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### **Sexuality, Imperial Virility, and the Black Power Movement in the Vietnam War**

On Memorial Day of this year, President Barack Obama spoke at the Vietnam War Memorial to commemorate veterans of the conflict. He called on the nation to remember “the story of our Vietnam servicemembers -- the story that needs to be told. ... You did your job. You served with honor. You made us proud.” But whose story, according to the president, “needs to be told,” and who exactly “served with honor” and “made *us* proud?” Noticeably missing from the president’s speech was any reference to the significant breakdown of U.S. servicemembers’ morale and discipline that included combat refusals by company-size units, record levels of desertions, and even attempts made on the lives of the officers and senior enlisted, known as “fraggings.” Their stories represent a significant minority of servicemembers who refused to be “the last man to die,” as a once-brave John Kerry stated in his testimony before a Senate Committee on April, 1971 as a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

But within this significant minority were thousands of Black GIs who found solidarity with their fellow “bloods,” rather than with what many called a “white man’s war.” Their stories in resisting U.S. empire and in critiquing the systemic racism at home and abroad as practiced through U.S. foreign policy challenge patriotic narratives and commemorations. The Black Power Movement in Southeast Asia reveals how the Vietnam War lingers as “acid bath in which received myths dissolved,” as described by historian Marilyn B. Young.<sup>1</sup> Black GI dissent was the leading edge of antiwar organizing within the military ranks. Such troops waged a different war, one against white supremacy, structural racism within the military, and imperial wars waged by the United States worldwide against people of color from Asia to Latin America.

The transnational circulation of Black Nationalist ideology and cultural practices to Southeast Asia—and to U.S. ships, bases, and posts around the globe—expands the parameters of

the Black Power Movement beyond the urban setting, while also contributing to the growing literature of Black Power studies. The dissenting Black GIs of the Vietnam War do indeed deserve to be honored, as Obama argued in his commemoration of Vietnam veterans. In reframing the Black Power Movement and expanding its borders to include the “bloods of ‘Nam,” it is recognition of pride in their service not as imperial grunts, but to their communities, to each other, and to Third World liberation.

I’m confident that few in attendance at this conference are surprised that the president failed to acknowledge the unique stories of Black GIs, given his record of distancing himself from blackness, and his timidity in addressing the issues of African Americans. And to his credit, if he had done so, it would have been controversial, if not political suicide. But more surprising, Black Power-inspired troops in the Vietnam-era military are too often effaced from the historiography of the Black Power Movement and from the core literature of Black Power studies. Yet there is a growing body of works that examine the movement in the military. Groundbreaking and important scholarship include Curtis Austin’s research on the Black Panther Party’s organizing among veterans, Herman Graham III’s study of gender and “the Brothers’ Vietnam War,” Yuichiro Onishi’s dissertation on cross-solidarities between Black Power-inspired soldiers and Okinawans in Japan, and of course the remarkable public history exhibition entitled “Soul Soldiers” that traveled throughout African American history museums.

Yet there is a gap in the literature. Sexuality is an underdeveloped topic not only in the core literature, but also in the study of Black Power in the military in particular. The Cold War-era U.S. military used sexuality as a means of social control for all troops. However, due to the historic legacy of white supremacy’s paranoia and pathologizing of Black male sexuality, the military’s treatment of Black soldiers was a form of social control quite different from that of

white soldiers. As I will argue, the military granted a degree of sexual promiscuity and demanded the performance of heterosexuality among its servicemembers as a fundamental character of military manhood. Yet in contrast, when troops of color inspired by the Black Power Movement broke ranks with discipline, challenged military authority, and questioned its institutionalized racism, the officer corps and senior enlisted revoked their privilege to heterosexual pleasure and performance. Instead, the military authority monitored, policed, and entered in the official record not just the organizing efforts and insubordination of politicized and dissident Black troops, but they also investigated their sexual habits.

Such vigilance and concern over African American soldiers' sexuality contrasted with the promotion of heterosexuality and of sexual prowess for white troops in particular and for all soldiers in general. I'd like to elaborate more on this point in order to explain my theorization of sexuality in the military and also provide some interpretative context to frame how we might interrogate sexuality and the Black Power Movement in the war. To begin with, I argue that winning support by the draftee and volunteer-enlisted ranks for the Vietnam War was based upon the war planners and military leaders' promotion of what I term "imperial virility." Imperial virility was an ideological underpinning of the Vietnam-era military that encouraged U.S. soldiers to associate their heterosexual identity and its performance with support for and compliance with U.S. foreign policy goals.

Indoctrination in imperial virility began in Army Basic Training and Marine Boot Camp. In this training that included hazing rituals and cadence calls that were often homophobic and sexist, soldiers learned to associate their sexual identities with the United States' superiority in firepower and mythic potency in achieving eternal victories in war. A soldier earned the military-sanctioned privilege to sexual pleasure as an occupational perk granted to and encouraged for

enlisted servicemen that motivated their sacrifice and labor to nation for low wages and in often-hazardous work conditions. Thus soldiers' sexual identity was tied to U.S. imperial ambitions, as they became imperial warriors—and while I do not have the time to elaborate here, this identity was also always racialized. The achievement of a racially-integrated fighting force depended on soldiers' bonding and developing a shared and collective identity formed in opposition to a racialized enemy who was broadly defined to include women, homosexuals, Communists, and of course the Vietnamese, referred to throughout military training as “gooks,” “dinks,” and “slopes.”

Beyond training, patriarchy and women's degraded status was also fundamental to the military's institutional culture that included sexist and homophobic jokes and encouraged sexual harassment of women, as described in oral histories by nurses who served in the war. Other examples of the promotion of imperial virility include the Bob Hope USO Christmas shows that regularly featured mostly white women as sexual objects with feigned low intelligence and were always the brunt of Hope's hapless jokes. Likewise, pin-up girls encouraged male servicemembers' to see women as sexual objects, which while common in World War II, only began appearing in the official military newspaper the *Stars and Stripes* in the mid-1960s. [show power point slides of sexist ads]. Interestingly, Black women began to appear in Hope's shows and as pin-ups in the military newspapers in the late 1960s, at the same time that Black Power activism began to emerge in Vietnam. This suggests that the military was both responding to Black GIs who were challenging the racist conditions of their military service through insubordination, and that imperial virility was capable of adapting and appealing to Black GI's sexuality in order to win their allegiance to U.S. war aims.

Thus I am arguing that imperial virility was linked to a hegemonic masculine ideal that sanctioned a particular kind of manhood that was always classed, racialized, and sexualized—and also constructed within a nationalist framework. The idea that the military “makes men” is captured in the prominent Cold War-era Marine recruiting slogan: “The Marine Corps builds men.” Implicit in the slogan is the idea that military service offered to its overwhelming working-class ranks a claim to manhood that was inaccessible to them in civilian life and that society could not provide. Of course, it has historically been denied to African American males in particular, as poignantly expressed by the 1968 Memphis sanitation strikers whose signs read “I AM a Man.” This tension between white liberals’ preoccupation with Black manhood and then Black Power activists rejection of the racism at the core of such efforts emerged shortly after U.S. ground forces had first landed in Vietnam. In the infamous Moynihan Report, white liberals and sociologists promoted the matriarchy thesis to point blame not only at Black women for the “tangle of pathology,” but it also implied that Black men had been emasculated and were not “men,” as defined by white society. Thus there was an implicit and racist argument that African American men were either hypersexual and incapable of monogamous familial restraints on the one hand or had proclivities towards homosexuality on the other. In fact, one of the central arguments of the Moynihan Report is that African American youth should join the military ranks in order to learn the proper values and discipline of manhood.

In fact, the Moynihan Report was part of the impetus and scholarly foundation for President’s Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of State Robert MacNamara’s Project 100,000. This program, introduced in 1966, lowered military entry standards so that thousands of formerly rejected entrants due to low-test scores were now eligible for the draft and called “new standards men.”<sup>2</sup> McNamara proclaimed Project 100,000 to be the best chance for social uplift for the poor

and was part of Johnson's "war on poverty."<sup>3</sup> However, the Project's implementation proved devastating for African Americans.<sup>4</sup> According to historian Christian G. Appy, the effects were that over half of Project 100,000 participants, forty percent African American, were sent to Vietnam and later died at twice the rate of U.S. forces overall. While promising job training and opportunities, from 1966 to 1968 the military granted further training to only six percent of the "new standards men."<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Project 100,000, I want to also draw attention to the gendered and sexual underpinnings of Executive Order E.O. 9981, which led to the integration of the military. I argue that while this reform was significant, it also was part of how the state mandated racial integration through the promotion of heterosexuality. While the Order led to a series of landmark civil rights legal victories and helped energize the ranks of the Black Liberation Movement, it was also about the containment of Black masculinities and the promotion of a particular masculine ideal of the Black soldier. The order cut three ways by: 1) validating African Americans' claim to manhood on the basis of their entrance into an integrated military institution; 2) limiting the sanction of Black males' masculinities in civil society to their role and identities as U.S. servicemembers; and 3) defining the acceptable terms and meaning of Black masculinities in the body politic as conformity with the goals of U.S. foreign policy and in support of the military-industrial complex.

So I am arguing that Black entry into an integrated military and their service in the Vietnam War was linked to their acceptance of the terms of the bargain. That is, upon entry, African Americans gained white society's recognition of their manhood and the occupational perks of imperial virility, such as the Black pin-up girls in *Stars and Stripes* and access to the thriving sex trade that emerged at most U.S. posts and base camps around the globe during the

Cold War. However, this access to imperial virility was based upon the condition that troops were compliant within an institution of white supremacy, male power, and heterosexual performance. Thus when Black soldiers began breaking ranks and refusing to comply, military leaders began drawing upon longstanding racial fears of and attempts to control Black male sexuality.

I would like to highlight two examples from my research to illustrate how sexuality is embedded within the official military documents of Black Power activism in Vietnam. The first is of an official investigation into an unauthorized all-black barracks space at the 93d Evacuation Hospital at the U.S. Army's Long Binh Post during March of 1970. Officers and Inspector Generals investigated African American troops who had appropriated barracks space improperly by organizing among themselves to change rooms and keep white soldiers out. Order and discipline depends on soldiers willing obedience to confine themselves within the assigned space of military barracks, so that the military can then more easily manage their labor. Yet in addition to switching rooms, the report notes that there were rumors of "black militant" meetings and that these Black GIs often had unauthorized female local nationals visit their rooms at night.

It is important to note that there was a different treatment given to white troops and to soldiers who were compliant to military authority. Having unauthorized female guests was against official military regulations, particularly for the enlisted ranks. However, at the same time, there are reports that as the ground war was winding down, at some bases, unauthorized visits by sex workers was a common occurrence, if not encouraged. Take for example, a *Life* magazine report on conditions at a post in South Vietnam. According to the author John Saar, "Sgt. Mike Griffin, the detachment's only MP ... [has] duties [that] are quite unusual: "They last truck at night takes the KPs [kitchen patrols] home and brings the girls back up, around

30 of them. I collect all their ID cards and call the guys to come down to the gate and fetch them. Sometimes there's a couple left over and I can't just leave them there, so I go around the guys." Then he imitates the wheedling pidgin of the brothel owners: " 'You want nice girl, GI? Tee tee money.' MP. The guys call me the Midnight Pimp." Many of the girls have a contract relationship with the soldiers and are paid between \$50 and \$100 a month. They stay overnight and in the past used to make the trip nearly every night of the week. ... One of the few men who does not approve of the practice lamented, "The girls are an obsession with them. They keep asking the officers, 'Are the girls coming up tonight?' Well, the colonel banned it and the lieutenant tried to stop it, but they just got too uptight." With the justification that "We do our job, so what can they say?" the soldiers deeply resent any infringement on liberties that would be remarkable anywhere."

The question then is why the military was so vigilant about policing sexuality as practiced by Black Power GIs. As I have suggested, part of this can be explained as a form of punishment. That is, heterosexual privilege and promiscuity were denied to soldiers who broke with military discipline. Yet another possible explanation is that in breaking military discipline through Black Power activism, the white power structure of the Armed Forces feared the broader implications. As Black soldiers dissented, it might lead to a broader unraveling of the social and military fabric and of the project of containing Black masculinities as a tool of social control and labor management.

My second example suggests that the military feared the possibility of solidarities formed between the Vietnamese revolutionary forces and Black Power activists that might undermine the war effort. #2 I have documented evidence that the military leased space at the Long Binh Army post for a large brothel ran by a Vietnamese woman the military referred to as the "dragon



lady" and which employed almost 200 masseuses.<sup>6</sup> On 5 August 1970, her "massage" facility was investigated on suspicion of criminal activities, including prostitution, drug use, the storing of black market items, and overcharging for concession items. However, offering oral sex and hand jobs for a modest price and charging twenty cents for a soda instead of ten were likely not the real cause of the investigation. The facility was also accused of being utilized by "racial or extremist organizations." Whether these organizations were suspected radical Black Power Movement organizations or those of Vietnamese revolutionary forces is unclear from the record. The ambiguity suggests the connection between them that the military made—seeing them as possibly undermining troop morale and working in solidarity against U.S. war efforts. In fact, the military questioned the massage parlors owner about potential employees having sympathies with the "Viet Cong."

Also, it is important to understand that while the U.S. military trained its servicemen to view Vietnamese women as suitable and sanctioned to please their every need, they were never sanctioned as appropriate bodies for dating, long-term relationships, or marriage. The emphasis throughout imperial virility's ideological production was on the importance of white *American* girls as racially superior to and the appropriate choice for U.S. soldiers' lasting affection. In some units, the command frowned upon U.S. soldiers dating Vietnamese women, and attempts to marry and then return as a conjugal pair to the United States were delayed through bureaucratic hurdles meant to discourage such interracial partnerships.<sup>7</sup> Military training built men who desired fighting and their deserved privilege to pleasure. They learned to identify with U.S. nationalism in relation to their racialized and sexual dominance over Vietnamese women—be they so-called "friend" or foe. Therefore such interracial solidarity that was transnational was particularly scrutinized as inappropriate soldierly behavior.

[will also add a few sentences that highlight actual solidarities between Black Power activists and the National Liberation Front and Hanoi.

**[try to tie this all together with some closing remarks. I plan to end by riffing off of Obama's speech again about]**

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn B. Young, “Dangerous History: Vietnam and the ‘Good War,’” in *History Wars*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York, 1996), 201.

<sup>2</sup> Appy, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Appy, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 84.

<sup>5</sup> Appy, 32-33.

<sup>6</sup> “Twisted Trail of Viet Black Money,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes* 25, no. 326 (23 Nov 1969): 3.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Wayne Booker served in the Army’s Americal Division at Chu Lai and wrote a letter dated 10 November 1969 to the U.S. Armed Services Committee. He complained of his difficulty in bringing his Vietnamese wife and child to the United States. See Letter, Army-General (Nov. 1968), Box 928: 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions. General Correspondence. Armed Services Committee—Personnel, *NAB*.