

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Controversy, Racial Equality, And American World War I, Cemeteries In Europe

Abstract: Approximately two million U.S. soldiers were deployed to the Western Front during WWI. The vast majority of those killed were repatriated to the United States and buried in racially segregated plots. Still, nearly 32,000 remain in U.S. cemeteries in Europe which are not segregated by race. Controversy may arise over the transgression of boundaries and borrow from both discursive and nondiscursive arguments. These integrated cemeteries constitute an argument grounded in materiality against racial segregation.

Keywords: argumentation, American cemeteries, controversy, distribution of the sensible, material argument, nondiscursive argument, Rancière, World War I.

1. Introduction

The American Expeditionary Force deployed more than two million U.S. soldiers to the Western Front during World War I. Despite the desire of many to leave the nearly 80,000 American dead in overseas cemeteries, the vast majority were repatriated to the United States at the request of next of kin. Many of them were buried in U.S. national cemeteries, Arlington National Cemetery for example, and, following accepted practice, were placed in racially segregated plots. Still, not all were returned and nearly 32,000 remain in eight U.S. cemeteries in Europe (six in France, one in Belgium and one in England). There was one remarkable difference between the cemeteries: Those in the U.S. were racially segregated, while those in Europe were racially integrated.

This essay examines this occurrence as a significant moment in the controversy over racial equality. Goodnight (1991, p.2) notes that controversy may arise over the transgression of boundaries and borrow from a “broad range of both discursive and nondiscursive argument.” We contend that the presence of integrated cemeteries in Europe constitutes an oppositional, material argument against the then accepted practice of racial segregation. We also believe that

Jacques Rancière's (2004, p. 1) concept of the "distribution of the sensible" offers valuable insights into the function of this nondiscursive argument.

2. *U.S. cemeteries and the "distribution of the sensible"*

Goodnight (1991, p. 2) observed that, "Controversies permeate contemporary life," and, along with Olson (Olson & Goodnight, 1994, p. 249), placed them "at those sites of struggle where arguers criticize and invent alternatives to established social conventions and sanctioned norms of communication." Certainly controversies flourished about American participation in World War I, including whether the United States should even enter the war. But some of the most interesting had to do with the relations between African American and white soldiers, black Americans' role in the military, and the obligations and limitations of citizenship vis-à-vis African American soldiers. African American newspapers routinely reported on, challenging and praising as appropriate, such practices as separate training for African American troops, the replacement of black officers by whites, and the performance of black units such as the highly decorated 93rd Division which was attached to French forces, and so on. Ultimately, approximately 10 percent of the nearly 4 million American men in military service during this period were African American.

Even in the aftermath of the war, racial tensions, quite strong prior to American entry into the War, remained a significant factor as segregation and white supremacy became more strongly entrenched. The military reflected civilian attitudes as a review board at Fort Meade, for instance, denied the request from an African American officer to remain on active duty with the regular army, stating that he was "unqualified by reason of the qualities inherent in the Negro race" and that "Negroes are deficient in moral fiber [sic], rendering them unfit as officers and leaders of men" (Colored officers and the regular army, 1919, p. 4). Although this ruling was later overruled by the Secretary of War, it nevertheless reflected the broader cultural milieu.

As bodies of U.S. soldiers were repatriated to the United States at the request of their relatives, racial segregation was the norm, even in death. As Francis (2003, p. 222) observed, a cemetery can be viewed "as a 'collective representation', a sacred, symbolic replica of the living community that expressed many of the community's basic beliefs and values." That reflection of contemporary social practices was affirmed in an account of construction plans for the World War I section at Arlington National Cemetery: "At the eastern point the Negro soldiers

are to be buried; the graves for the white soldiers begin at the other end of the ground" (Commission of Fine Arts, 1920).

Given these practices, it seems astonishing for the U.S. cemeteries abroad to have been racially integrated and even more so for that decision to have been made by the U.S. Army. At the time of the Armistice in November, 1918 there were approximately 2,400 American burial places in Europe (Smith, 1926). Following repatriation, the remaining soldier dead were concentrated into eight permanent cemeteries. From the beginning, no question existed but that these cemeteries were to fulfill an important function beyond simply the disposal of bodies. The Assistant Secretary of War noted (Hayes, 1920) that,

the work of beautifying them may be pushed forward speedily, in order that they may serve alike as a symbol of the Nation's gratitude to its departed sons and a demonstration to all peoples for all time of America's response to a great threat.

The War Department invited representatives from the Commission of Fine Arts to provide guidance for the beautification of the cemeteries, and the Gold Star Fathers' Association (Bentley, 1922, p. 51) recommended that, suitable objects of art and architecture...be produced...and erected in each of said cemeteries to depict the ideals for which American heroes have fallen and to inspire thereby the people of Europe with the lofty and unselfish purpose of America in waging war on foreign soil.

It is here that Rancière's (Rockhill, 2004, p. 57) notion of the "distribution of the sensible, or the system of divisions and boundaries that define...what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetic-political regime," offers important insights. The U.S. cemeteries constitute an argument about American sacrifice and artistic standards. Their "logic of demonstration is indissolubly an aesthetic of expression" (Rancière, 1999, p. 57). These "artistic practices," as Rancière's notes (2004, p. 13), "are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility." These cemeteries made American sacrifice visible and formed new relationships with European audiences. The fact that they were racially integrated meant that they were able to continue their public diplomacy mission even as charges were leveled during the Cold War about America's racial practices by the Soviet Union. One can only imagine the political embarrassment that would have ensued in the twenty-first

century had those cemeteries been segregated.

3. U.S. cemeteries as material, oppositional argument

That leads, we believe, to another important function of the overseas cemeteries. They constituted a strong oppositional argument to the practice of racial segregation in American cemeteries and, implicitly, against the cultural practices which sanctioned that segregation. No clear, consistent practice seemed to exist regarding the arrangement of graves in the early, temporary cemeteries. In some, officers and enlisted soldiers were separated as were white and Negro troops. In others, all were buried regardless of rank, race and whether they served honorably or not (United States Senate, 1923). Nevertheless, as concentrations into the permanent cemeteries began, the “question of re-arrangement of the graves was taken up” by the Graves Registration Service (GRS). As the Cemeterial Division in the Office of the Quartermaster General noted in November 1920,

the principle has been laid down by the War Memorials Council and approved by the Secty [sic] of War to the effect that there shall be no segregation of bodies in our permanent cemeteries overseas, on basis of military commission or rank, etc.” (Office of the Quartermaster General, 1920).

As Lt. Thomas North (North, n.d., p. 19), ABMC, working with the GRS as permanent cemeteries were being finalized, noted, the remains “were interred without distinction of rank or race according to the regular patterns designed by the landscape architects of the AGRS.” In a remarkable silence in the archives, no indication exists as to who made the final decision to integrate the cemeteries, although evidence does indicate that the GRS was diligent in assuring that no identifying markers of race were visible prior to the installation of the permanent headstones of carrara marble. A 1924 memorandum (Canty, 1924) to the caretaker of the Oise-Aisne American cemetery ordered that the inscription on one temporary cross be changed to read “Unknown U.S. Soldier” instead of “Unknown Colored Man.”

Equally surprising, given the state of race relations in the United States, was the relative absence of audible controversy surrounding this practice within the domestic public sphere. Congressman Bland (1919, p. 4), from Indiana, did testify before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that, “White and colored are buried alike, no discrimination having been shown.” Even in the Hearings on

Alleged Executions (United States Senate, 1923, p. 493), Senator Watson attacked the practice of burying the “dishonored” dead, those identified as having died by execution, among those who served honorably, but was notably silent on the racial question:

Senator Watson. Were the negroes as a rule buried in the same cemetery as the whites?

Capt. Wynne. Yes, sir; they were all soldiers.

Senator Watson. That is all. I have nothing further, Mr. Chairman. (Wynne, 1922, p. 493)

Even the mainstream press (*Bodies of men hanged buried beside heroes*, 1922, p. 1; *Attacks military burials in France*, 1922, p. 10) reported the exchange with a focus on those “hanged for ‘unmentionable crimes’” while still noting that blacks and whites were buried together, including the remark that “all were soldiers.” Years later, protesting the segregated trips at Government expense to Europe for Gold Star Mothers (those who had lost husbands or sons during the war and whose bodies remained in Europe), the *Baltimore Afro-American* (Jim crowing the dead, 1930, p. 1) commented that, “In some French cemeteries Negro troops were buried in segregated areas.” It is perhaps that the potential controversy on this issue was too strong to broach in a serious public debate (Splichal, 2006, p. 109).

Even if no audible social controversy existed domestically over the practice of integrating military cemeteries in Europe, the presence of Negro graves buried among their white compatriots nevertheless constituted a powerful oppositional argument to the practice in both civilian and military domestic cemeteries. Olson and Goodnight (1994, p. 252) noted that,

nondiscursive arguments usher into the public realm aspects of life that are hidden away, habitually ignored, or routinely disconnected from public appearance. By rendering these aspects noticeable and comment-worthy, performed arguments expose social conventions as unreflective habits and so revalue human activities.

Just as these cemeteries redefined the “distribution of the sensible” in terms of relations between the United States and the European allies after the War, so, too, did these cemeteries reconstitute the political subject in terms of race

relations. Those who created the integrated cemeteries in Europe were, following Rancière (2009a, p. 24), political performers

who have ... the peculiar role of inventing arguments and demonstrations – in the double, logical and aesthetic, senses of the terms – to bring nonrelationship into relationship and to give place to the nonplace. This invention is performed in forms that are not metapolitical ‘forms’ of a problematic ‘content,’ but forms of materialization of the people....

Rancière (2010, p. 39) further maintains that,

Political argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue, over an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he [sic] ‘normally’ has no reason either to see or to hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds.

The presence of integrated cemeteries put together two separate worlds creating a different kind of “common sense” where visibility was conferred upon those formerly invisible and where those formerly invisible were now aware of their visibility. The headstones of white and black American soldiers, sharing the same field of honor, demonstrated the possibility “to construct different realities, different forms of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings” (Rancière, 2009b, p. 102). These cemeteries, in contrast to Arlington, shift the role of African Americans from those who are visibly marginalized (the invisible?) to those who are equally present with all other American soldiers. The totality of American sacrifice is now visible, not just to Europeans as the War Department intended, but to all Americans including African-Americans. The visible presence of Black soldiers’ headstones now integrates them irrefutably into the national narrative. As Kirt Wilson (1995, p. 206) wrote concerning Radical Republicans’ account of American history during Reconstruction that included Blacks’ role in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 and the Civil War,

They identified the nation and its success with the courage of black soldiers; moreover, they implied a link between the two races. In the radicals’ rhetoric, blacks and whites were alike because they shared a history and a loyalty to the

United States. Just as both races had red blood, both had shed that blood for the country's sake.

This new "distribution of the sensible" permitted by the cemeteries "help[s] create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective may be developed...." (Rancière, 2010, p. 142).

It creates, in other words, "new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities" (Rancière, 2010, p. 139).

4. Conclusion

As Goodnight (2005, p. 27) observed,

The focal issues of a period may shift, but once initiated controversies do not so much die out as become dormant, only to reappear in more virulent form later, when small changes unsettle the balances of well-known paths of argument....

The absence of overt public controversy over domestic segregated military cemeteries during the inter-War period came to an abrupt conclusion when then the War Department was planning for the repatriation of African American soldiers from World War II. As *The Chicago Defender* (War department continues segregation, 1947, p. 10) reported, the Quartermaster General's Office ordered that, "Present regulations, procedures and policies pertaining to segregation of grave sites in national cemeteries will be continued." Those policies required that separate sections would be developed for white officers, black officers, white enlisted men, and black enlisted men, according to the *Baltimore Afro-American* (Burial rule changed by war department, 1947, p. 12). Following a national uproar within the African American community and protests to the War Department, Secretary of War Robert Patterson overturned the Quartermaster General's office. He directed that

no distinction be made between the location of graves of officers in new sections of national cemeteries. The policy of providing uniform burial facilities without distinction as to rank or race of deceased veterans will be effected progressively as new sections are laid out" (Army drops caste system in cemeteries, 1947, p. 5).

Although it would still take more than a decade before the Department of Defense implemented the policy fully (MacGregor, 1981, n.p.), the “common sense” of racial equality seemed a bit more plausible than when the overseas cemeteries were integrated immediately after World War I. The argument forwarded by those cemeteries, however, showed the possibilities of new and different relations between political subjects and citizens – a new distribution of the sensible.

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