oral histories, protest statements, or moments of withdrawal and bitterness. The point is to name the political and ethical damage produced when Black service members discovered that sacrifice did not guarantee recognition. Racialized moral injury differs from standard moral injury frameworks because it locates the betrayal not in individual combat decisions but in systemic structures that demanded patriotic performance while rationing civic belonging.

Contested Patriotism

The third feature is contested patriotism. Black veterans have frequently expressed love of country through petition, protest, organizing, and reinterpretation rather than deference. Their patriotism has often been transformative rather than acquiescent: a demand that the republic honor the obligations

that military service was supposed to confirm. Black veteranality therefore treats criticism not as evidence against patriotic attachment but as one of its recurrent forms. This understanding inverts assumptions common in both public discourse and military history, which often read Black veterans' critiques as disloyalty. Instead, the framework recognizes that for Black veterans, critique has been not the negation of patriotism but one of its most exacting forms.

These features are not exhaustive. They vary by gender, class, branch, region, empire, and era. Black women veterans, for instance, navigate tripartite consciousness while simultaneously confronting gendered exclusions within both military institutions and commemorative culture. Their veteranhood has been doubly contested—claimed against both white supremacy and patriarchal veteran organizations. Officers experienced different material conditions than enlisted personnel, and career service members inhabited military institutions differently than draftees. The framework is useful precisely because it invites historians to ask when and how these dynamics appear, not to assume them in identical form.

What Black Veteranality Changes in Military History

As a historian's tool, the value of Black veteranality lies in the questions it changes and the connections it enables.

From Battle to the Afterlife of Service

First, it reperiodizes military history. Many accounts end with victory, defeat, or demobilization. Black veteranality insists that the historical meaning of service often becomes clearest after war: in pension adjudication, labor markets, voter registration, racial terror, veterans' organizations, hospital systems, and public commemoration. Shaffer's Black Civil War veterans cannot be understood apart from pension files, Grand Army of the Republic posts, property acquisition, and white violence after Appomattox.[30] Black veteranality gives historians a language for that long aftermath. The framework positions demobilization, benefits administration, and memory work not as postscripts to military history but as constitutive sites where the meaning of service was negotiated and contested.

Reading State and Community Archives Together

Second, the framework changes the archive. Official records remain indispensable—muster rolls, service records, court-martial files, pension files, Veterans Administration case files, congressional hearings, and unit newspapers. But read alone, they can naturalize the state's categories. Black veteranality requires archival pluralism: pairing state records with the Black press, NAACP files, churches, fraternal orders, oral histories, local museums, cemetery landscapes, monuments, and family collections. Price's Appomattox work is emblematic. The historical record expanded when USCT service files were read alongside Black community stewardship of memory, not when one replaced the other.[31] This methodological principle applies across periods and conflicts.

Making Citizenship and Patriotism Historical

Third, the framework makes citizenship and patriotism historical objects rather than settled terms. Brooks shows that returning veterans in Georgia altered postwar political culture; military service sharpened rather than quieted claims to democratic participation.[32] Ira Katznelson's work on the

GI Bill demonstrates how veterans' benefits were administered through racialized local institutions, making access to postwar opportunity profoundly uneven.[33] Black veteranality helps explain why service could deepen demands on the nation even as the nation rationed the rewards of service. Patriotism becomes not an assumed virtue but a contested political claim—one that Black veterans repeatedly redefined through their organizing, testimony, and commemoration.

Memory, Monuments, and the Public Meaning of Veteranhood

Fourth, the framework is useful in public history. It asks who counts publicly as a veteran, whose sacrifice is made visible, and how commemorative sites encode race. Asch and Musgrove's reading of the Emancipation Memorial shows that a monument often dismissed as paternalist also became, through Black political action, a site of Black resistance, veteran memory, and democratic claim-making.[34] The same question can be extended to cemeteries, Memorial Day rituals, reunion culture, museum interpretation, and the naming of military heroes. Black veteranality positions public memory not as reflection of consensus but as an ongoing struggle over whose service matters and how it should be honored.

Vietnam, Post-9/11 Conflicts, and the Contemporary Moment

Finally, Black veteranality bridges older military history and the recent past. In the Vietnam era, Black service members confronted the contradiction between a war fought in the language of freedom and a home front marked by segregation, police violence, and unequal military discipline. The framework helps historians study Black GI protest, homecoming, and debates over trauma without flattening Black veterans into either patriotic exemplars or dissident exceptions. Its value here is diagnostic: It identifies why military service could produce simultaneous attachment, estrangement, and political radicalization.

For post-9/11 conflicts, the framework remains relevant. Black veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan navigate the same contradictions Du Bois identified in World War I: fighting for ostensible democracy abroad while confronting structural racism, employment discrimination, and police violence at home.[35] Contemporary Black veterans increasingly connect their military service to activism around mass incarceration, educational equity, and housing justice—extending the long tradition of veterans' claims-making into twenty-first-century contexts.

For military historians, then, the framework is most useful when the object of analysis is not only combat performance or institutional design but the relationship between service and belonging. It is especially strong in work on demobilization, veteran policy, public memory, civil rights, and community history. It is less decisive for narrowly tactical or operational questions, although even there it can sharpen analysis of recruitment, discipline, leadership, and casualty narratives. Its greatest strength is synthetic: It lets historians connect archives and periods too often kept apart.

Method, Archive, and Limits

Because the framework is intended for historians, its methodological center of gravity is archival rather than purely ethnographic. The basic practice is archival pluralism: Read military and state records against the grain, situate them within Black-produced archives, and track the movement

from service to veteran status across time. This means following people through multiple repositories rather than confining them to one war or one institution.

Oral history remains essential, especially for twentieth- and twenty-first-century veterans. As Alessandro Portelli reminds us, oral testimony matters not only for what happened but for the meanings narrators attach to what happened.[36] Oral histories can therefore reveal how veterans understood honor, betrayal, duty, masculinity, femininity, kinship, and community—categories that official files often flatten or omit. For contemporary Black veterans navigating post-9/11 conflicts, oral history captures how veteranhood is lived and interpreted in real time, before retrospective narratives solidify.

My own scholarship demonstrates how autoethnography and archival research can work in concert. My book *Black Veteranality: Military Service and the Illusion of Inclusive Patriotism* (2026) employs autoethnography to theorize Black veteran identity as a lived, embodied formation. That methodological approach illuminates dimensions of veteranhood—emotional labor, institutional navigation, identity negotiation—that archival records alone cannot capture. In this article, I adapt that framework specifically for historians working primarily with documentary sources. Autoethnography can contribute powerfully when the historian's own veteran status is part of the interpretive problem, when living veteran communities are themselves the archive, or when a project explicitly examines the encounter between past records and present memory.[37] Used alongside archival work, such methods illuminate experience, silence, and historical afterlife. For historians, however, the framework's greatest utility lies in its capacity to organize documentary evidence across wars, institutions, and commemorative practices.

The framework also has clear limits. It should not homogenize Black veterans across gender, sexuality, class, religion, branch, region, or imperial setting. Black women veterans navigate distinct forms of exclusion and recognition. Command Sergeant Major Mildred Kelly, the first Black female sergeant major in the U.S. Army (1972), and Brigadier General Hazel Johnson-Brown, the first Black woman general officer (1979), occupied veteranhood differently than enlisted women or men at equivalent ranks.[38] Queer Black veterans, though often erased from official records, experienced military institutions and postservice organizing through intersecting marginalities. Officers, draftees, and career service members do not inhabit veteranhood identically. Regional variations matter: Southern Black veterans faced different forms of violence and disenfranchisement than Northern veterans, though neither escaped racial hierarchy.

Nor should Black veteranality become a language of injury only. It must remain attentive to pleasure, aspiration, professionalism, humor, family strategy, and institutional skill. Black veterans have found meaning, community, and professional advancement within military service even while critiquing its injustices. The framework should capture both dimensions.

Black veteranality should complement rather than displace operational history. Campaigns, logistics, doctrine, and command still matter; the framework shows what those histories miss when they treat race and veteran status as secondary. Military historians working on tactics, strategy, or technology can benefit from asking how race shaped recruitment, unit cohesion, discipline, and casualty reporting—questions Black veteranality helps to foreground.

Conclusion

Black veteranality is valuable because it changes the scale and sequence of military history. It moves inquiry from the event of war to the longer making of veterans, from the battlefield to the pension board, from enlistment to public memory. It also provides a portable vocabulary for linking Civil War emancipation, post-Reconstruction service, World War II mobilization, Cold War benefits, Vietnam-era protest, and contemporary veteran politics without collapsing their differences.

Just as important, the framework meets the profession at a productive moment. AHA discourse has urged historians to confront racist historiographies, to center Black archives and interpreters, and to rethink how military and public history are written and taught. Black veteranality answers that call at the level of method. It explains why Black veterans have stood so often at the junction of war-making, race-making, and state-making in the United States. It positions demobilization, benefits struggles, and commemorative politics as central rather than peripheral to military history. It treats patriotism not as an assumed virtue but as a contested historical claim.

If military history is to account fully for the United States as both a martial and a racial order, it needs a language for the afterlife of service. Black veteranality provides that language. It shows that for Black veterans, critique has often been not the negation of patriotism but one of its most exacting forms. Their service, their sacrifices, and their struggles to claim the citizenship they were promised remain foundational to understanding American military history, American citizenship, and American democracy itself.

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