

Rafael Viera

An interview

Gloria Larry House

1969

Editors' Note: The following interview with Rafael Viera took place at a conference of the Republic of New Africa which was held in Washington, D.C. recently. Viera is awaiting trial on second-degree murder charges stemming from the fatal shooting of Patrolman Michael J. Czapski outside the New Bethel Baptist Church, last March 29.

At our meeting, Rafael smiled, looked directly at me, held my hand in a clasp warmer than a handshake while he communicated in rapid, Spanish accented, husky speech. In his voice flowed the rhythm of a poet and the idioms of Afro-America.

Who is Rafael Viera, the slender, obviously Latin-American brother in the Republic of New Africa.

"I am a black nationalist," he says, defying obstructionists who argue, "but you're Puerto Rican!"

"In the Third World, we are all black. Latin-American and Asian brothers are reaching that realization, too. Once we all realize this and form our coalitions, it will all boil down to black."

Two aspects of Rafael's character appealed to me immediately. He is energetic—very intense, fast-moving—and he appears happy. His spontaneous smile reflects his sense of freedom. Joy, he seems to have learned, is resistance, is struggle, is understanding that we will win.

Rafael's present clarity has come after a long period during which he ignored the struggle altogether.

"I was always conscious," he says, "But I was doing my niggerly things into a party and clothes bag."

He was born in Harlem, July 24, 1948: his parents, Consuela, a Kenyan who had come to study at Columbia, and Rafael, a Puerto Rican. He grew up with his brother, Victor, and his sister, Millie in a 125th St. neighborhood, then went to finish high school in Puerto Rico, where his father owns a record distributing firm.

While in Puerto Rico, he joined the Navy.

After a two-year stint and a medical separation, Viera was back in Harlem. He opened an Afro shop and operated that for a while. But he says this was a particularly low period for him.

The million and one ways through which the system erodes our minds and bodies plagued him and he realized he had to break through the kind of death he was in.

His father, Rafael, had always been active in the Puerto Rican nationalist movement for independence. He had worked with other Puerto Ricans in New York to support the Commandos Armados de la Liberacion in Puerto Rico.

As the brother said, he was conscious, he had always understood what it meant to fight U.S. imperialism—his father's life was an example. But he himself had been avoiding any such involvement.

In a new effort to discard his "niggerly things" and clear his thinking, Rafael started writing.

"I started writing poetry. Then I had poetry readings and I wanted to live the poetry. I knew I had to follow through on all the things I wrote in the poetry—had to fight for liberation.

"I started working with the National Black Theater Workshop (a Harlem group experimenting in revolutionary drama, directed by a brilliant sister, Barbara Ann Tier). Rafael says his participation in this group "freed my soul."

Prior to what is now called the “New Bethel Incident” in Detroit, Rafael taught black children remedial reading in a Harlem OEO funded program which is coordinated with the N.Y. school system. A good deal of his time was spent in the classroom tutoring and in home consulta with the children’s parents.

It was an around-the-clock job.

“I would get to sleep about four or five every morning, sleep a couple of hours, and start again.”

He had worked like this for ten months before coming to the New Africa conference at the New Bethel Baptist Church.

There is no doubt he felt his work with the children was very meaningful. In an RNA workshop on the new society, he insisted that it was to the children that we should devote our educational programs because “once they had a little knowledge they could take it and move...It’s like giving them half a piece of chewing gum. They’re not satisfied with that, they want the whole thing.”

But it isn’t only children who are prepared to learn the revolutionary way. The political worker finds ways to inspire the overall community to choose self—determination over exploitation.

Of the Liberation Site on 125th in Harlem, where a group of radicals have freed the area of dependence on the city of N.Y., set up their own lighting system established educational activities, etc. in an attempt to create a revolutionary community, Rafael said, “we’re showing people that we can live without the Man.”

Right on!

With two other Puerto Rican political groups, the Young Lords and the Third World Revelationists Black Street Theater (at 107th Street between 1st and FDR Drive), he feels he is doing “solid things, relating to the community, doing things for the people.”

And that brings us to the role of the FBI.

It is common knowledge that whoever works in the interest of the people is subject to the fascist, insidious voyeurism of the FBI. Rafael indicated that he had been harassed by agents before New Bethel, and feels the second-degree murder charge he faces is just a continuation of their persecution.

In the seven months he has worked in New Africa and in meetings with Third World groups, where he says he has “Lit the spark” for further collaboration, Rafael has made the contacts, created the brotherhood implicit in Third World ideology.

“I think I will be one of the major elements in bringing about the realization of Third World coalitions in this country,” Rafael said.

There is no doubt in my mind that he will be.

We know this, and they know it.

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