

## Vietnam Generation

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Volume 1

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

Article 9

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4-1989

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### Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Verner D. (1989) "I, Too, Sing America: Vietnam as Metaphor in Coming Home," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss2/9>

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# I, TOO, SING AMERICA: VIETNAM AS METAPHOR IN *COMING HOME*

**VERNER D. MITCHELL**

George Davis' novel *Coming Home* is both a Vietnam war novel and a significant contribution to the larger body of Afro-American literature. Davis uses the war as a metaphor for dramatizing the black man's struggle for basic human rights in America—his struggle, as Langston Hughes might say, to also sing America. This theme runs through the heart of Afro-American literature, and is reflected in the fictional journeys of characters like Richard Wright's black boy, Ralph Ellison's invisible man, Toni Morrison's Milkman Dead, and Langston Hughes' darker brother. They all journey in search of freedom and dignity.

*Coming Home* is also different from these traditional Afro-American odysseys. Davis' book is one of the few black American novels which focuses on the dilemma of the Afro-American fighting man. Davis, like a few other black American authors, including John Oliver Killens (*And Then We Heard the Thunder*, 1962), John A. Williams (*Captain Blackman*, 1972), and AR Flowers (*De Mojo Blues*, 1985), uses his literary talents to create a character trapped in a war on two fronts. Revolutionary soldiers in an age of slavery, Buffalo Soldiers in a society which condemned blacks and Native Americans equally, American soldiers in service of imperial conquest from the Philippines to Central America and finally to Southeast Asia, the black man in the military has always had an ambivalent relationship with the institution in which he serves. At the heart of Davis' novel, then, is the artistic dramatization of the effects of this terrible double burden.

The protagonists of Davis' novel, Air Force Lieutenants Ben Williams and James Childress, regularly fly tense combat missions in defense of such ideals as liberty, equality, and justice, only to land and be insulted by the "discriminatory practices of white peers and commanding officers."<sup>M</sup>any commanders believed that blacks were inferior beings and considered it prudent to protect white soldiers by assigning blacks to more dangerous missions—an unwritten policy which largely accounts for the disproportionately high number of

black casualties during the war. Professor Mel Watkins observes that from 1965 to 1966 it was not unusual to find blacks accounting for 30 to 60 percent of the combat troops in front-line units.<sup>2</sup> A Department of Defense report reluctantly admits that "blacks assumed a higher proportion of the casualties than might be expected," given that blacks constituted 16% of the forces drafted and only 11% of the US population.<sup>3</sup> In *Coming Home* Davis generates an example of the use of black men as cannon fodder, describing a situation in which Ben is forced to fly more sorties than his white peers.

Early in the novel the reader is treated to a vivid account of Ben's reaction to discriminatory practices institutionalized within the military. Ben and Childress sit in a dirty, segregated bordello, thinking about the "cleaner, air-conditioned white whorehouses up the row":

I can only hate whitey for the smaller symptoms of the disease that he is spreading around the world, like...segregating the whorehouses and the bathhouses over here...like trying to get the Thai girls to hate Negroes by telling them niggers have tails and niggers have big dicks and will hurt them.<sup>4</sup>

In the end Ben, like Wright's black boy and Ellison's invisible man, discovers that America's irrational obsession with race poses an insurmountable obstacle:

As I walk I feel strangely free, and I dread the thought of going back to America. I don't know how I can ever feel right about America again.... I want to go to graduate school, but I know I'll never sit in a class and learn from a white man. And who will I work for, and where will I go?<sup>5</sup>

Ben eventually goes AWOL. Childress manages to complete his tour, but shortly after his return to the United States, he finds himself in trouble:

I was walking down the street in Baltimore in the middle of the day and this young black dude was handing out leaflets on the corner. So I took one and started to read it. Then this big ugly white cop come up and told me to get moving, like that. So I told him to wait a minute until I finished reading my little leaflet. And he said, "Get your black ass moving. Now." I said, "Man, I got a Constitutional right to be here just like everybody else." And the sucker draws his pistol and tells me, "This is all the Constitution you need." So I go to get in my car, and when I started to get in, the cracker kicked me

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dead in my ass. So, I picked up a jack handle and knocked the gun out of his hand and knocked him down. He killed his own damn self when his head hit the concrete. All I was trying to do is teach him not to kick anybody any more.<sup>6</sup>

The reader is free to agree with or disagree with Ben's or Childress' behavior, but Davis insists that the audience begin to examine the complex social and cultural forces which combine to make black soldiers and veterans bitter about America.

Most other artistic works which focus on the Vietnam war deal with black characters in simplistic terms. The images of black combatants—both in movies and novels—resonate with negative stereotypes which subtly or blatantly suggest that black soldiers were cowardly in battle and criminal in inclination. These unflattering portraits appear again and again, even though it is commonly known that soldiers of color died in disproportionate numbers in Southeast Asia.

Tim O'Brien's National Book Award winner, *Going After Cacciato*, contains the following account of a black soldier who wishes he was back home in Detroit, looting and raping: "Oscar Johnson said [the weather] made him think of Detroit in the month of May. 'Lootin' weather,' he liked to say. 'The dark an' gloom, just right for rape an' lootin.'"<sup>7</sup> An especially unpleasant example comes from the recent Hollywood Academy Award winner, *Platoon*. Oliver Stone's Vietnam war film features a black character named Francis, lethargic and nonchalant when the enemy is out of sight, but cowardly and unprincipled when the fighting begins. When the Vietnamese communists attack, Francis jumps into a foxhole and stabs a knife into his leg, writing his own ticket out of the battle zone. As he is being carried to an evacuation helicopter, Francis—grinning like a character in a minstrel show—turns to another injured soldier and says: "Hey dig it...man we gon get outta heah. I'm gon see you in the hospital. We gon get high, high. Yes sir!"<sup>8</sup> In popular consciousness, black soldiers have become criminals and irresponsible cowards who are willing to do almost anything to avoid fighting.<sup>9</sup>

The popular culture portraits of O'Brien, Stone, and others are far removed from the reality of the Afro-American experience in Southeast Asia. Bombarding their audiences with racist stereotypes, they avoid the challenge of seriously attempting to detail the lives of black soldiers in Vietnam, and thus promote what Norman Harris labels "historical amnesia."<sup>10</sup> Viewed collectively, these works suggest that Afro-American cowardice, criminality, and overall ineptness are usual; that the black misfit in Vietnam is only the latest in a series of

infamous martial incompetents which extends back to at least the Revolutionary War. Such accounts are in direct contradiction to historical evidence ranging from written and oral testimony of black courage in war<sup>11</sup> to the significant number of black men (20) awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor—America's highest military award for bravery—during the Vietnam war.<sup>12</sup>

*Coming Home* is a welcome antidote to racist images of black men in Vietnam. Davis does not succumb to stereotyping his black characters; instead, he portrays the Afro-American combatant as neither a coward, nor a natural criminal. Rejecting oversimplified characterizations, Davis gives an empathetic rendering of black soldiers in human terms, a rendering which allows the reader to begin to understand the unique difficulties these men faced. Davis helps us imagine how Ben and Childress must have felt, flying in formation with white pilots to drop bombs and napalm canisters on a people of color, while they, as black men, were simultaneously suffering from the discriminatory racial policies of their own countrymen. Davis' primary interest is in exploring the ways in which his characters might cope with their double burden. How do Ben and Childress resolve the paradox of risking their lives to bring freedom and equality to the Vietnamese when they do not themselves enjoy that freedom or those rights? How do they deal with the fact that American freedoms and rights are apparently not available to people of color, either Afro-American or Vietnamese?

Ben and Childress are the only black pilots in an F-105 squadron based in Thailand. They are roommates, yet they still feel isolated and confused, as the war continues to reflect the hardships and inequities of the American system. Ben's confusion began while he was studying at Harvard. He realizes that his training at this prestigious Ivy League university will undoubtedly ensure his material success, but the price of this knowledge has been a "bourgeois socialization"<sup>13</sup> which has alienated him from his ethnic and spiritual roots. Ben is cognizant of the Western world's greatest accomplishments, but unsure of his own identity and his place in the white Western order. Childress senses Ben's ambivalence and labels him "a confused and fucked-up black motherfucker."<sup>14</sup> But Childress doesn't realize that he is just as confused as Ben. Consequently, when Ben says that "the white man is a threat to human life on earth," Childress responds in a self-assured and condescending manner: "What're you going to do, sit around and whine about it?"<sup>15</sup> Childress' solution to his situation is to isolate himself, putting up a façade of stoic imperviousness. Cut off from meaningful relationships with blacks and whites both, Childress becomes more and more committed



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to his superman pose. In his mind he is immune to the effects of unfair and inequitable treatment, neither wanting nor needing anyone else's help. Davis signals us to his character's response in the scenes where Childress flies his sorties—Childress routinely ignores the authoritative air traffic control warnings: "Forward air controller, says 'Number 2, you're too low.' I go lower. Fuck him."<sup>16</sup>

Most telling, however, is Childress' relationship with the Thai prostitute, Damg. Even in bed Childress persists with his self-deceiving, isolationist stance: "I didn't need her love. I just wanted her to be with me.... I wanted her pussy, not her sympathy."<sup>17</sup> Davis signals us that Childress' pose is false, in a scene in which Childress plants communist papers in Damg's room to ensure that Ben will not "inherit" her when he leaves Vietnam. This is, Davis suggests, too elaborate a plan for a man who cares only about Damg's body. Childress is unable to realize that he needs Damg's compassion and human warmth, that he isn't an unfeeling stone. Because he cannot come to terms with his own human needs, Childress betrays both his lover, Damg, and his friend, Ben.

Norman Harris, in *Connecting Times*, describes Childress as "a metaphor for the numerous black Vietnam veterans who were unable to generalize their war experience and therefore ended in prison, addicted to drugs, or killed in civilian disputes."<sup>18</sup> Harris continues: "Childress' self-assured projection of himself made it difficult for him to interact with other Afro-American soldiers who were also searching for meaning.... Cut off from a community, Childress has difficulty discovering himself in the context of racial history."<sup>19</sup> Childress leaves the war confused and ill-prepared for surviving within the American paradigm. His murder of the white policeman seems inevitable, an act committed because he does not have the knowledge which would allow him to avoid it. Childress lacks both the historical grounding and cultural literacy necessary for appreciating the nature of blackness in America. Davis communicates the inevitability of Childress' downfall in the description of his last flying mission: "I almost wish I'd see a Mig today so I could get me one before I go home. Win another medal. Take it back to Baltimore and wave it in the Man's face. When he says: 'Boy...' I'll say, 'Boy, my ass.' and slap him across his motherfuckin' nose with one of my medals."<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Childress, Ben eventually manages to situate his dilemma in a larger historical context. In a moment of extreme disillusionment, Ben "look[s] out across the water. Bangkok, Rangoon, Kuala Lumpur, Djakarta, Calcutta—dark music—and then across the Indian Ocean to Africa."<sup>21</sup> This is the strongest image which Davis can conjure: Ben is nurtured as he embraces his cultural and historical

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roots. He begins to join those dancers to the darker tunes in their long battle against European imperialism. No longer will he be an agent of white oppression and aggression. Turning his plane around, Ben returns to his base with a "full load of bombs," and tells Stacy, "I'm not going to fly any more. I'm tired of helping white men keep their hold over the world."<sup>22</sup>

Harris asserts that: "Despite the war's overall negative effect...for Ben, ironically, it serves a positive function. It forces him to harmonize the two selves that Harvard created, and this allows him to appropriate an aspect of his racial past that helps him deal with the situation at hand."<sup>23</sup> But Harris misses the point. Undeniably, dealing with the war's racial contradictions does lead Ben to embrace his communal roots and discover who he is. But the war's overall effect on Ben is decisively negative, for Ben finally realizes that regardless of his military accomplishments and his level of education he—as a black man—still has no place in America. To find himself he must leave the country of his birth and renounce the ties of 400 years of his people's history: 300 years in slavery and 100 years still not free.

With Ben's decision to stop flying bombing missions, and to desert from the Air Force, come the achievement of an elusive dignity and inner peace. Nevertheless, the novel's tone is one of mild pessimism. George Davis is clearly suggesting that Childress and Ben have received the answer to the question, "Can I, too, sing America?" And that answer, reverberating through history, is "Not yet. Not yet."

<sup>1</sup> Norman Harris, *Connecting Times: The Sixties in Afro-American Fiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) 1988: 17.

<sup>2</sup> Mel Watkins, "Introduction," in George Davis, *Coming Home* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press) 1971: xi. See the article by Lisa Hsiao in this issue.

<sup>3</sup> *Black Americans in Defense of Our Nation* (Washington DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Equal Opportunity) 1985: 43.

<sup>4</sup> George Davis, *Coming Home* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press) 1971: 17-18, 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 185-186.

<sup>7</sup> Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Dell) 1975: 14. On page 173 of the novel, we learn that Oscar Johnson is really from Bangor, Maine.

<sup>8</sup> *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone. With Tom Berenger, William Dafoe, and Charlie Sheen (Orion) 1987.

<sup>9</sup> That the image of the black soldier has grown less positive over time can be clearly seen when we compare the 1977 film *The Boys in Company C* (directed by Stephen Furie. With Stan Shaw, Michael Lembeck and James Canning [EMI/Raymond Chow]) with Stone's 1987 release. Furie's film

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features a brave and capable black soldier who stands as an example to his platoon, and who refuses to join in a plot hatched by corrupt US officers and ARVN officers to smuggle heroin back into the United States.

<sup>10</sup> Harris: 21.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent account of black contributions during wartime, see Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1964*, revised edition (New York: Penguin) 1964.

<sup>12</sup> *Black Americans*: 67.

<sup>13</sup> Harris: 50.

<sup>14</sup> Davis.: 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.

<sup>18</sup> Harris: 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 47.

<sup>20</sup> Davis: 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 28.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 88.

<sup>23</sup> Harris: 57.