

## Vietnam Generation

---

Volume 1

Number 2 *A White Man's War: Race Issues and Vietnam*

Article 5

---

4-1989

# Soldados Razos: Issues of Race in Vietnam War Drama

David J. DeRose

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

DeRose, David J. (1989) "Soldados Razos: Issues of Race in Vietnam War Drama," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

# **Soldados RAZOS: ISSUES OF RACE IN VIETNAM WAR DRAMA**

**DAVID J. DeROSE**

In *Vietnam Campesino*, Luis Valdez's 1970 agitprop play, a white militarist, satirically named General Defense, rounds up young Chicano laborers to fight in Vietnam. He is assisted by his allegorical henchman, "El Draft," a tall figure with a death's mask, shrouded in an American flag. "What's the matter with you, Draft," the General scolds, "Haven't I told you to stick to the minorities?"<sup>1</sup> Despite his reprimand, the General does not appear to need much help from El Draft. As he tells one wealthy white father, "Mexicans are pouring into the army." "We just give 'em a pretty little uniform, a few pesos, a blessing from mamacita, and wham-o, they're on the frontlines. Those boys are dying to show their machismo."<sup>2</sup> Many American racial minorities, blacks and Asians, as well as Latinos, joined the armed forces during the Vietnam war in hopes of gaining the respect of their cultural community, of escaping a life of poverty, or of proving their mettle to themselves and to "the Man". They joined the armed forces to become—like the titular hero of another Valdez play—*soldados rasos*.

*Soldado raso* is the Spanish equivalent of our own "buck private". But with not so much as a slip of the tongue, *raso* becomes *razo* and "buck private" becomes a "soldier of the race". Minority draftees of the Vietnam era learned quickly that they were indeed *soldados rasos*, involved in a race war with the white society which sent them to Vietnam.

There is a significant body of dramatic literature on the Vietnam war which is rarely mentioned in scholarly essays. Written by blacks, a few whites, Chicanos, Asians, and Puerto Rican nationals, these plays portray a wide spectrum of minority experience, from the pre-war enthusiasm of blacks for a newly integrated military, to the race riots in Vietnam's Long Binh Jail, to the betrayal felt by minority veterans returning to find that the country for which they fought still had no place for them. They explore in microcosm the inequities experienced by America's racial minorities fighting in Vietnam.

Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*, written in 1981, but portraying the lives of black soldiers in 1944, serves as a history lesson in

minority attitudes toward the military. In World War 2, the American armed forces were still segregated, but the military was nevertheless seen by blacks as a place where they could work their way into a position of some rank. In *A Soldier's Play*, Sgt. Vernon C. Waters, a black career soldier and hard-line integrationist, looks upon the war as an opportunity for blacks to prove themselves. "When this war's over, things are going to change," he comments. "The First War, it didn't change much for us, boy—but this one—it's gonna change a lot of things."<sup>3</sup> Waters is referring to the opportunity that blacks (albeit only a few) would have in World War 2 to form and fight in combat units. "We are men—soldiers," Waters declares, "and I don't intend to have our race cheated out of its place of honor and respect in this war."<sup>4</sup>

Attitudes like Waters'—that the military offered blacks greater career opportunities than the civilian job market—persisted through the 1950s and into the 1960s. A 1968 *New York Times* article on blacks in the military reported that many black soldiers reenlisted because civilian employers back home offered "only 'colored' jobs...where whites did the same work for higher pay."<sup>5</sup> In August Wilson's play *Fences* (1986), an unemployed black musician advises his younger brother to "Stick with Uncle Sam and retire early. Ain't nothing out here."<sup>6</sup> The unspoken irony of these lines from the final scene of Wilson's play is that the year is 1965, and the young man, a corporal in the Marine Corps, will undoubtedly be called upon to serve in Vietnam.

Although President Harry Truman ordered the military services desegregated in 1948, blacks in the Korean war still fought in all-black units or in non-combat positions. Vietnam was, thus, the first war in which all areas of military service, including combat positions, were fully integrated. "For the first time in the nation's military history," *Time Magazine* proudly reported in a cover story from 1967, "its Negro fighting men are fully integrated in combat, fruitfully employed in positions of leadership, and fiercely proud of their performance."<sup>7</sup> Wallace Terry, Jr., then a junior correspondent for *Time*, is reported as saying, "I have observed here the most successfully integrated institution in America."<sup>8</sup> The war in Vietnam was seen by many blacks as a great opportunity; according to *Time*, the black soldier in Vietnam "fights for the dignity of the Negro, to shatter the stereotype of racial inferiority."<sup>9</sup>

Young Latinos also seemed eager to serve their country as a matter of racial and communal pride. In Ruben Sierra's play *Manolo* (1976), about an Latino Vietnam vet turned drug addict, the unfortunate protagonist recalls how he brought a halt to his anti-establishment protests and enlisted in the Army because he believed his racial

## 40 VIETNAM GENERATION

community expected it of him and would never accept him as a community leader if he refused to fight in Vietnam. In Valdez's *Soldado Razo*, Johnny, a young Chicano leaving for Vietnam, is viewed with admiration and envy by family and friends. Johnny's girlfriend dreams of marrying her man in uniform. Her parents loan Johnny their family car since "he's more responsible now that he's in the service."<sup>10</sup> Johnny's father is proud because his son has become "a man". He looks upon the uniform as a sign of success, and hopes Johnny's younger brother will follow in his footsteps. Johnny's brother is envious of the attention and wishes he were old enough to enlist. Johnny basks in his family's regard. His own thoughts echo his father's: "*Ahora sí*, I'm a man!" He naively fantasizes about proving himself to the people of the barrio:

Maybe they'll feel different when I come back from Nam. *Simon el War Veteran!* Maybe I'll get wounded and come back *con un chigatal de* medals. I wonder how the *vatos* around here are going to think about that?... I might even get killed. If I do, they'll bring me back here in a box, covered with the flag...military funeral like they gave Pete Gomez...everybody crying...<sup>11</sup>.

Johnny, of course, receives what he has foolishly wished for. He is killed in Vietnam, as are all the Chicano soldiers in Valdez's three antiwar plays.

Muerte, the figure of Death who serves as a narrator in *Soldado Razo*, confirms that Johnny got the funeral he wanted: "Military coffin, *muchas flores*, American flag, *mujeres llorando*, and a trumpet playing taps with a rifle salute at the end."<sup>12</sup> Muerte knows that he can depend on the Chicano community to continue sending its brave and foolish young men to fight and die for a false dream of glory and the self-perpetuating stereotype of the Latino male as noble warrior. In Valdez's *The Dark Root of a Scream* (1967), a Chicano mother collects her third posthumous Medal of Honor, having lost sons in World War 2, Korea, and Vietnam. The barrio priest assures her that her son has sacrificed himself for the sacred Christian cause of democracy. The local barrio youths, envious of the admiration inspired by the dead soldier, wonder if they, too, should enlist.

Only Johnny, in *Soldado Razo*, sees the waste of his race's brave young men. He writes to his mother from Vietnam, asking her to tell his friends what the war is really about. But the letter is never finished. Muerte, who must continue to exploit the naive and heroic attitudes of the barrio youths, guns Johnny down with a knowing smile.

By 1968, returning veterans were rapidly dispelling any

romantic attitudes that minorities might have had about the glory of proving their worth in the American military. Instead of being viewed as a great opportunity, the military came to be seen as a last resort for unemployed and untrained minority youths in a country which offered them few means of advancement. "It's an awful indictment of America," a soldier in the *New York Times* was reported to say, "that many young Negroes must go into the military for fulfillment, for status—and that they prefer service overseas to their homeland."<sup>13</sup> To a new generation of black soldiers, equal opportunity for status became far too great an opportunity for death. This change in attitude is dramatically embodied in white dramatist Jonathan Greenberg's *Casualties* (1987). A black career officer argues that "We forced them to integrate the service! We were at the *forefront* of the civil rights movement!" But his arguments are countered by the ghost of a black grunt, killed in combat, who sneers at him, "you're proud...cuz they integrated the fuckin *cemetery*. Yeah, that's your 'victory'. We all get wasted now."<sup>14</sup>

When statistics on the racial make-up of combat troops and casualties began to appear, it became clear that minorities—especially blacks—were taking on more than their fair share of the war. In 1965, for instance, 23.5% of all Army enlisted men killed in action were black.<sup>15</sup> By 1968, blacks accounted for 9.8% of the military forces in Vietnam, but in combat units, that figure rose to 20%, and even 25% in such elite units as the paratroopers.<sup>16</sup> In 1970, black combat deaths were "running about one-third above the proportion of blacks stationed in Southeast Asia."<sup>17</sup> Casualty rates for Spanish surnamed soldiers were also disproportionately high.<sup>18</sup>

At first the disproportionate number of blacks in combat units and subsequent combat deaths were viewed as the result of blacks volunteering for elite units as a means of gaining status. In 1967, National Urban League president, Whitney Young Jr., reported that:

The reason for the high rate of negro combat deaths lies in the simple fact that a higher proportion of negroes volunteer for hazardous duty. They do so not for the money—which doesn't begin to justify the risk—but more from a desire to prove to themselves and to their white colleagues that they are men capable of as much skill, courage, and sacrifice as any man alive.<sup>19</sup>

While Young's statement might have been true of blacks who served in Vietnam before 1967, by the time these sentiments were quoted in *Harper's*, a military program had been implemented which would send more and more impoverished and unwilling minority draftees into combat positions in Vietnam.



## 42 VIETNAM GENERATION

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Project 100,000 was intended, according to its creators, to make more men eligible for military service by reducing the mental and physical aptitude standards of the armed forces. McNamara claimed that the program would give America's poor an opportunity to serve their country and "an opportunity to return to civilian life with skills and aptitudes which for them and their families [would] reverse the downward spiral of decay."<sup>20</sup> In fact, while Project 100,000 lowered admission standards, it did not lower similar prerequisites for special training in technical positions within the military. The end result was that approximately 40 percent of the one hundred thousand "New Standards Men" being accepted for military duty each year were used as combat troops.<sup>21</sup> Few gained the skills and aptitudes promised by McNamara. And since Project 100,000 reduced standards for draftees as well as enlistees, the draft was able to dig deeper into ghetto communities and rural areas of the deep South to fill combat units with the poor and underprivileged while continuing to give educational deferments to college students. Later figures confirmed that 41% of all Project 100,000 men were black.<sup>22</sup>

In a 1970 article for *The Black Scholar*, Wallace Terry Jr. describes a dramatic reversal in black attitudes toward the military and the Vietnam war. Unlike his 1967 *Time* report, which proclaimed the successful integration of the military, his *Black Scholar* essay confirmed that blacks had begun to view the military as a deadly extension of civilian discrimination. "Among all black enlisted men surveyed," Terry notes, "nearly half believe that blacks were assigned more dangerous duty than whites. Even some whites agree." One white sergeant told Terry that "you honestly have to say that the black man in our brigade...has almost no chance of getting a support job."<sup>23</sup> Terry also contradicts the 1967 claim made by Whitney Young Jr. that blacks in Vietnam were the "cream of the crop of the Negro community."<sup>24</sup> Terry declared that some of the so-called "volunteers" he spoke with had either enlisted to avoid the draft, or were escaping jail terms—often for arrests made during ghetto uprisings.<sup>25</sup>

One such ghetto dweller is portrayed in white veteran David Rabe's *Streamers* (1976). Carlyle is a black draftee; uneducated and unskilled, he knows he has been written off as cannon fodder by the military. "You got it made," he tells three other draftees, all with clerical skills and special assignments. "I don't got it made."

You got jobs they probably ain't ever gonna ship you out, you got so important jobs. I got no job. They don't even wanna give me a job. I know it. They are gonna kill me. They are gonna send me over there to get me killed, goddammit....

I don't wanna be no DEAD man. I don't wanna be the one they all thinkin' is so stupid he's the only one'll go, they tell him; they don't even give him a job. I got thoughts, man, in my head; alla time burnin', burnin' thoughts a understandin'.<sup>26</sup>

Carlyle's fatal sentiments are an accurate reflection of the feelings of blacks interviewed by Terry in Vietnam. Terry quotes one black paratrooper as he prepared to jump into the Ashau Valley: "I was a dead man when they told me I was going to Vietnam.... I have nothing to lose here or back home. The white man has told me to die."<sup>27</sup> The promise of a military organization where "the only color is olive drab" had proven hollow.

The outrage of blacks in Vietnam reached crescendo pitch in 1968. The Tet Offensive in January of that year meant an escalation in fighting and thus in drafting new combat troops—a disproportionate number of whom were black. The assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 brought out the ugliest side of white racism in Vietnam, and sent blacks into paroxysms of violence. In the wake of King's murder, whites burned crosses at Cam Ranh Bay and flew Confederate flags over bases at Da Nang.<sup>28</sup> Rumors spread among both black and white soldiers that an all-out race war was underway back in the States.

Blacks in large numbers were questioning their participation in the Vietnam war. Many draftees of this period had spoken with returning veterans about conditions in Vietnam. Others were witnesses to, and often participants in, the racial violence of stateside civil rights battles and ghetto riots. These men had very little desire to fight or die for a country which had declared war on them. In a *New York Times* article from July 1968, black veterans expressed a growing opposition to the war. "We shouldn't fight for this country until it's worth fighting for," declared one black vet. "The rights we fought for [for] somebody else just don't exist for us," says another.<sup>29</sup> These sentiments are echoed by the character Carlyle in *Streamers*, who declares that "It ain't our war nohow because it ain't our country."<sup>30</sup>

Vietnam became the first war in American history in which black national leaders did not urge black youths "to take up arms in support of American policy to improve the lot of the black man in the United States."<sup>31</sup> Before his death, Martin Luther King Jr. was one of several black leaders to condemn the presence of blacks in Vietnam. His speech in New York City's Riverside Church in April of 1967 proclaimed:

We are taking the young black men who have been crippled by our society and sending them 8,000 miles away to

## 44 VIETNAM GENERATION

guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together at the same school.<sup>32</sup>

Blacks stationed in Vietnam were at first confused and frustrated when leaders as ideologically dissimilar as Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King Jr. labeled Vietnam a race war and encouraged blacks not to fight. But many black soldiers soon saw the sense in the arguments of American black leaders, and adopted an antiwar stance. At the time of King's murder in 1968, he was held in high esteem by black GIs, as were other antiwar black activists such as Carmichael, Cassius Clay, and Julian Bond.<sup>33</sup> Black GIs began to view the war as an example of the oppression of a nonwhite people by the white American establishment. Stated one black veteran: "We're not fighting for the freedom of the Vietnamese, but rather to oppress them. The Vietnamese are fighting for self-determination the same as black people here." Another veteran concluded that "We [are doing] to the yellow people what whites do to us."<sup>34</sup>

Other racial communities whose young men were fighting in the American military expressed similar emotions. In Jaime Carrero's play *Flag Inside* (1966), a Puerto Rican family laments the loss of their son in a war waged by imperialist America against a small non-white nation much like their own. In *Honey Bucket* (1976), Filipino veteran and playwright Melvyn Escueta examines what it meant to be "a gook killing gooks."<sup>35</sup> His young Filipino hero, Andy, is haunted by images of Vietnamese peasants who, noting his Asian features, tell him "same-same, Viet-Me." At first Andy rejects his connection to these people, but eventually he finds that "We were cousins under the skin." When a white lieutenant is disgusted by the "crap" in an old woman's mouth, Andy impatiently explains that she is chewing betel nuts and that his grandparents "chew that 'crap'." On another occasion, he shares a bowl of rice and *nuoc mom* (fish sauce) with a Vietnamese girl, trying to explain to her that it is much like the Filipino dish *bagoong*. The smell, he says, "reminds me of home." When two white soldiers enter the scene, they complain about the stench, commenting that the fermented fish smells like "something crawled up somebody's ass and died." Andy's anger about such slurs against Asians is so great that five years after his return from Vietnam, he still cannot help but feel that in America "anyone not white is a gook."

Luis Valdez expresses much the same sentiment on behalf of the Chicano community with *Vietnam Campesino* (1970) in which



Chicano *campesinos* (farmworkers) are shown the similarities between their plight and that of farmers in Vietnam. Valdez depicts both the migrant *campesinos*, and the Vietnamese peasants as simple agrarians who wish to escape a capitalist society in which their lives are controlled by wealthy landowners. Several parallels are drawn between the two groups and their relationship to the American capitalist establishment. The *campesinos* wish to unionize; the Vietnamese wish to socialize. In both instances, white Americans in power encourage the farmers to ignore their own leaders (Ho Chi Minh and Cesar Chavez) and support puppet leaders backed by the American government and wealthy capitalists. Valdez compares the actions of agrobusiness executives who order pesticide spraying while farmworkers are still in the fields to the actions of US government officials who order soldiers to bomb Vietnamese villagers. (Ironically, Valdez was unaware of the fact that both Chicanos and Vietnamese were being drenched with Agent Orange at that time.)

The Vietnamese Communist Party was quick to capitalize on the racial ambiguity of the US government's foreign and domestic policy stance. According to Whitney Young, "one of the favorite propaganda exercises of the Vietcong is to drop leaflets explaining the race issue to the American Negro. These thoughtfully remind the Negro troops of their own period of slavery and ask for what purposes they are in Vietnam helping the whites oppress a colored people."<sup>36</sup> As one veteran tells, blacks quickly got the feeling that they had been "seduced and abandoned by the man."<sup>37</sup>

Three plays by black veterans, set in-country during the peak of racial tensions in 1968, dramatize the anger and the frustration of black soldiers who consider themselves patriotic Americans, but who find themselves at odds with the society for which they are fighting. Fred Gamel's *Wasted* (1984) involves a fragging plot on the night that troops in Vietnam learn of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Charles Michael Moore's *The Hooch* (1978) takes place several weeks after King's death, as inter-racial tension between bunkmates builds toward violence. Jamal's *LBJ* (1986) recreates one of the most infamous prison riots in Army history in which 200 black inmates gained control of Long Binh Jail and injured scores of white prisoners.

In all three plays, black moderates are torn between a moral vision of racial tolerance and an emotional bond with their militant brothers. In *Wasted*, a black sergeant named Bassett must decide whether or not he will conceal a plot by one of his men to frag a white "nigger-hating" sergeant in symbolic retaliation for the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. In a climactic scene, Bassett vents the frustration of a moral man and a loyal citizen fighting in a war he knows is no longer

## 46 VIETNAM GENERATION

his own:

What's supposed to be eating me...a leader of my people gets wasted in the land of the PX, nobody even sends word of it to us at the firebase...we get a deadhead nigger-hater for a platoon sergeant.... I'm fighting a war for a country where I'm a second-class citizen...and I'm supposed to sail on like nothing's ever been wrong in my life.<sup>36</sup>

Although Bassett remains reluctant to halt the fragging of a white racist, he must eventually shoot a black soldier to end the escalating tension on the base camp.

Charles Michael Moore's *The Hooch* is also set within a basecamp tense over racial issues, where black grunts guard a military radar unit controlled by white technicians. The symbolic significance of this hierarchy is unveiled late in the play when a black soldier discovers that the equipment on the hill, which the whites have carefully hidden and which the blacks are expected to give their lives to protect, is a worthless invention which has never worked and which the white technicians do not know how to repair. The radar unit on the hill, like America's involvement in Vietnam, is unveiled as a white man's cause, and a worthless one at that, for which blacks are expected to die.

The black soldier who discovers this folly is a radar specialist—the first black to hold such a position on this base. His name is Corporal Promus (i.e., Promise), and he is a redemptive figure of high moral fortitude, racial tolerance, and intelligence. In revealing the false god on the hill, he manages to disarm the aggression building between blacks and whites in camp. His philosophy is a simple one: "What goes around, comes around." He convinces a fellow black soldier not to sink to the level of the white racists by shooting a white corporal who they believe has killed one of the black grunts.

In Jamal's *LBJ*, an unlikely inter-racial trio of prisoners band together in the face of certain death by rampaging black inmates. Wade is a level-headed but independent-minded black who has made an enemy of Big Man, the dangerous leader of the rioters. Wade is forced to share a hiding place with Chacon, a Chicano who is generally friendly with neither whites nor blacks, and Christopherson, a white pacifist. These three are trapped together inside Long Binh Jail during the race riots of 1968. By calling an end to their petty differences and combining forces, they defeat Big Man and his murderous cohort, Weasel. The message, as in *The Hooch* and *Wasted*, is one of inter-racial solidarity and tolerance as an alternative to white or black extremism.

Juxtaposed against the moderate protagonists in all three of these plays are black militants who find themselves driven to acts of violence against whites by a system which refuses to recognize their rights. "They make you prove it to them, Bro," Chacon laments in *LBJ*. "They hate to give you your respect."<sup>39</sup> In *Wasted*, the hot-headed Spider Evans, who joined the military in lieu of a prison sentence for assault, plots against the white sergeant who has made his distaste for blacks well known. In *The Hooch*, short-timer Horus Brown plans to kill a white soldier who he believes has murdered one of his men. Brown looks upon relationships with whites in terms of war. He tells Promus he wants blacks to "infiltrate" all areas of white military duty because, in his words, "this is war."<sup>40</sup> His white counterpart, Seebold, believes that the army is training blacks to kill whites. "These people are at war with us," he tells another white technician.

These images of races at war accurately reflect the conditions in Vietnam as described by numerous veterans in interviews between 1968 and 1973.<sup>41</sup> Some veterans expressed the concern that blacks in Vietnam saw the real war as one they would fight, with their new and deadly skills, on the streets of America. "The big question," one black GI told the *New York Times*, "is whether the black cat can walk like a dragon here in South Vietnam and like a fairy back in the land of the big PX."<sup>42</sup> In *LBJ*, Big Man claims that the war "has been giving the real brothers the experience they'll need when they get back home."

Vietnam is giving me an education: a chance to learn about life. Ain't my fault the man turned loose the beast over here. You, me, Weasel and 500,000 more. He thought he would ride the back of this beast making it do his killing, blindly, obediently. And he's been riding it into the ground. But... then he forgot something...one day he had to get off that beast's back and when he does...[laughs] The beast would still be hungry and the man would be devoured.

Wallace Terry, Jr. notes, as does Thomas Johnson in the *New York Times*, that black militant groups were not uncommon in Vietnam. The Black Panthers, the JuJus, the MauMaus, and the Zulu 1200s were all represented. "I dig the militant brothers," one black soldier told Terry. "Non-violence didn't do anything but get Martin Luther King killed."<sup>43</sup>

Many black veterans returned from Vietnam to communities where the rate of unemployment for blacks was "at least three times the national average" and where the unemployment rate for blacks between 20 and 25 (the age of most veterans) "was likely to be eight or nine times the national average."<sup>44</sup> In the words of playwright Tom

## 48 VIETNAM GENERATION

Cole's Medal of Honor winner, DJ, the average black veteran became "just another invisible Nigger, waiting on line and getting shit on just for being there."<sup>45</sup> Many black vets, like Spec 4 Anthony Brazil in Stephen Mack Jones' *Back in the World* (1984), found that Vietnam had trained them for one job only:

So here I am, right? At home. Back in Indianapolis. Back in the world. If you can call Indianapolis "the world." And all I'm trained to do is kill. Twenty years old now and that's all I know how to do. Not exactly the kind of thing you put on a resume....

Two months later, I re-up. Four months, I'm back in the 'Nam. Don't need no resume. No references.<sup>46</sup>

Combat veterans could expect to be pressured about reenlistment while still in Vietnam, or approached back in the States by National Guard or State Police forces who hoped to use them as riot control troops. Although many veterans accepted service with these organizations, the outcome was often further racial confrontation. Wallace Terry, Jr. cites at least one instance in which 43 black soldiers from Fort Hood, Texas, refused an assignment at the Democratic National Convention for fear of being ordered to battle the black youth of Chicago.<sup>47</sup>

Black vets were also solicited by militant groups eager to capitalize on their battle training and their escalating resentment of white America. In 1968, Bobby Seale said veterans had been steadily joining the ranks of the Oakland Black Panthers; that same year, Clarence Guthrie of the Zulu 1200s estimated that about one-third of his members were vets. The majority of black vets interviewed by the *New York Times* said they were opposed to the war. Many said they would never fight for the United States again. One black vet expressed the intensity of the rage felt by many of his brothers: "I find myself hating this [white] man so much that [Uncle] Sam couldn't kill me, melt me, or pour me back into the Army or back into the Nam."<sup>48</sup> Despite such sentiments, there were only scattered incidences of "insane veterans' militancy" in the wake of the war, and most of the violence came, not from black veterans, but from right-wing white mercenaries and KKK veterans.<sup>49</sup>

Two plays, both by non-veterans, directly address the helplessness, rage and resentment experienced by black veterans upon their return to civilian life. Black playwright Adrienne Kennedy's *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1973) and Tom Cole's *Medal of Honor Rag* (1975) are both based on true stories of black veterans who met with violent ends after their return to the United States.

Kennedy's play recounts the death of 23-year-old Mark Essex



in January 1973. Firing his high-powered rifle from the roof of a New Orleans Howard Johnson, Essex carried on a 32 hour shooting spree in which seven people were killed and 21 others wounded. He was eventually overcome by 40 police sharpshooters and a military helicopter; over 100 bullets were found in his body.

In what amounts to more of a memorial service or documentary than a conventional drama, *An Evening with Dead Essex* attempts to reach a sympathetic understanding of the events which led a young black man of highly spiritual upbringing to randomly gun down passers-by from the roof of a hotel. A company of black actors use quotations from Essex's family and friends, stories of his youth and his military service, pictures from his life and from the day of his death, and fabricated testimony to summon the spirit of dead Essex.

Essex is revealed as an innocent Kansas youth, deeply religious, who believed in the benevolence of his white neighbors and in the goodness of God and country. While serving in the Navy, Essex's profound faith was shattered by the cruel bigotry of the white military hierarchy. Kennedy's play relates how Essex comes to believe that white men are his enemy, that America is the white man's country, and that Christianity is a "white man's religion." According to Kennedy, it is the subversion of Essex's faith which makes him pursue, with religious zeal, the destruction of the society which has brutally betrayed him.

Although Essex served in San Diego, not Vietnam, his death is presented by Kennedy (as it was viewed by the American press in 1973) as an emblem of the brutality which the Vietnam war had brought to America's streets. Kennedy illustrates the militarization of civilian culture with two news clippings, recited in sequence by an actor:

1972—B-52 bombers made their biggest raid on the Vietnam war demilitarized zone to date dropping nearly 200 tons of bombs. 1973—at 9:25PM the helicopters lumbered past again.

[Pause]

When the sharpshooters opened fire, a slight figure, rifle in hand, bolted into the open. Trapped in a withering crossfire between the helicopter overhead and marksmen in two adjacent buildings, Jimmy Essex was literally ripped apart by at least a hundred bullets. The police kept firing even after he went down, his body twitching with the impact of each slug and his rifle shattered beside him.<sup>50</sup>

Because the actor finishes the first quotation and begins reading the second before pausing, the distinction between the two events—the



## 50 VIETNAM GENERATION

bombing in Vietnam and the violent death in New Orleans—is blurred. As one of the actors comments, the two events “very much continue into each other”<sup>51</sup> and the war in Vietnam becomes indistinguishable from the violence on America’s streets.

Elsewhere in the play, one of the actors speaks with shocking directness on the significance of Mark Essex’s death to the black community. He speaks for a generation of black veterans, many of whom feel betrayed by their country, and who see Essex as a spokesman and a martyr:

About a year ago five of us ex-G.I.s were arrested.... They said we had a plot to kill all white people. We didn’t. But we did meet in the cellar almost every day and talk, just talk. We wished we had a plot to kill white people—we had a lot to say to each other—about our confusion about the deep racial significance of the war between the U.S. and Viet Nam, white against non-white—about our joblessness—we did *want to kill* but we had no plot—we had a lot to say and we still have a lot to say—about Mark Essex—to us he is a hero—we believe he was carrying a banner—we believe he saw himself as a soldier of mercy—we have a lot to say about dead Essex.<sup>52</sup>

While few would readily recognize a sniper, randomly firing at pedestrians, as either victim or martyr, Adrienne Kennedy’s play draws attention to the tragic stature of the “slight figure” on the roof. She successfully creates a documentary image of an innocent young man from Kansas who enters the Navy in order to serve his God and his country, and who is transformed into a genocidal killer by the bigotry and racial hatred he finds there.

Mark Essex’s acts of violence and racial hatred may have made him an unlikely subject for sympathetic dramatic portrayal. By contrast, Dwight Johnson, fictionally characterized as DJ in Tom Cole’s *Medal of Honor Rag*, immediately captured the sympathy of the American public in 1971 when he was shot to death while robbing a grocery store in his home town of Detroit. Unlike Essex, who chose violence to express his personal sense of rage, Johnson ran from the rage he had found within himself in Vietnam.

Johnson returns from Vietnam to find he is unemployable. Trained to kill, he feels roughly discarded after his service to his country. As recounted in the play, DJ’s tour of duty in Vietnam ends suddenly and dramatically with a firefight in which he single-handedly wipes out an entire North Vietnamese unit after witnessing the deaths of his closest friends. In a mortal frenzy, DJ is dragged from the scene

of the battle and tranquilized. Within 48 hours, he is on a plane headed for Detroit with a medical discharge. Several months later, two MPs suddenly appear at DJ's door and question his mother about his activities. He is asked to take another sudden plane ride, this time from the Detroit ghetto he calls home to the White House, where he is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. DJ expresses the bitter irony of his country's treatment of him: "Yesterday afternoon for all they knew I was a junkie on the streets, today the President of the United States can't wait to see me...."<sup>53</sup> The country that exploits his services as a trained killer, then throws him back into the ghetto, now needs him again. DJ becomes the token black hero at an awards ceremony conceived of by the Johnson administration to counteract the war's bad press.

Despite the obvious status and social mobility which the medal offers DJ, he cannot help but see it as a reward for acts of violence which he considers heinous. "I got that medal," he tells his psychiatrist, "because I went totally out of my fucking skull and killed everything in sight."<sup>54</sup> He fears that he may again lose control of himself and repeat his violence in his home town. "Man, if I lose my cool again—just, freak out," DJ asks, "what's to stop me from going up and down the streets of Detroit killing everything I see?"<sup>55</sup> Though DJ feels that the medal brands him as a crazed killer, he cannot reject it without disgracing his family, his community, and the black race. The prestige which accompanies the medal reflects not only on DJ, but on the community at large:

I am an authentic hero, a showpiece. One look at me, enlistments go up two hundred percent.... I am a credit to my race. Did you know that? I am an honor to the city of Detroit, to say nothing of the state of Michigan, of which I am the only living Medal of Honor winner! I am a feather in the cap of the army, a flower in the lapel of the military.<sup>56</sup>

In need of someone to pass judgement on him, DJ enters a grocery store in a white section of Detroit. He has a pistol, but never fires it as the white cashier pulls his gun from behind the counter and shoots him repeatedly. In the words of the real Dwight Johnson's mother, he "tired of this life and needed someone else to pull the trigger."<sup>57</sup>

*Medal of Honor Rag* and *An Evening with Dead Essex* were written at a time when the Vietnam war was still a gaping wound in the lives of most veterans. In the early 1970s, the vast majority of vets did not dare to speak of their war experiences, let alone express their confusion and hatred on the stage. Among veterans of this period, only David Rabe chose the stage as a means of openly venting his anger. His

## 52 VIETNAM GENERATION

vitriolic anti-American plays, *Sticks and Bones* and *The Basic Training of Paulo Hummel*, raised great controversy and resentment when they were produced in 1971, alienating far more people than they converted. But Rabe was the exception, and several years passed before other veterans took to the stage.

Of the veteran plays discussed in this essay, Sierra's *Manolo* and Escueta's *Honey Bucket* (both produced regionally in 1976) were the first to appear. These works portray Vietnam veterans who survive the war only to self-destruct after returning to their homes. *Manolo* is a crime-world melodrama in which a Latino soldier returns unscratched from Vietnam only to find that his mother has died in his absence and that his little brother has been stabbed to death by a neighborhood pusher. Manolo dies taking his revenge on the pusher who would never have come to power in his neighborhood if Manolo had not been sent to Vietnam. Andy, the veteran protagonist in Escueta's *Honey Bucket*, finds his recurrent flashbacks of Vietnam far more vivid than his real life. He is haunted throughout the play by the ghosts of his friends who died in battle. At the end of *Honey Bucket*, Andy, alienated from his wife and family, speeds out of control on his motorcycle while his dead companions encourage his suicide with screams of "Come on home," and "You're better off with your buddies." Both Escueta and Sierra make it clear that death could seem the only way out for troubled minority veterans of this period.

Plays by black veterans from the late 1970s and into the 1980s still express the anger and despair of the immediate postwar years. But the sense of hopelessness and of hatred, directed both at whites and inward at the self, has evolved in these plays into a positive, sometimes therapeutic energy. *The Hooch, Wasted*, and *LBJ* advance the portrait of a protagonist who transcends the racial hatred of his companions, black and white, and offers hope of tolerance and racial harmony. The placement of this type of character at the heart of these plays suggest that veteran playwrights are attempting to instill their Vietnam experience with a sense of redemption in order to leave behind their lingering rage.

The evolution of Escueta's *Honey Bucket* offers an excellent example of the conversion of anger and hopelessness into therapeutic regeneration. After the first production in 1976, Escueta frequently revised the play until in 1982, having determined that isolation and death were not the only way out for his veteran protagonist, Escueta rewrote the final scene so that Andy lives. Instead of urging Andy toward suicide, the ghosts of his dead comrades cease to haunt him, granting him permission to start living again. The play in its revised form still contains a strong message about a Filipino veteran's anger at America's treatment of minorities, but *Honey Bucket* is now

therapeutic rather than destructive. Instead of promoting the image of an inevitable dead-end, the play speaks of a veteran making the long mental journey back to the World.

That same therapeutic journey and re-emergence can be found in Jones's *Back in the World* (1988). In a series of monologues, much like a veterans' rap session, five black vets tell their stories in turn while the others listen and occasionally comment. Some part of each of these characters is still trapped in Vietnam. Among them are the man who refuses to believe the war is over, insisting it could still be won if ignorant liberals would not interfere; the soldier who searches photographs of Saigon for the Vietnamese wife and child he was forced to leave behind; and, the exile who lives in Belgium with his white wife and his children. In each of these characters, one can sense a powerful desire to "come home". Sharing their stories, they help each other approach that end. A letter from a stateside friend (a disabled veteran), read by the exile, expresses this common desire: "I wish to God you'd save me some postage and come home. For better or worse, America is home, James. And if you can't stand proud at home, it's hard to do it anywhere else in the world."

While the individual monologues all conclude on a similar note of longed-for homecoming and healing, the play is open-ended. The final lines are spoken by the one character who will never be able to return to the World. He is a homeless veteran, known only as The Man, who is first seen curled up with his radio in an alley. He lives on the edge, struggling each day with the flashbacks that send him screaming for cover. He tells us that he works occasionally with "black kids off the street" at a local community center: "Trying to help 'um, you know, make somethin' outta theyselves." He wants the present generation of young ghetto dwellers—a generation facing an all-time high unemployment rate for black youths<sup>58</sup>—to see what has happened to him, and to be sure that they never allow themselves to be swept without question into war by a government promising to reverse "the downward spiral of decay" for minorities.

The Man's message to the present generation of draft-age minorities recalls young Johnny's words to his Vietnam era friends: "Please," Johnny writes to his mother, "tell Sapó and all the *vatos* how it's like over here. Don't let them..."<sup>59</sup> But his warning is cut short by a bullet to the head, fired by the gleeful figure of Muerte as he sings the ballad of "*El Soldado Razo*."

<sup>1</sup> Luis Valdez, *Vietnam Campesino*, in *Actos* (Fresno, CA: Cucaracha Press) 1971: 117. Hereafter, Valdez, *Vietnam*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: 108.



# 54 VIETNAM GENERATION

- <sup>3</sup> Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play* (New York: Hill & Wang) 1981: 28, 72. Hereafter, Fuller.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 90.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas A. Johnson, "The US Negro in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1968: 16. Hereafter, *NYT*, 4/29/68.
- <sup>6</sup> August Wilson, *Fences* (New York: New American Library) 1986: 94.
- <sup>7</sup> "Democracy in the Foxhole," *Time*, May 26, 1967: 15.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 1
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.
- <sup>10</sup> Luis Valdez, *Soldado Razo*, in *West Coast Plays 19/20* (Los Angeles: California Theatre Council) 1986: 62. Hereafter, Valdez, *Soldado*.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 56.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *NYT*, 4/29/68: 16.
- <sup>14</sup> All quotations from Jonathan Greenberg, *Casualties* (unpublished script) 1987. First produced February, 1987 at TheatreWorks, Palo Alto, CA.
- <sup>15</sup> Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday) 1984: 559. Hereafter, MacPherson.
- <sup>16</sup> *NYT*, 4/29/68: 16.
- <sup>17</sup> Wallace Terry, Jr., "Bringing the War Home," *The Black Scholar* (2:3), November 1970: 12. Hereafter, Terry.
- <sup>18</sup> MacPherson: 560.
- <sup>19</sup> Whitney M. Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," *Harper's*, June 1967: 66. Hereafter, Young.
- <sup>20</sup> Paul Starr, *The Discarded Army: Veterans After Vietnam* (New York: Charterhouse) 1973: 190. Hereafter, Starr.
- <sup>21</sup> MacPherson: 559.
- <sup>22</sup> MacPherson, citing a 1970 Defense Department Study: 559.
- <sup>23</sup> Terry: 12.
- <sup>24</sup> Young: 66.
- <sup>25</sup> Terry: 7.
- <sup>26</sup> David Rabe, *Streamers*, in *Coming to Terms: American Plays & the Vietnam War*, James Reston, ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group) 1985: 32. Hereafter, Rabe.
- <sup>27</sup> Terry: 15.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 11.
- <sup>29</sup> Terry: 14.
- <sup>30</sup> Rabe: 16.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas A. Johnson, "Negro in Vietnam Uneasy about US," *New York Times*, May 1, 1968: 14. Hereafter, *NYT*, 5/1/68.
- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in Starr: 193.
- <sup>33</sup> Terry: 7.
- <sup>34</sup> Thomas A. Johnson, "Negro Veteran is Confused and Bitter," *New York Times*, July 29, 1968: 14. Hereafter, *NYT*, 7/29/68.
- <sup>35</sup> All quotations are from Melvyn Escueta, *Honey Bucket* (unpublished script in two drafts, 1976 & 1988). First produced October 1976 at the Asian American Theatre, San Francisco, CA.
- <sup>36</sup> Young: 64.



<sup>37</sup> NYT, 7/19/68: 14.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Gamel, *Wasted*, in *The Best Plays of 1983-1984*, Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead) 1984: 55.

<sup>39</sup> All quotations from Jamal, *LEJ* (unpublished script) 1968. First produced January 1986 by SEW/Lorraine Hansberry Theater at the San Francisco Repertory Theater.

<sup>40</sup> All quotations from Charles Michael Moore, *The Hooch* (unpublished script) 1978. First produced May 1984 at the New Federal Theater, New York City.

<sup>41</sup> As well as the examples cited from the *New York Times* (1968) and from Terry (1970), these attitudes are expressed in interviews with veterans in David F. Addlestone and Susan Sherer, "Battleground: Race in Viet Nam," *Civil Rights*, February 1973.

<sup>42</sup> NYT, 5/1/68: 1.

<sup>43</sup> Terry: 14.

<sup>44</sup> NYT, 7/29/68: 14.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Cole, *Medal of Honor Rag*, in *Coming to Terms: American Plays and the Vietnam War*, James Reston, ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group) 1985: 146. Hereafter, Cole.

<sup>46</sup> All quotations from Stephen Mack Jones, *Back in the World* (unpublished manuscript) 1988. First produced April 1987 at the Attic Theater, Detroit. Produced in its current form October 1988 by the Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theatre Company, New York City.

<sup>47</sup> Terry: 10.

<sup>48</sup> NYT, 7/29/68: 14.

<sup>49</sup> MacPherson: 568.

<sup>50</sup> Adrienne Kennedy, *An Evening with Dead Essex*, *Theater* (9:2), Spring 1978: 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*: 67-68.

<sup>53</sup> Cole: 142.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 143.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 141.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*: 126.

<sup>5</sup> John Nordheimer, "From Dakto to Detroit: Death of a Troubled Hero," *New York Times*, May 26 1971: 16.

<sup>58</sup> MacPherson: 554.

<sup>59</sup> Valdez, *Soldado*: 65.