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Empowerment or Erasure: The Legacy and Rhetoric of The Shaw Memorial

Located in a place of prominence directly across from the Massachusetts State House and within the lush, crowd-attracting greenery of Boston Common, the Robert Gould Shaw memorial, completed in 1897, is one of the most evocative, meaningful memorials to Civil War soldiers in existence. This bronze monument commemorates the 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, an all-Black regiment led by Robert Gould Shaw. Shaw was a child of abolitionists and a deeply principled man, even being buried with his Black troops in a mass grave after his death, highlighting his dedication both to his men and to racial equality. This monument is thus meant to honor his fortitude and sacrifice, as he perished in battle at age 25, as well as the courage and bravery of his troops, many of whom also died in the war and all of whom faced prejudice whilst serving the Union. The rhetoric of the memorial, however, is a little muddled, as it has some very progressive, racially empowering symbolism but also some artistic details that seem to evoke a sense of white supremacy, creating a thorny legacy for the shining sculpture.

The artist behind the monument, Augustus Saint-Gauden, made a very powerful statement when he decided to painstakingly create a unique, realistic face for every Black soldier in the piece, refusing to have them all be bland or identical and opting to instead honor their distinct importance. Saint-Gauden modeled their faces off of real Black men and was very thorough and intentional in how he portrayed these trailblazing soldiers who died for a country that had enslaved their ancestors for years. However, the memorial is still regressive in that it
portrays a white Colonel towering above his Black soldiers, leading the charge into battle while his men trod beneath him. This is particularly troubling when looking at the details in the middle of the relief, where disembodied legs of Black troops can be seen below and behind the majestic horse of Colonel Shaw, showing off the white leader in lieu of several courageous men of color.

The memorial does not only portray an intriguing visual rhetoric, but a written one as well. The front of the relief relays the Latin phrase “OMNIA RELINQVIT/ SERVARE REMPVBLICAM,” meaning “He left behind everything to save the Republic.” The question this inscription then poses is who “he” refers to; does it refer singularly to Shaw as the leader of the 54th, or also to the Black men who fought and gave their lives for the “Republic” that had caused them and their ancestors great suffering? The poem “Memoriae Positum” by James Russell Lowell written below the sculpture offers a similar complexity, reading “...he fell forwards as fits a man; but the high soul burns on to light men’s feet where death for noble ends makes dying sweet.” These verses seem to highlight Shaw’s courage and honor, which is much deserved, but perhaps at the expense of the lesser known Black infantry members who also died for “noble ends.” It must always be remembered that this poem, describing the brave sacrifice of only a singular person, is inscribed on the Shaw Memorial, a statue dedicated to a wealthy white man; are there any such statues dedicated solely to the Black men whose bronze feet can be seen hidden behind Shaw? To the Black men whose names were forgotten until a century after the war, who are depicted underneath Shaw like servants, who were discriminated against by the very white men they were dying for?

Less controversially, the Shaw Memorial also has several allegorical symbols sculpted within it, symbols of glory, honor, bravery, patriotism. The most prominent of these is Victory, represented by a winged woman flying above the infantrymen, shrouded in laurels and reaching
out into the heavens. This angelic woman symbolizes the dogged pursuit and goal of the Union soldiers, that being a resounding win against the Confederates who tore apart America in order to keep Black people (like those in this monument) enslaved, in chains, subhuman. On either side of the monument there is a large eagle, representing America and all the perceived beauty and strength of this nation that thousands of men, like those in the 54th Regiment, died to protect. Additionally, although not sculpted out of stone or bronze, the fact that this monument currently sits directly across from the Massachusetts State House, in full view of the shimmering gold dome and majestic steps of the prestigious government hall, is a symbol of how important this monument is in both a historical and contemporary context.

The back of this monument is also rich with meaning, with a message written by Charles Eliot emblazoned across the stone saying “The White Officers taking life and honor in their hands cast in their lot with men of a despised race unproven in war...the Black rank and file... gave to the Nation and the World undying proof that Americans of African descent possess the pride, courage and devotion of the patriot soldier…” This inscription, like much of the monument, is rather complicated, with the first part of the quote seeming to heap praise on white officers for reluctantly dealing with “men of a despised race” while the second part justly honors the Black soldiers who had to prove their worth as “patriots.” The names of the lost 54th Regiment soldiers are inscribed upon the back of the statue, which is somewhat bittersweet as the names of these Black servicemen were not even added to the monument until 120 years after they were killed. The emotional response stirred up by their names is made even more poignant by the inclusion of the simple, powerful phrase “The Memory of the Just is Blessed” written directly above the names of these almost forgotten dead.
This monument is clearly an integral part of the history of Boston, as during the time I was filming there were countless visitors, student groups, and tour buses perusing the inscriptions on the monument and discussing its significance. I witnessed people of different backgrounds, nationalities, and ages being genuinely fascinated and even moved by the powerful imagery and written engravings. The reverential and intrigued response that the Shaw Memorial evokes in viewers is profound in its complexity; passersby experience both deep respect for the shining, distinct portrayals of men who died to secure freedom for all, and also discomfort at the somewhat inferior depiction of the Black troops who died with Colonel Shaw. This monument has the knotty legacy of being one of the first American monuments to honor Black people but also one that didn’t include the names of the Black martyrs until the 1980s, one that was championed and funded primarily by free Black people but that also portrays Black men as subservient to a white hero. It thus cannot be denied that the Shaw Memorial has a very complicated and almost contradictory rhetoric; it is both a testament to anti-racist and sacrificial ideals of the Union and also a reminder of the ways Black Americans have been historically underlooked and underappreciated for their contributions to this nation.
Bibliography (Transcript)


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