

fully making connections between the museum and its borough and between past and present.

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“Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era.” Senator John Heinz History Center in association with the Smithsonian Institution, Pittsburgh, Pa. <http://www.heinzhistorycenter.org>.

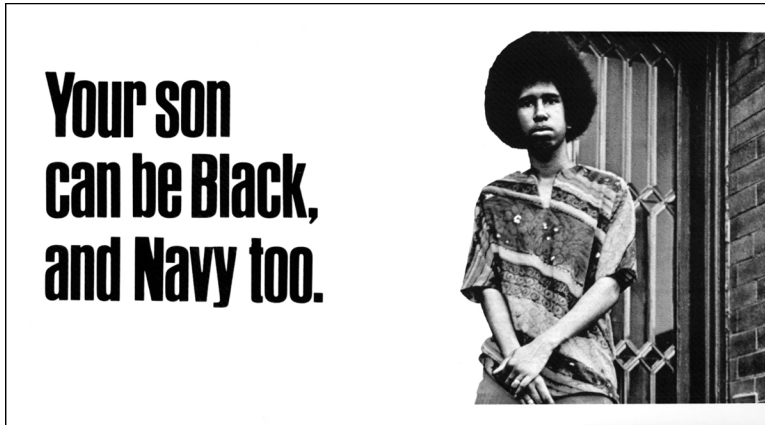
Temporary exhibition, Nov. 11, 2006–Nov. 12, 2007. 2,600 sq. ft. Traveling exhibition through 2010. Samuel W. Black, curator.

One of the most striking images in the exhibition “Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era” is of Philippa Duke Schuyler. As a child Schuyler had been a famous musical prodigy, but she later gave up her musical career to work as a journalist and traveled to Vietnam as a war correspondent. Shortly before she drowned as a result of a helicopter crash in 1967, a photograph captured her in disguise as a Vietnamese peasant, gazing out at the camera from below a wig and wearing a traditional dress.

At first glance, it looks as if Schuyler had “gone native,” trading in her American identity for an international solidarity with the people of Vietnam. Indeed, while in Vietnam she spent much of her time trying to assist South Vietnamese children who had been orphaned by the war. The photograph of a disguised Schuyler seems to signal a turning away from pro-American sentiments to an internationalist, Third World perspective that became popular during the later, militant phases of the civil rights movement in the United States.

But, as is often the case, the story is not that simple. Schuyler, the daughter of a prominent African American journalist and a white mother from Texas, had been brought up by her parents in a utopian experiment to raise the perfect mixed-race daughter in America. Yet in her adulthood she sometimes avoided identifying with her American upbringing to pass as a Spanish woman named Filipa Monterro. Further complicating the story line, Schuyler took a conservative, pro-American position on the war in Vietnam. Though she had reservations about the militaristic and cultural imperialism of the United States, she advocated invading North Vietnam in the name of anticommunism. And she noted in her book *Good Men Die* (1969) that most African American officers in the U.S. military she encountered felt the same way. Though pictured as a Vietnamese peasant, Schuyler had not abandoned her American heritage so easily (Kimberly L. Phillips discusses Schuyler in her essay “And Sing No More of War,” which appears in the exhibition’s accompanying book, *Soul Soldiers*, edited by Samuel W. Black, 2006).

Schuyler’s photograph and her story point to what makes “Soul Soldiers” a fascinating exhibition: the exploration of what W. E. B. Du Bois famously called African American double consciousness. The exhibition veers between a story of inclusion and exclusion, of becoming American by fighting the nation’s wars and rejecting America for another identity—a diasporic, postcolonial, African-based internationalism that opposed Cold War U.S. imperialism.



The exhibition “Soul Soldiers” displays a Vietnam War–era U.S. Navy recruiting poster addressed to young African American men and their parents that hints at the tension between patriotism and diasporic black nationalism and attempts to resolve it for African Americans contemplating military service. That tension is the unannounced theme of “Soul Soldiers.”
Courtesy Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Although “Soul Soldiers” never explicitly engages with the story of double consciousness, the exhibition nevertheless overflows with contradictory feelings. On the surface the exhibition tells a story of how the Vietnam conflict, like so many American wars before it, became a means for African Americans to claim their rights as citizens. That is the tale of inclusion. In tattered uniforms of the dead, war talismans, photographs of integrated troops on the front lines, official letters of commendation, Purple Heart medals, and military posters that encouraged black Americans to enlist, the exhibition focuses on the loyal role African Americans played in the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. “Soul Soldiers” asserts that African Americans deserve a place in the larger consensus narrative of the United States. And appearing among similar elegiac exhibitions at the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, where I viewed it in the summer of 2008, the implicit message of “Soul Soldiers” was that by fighting Communism in the Third World, black citizens of the United States traded in the African side of their double consciousness for the American side.

The most prominent part of the exhibition is also the area that most emphasizes that narrative. In a re-created G.I. “hooch” (the makeshift bunker that many troops lived in during their time in country), visitors to the exhibition sit on wood planks and watch a thirteen-minute video, “The Soul of Vietnam,” which strikes an elegiac tone in describing the contributions of African Americans to the U.S. involvement in the war. Yet, even there, surrounded by corrugated tin, rope, and mock barrels of ammunition, an edge of anxiety, even *Apocalypse Now*–style paranoia, creeps in. A *punjee* stick that had almost killed Sgt. John Clark of the U.S. Marines stands nearby, as if to puncture holes in the celebratory consensus narrative that presents the U.S. intervention in Vietnam as a “good war.”

Many parts of the exhibition emphasize the ways the Vietnam experience sparked a strong critique of U.S. foreign policy and a turn to the possibilities of a diasporic, international, Third World vision of African American identity. *Vietnam*, Julian Bond and T.

G. Lewis's remarkable 1967 comic book critiquing the Vietnam War, offers a viewpoint from the growing domestic antiwar movement. In the exhibition one can see a few pages of Bond and Lewis's creation, which tells the story of Vietnam's anticolonial struggle and links it to the African American civil rights movement for freedom through the use of bold, black ink line drawings and sparse text. Past an enlistment advertisement that depicts a young black man with an Afro and a dashiki and declares "Your son can be Black, and Navy too," visitors begin to see photographs of African Americans in Vietnam who organized black studies reading groups and raised their fists in black power salutes. Visitors read a journal from a young African American soldier who asks, "Why should me, a brother of soul, whose war is on the streets in the States, be here fighting?" The viewer can glimpse the emerging critique of U.S. foreign policy in the stories of African American women—nurses, performers, and journalists—who saw what the war was doing to those caught in its quagmire. Visitors put on headphones and listen to songs that—either directly, as in Freda Payne's "Bring the Boys Home" or Edwin Starr's "War," or indirectly, as in Marvin Gaye's evocative "What's Going On?"—express sadness and anger at the cost in black lives of a confusing and perhaps unjust war. And in possibly the most moving part of the exhibition, visitors view art made by African American Vietnam veterans that condenses all the pain and agony of the war into feverish paintings drawn from scarred memories and traumatized imaginations.

That material explores the flipside to the consensus narrative of black inclusion in the American polity. Without explicitly saying so, the exhibition almost screams with anger at the failure of the United States to address its history of racism and imperialism. The photographs, journals, editorial cartoons, and art whisper of a new territory from which visitors can imagine a different version of the black experience—one that leans toward the African side of the African American double consciousness.

That version of the African American experience during the Vietnam era is muted by the heartfelt effort (and the institutional need?) to fit the black experience into a feel-good story about the United States. But the African diaspora-leaning version persists in "Soul Soldiers." Myriad examples of the growing militancy against the U.S. military lurk everywhere, never allowing the exhibition to resolve the deep tensions of double consciousness. Sometimes the militancy directly challenged the order of the U.S. war effort, and sometimes it simply expressed black solidarity in a confusing battle zone. Numerous photographs show black G.I.'s "dapping" (using the famously complex handshakes that soldiers created) or raising their fists in black power salutes. Visitors see Jeff Anthony's army poncho jacket, on which he stitched the lyrics to James Brown's "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." Two of the most amazing items are a walking stick carved into a black power salute fist that was passed down through the Forty-ninth Scout Dog Platoon of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in 1969 and an African-looking bracelet worn by Chris Jenkins, a member of the Mau Mau group—an association of black nationalist soldiers in Vietnam. These images and items keep "Soul Soldiers" from turning the gut-wrenching upset, the anger, and the pain of Vietnam into easily digestible, consensus American history.

There are, however, other bleaker and more disturbing aspects of the black experience of Vietnam around which the exhibition only tiptoes. Visitors get only a vague sense of the drug abuse and addiction G.I.'s of all backgrounds, including African Americans, fell into in Vietnam. One does not learn much about the rebellions and sometimes the

outright mutinies by African American G.I.'s during the war. "Soul Soldiers" hints at the costs of posttraumatic stress disorder for African American veterans but never confronts the issue in depth. And even though the exhibit is subtitled "African Americans and the Vietnam Era," it does not address the deep social problems facing African Americans on the home front as the triumphs of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave way to heartrending tragedies of assassination and riot, which provided further evidence of the persistence of American racism.

Of course, an exhibition cannot do everything. "Soul Soldiers," which began with curator Samuel W. Black's curiosity about a photograph of his brother Jimmy McNeil, who served and died in the Vietnam War, brings together a remarkable range of materials. It is particularly strong in recovering the story of African American women's experience of the Vietnam War—the story of those who served as nurses and those back at home who began to protest the war's costs to black Americans (sometimes they were one and the same). And just when the exhibition might seem to be smoothing over the disillusionment with the United States that African Americans caught in the war's quagmire felt, the exhibition returns to the disappointment, rage, and bitterness that the Vietnam era involved for so many. Allowing both stories—the official account of how African Americans served their American country bravely and the hidden tale of how African Americans pursued an African-inspired, anti-imperialist, Third World alternative because of the Vietnam experience—"Soul Soldiers" captures the ambivalences of a war history that remains deeply fraught some forty years after it happened.

"There's more than a nation inside us," Yusef Komunyakaa wrote in the poem "Tu Do Street," which is reprinted in the book that accompanies the exhibition (p. 150). For African Americans in the Vietnam era, that indeed seems to have been the case. The war inspired many to serve their American nation, no questions asked. But Vietnam also forced them to confront their vexed relationship with the United States. "Soul Soldiers" shows African Americans caught between the two sides of their double consciousness, seeking a way to heal the wounds while also showing how the wounds persist.

Particularly now, as the United States continues to wage wars of questionable worth even while it looks to a new president who embodies—and has boldly examined—African American double consciousness, the Vietnam era is worth remembering in all its complexity. "Soul Soldiers" helps us do so.

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National Museum of the Marine Corps, Triangle, Va. <http://www.usmcmuseum.com>.

Permanent exhibition, opened Nov. 2006. 118,000 sq. ft. Fentress Bradburn Architects; Christopher Chadbourne and Associates, exhibition planners and designers; Chuck Girbovan, National Museum of the Marine Corps museum chief of exhibit services.

"Soldiers are not as other men," John Keegan observes in *A History of Warfare* (1993). Not one himself, indeed physically unqualified for military service, Keegan has devoted a lifetime to military history. The military is a "world apart," one that "exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it." Military organizations such as