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CONTEMPORARY AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE STUDY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

HERMAN BEAVERS

The relationship between Afro-American and Vietnam era studies seems to propose two questions. First, there is the question of how Afro-American Studies responds to a discipline that is, in effect, “younger” in the span of its existence and, on first glance, more narrowly focused. The second question is why should Afro-American Studies shift its focus to consider a field that, on its face, falls outside of its scope of interest? These questions are important, given the fact that Vietnam Studies is gaining momentum both in and out of academic circles and one wonders why Afro-American Studies has not engaged the field in the same manner that it has Women’s and American Studies.

Certainly within the last ten years Afro-American Studies has veered from the polemical to the constitutive; from narrow didacticism to a more synthetic form of analysis. In the mid 1970s, Afro-American Studies was still engaged in the task of constructing an Afro-American identity that distanced itself from the negative connotations of blackness that four hundred years of Western civilization had accumulated in black minds. As part of such a project, scholars within the field often shunned methodologies that originated within “mainstream” scholarship, arguing that these approaches were either inherently racist or irrelevant to the study of Afro-Americans. The later 1970s and early 1980s saw a greater willingness on the part of Afro-American scholars to confront new theories. For example, literary critic Houston Baker shifted from his position as a staunch proponent of the Black Aesthetic, and began to use French post-structuralist theory as one of the key elements of a criticism that valorized Afro-American vernacular speech.

It is not my intent to denigrate that earlier project here. Rather, I want to suggest that Afro-American Studies—or Black Studies, if you prefer—fused social activism and scholarly enterprise. The result was that the boundaries between the academy and the black communities that often surrounded it were blurred. As Robert Allen points out:

The demand for Black Studies cannot be separated from the rise of the militant black student movement in the 1960's. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the establishment of hundreds of Black Studies curricula in colleges and universities is one of the major achievements of the black student movement.¹

Afro-American scholars attempted to create strategies relevant to revolutionary action as well as to confront the fact that "the totality of the black experience was not to be found in the curricula of the vast majority of colleges and universities."²

Ironically, this movement developed almost concurrently with the Vietnam war. And, indeed, as activists made conceptual links to Africa and other states in the Third World, Vietnam was among the topics of discussion. For example, consider these remarks by Robert Browne:

The Vietnam War is gradually replacing civil rights as the top story of the Mid-Sixties, and because the protests against the United States policy in Vietnam has been primarily made on moral grounds, as was the demand for civil rights, there has been inevitable coincidence of the two movements on various levels.³

These observations can be found in a 1965 issue of *Freedomways*. Clearly, Browne's reading of events is perceptive. And his remarks suggest that black activists realized that it was in their best interest to involve themselves in the protests against the war. Thus, as early as 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. was moved to take a stand against the war in Vietnam. He saw that it was wrong for Afro-American soldiers to take up arms against another people of color when the country they served would not accord American blacks full citizenship.

As Afro-American Studies moved into middle and later years of the 1970s, there was a tendency to voice solidarity with the Vietnamese struggle for independence. The United States' role in the Vietnam war was characterized as racist imperialism. But as this reading has taken hold, a kind of conceptual slippage has resulted, causing Afro-American Studies and Vietnam era studies to dovetail, even though the former displayed at least a cursory interest in the latter during the 1960s. By constructing Vietnam as a "white man's war," where black men were pawns, black scholars have transformed the war into a symbol of black exploitation. This, coupled with the fact that the war exemplified a larger imperative: the need to break ties with any- and everything "American" (a euphemism for things white), led Afro-American Studies away from the issue of Vietnam once the

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war ended.

Perhaps this explains why Afro-American literature and scholarship has not taken up the subject of Vietnam. The black soldiers who fought in the war, most of whom were too poor to avoid the draft, were marginalized by this scholarly inattention. Their struggle to reintegrate themselves into American society is screened from view, even though Afro-American Studies enjoys a more institutionally secure status in the academy. Thus, one is hard pressed to find in Afro-American literature more than three novels that center on the Vietnam experience. Non-fiction books of note are equally scarce.

The irony in considering Afro-American and Vietnam era studies in joint fashion is that both scholarly projects have constituted themselves as revisionary enterprises. What is also clear is that Vietnam and blackness have undergone similar types of entry into American public space. That is, we find that the representation of the war in literature and film seems to be analogous to that experienced by blacks in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Afro-Americans were becoming a consistent part of newspaper and television coverage, suddenly commercial television shows from *Bonanza* to *Star Trek* to *The Partridge Family* all had story lines that presented images of Afro-Americans. Further, the film industry produced films where the plots centered on the many different ways an angry black man could kick white ass—and get the girl (also white). Black audiences ate it up and came back for more.⁴ And of course, in the print media, one needed only to use the word “Black” in the title for a book to become a best-seller.

But there is a deeper relationship to be gleaned here. That relationship resides in the intersection of ideology and myth. And when we consider the image within this nexus, I hope it becomes clear that Afro-American and Vietnam era studies share a common agenda. An increase in cultural activity, whether it concerns Afro-Americans or American soldiers in Vietnam, has very strong implications. Indeed, when one considers the marginality of both groups, the revisionist postures of their respective scholarly enterprises has grown, in part, from the necessity of demystification, debunking the myths that surround both. Unfortunately, neither of these enterprises exists in a scholarly vacuum and, thus, they are not safe from the American cultural machine.

Even as texts began to appear that revised our sense of what happened in Vietnam, images of the war were commodified and reconstructed within the context of American ideology. Bill Nichols examines the ramifications of this and observes:

Images surround us. There are those we fabricate ourselves, perceptually; there are those fabricated for us, artistically or commercially. Represent: to stand for or in place of something else to bring clearly before the mind.... To represent with images is to symbolize and symbolization is basic to intercommunication.⁵

As legitimate images meant to raise our consciousness proliferated, so too did images that served as mere representations. Thus, it was often assumed that all those artists who wrote or made films about Vietnam—or blacks—had somehow been transformed, enlightened.⁶ And if they were, by chance, Vietnam veterans, they were not susceptible to the effects of the ideology that drives American cultural production. As Nichols informs us, however:

Ideology arises in association with processes of communication and exchange. Ideology involves the reproduction of the existing relations of production (those activities by which a society guarantees its survival). Ideology is how the existing ensemble of social relations represents itself to individuals; it is the image a society gives to itself in order to perpetuate itself...⁷

Nichols argues that images, as representations, “establish fixed places...that work to guarantee coherent social actions over time.”⁸ Vietnam, no less than blackness in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is a part of the American image industry. As such, the proliferation of prose fiction and fiction films that deal with Vietnam suggests that artistic production on this topic is ideologically entrapped.

What does this have to do with Afro-American Studies? It should be clear that the struggle in the 1960s and early 1970s in the Black Studies Movement had everything to do with the revision of cultural representation. And what was also clear, though much later, was that the film where John Shaft “did in” the white dude didn’t present positive images of women at all, and was not much better at constructing a realistic image of black manhood. The proverbial snowball effect was in motion. It took black feminist criticism to deconstruct John Shaft. And when I consider the ways Afro-Americans are represented in Vietnam narratives, it is clear that Afro-American Studies must address the subject of Vietnam.⁹

Popular culture has perpetrated a mythic Vietnam experience: that, somehow, black and white soldiers were de-racialized. No longer could one make distinctions between black and white. Rather, Vietnam produced a new racial distinction: the grunt. However, as Loren Baritz points out:

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Racial conflict was suffused throughout the war, from 1968 until the end. Every service, including the previously calm air force, had race riots of varying magnitude. As some of America's cities burned, or rather as the ghettos in some cities burned, the domestic rage found its counterpart in the military.¹⁰

What one finds in many Vietnam narratives, however, are white narrators who suggest that, against all odds, they understand the black grunt. For example, in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, we find Herr's description of a black Marine named Day Tripper. To Herr, he is a "big black spade gone wrong somehow and no matter how mean he tried to look something constantly gentle showed."¹¹ Herr's language suggests that as a black man "gone wrong," Day Tripper has been transformed from Detroit homeboy to gentle grunt. The assumption here is that anger or hardness is the emotional state of most black men. The passage does not illuminate Day Tripper so much as it clarifies the positioning of Herr's observation. His reading of Day Tripper suggests that his biases are somehow suspended; he can decode blackness within the Vietnam context, even as he maintains the racist language used to describe blacks in the States.

In Nicholas Rinaldi's *Bridge Fall Down*, a novel that follows the story of a team sent to blow up a bridge (a reprise of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) in a mythical Third World country modelled on Vietnam and Central America, we find Rinaldi's description of Thurl, a black lieutenant:

Up ahead, Thurl was laboring along, tall and bulky, black, from Harlem, his powerful left hand carrying his automatic weapon as if it were a toy. A pink earphone was saddled to his right ear, feeding him tunes from a cassette. He was a lieutenant, but it was hard to tell, because he had long ago lost any enthusiasm he might have had for being a lieutenant, and now was more or less just going through the motions, waiting for his tour to be over...he didn't give a damn about war or nonwar, discipline or anything else; he just shuffled along, his own man, amiable and easy, trying to survive the jungle.¹²

Rinaldi offers us a narrator capable of reading the black presence. The protagonist of the novel, Simon Grzegorz, is carrying high explosives in his backpack and thus he is described as "ground zero." What this suggests is that the other characters in the book are deployed in fictional space around him; he is the conceptual center of the

discourse. Grzegorz is, of course, a white male. Thus, his position in the narrative reflects mainstream cultural discourse. Rinaldi's description of Thurl, the fact that he "shuffles along," alludes to the stereotypical manner of describing black motion. Further, Thurl's cassette inscribes the image of young black men with "ghetto blasters," marginal because they commit the crime of being black and male, a threat to the hegemony of the white man. Thurl, in a novel written in 1985 about Vietnam, is himself a representation of the ghetto blaster. His ferocity in a firefight is what makes him valuable; his ability to kill coupled with his enclosure in a musical world bears a strong analogy to images of black men who listen to large radios and kill with little provocation. His apathy reflects the popular image of black men in the 1980s. And Rinaldi's characterization of Thurl as someone who has little regard for his own authority as a lieutenant, likewise implies that the white narrator has no reason to respect his authority either.

Steven Philip Smith's novel, *American Boys*, presents a black character named Padgett. Though Smith can be credited with making Padgett a complex character, an artist who goes to war to confront the question of his sexuality, Smith's narrative technique attempts to render Padgett's black idiom with questionable results. Consider this passage:

One night he fell in with some guys from school, and they were smokin' and sippin' when all of a sudden the fat cat's name come up. All the other dudes was pokin' each other and grinning like they all know who he is, and they start puttin' down this rap about him being a queen.¹³

This passage is unusual when one compares it to the paragraphs used to introduce other characters. Smith strains to represent Afro-American urban slang. Inevitably, Smith mystifies black speech because his representation of that speech is filtered through a narrator who suggests a white man who "talks black," rather than Padgett's actual thoughts being reconstructed on the page.

While there are aspects of Smith's characterization of Padgett that are admirable, I want to suggest here that the danger (and this is equally true with each of the texts I have mentioned) is that the narrative valorizes a point of view that is white and male. Consider the way Smith tells us how Padgett gets "...the blackest hole he [can] find and cut[s] that bitch till her pussy hurt[s]." The reader can only bond with Padgett, in his state of sexual uncertainty, if he is willing to participate in a scene grounded in misogyny and contempt for blackness.

Each of the writers mentioned above falls prey to mainstream

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notions of black manhood. Their narratives, as cultural productions driven by ideological machinery, privilege the construction of the white narrator who is hip enough to understand, and thus decode the black presence in the war. Because there is such a dearth of Afro-American narratives to offset this state of affairs, or scholarship by Afro-American critics that deconstructs these images, inevitably, these narratives come to stand for the reality of the black experience in Vietnam. Nichols alludes to the danger of this: "Ideology appears to produce not itself; but the world. It proposes obviousness, a sense of 'the way things are' within which our sense of place and self emerges an equally self-evident proposition."¹⁴ These narratives, because they occur within an ideological space that seeks to commodify images of Vietnam, to make that commodified image into the reality of "what happened," serve to "persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be"—white men rendering Vietnam faithfully, with egalitarian intentions.

The ineffectual nature of these renderings of the black experience in Vietnam is made clear when we consider it alongside David Berman's study of the war as it is rendered in school textbooks. Berman convincingly argues that American textbooks' treatment of Vietnam was reductive, driven by a need to fit the experience into the prevailing American cultural myth. Berman asserts that when

we reduce warfare to a theoretical model we conceal its violence from our students, some of whom will go on to fight the next war, ignorant of its costs. Academics treat Vietnam as a limited war, for which limited coverage is appropriate. Remarkable for its "lack of passion" our educational writings on the war are consistent with the political tone of textbooks "suitable" for distribution to high school students whose minds are in the process of being shaped to inherit the ideology of the patriotic American community.¹⁵

Berman's remarks suggest that the revisionist history that erased Afro-Americans as a presence in American history is likewise revising their experience in Vietnam, homogenizing it until it disappears altogether. What I would like to offer in closing is a call to Afro-American scholars to consider Vietnam, not as an event that fourteen years and the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign have distanced us from, but as an event which continues to loom in the American cultural machinery. The discipline's concern with demystifying the Afro-American presence must extend its parameters to encompass what has thus far been of marginal interest to scholars in the field. The critical skills that we bring to bear on mainstream notions of American history, sociology, and literature must be applied to the multifaceted

construct that is the Vietnam war era. And the revisionary role we apply to mainstream representations of blackness must be focused on the Vietnam war.

I would call Vietnam era scholars to resist the reduction of the Vietnam war to a raceless experience where the nation somehow transcended its racial chauvinism. I hope it is clear that we must hold those who write about and create films about the Vietnam war accountable for the narratives and images they produce. In this, Afro-American Studies and Vietnam era studies share a common mission: to present the American landscape as it is, to achieve a self-recovery that allows us to embrace difference.

¹ Robert L. Allen, "Politics of the Attack on Black Studies," *The Black Scholar*, September 1974: 2.

² *Ibid.*: 3.

³ Robert Brown, "The Freedom Movement and the Vietnam War," *Freedomways* (5:4) 1965: 472.

⁴ Consider the proliferation of what were called "blaxploitation films" where somehow black men rebelled against the system and played out a violent fantasy. Inevitably, these films represented their own form of containment, in ways more destructive than the stereotypical servant if only because they often suggested that black men had more power than they actually possessed. Films such as *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Three the Hard Way*, and *Trouble Man* all presented this plotline. For more on this topic, cf Donald Bogle's fine study, *Uncle Toms, Coonies, Mammies, and Bucks*.

⁵ Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) 1981: 1.

⁶ Consider, for example, the *Rambo* films alongside Bill Moyers report on blacks in poverty. Both offer representations of the Vietnam veterans and the urban poor (particularly black men) that call us to challenge them as images.

⁷ Nichols: 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This is not to suggest that Vietnam scholars have been irresponsible, rather it is clear that Afro-American Studies must take up the project of examining Vietnam narratives in the same way that Southern literature, for example, has been addressed in Afro-American literary criticism.

¹⁰ Loren Baritz, *Backfire* (New York: William Morrow) 1985: 316.

¹¹ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon) 1977: 125.

¹² Nicholas Rinaldi, *Bridge Fall Down* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 1985:8.

¹³ Steven Philip Smith, *American Boys* (New York: Avon) 1975: 46.

¹⁴ Nichols: 2.

¹⁵ David M. Berman, "In Cold Blood: Vietnam In Textbooks," *Vietnam Generation* (1:1) 1989 Winter: 62-63.