

Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 498 pp.

Reviewed by **Janice Harrington**, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin presents a provocative, meticulously researched, multidisciplinary, and multilayered interpretation of the paintings and autobiographical writings of Horace Pippin, an African American visual artist and World War I veteran who fought in the 369th Infantry, popularly known as the Harlem Hellfighters. Wounded by a German sniper's bullet, Pippin returned to the US in 1919, a proud veteran with a disabled, pain-ridden arm. Battling "blue spells," Pippin made his first pyrograph in 1925, followed in 1930 by his first oil painting, "The End of the War: Starting Home" (1930). He went on to become the best known African American visual artist of the 1930s and early 1940s. He also wrote several unfinished recollections of the war and a four-page autobiography.

Two works stand as watersheds for anyone studying Pippin: the first biography, Selden Rodman's *Horace Pippin: A Negro Painter in America* (1947), and Judith Stein's groundbreaking *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (1993), which brought together art historians, curators, and preservationists, as well as philosopher-activist Cornel West, and which triggered an ongoing resurgence of interest in Pippin.

Building on these earlier works (especially Judith Wilson's "Scenes of War," in *I Tell My Heart*) with path-opening and in-depth archival research, and pointing readers to leading new scholarship on black combat soldiers in World War I and Pippin, Celeste-Marie Bernier "ruptures the oversimplified accounts" of this artist's aesthetic in much the same way that she sees Pippin's subtlety, symbolism, political resistance, and antiwar aesthetic rupturing the label "primitive." Bernier amends and critiques the "critical myopia" that negates Pippin's military service, experimental writings, and paintings. Defining him as a "self-reflexive" artist profoundly affected by his time in the trenches of World War I, Bernier highlights Pippin's agency as an inventive, self-aware artist speaking back to the denigrations of a racist society. Explicating the polarities of pain and transcendence that Pippin met in the trenches, she extrapolates from his words, "I can never for get suffering and I will never for get sun set" [sic], reading the suffering and sunsets that underlie, echo through, and provide the "symbolic lexicon" of Pippin's art, his fragmented storytelling, and his antiwar aesthetic.

Bernier brings Pippin's art and his writings in conversation with each other. She uncovers useful intersections between his oeuvre and the recollections of other black World War I combat soldiers, so that Pippin's writings reply in a "call and response" to

the narratives of soldiers and war laborers, whose presence in World War I, like Pippin's, has been distorted, ignored, or elided from historical studies, archival records, and the US imaginary.

By setting Pippin's writings and art in the context of the war, Bernier further undermines any effort to marginalize him or to critique his work in a historical vacuum. She reads Pippin's autobiographies as a woefully overlooked experimental literature that counters the erasures by scholars and a racist World War I military. She argues further, and originally, that Pippin forged himself into a "self-made" soldier in much the same way as he shaped himself into an artist. We may temper her concept of self-invention if we consider that men who drilled with broomsticks along the sidewalks of New York and supported one another in hostile army camps, both in the North and in the South, men who maintained a sense of themselves as "Rattlers" and members of the 15th New York, developed a camaraderie, pride, and collective sense of group identity. Moreover, Bernier underscores the shifting research paradigms that point to African American soldiers' role in fomenting the renaissance of the 1920s, as well as contributing to the evolution of later African American social and political movements.

Intellectually rousing, Bernier's close readings look beyond Pippin's rough spelling or grammatical inconsistencies to reconceptualize his writing style as an experimental aesthetic. She looks at Pippin's writing as a self-aware creative strategy, not as the result of a broken and segregated education or the product of an economic class forced to privilege wage-earning over schooling. Pippin speaks to the collective experience of the black soldier and for the "limited view of individual soldiers" while consistently thwarting white expectations. Bernier builds her case by politicizing Pippin's art and placing his creative responses in the context of antiwar protest and America's racialized history, as well as within the longstanding tradition of African American resistance. In *Suffering and Sunset*, Pippin is the "memorialist-witness" laboring to draw attention to the horrors of war, to the unwritten stories of the combat soldier, and to African American lives in a racially oppressive society.

While Bernier alludes to the tension between Pippin's faith and his tasks as a soldier, Christianity weaves thematically through Pippin's writings, letters, biographical anecdotes, and many of his paintings. Future research, building on Bernier's rich reflections on the connections between Pippin and World War I, might also pay more heed to the faith practices in Pippin's work and in the lives of black soldiers and as a resource for black agency, resilience, and resistance.

Bernier intrepidly enters the labyrinth of Pippin's genealogy. Through extensive and ground-breaking archival work, she offers, throughout the book, intriguing and

previously unknown information about Pippin's family history, including the likely identity of his mother and the misconception that Pippin was the grandchild or son of slaves. In discussing his marriage, Bernier relies on the artist's words, without extended discussion of his wife's influence. Yet Jennie Ora Pippin's absent presence and the domestic arts of African American women (doily-making, rug-making, quilting, homemaking, paper-cutting, faith practice) register in numerous paintings. While Bernier speaks to Pippin's exposure to a rich array of black domestic art, a feminist reading of his paintings may lead to new insight and tease out Bernier's juxtaposition of war and domesticity.

Bernier presents an innovative recovery and repositioning of Pippin's written archive. She shows that his writings are as thematically and formally suggestive as his supposedly "simple" paintings, theorizing his use of understatement, elliptical sentence structures, disjunction, fragment, multifaceted metaphors, symbolism, and experimental narrative vignettes. His writings, like his paintings, argue for war as a site of suffering, dehumanization, and spiritual devastation. Pippin's art grapples with the ongoing memories and the emotional shrapnel of No Man's Land. But Bernier's investigations equally emphasize that Pippin's written and painted narratives show the limits of any representation to convey the lived traumas of black World War I soldiers caught between the No Man's Lands of war and racism.

Bernier argues that racism and white supremacy reduced the black soldier to a burlesque of stereotypes and minstrelsy, visualized black heroism as a figurative aping of white soldiers, and castrated black masculinity. The work and writings of World War I combat soldiers, like Pippin, she argues, reclaim that masculinity and restore the lost narratives of these soldiers. In his paintings and writings, Pippin "displays no interest in proving Black humanity for white audiences." Instead, he presents "Black manhood as the normative default, complex and multidimensional" (302).

Bernier studies Pippin's antiwar protest aesthetic across his oeuvre, including his *Holy Mountain* series, World War I- and World War II-era paintings, and his still lifes. Her careful readings enlarge the critical interpretations of Pippin's work and continually locate the war as a site of trauma and an echo in his paintings. As she sets Pippin on the large canvas of the war, Bernier equally places him in the US' larger racialized history. Connecting the depiction of a punished slave in *The Whipping* and Pippin's protest against war and lynching in the *Holy Mountain* series, she interprets the black body, along with the war, as a site for trauma and resistance.

Most provocatively, in a debatable reading of *The Whipping*, Bernier describes the body of a slave bound to a whipping post as female, a visual interpretation that destabilizes

the typical reading of the figure as male. Is the whipped figure wearing overalls? Does the short-cropped, uncovered hair suggest a male body and figure? Reading the body as female writes black women into the painted history, however, and into Pippin's protest aesthetic. Other readings are equally challenging. In the African American surgeon in hospital gown and surgical mask in *Mr. Prejudice*, Bernier sees as a patient wearing bandages. Or studying Pippin's sketch of a young soldier, Bernier theorizes that it is a self-portrait. Yet his painted self-portraits show that he can individualize himself visually. But thinking about these questions and rethinking Pippin's paintings will trigger additional inquiry.

Racism, the othering of black artists, shallow scholarship, the systematic omission of black soldiers from historical records, and the simple labels preferred by the consuming art market have conjoined to reduce Pippin to a set of easy tropes: self-taught painter, disabled vet, isolated folk artist, and one-time junk dealer discovered by philanthropic white folks. It is not possible to maintain these misconceptions after *Suffering and Sunset*.