

*Blackness and the Unmanning of America
in Dave Rabe's Streamers*

In his 1973 "Introduction" to the volume comprised of the two earliest plays in his Vietnam trilogy, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*, Dave Rabe links the Vietnam experience to American tribalism of which racism is a part rooted in "sex, or more exactly miscegenation" (Rabe *Two Plays* xxiii). Both these early plays explore the immediacy of Vietnam, one set in training and combat, the other in the middle-class home of a wounded, returned soldier; neither explores extensively the war's roots in the soil of American racism. In *Streamers* (1977), however, Rabe literally pushes Vietnam off-stage to probe the racism that contributed to America's prolonged, deadly, and socially divisive engagement with an Asian Other.¹ Set in a barracks room and dealing with central characters anxiously awaiting shipment to a new, mysterious war in Vietnam, *Streamers* is the lacerating ritual of young men seeking manhood in a racialized and sexualized America. Rabe precipitates their passage to manhood through an encounter with an African American Other and in the process rejects white, heterosexual hegemony as the text of manhood. Moreover, he hints at the global consequences of racism and offers the world a tenuous hope for transcending dangerously divisive difference.

The Vietnam-bound enlisted men in *Streamers* represent the bitter fruits of America's history, which proposes a color-blind ideology masking the culturally rooted racial and sexual stereotypes the American mainstream imposes. Experiencing a quintessential American tension, each character attempts to negotiate his individual identity within the highly constraining text of manhood proposed by the army. Roger, a black character

who adopts the army's routines and language, seeks to put the confusing and terrifying "crap" (Rabe *Streamers* 29) of the ghetto at a distance, to escape the imposed Otherness of blackness. The two white characters, who are Rabe's central foci, are college-educated. Richie is an "effeminate" (Rabe 68), sophisticated, rich homosexual boy from New York City. He finds the army's ultra-masculinity and male camaraderie both appalling and attractive; military rituals, rules, and regulations are inconveniences he rejects though tolerates as he seeks male companionship to overcome his alienation. The unresponsive object of his affection is Billy, a tall, blonde, athletic, "straight," midwesterner who seeks to allay his sexual fears through initiation into an aggressive, masculine world. For him pushups, policing the barracks, and fighting a war are man-making rituals, necessary to fend off his fears of homosexuality.

To begin the rite of passage to manhood, Rabe presents the inscribing text of American manhood through comic barracks-room stereotypes: Rooney and Cokes, two older, white-haired, white sergeants. They are the cherished flotsam and jetsam of a dying social and cultural paradigm who provide the younger men with the script for American manhood, a script privileging whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculine aggression. Sergeants Rooney and Cokes are bloodied veterans of World War II, Korea, and, in Cokes's case, Vietnam; they have killed their share of "Krauts, dinks, and gooks" (Rabe *Streamers* 108), and now careen drunkenly into the barracks room and through the local town. While Rabe's satiric representation of the sergeants implicitly rejects their version of manhood as dangerously inhuman, the young initiates see them almost nostalgically. Even Richie, the character most resistant to army values, comments that "They made me sad; but I loved them, sort of. Better than movies" (47).²

Through Rooney and Cokes, who have defined manhood through "othering" and aggression, Rabe extends American racism to a global scope. In their first raucous visit, Rooney and Cokes use crude scatological humor to create Others through a defining difference—color. People of color, Asians and African Americans, are inscribed in terms of excrement. Veiled in the crude humor of aggressive masculinity, their jokes reveal the process of creating oppressive difference. Bragging about killing Vietnamese, Cokes bellows, "Gonna piss on 'em. . . . 'At's what

I did. Piss in the rivers. Goddam GI's secret weapon is old booze and he's pissin' it in all their runnin' water. Makes 'em yellow" (37-38). Referring to the way they pursued manhood by dealing death in the past, Rooney adds: "Me and Cokesy been in so much shit together we ought to be brown" (38); then links their harrowing experiences with the Other to Roger: "Don't take no offense at that Moore. We been swimmin' in it" (38). Continuing their display of manhood, they boast of killing "forty-seven chinky Chinese gooks" (41) in Korea, and express eagerness to go to Vietnam where Cokes has already become a "fuckin' hero. He's always been a fuckin' hero" (37) and where Rooney feels he's "Got to go [to] kill some gooks" (37).

While the white sergeants represent an image of American manhood emanating from the mainstream text, Rabe introduces Carlyle, a marginalized African American, a home-grown native son Other, and the avatar of Vietnam in the heart of the home front. Carlyle is what Toni Morrison calls in *Playing in the Dark* the "dark, abiding signifying Africanist presence . . . crucial to [white writers'] sense of their Americanness" (5-6). In Carlyle, Rabe allows America's color and sexual fetishes to converge. Carlyle's blackness serves as what Morrison calls "a playground of the imagination" (38) where Rabe's characters play out historical and psychological rituals. Rabe introduces Carlyle to force the white characters into a destructive process of self-definition in which the white boys play out their desires and fears as well as assert their power.³ Moreover, he uses Carlyle to link America's racialized and sexualized social history to Vietnam.

Like the Vietnam War, Carlyle has the paradoxical ability to elicit desire and fear as well as to deal death. Just as the Vietnam War serves as a means of "making men" through conquest, and "unmaking them" through fear and death, Carlyle's blackness and bi-sexuality will make and unmake Billy's manhood. Carlyle offers Billy the opportunity for heterosexual conquest validating his manhood; but, through homosexual dominance of Richie, he threatens Billy's coveted sense of manhood. The desire for conquest and the unmanly fear of homosexuality that Carlyle elicits in Billy also links him to Vietnam. For Billy, Vietnam is the place to make a manly assertion against Communists; but the Viet Cong's guerrilla tactics create the unmanly fear of the "unnatural" otherness of the Vietnam War. In discussing Viet Cong tactics, Richie uses multivalent phallic images which

transform the sexual emblem of manhood into fearful images for Billy of gruesome, unheroic death: punji stakes covered with infectious elephant shit and caves booby-trapped with angry snakes hanging from the ceilings (31). Also like the war, Carlyle, in his shifting sexual roles and mercurial mood swings, is an incommensurable phenomenon who blurs the distinctions between ally and enemy, human and monstrosly inhuman, heightening anxiety and precipitating as well as escalating absurd violence.

Moreover, like the Vietnam War on the home front, Rabe uses Carlyle's otherness to disturb the tenuous, nervous equilibrium of the barracks-room society and to force the white characters into the process of self-definition. Rejected by Billy, Richie seeks a homoerotic experience with Carlyle which will reveal Richie's self-contradictions. In seeking to fellate Carlyle, Richie simultaneously rejects and validates the power of white manhood through a kind of sterile, inverted miscegenation. For Richie, Carlyle's blackness and willingness to engage in homoerotic behavior represent his own alienation from the mainstream values of manhood; at the same time, submitting—racially and sexually—to Carlyle's demand to be fellated allows Richie to punish himself for violating the heterosexual terms of manhood. In the process, he hopes also to punish Billy, the clearest candidate for full initiation into the mysteries of white American manhood.

In Billy's case, Carlyle threatens both sexual and racial order through his perplexing doubleness: agent of Billy's manhood and its saboteur. For Billy, Carlyle offers the opportunity to validate his manhood in heterosexual terms, to prove that he "got him a lion tamer 'tween his legs" (74). But it is through the exploitation of black bodies, going to a black whorehouse with Carlyle and Roger, that enables Billy momentarily to assuage his fears of latent homosexuality. Ironically, in accepting Carlyle's invitation to prove his manhood, Billy also reasserts white privilege and hegemony over the Other, who is both black and female.⁴ Later, as Carlyle aggressively approaches Richie for oral sex, Billy's fears and subliminal racism emerge. His white territorial imperative asserts itself: "Go on out in the bushes or out in some field. . . . It ain't gonna be done in my house" (83). It is Billy's positioning Carlyle as Other, an uncivilized, black "bad-assed animal" (88) and, in light of the homosexual act, non-

man, that propels him into the text of manhood, asserting the prerogatives of his white, male status. Seeing Richie in a submissive “female” position puts heterosexuality, whiteness, and their attendant power in jeopardy. Billy’s rigid categories of manhood shatter; his sense of identity intimately bound up in his position of privilege is threatened by Carlyle’s assertive desire for sexual pleasure and, more importantly, racial revenge.

Mimicking the social cost of Vietnam, the contact with Carlyle leads to exposure of America’s masked racist roots and to violent dissolution of the bonds that held the cadre room society together. In *Streamers*’ climactic sequence, Rabe catapults his naturalistic characters into the realm of historical American ritual. When white male identity and privilege are challenged, the historical pageant of America’s racial *agon* emerges. Focussing on Billy’s apotheosis as white man, Rabe reveals the ingrained poison of American racism. Until his confrontation with Carlyle over sexual behavior, Billy had successfully buried American racism in his personal life just as he had repressed his own latent homosexual feelings. His camaraderie with “black Roger” (49) and whoring and drinking with Carlyle mask a culturally rooted racism that emerges under pressure and violent aggression by blackness.

In the climactic sequence, the confluence of race and sex, blackness and homoerotic action, is literally brought to light and creates an overwhelming threat to Billy’s sense of manhood. Protesting vigorously that no homosexual act will occur in his space, Billy turns on the lights Carlyle had switched off to hide his liaison with Richie. In the flood of light, he discovers a “perverted” image of the archetypal horror of miscegenation residing in the dominant culture: Carlyle seated on Richie’s bed with Richie kneeling before him. Billy responds with a seemingly innocuous, violent gesture; he throws a sneaker at Carlyle’s feet (85). Only with the historical perspective of oppression can one hope to comprehend the violence with which Carlyle responds and Billy’s reaction to it. First, Carlyle draws the archetypal switchblade of the “bad nigger” and simultaneously asserts his right to personal feeling by cutting Billy’s palm to teach: “Goddam you, boy! I’m gonna cut your ass, just to show you how it feel—and cuttin’ can happen. This knife true” (86). The seemingly absurd violence of the Other rips away Billy’s mask of egalitarianism supported by higher education that has

camouflaged racism. Unable to grasp the history of Carlyle's pain and the truth of his knife, Billy reacts viscerally, racially, and his response frightens even him:

Jesus . . . H . . . Christ . . . ! Do you know what I'm doin'?
. . . I'm a twenty-four-year-old goddamn college graduate—intellectual goddamn scholar type—and I got a razor in my hand. I'm thinkin' about comin' up behind one black human being and I'm thinking nigger this and nigger that—I wanna cut his throat. THAT IS RIDICULOUS. I NEVER FACED ANYBODY IN MY LIFE WITH ANYTHING TO KILL THEM. YOU UNDERSTAND ME? I DON'T HAVE A GODDAMN THING ON THE LINE HERE! (87)

Ironically, Billy has a great deal on the line. His rejection of racism is also a renunciation of the very terms that, under different conditions, those of combat, define the army's concept of manhood. Unable to see the connection, rather than renounce the violent, racist text of Rooney and Cokes, Billy vehemently denounces homosexuality and blackness, Richie and Carlyle, in language that recreates them as Other. To Richie and Carlyle he rants,

You wanna be a goddamn swish—a goddamn faggot-queer—Go! AND YOU . . . You wanna be a bad-assed animal, man, get it on—go—but I wash my hands. I am not human as you are. I put you down, I put you down— . . . you gay little piece of shit cake—SHIT CAKE. AND YOU— . . . you are your own goddamn fault, SAMBO! SAMBO! (88)

In this untenable condition, desiring manhood but unable to enact the violent domination required for initiation, Billy is undone and killed. Inarticulate in the face of whiteness, Carlyle, now inscribed in the ritual terms of racism, ironically asserts his humanity by slitting Billy's gut.

After the carnage, Roger tries to comfort Billy, but compassion and camaraderie are also victims. Billy's reaction to his closest confidante and friend is rejection in black and white: "NO-O-O-O-O-O-O, you nigger!" (90). Thus, Billy's encounter with blackness

unmans him by ripping away America's color-blind ideology and the rational veneer of civilized tolerance, revealing a culturally constructed racist self that appalls him.

Using Carlyle's otherness as a critical blade, Rabe cuts through the hollow concept of mainstream American manhood to reveal its corrupting life blood: racism. He reinforces the connection by bringing in Sergeant Rooney as Billy lies dying, hand slashed and belly slit, on the barracks-room floor. As a comic figuration of the manhood to which Billy sacrifices himself, Rooney enters and confronts Carlyle. In a series of carefully orchestrated theatrical signs, Rabe links Billy, the initiate, to Rooney the archetype. Screaming the Airborne eagle cry, Rooney turns to the attack Carlyle and cuts his own hand, whimpering like Billy at the incomprehensibility of his wound; then Carlyle stabs him in his stomach as he had Billy. In an outburst of slashing that can be explained only as an eruption of long pent-up anger and his intense desire "to be free" (20), Carlyle brutally kills the drunken, white sergeant. Blackness has violently overturned the social order. Ironically, the entrance of the alienated Richie leading in white authority in the figures of MPs restores America's historic and racist order.

To deepen the irony, the black character who has killed these white men and thereby attacked the images of cultural hegemony becomes the sacrificial "animal." Carlyle is raised to scapegoat-victim, and his destruction re-enacts a long-standing ritual text. As scapegoat, Carlyle's seemingly irrational, animal violence allows the army and Richie, socially the most privileged character in the play, to confirm old stereotypes of black danger. Earlier Roger had warned Carlyle that a homosexual liaison with Richie would confirm him in a dehumanizing, black stereotype: "Richie one a those people want to get fucked by niggers, man. . . . Want to make it real in the world, how a nigger is an animal. . . . Hear me Carlyle?" (84). In pursuing freedom through sexual pleasure and the long-deferred pleasure of dominating whiteness, Carlyle's assertion of his difference calls into being white oppression.

In the aftermath of bloody violence caused by the mainstream encounter with the Other, Rabe offers hard-won wisdom. He ends the play with a comic-pathetic coda that allows us to lament yet hope for overcoming America's culturally rooted racism. After the bodies of Billy, the aspiring man, and Rooney, the

model man, have been removed, Roger begins “policing the area,” mopping up the “wasted” blood of his friend. In the ritual casting out of the Other and restoration of white hegemonic order, the audience can only hopelessly anticipate a re-enactment of America’s absurd, futile, and historically determined racial rituals.

But read through the lens of difference, blood and blackness also posit hope. As the animal who has no feeling and is all feeling, Carlyle provides a cryptic, ironic message of salvation—a kind of proposal for a transfusion of fellow-feeling that can restore the human bonds of society. It is a proposal signed in blood, the coursing source of human life. When Carlyle cuts Billy’s hand, he does so as a means of communicating his own personal and historical pain. It is a plea for understanding masked as aggression; it is the language of the Other baffled by history. Earlier he revealed that “the black man’s problem . . . [is] too much feelin’ . . . too close to his blood, to his body” (67). Having cut Billy to assert his own humanity, Carlyle “in his own sudden distress” laments, “I see blood come outa somebody like that, it don’t make me feel good—hurt me—hurt on somebody I thought was my friend. But I ain’t supposed to see. One dumb nigger. No mind he think, no heart, no feelings a gentleness” (87). Carlyle’s slashing of Billy’s hand and proposing the black man as all feeling and no feeling confirm the uncivilized, irrational, animal stereotypes of blackness in American culture. Seen Otherwise, however, blood becomes the means of life and social bonding. In the “Introduction” to his two earlier Vietnam plays, Rabe admits to a lingering “urge to interpret the world to itself, to give the world a sermon that would bring it back to its truest self” (xi). In *Streamers*, Rabe’s homiletic impulse seems to say that if Americans had “healthy blood,” that is, a compassionate understanding of the Other’s pain and history, then we could re-establish community, freed of anxieties bred from Othering, freed from violent blood-shedding. America could, in the ideal world of the sermon, become an inclusive home for all its citizens, where all are “bloods,” and we might avert Vietnams.

Recognizing that Death is the only true Other, Rabe concludes with an ironic, darkly shaded note of hope, wrung from seemingly absurd sound and fury. Returning Sergeant Cokes to center stage, Rabe emphasizes the passing of the absurdly

destructive idea of American manhood and allows Cokes a moral and humanizing vision through a confrontation with death. The white-haired, white Cokes is sterile and afflicted with leukemia—too much whiteness in the blood, too little feeling. Looming death has created a hiatus in the antic, destructive sergeant's career, a moment confused but pregnant with possibility for reconstructing a world beyond racism and difference. In a speech near soliloquy, he comforts Richie and Roger, the survivors who are marked for delivery to Vietnam. As Richie laments his homosexuality, his guilt, his loss, and his fears, Cokes consoles Richie and uses his difference for self-reflection:

Boy, I tell you it's a real strange thing the way havin' leukemia gives you a lotta funny thoughts about things. Two months ago—or maybe even yesterday—I'da called a boy who was a queer a lotta awful names. But now I just want to be figurin' things out. . . . You gonna be okay. There's a lotta worse things in this world than bein' a queer. I seen a lot of 'em, too. I mean, you could have leukemia. That's worse. That can kill you. . . . You listen to the ole sarge. I mean, maybe I was a queer, I wouldn't have leukemia. Who's to say? Lived a whole different life. Who's to say? I keep thinkin' there was maybe somethin' I coulda done different. Maybe not drunk so much. Or if I'd killed more gooks, or more Krauts or more dinks, I was kind-hearted sometimes. Or if I'd had a wife and I had some kids. Never had any. . . . Gives you a whole funny different way a lookin' at things, I'll tell you. (107-8)

While Cokes's new-found vision is confused, unable quite to separate from the "life-giving" commitment to the destruction of others, it nonetheless recognizes human connections and tolerance, accepting the possibility even of being Other. Then, Cokes bursts out with a terrifying call for the lost image of manhood, his other self: "Ohhhh, Rooney, Rooney" (108) and experiences an epiphany, transcending difference. Memory of Rooney morphs into memory of "this little gook outa that spider hole" who wounded Cokes in Korea and whom Cokes killed by throwing a grenade into the hole, sitting on it, and listening to the comic horror of the Other confronting death in a small room. Now, as he too confronts death, Cokes almost mystically

becomes the Other. "I'd a let him out now, he was in there. . . . Oh, how'm I ever gonna forget it? That funny little guy. . . . I'm sittin' on the lid and it's made outa steel. I can feel him in there, though, bangin' and yellin' under me, and his yelling I can hear is begging me to let him out. It was like a goddamn Charlie Chaplin movie" (108). In an emotional recognition of the bond death has created, his oneness with the Other, Cokes sings the comic lament that gives the play its title: "Beautiful Streamers." It is a song of hope in hopelessness, a song, we learned in Act I, that "a man sings" in free fall (42). The violence-prone white sergeant—symbol of the dying racist, homophobic American social order—sings what is first an angry, then by degrees, moving elegy for the Korean soldier he had killed years ago. Momentarily freeing himself from the dominant culture's text of manhood, Cokes sings in an approximation of the language of the Other, a "makeshift language imitating Korean" (109). Thus, Rabe concludes *Streamers* with a haunting, ironic image of American and Asian Other as one. It is a vision that provides a tentative, humanistic vision necessary to refigure the world harmoniously.⁵ An image of death destroying difference. ■

Notes

1. Making a persuasive argument for including *Streamers* in "the Vietnam Canon" and as the legitimate third play in what critics call Rabe's Vietnam Trilogy, N. Bradley Christie in an article in *David Rabe: A Casebook* notes that "in *Streamers* the physical war remains outside. The cadre room seems hermetically sealed against its threat, but the palpability of that threat pervades the thoughts of every character in the play, the external war internalized most insidiously" (106).
2. While Christie comments that Rabe's plays generally avoid sentimentality and stereotyping and "do not employ the kind of cutout characters or gratuitous violence common to many popular texts" (111), Sergeants Rooney and Cokes certainly appear cut from the cloth of the *miles gloriosus* of American barracks-room comedy. Stephen Watt's analysis of Rabe's character construction in *David Rabe: A Casebook* seems closer to target. Using Jean Baudrillard's provocative cultural theory, he discusses images from mass culture as "the means through

which self-definition and individuation are articulated” and notes that the “image as love-object” is also a “viral marauder potentially fatal to our culture” (51). Certainly in *Streamers*, Rabe presents Rooney and Cokes as images from the dominant cultural discourse on manhood who help the main characters define themselves and whose absurdly violent behavior threatens others and self.

3. In writing about the *Boom Boom Room*, *Sticks and Bones*, and Rabe’s film script for *Casualties of War*, Watt observes that Rabe’s use of “otherness” is “Analogous to the functions of stereotyping in colonialist discourses” which help “characters construct and maintain mythologies of selfhood” (53). Aldon Lynn Nielsen presents an extended discussion of this phenomenon, including its theoretical underpinnings, in *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*.

4. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks provides a useful analysis of the racial and sexual politics of identity that sheds light on the meaning of Billy’s visit to the whorehouse: “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (23). Like the American college students that hooks observed seeking black bodies, Billy, in his quest for manhood, claims “the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for [the] reconstruction of the masculine norm . . .” (24). Ironically, Billy, who seems non-racist, confirms the privilege and place of white, male, heterosexuality by transgressing culturally embedded racist taboos in order to be transformed.

5. The ending of *Streamers* remains a matter of critical debate. Toby Silverman Zinman writes in *Theatre Journal* that the play “ends in death and sadness, a grotesque muddle” (16). In his essay “Nationalism and Sexuality in David Rabe’s Vietnam War Trilogy,” Robert Skloot calls Cokes’s song “a worldless, racist plaint, full of sadness and death” (228). My interpretation sides with that of Stephen Watt. Watt’s reading of the concluding images of *Boom Boom Room* and *Streamers* seems to corroborate the view that the best of Rabe’s plays contain

small victories, transformations of devalued characters: "From a distant totalizing perspective, such instances seem to present pitifully abject characters: a young woman headed for further abuse and an aging soldier reduced to inebriated muttering. From a closer, more local perspective, these moments may illuminate hairline fractures on the glossy surface of powerful images and dominations" (62).

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