Race, *Battlefield 1* and the White Mythic Space of the First World War

Stefan Aguirre Quiroga
Independent Researcher
stefanaguirre@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The popular perception of the First World War has remained an inherently white mythic space in which white men fight against other white men and where minorities, when and if they are featured, are given an anonymous secondary role and are subject to the will and motivation of their white heroic leaders. This article will be considering the white mythic space of the First World War by focusing on the video game *Battlefield 1* (2016) and investigating the backlash by players on online message boards against the inclusion of soldiers of color in the game's multiplayer features. In the online discourse, these players diminish the role that minorities played in the First World War and although the presence of minorities in the historical First World War is to a minor extent acknowledged, their space in the video game is nonetheless denied. I argue that this backlash is based on a rejection of the inclusive collective memory as portrayed in *Battlefield 1*, supported by racist arguments against the backdrop of the white mythic space of the First World War and that their rejection of the presence of minorities in *Battlefield 1* can be constructed as a continuation of the denial of agency for soldiers of color by white individuals that took place during the First World War and the post-war period.

Keywords: Racism; First World War; Historical Memory; Collective Memory; Race

'It was just at dusk when they opened a terrific artillery fire on the wood. In five minutes, half our men were dead or wounded. Those who could, ran out, and among them was my brother Roy, carrying on his back a man thought to be wounded—it turned out he was dead—and then he too fell, killed by a shell that burst a little distance off and sent a small fragment of its casing into his heart. We buried him with the others next day, all wrapped up in blankets and placed in a field already established in anticipation for the battle, not far from where we had our camp. I cannot speak of how I felt. We were good friends and I was to be lonely for the rest of the war—lonely and bitter.'

(Manley, 1973: 8).

This account written after the war by a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery about the death of his brother in the days leading up to the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917 corresponds to many popular depictions of the First World War on the Western Front and the experiences of a British "Tommy". It all fits up to one point: most would assume that the gunner writing was a white man. That Roy, his brother, was white. Both men were in fact biracial, recognized as such by their comrades and prejudiced against throughout the conflict. Norman Washington Manley, whose account this is, would one day become Jamaica's first Prime Minister.

Norman and Roy Manley were not the only soldiers of color to fight and die on the Western Front, the Middle East, or other fronts in Europe and Asia. Soldiers of color from British India, the British West Indies, Bermuda, French West Africa, French North Africa, Madagascar, South Africa, Germany, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Siam, China, and Indochina all came to serve on or behind the frontlines of the Western Front to support the cause of the nation or empire that they volunteered for or were forcibly conscripted into (Winegard, 2014: 1–12; Costello, 2015: 67–89, 113–132; Fogarty, 2015: 109–129; Garton, 2015: 152–178; Guoqi 2015: 214–234). The largest number of soldiers of color served in the African theater of war where all the African colonies of Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, and Portugal, fought (Nasson, 2015: 130–151; Ribeiro de Meneses, 2015: 179–196, Hodges, 1978: 101–116, Strachan, 2004: 4–8).

This is a fact that has been acknowledged time and time again during the First World War centenary commemoration by western governments, organizations, museums, documentaries, popular and academic historians, to emphasize the role played by minorities and colonial soldiers during the war. Despite these efforts, the popular knowledge of the First World War as a *world war* is limited. In an international survey carried out by YouGov for the British Council in September 2013, an average 11 % of the participants were aware of the African involvement in the war in contrast with 82 % aware of the involvement of Western Europe (Lotten, 2014: 10). When participants in the UK were asked to name three things that came to mind when they thought about the First World War, the most common things mentioned were trenches, Battle of the Somme, gas, death, Germany, and mud (Lotten 2014: 6). This setting of the Western Front in the perception of the participants, a war of trenches, mud, and gas, is part of the pseudo-historical mythic space of the First World War. The popular image of the war has remained an inherently white mythic space where white men fight against other white men and where minorities, *if* they are included, are given an anonymous secondary role and are subject to the will and motivation of their white heroic leaders.

Richard Slotkin defines a mythic space as "a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture's myth/ideological tradition". (Slotkin, 1992: 234) A white mythic space erases non-white elements from the pseudo-historical setting and transforms it into a racially homogeneous space that is perceived as an authentic representation of the past.

I will now be considering the white mythic space of the First World War by focusing on the video game *Battlefield 1* (Electronic Arts, 2016) and analyzing the backlash by players of the game on online message boards against the inclusion of soldiers of color in the game's multiplayer feature. *Battlefield 1* (henceforth abridged as *BF1*) is a first-

person shooter that takes place in Europe and the Middle East between 1915 and 1918, with most of the game's single and multiplayer modes taking place in the last two years of the war. Before the game's release, the reactions to the game's cover art that depicts an African-American soldier would set the pattern for the rejection of the inclusion of soldiers of color as the game was released. Although a common argument made was that the United States did not enter the war until 1917, by which time many other nations had already been fighting for three years, a more common argument focused on the soldier's ethnicity. A representative thread can be found in the /r/gaming subreddit on Reddit in which a user creates a thread accusing *BF1* of "blackwashing" the First World War (BrinkerBreaker). The majority of the comments focus on the ethnicity of the soldier, agreeing with the sentiment of "blackwashing" and calling the inclusion of soldiers of color a historical inaccuracy as well as accusing the video game's publisher and developer, Electronic Arts and DICE, for supporting a political agenda through the inclusion of an African-American soldier. When one user tries to defend the fact that there were black Europeans during the First World War, the user is met with insults and rejection (Shaneo520). This is repeated throughout the thread. As a response to this backlash, the game's lead designer Daniel Berlin stated in an interview with GamesBeat that they purposely wanted to challenge preconceptions about the war and highlight diversity in the game (Dean Takashi). As we shall see, this goal would be met with more protests after the game's release.

The greatest controversy regarding inclusion appeared after the game's release in the online multiplayer feature. In the base version of the game, you can choose to play as different "classes" (assault, medic, support, scout), each with their own distinct weaponry and equipment, from six different nations (The British Empire, the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Italy, the Ottoman Empire and the United States, each with their own distinct soldier models. In three out of six factions (The British Empire, the German Empire and the United States), the scout class is represented by a soldier of African descent while the medic class in the British faction is represented by an Indian soldier. It is not implied in the game that the appearance of these classes is meant to represent an average soldier in the historical First World War. Even though players criticized the inclusion of minorities in general, the most contentious issue revolved around the inclusion of black men in German and British uniform.

The presence of men and women of African descent in Great Britain and Germany can be traced to before the 16th century. The history of British and German soldiers of African descent serving in Europe and the Middle East during the First World War remains an understudied area. The rise of transnational and transcultural perspectives has opened the door for historians to explore their stories in the context of the impact of colonialism and the legacy of slavery. Pioneering scholarship by David Killingray and most recently by Ray Costello has revealed much about the lives of black British soldiers, but a German equivalent has yet to be written.[1] There is no consensus on the number of black British and Afro-German soldiers who served in white regiments but their presence and involvement on the frontlines is indisputable.

One argument against inclusion evokes the East African theater of war as the reason for why there couldn't have been black men fighting for Britain and Germany in Europe (kingslayer8790; tjoppie02). This argument reinforces the mythic notion of the First

World War as a "white man's war", effectively separating the "white space" of the Western Front from the "black space" of Africa. Unlike France, Britain and Germany did not field any African regiments on the frontlines of the Western Front. Due to the blockade of Germany, they were unable to transport troops from Africa to Europe. Britain chose not to due to racial prejudice and the fear that allowing black men to kill white men would upset the racial hierarchy so important to the British Empire (Killingray, 1978: 421–436; Costello, 2015: 17–21). This meant that black soldiers from British colonies such as the British West India Regiment were not allowed to serve in combat in Europe, only serving as a labor force, although they were allowed to do so in the Middle East against an enemy considered less white than Europeans (Smith, 2004: 124–125). The argument overlooks the contribution made by black soldiers on both sides, some of which (as in the British case) were volunteers from Africa and the Caribbean who joined domiciled black British soldiers in otherwise all-white regiments (Costello, 2015: 67–89).

The largest amount of exclusionary arguments is aimed at the Afro-German scout. One user argues for example that Germany in the game "should not have black people" (terza712). Several other users argue that the inclusion "disrespect [sic] german culture" (ty15ler), is "historically inaccurate" (lucidstorm; Pan_Kalich) and that "[h]istory and the dead should be respected!" (bigstudy). A user who claims to have extensively studied WW1 states that "Black Africans did not serve where they are portrayed in the game" (MathewGurney) and that their inclusion is unrealistic. At the core of the arguments is the idea that Afro-Germans do not and should not have a place in the game because they are perceived as not belonging in Germany of the 1910s. The most repulsive rejections come from those who report the inclusion of Afro-Germans as an error in the game's programming (Hektiicz, TheophilKung). These arguments, all with strong racist undertones in the guise of "historical accuracy", echoes many of the contemporary wartime arguments against allowing black men to serve on the frontlines of Europe. Beyond upsetting the racial hierarchy (the modern argument being "upsetting the black-to-white ratio in the game"), black British recruits could sometimes be discharged on the condition of being black. Men of African descent were considered racially inferior and not fit to be soldiers in the view of the contemporary pseudo-scientific racism. This is made clear in one case where a biracial soldier had his ethnicity entered in their medical history report as a "slight defect" (Costello, 2015: 34–38). Furthermore, the indignation at seeing a black man in uniforms that they "don't belong in" mirrors the attitudes of southern men in the United States who stripped, assaulted, and lynched black men for wearing a "white" uniform (Davis, 2008: 477–491).

To disempower black soldiers, "colored interlopers" (James, 2007: 19), white soldiers demasculinized them. War was and is considered a masculine space and by demasculinizing black men by pushing them into a labor role, a lesser role away from the frontlines, they are blocked from military masculinity (James, 2007: 19). This is particularly evident with users who acknowledge the presence of Afro-Germans but demasculinize them by arguing that most were army musicians and therefore did not serve in a combat role (tjoppie02; Deathmatch Europe). This is untrue. Afro-German soldiers like Wilhelm Elo Sambo and Josef Mambo had both served as kettle drummers, but both saw action during the war and were injured in battle. Sambo served on the Western and

Eastern Fronts, and the Middle East where he was captured (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2013: 176). Mambo fought in East Prussia and in the battle of Verdun on the Western Front (Lewerenz, 2005: 120, 128).

In conclusion, the rejection of the inclusion of soldiers of color in *BF1* can be read as a continuation of the denial of agency and space for black men that was carried out during and after the First World War. Through this rejection, users separate the "intruding" black space in defense of the white mythic space that dominates their perception of the First World War. Despite the existing flaws in the representation of soldiers of color in the single player mode of *BF1*, the game integrates soldiers of color in the otherwise "white space" of the First World War in a way that few representations of the First World War have previously done. It is not enough to acknowledge their existence, the stories of soldiers of color need to be integrated into the established narrative. This is the only way to break down the white mythic space of the First World War.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Johannes Breit, doctoral student at Berlin's Humboldt University, for providing me with German sources. It would not have been possible to present the Afro-German perspective without him.

References

Bechhaus-Gerst, Marianne (2013): "Wilhelm Elo Sambo – Patenkind Des Kaisers Und Blauer Funke". In M. Bechhaus-Gerst and B. Anne-Kathrin Horstmann. eds., *Köln Und Der Deutsche Kolonialismus*, 175–178.

bigstudy (2016): "Needs RESPECT and take Responsibility!" *Battlefield.com*, 27 October 2016, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/47773/needs-respect-and-take-responsibility. [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

BrinkerBreaker (2016): "Battlefield 1 "black washing" the European hero's who died during WW1 by putting an African American on the cover of the game for "diversity" instead of commemorating the Europeans who fought 4 years in WW1". *Reddit*, 7 May 2016, www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/4i9ecx/battlefield_1_black_washing_the_european_heros/ [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

Costello, Ray (2015): *Black Tommies: British Soldiers of African Descent in the First World War*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Davis, David A. (2008): "Not Only War Is Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives". *African American Review*, 42(3/4): 477–491.

Deathmatch Europe (2016). "Too Many Black Soldiers in Battlefield 1? A Look at History". *YouTube*, 21 October 2016, youtu.be/ 8VjfKxlO-QA.

Fogarty, Richard S. (2015): "The French Empire". In R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 109–129.

Garton, Stephen (2015): "The Dominions, Ireland, and India". In R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 152-178.

Guoqi, Xu (2015): "China and Empire". In R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214–234.

Hektiicz (2016): "Dice pls fix." *Reddit*, 17 December 2016, www.reddit.com/r/battlefield_one/comments/5its4q/dice_pls_fix/. [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

Hodges, G. W. T. (1978): "African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914–1918". *The Journal of African History*, 19(1): 101–116.

James, Jennifer C. (2007): *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II*. University of North Carolina Press.

Killingray, David. "The Idea of a British Imperial African Army." *The Journal of African History*, vol. 20, no. 03, 1979, pp. 421–436.

kingslayer8790 (2017): "What's with the black German sniper" *Battlefield.com*, 5 April 2017, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/comment/778237. [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

Lewerenz, Susann (2005): *Die Deutsche Afrika-Schau (1935–1940)*. Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang.

Lotten, Mona, ed. (2014): *Remember the World as well as the War*. London, British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/remember-the-world-report-v5.pdf. [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

lucidstorm (2016): "Black soldier in german troops". *Battlefield.com*, 1 November 2016, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/51570/black-soldier-in-german-troops [Accessed 26 Aug. 2017].

Manley, Norman Washington (1973): "The Autobiography of Norman Washington Manley". *Jamaica Journal*, 7(1-2): 3–19, 92.

Mathew, Gurney (2016): "Re: How accurate is bf1?". *Battlefield.com*, 5 December. forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/comment/488663#Comment_488663 [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

Nasson, Bill (2015): "British Imperial Africa". In R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press,130–151.

Pan_Kalich (2016): "Historical inaccuracy VS Racism VS common sense". *Battlefield.com*, 4 November 2016, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/53447/historical-inaccuracy-vs-racism-vs-common-sense [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

Ribeiro de Meneses, Filipe (2015). "The Portuguese Empire". In R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 179–196.

Shaneo520 (2016): "Re: Battlefield 1 "black washing" the European hero's who died during WW1 by putting an African American on the cover of the game for "diversity" instead of commemorating the Europeans who fought 4 years in WW1." *Reddit*, 7 May 2016, www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/4i9ecx/battlefield_1_black_washing_the_european_heros/d2w7dfn/ [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

Slotkin, Richard (1992): *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Smith, Richard (2004): *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Strachan, Hew (2004): *The First World War in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Takashi, Dean (2016): "EA DICE's Lead Designer Answers Our Questions about Battlefield 1". *VentureBeat*, 6 May 2016, venturebeat.com/2016/05/06/ea-dices-lead-designer-answers-our-questions-about-battlefield-1/.

terza712 (2017): "Black Germans?Seriously DICE" *Battlefield.com*, 4 March 2017, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/92467/black-germans-seriously-dice [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

TheophilKung (2016): "the german's recon is a black guy, i think you have to fix it". *EA Answers HQ*, 19 October 2016, answers.ea.com/t5/Bug-Reports/the-german-s-recon-is-a-black-guy-i-think-you-have-to-fix-it/td-p/5635853 [Accessed 30 Aug. 2017].

tjoppie02 (2016): "Race in Battlefield 1 and how inaccurate it truly is." *Battlefield.com*, 30 November 2016, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/67252/race-in-battlefield-1-and-how-inaccurate-it-truly-is [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].
ty15ler (2016): "a black german sniper???" *Battlefield.com*, 5 November 2016, forums.battlefield.com/en-us/discussion/comment/367127 [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].
Winegard, Timothy C. (2014): *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.