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"Playing in the Doll's House of Revolution": White Students and Activists Involved in the Black Power Movement

Siobhan C. Atkins
University of Pennsylvania, siobhanc@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

When Stokey Charmichael first uttered the words "black power" to a crowd of civil rights supporters during the "March Against Fear" on June 16th, 1966, it marked an important – and disillusioning – moment for white students and activists involved in the movement, a shift from a civil rights struggle fought not only through nonviolent methods but also through coalitions between whites and blacks. In the years that followed, many of these white activists struggled to find a place in the burgeoning black power movement that often shunned them and the more pacifist approach to rights struggles associated with them. Many dropped out of the movement following this shift, or transferred their energies to other causes; others, however, found themselves involved in Black Power organizations such as the Black Panthers, or supporting their activities despite qualms about their policies and often-violent actions. The question thus must be asked: why did many whites join and support a movement that often excluded or devalued them as a matter of policy? This paper explores the complex social and psychological reasons behind many of these activists' support for Black Power – as well as the implications of their involvement for race relations to this day.

Siobhan Atkins
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By his own admission, Gary Howard was not exactly a likely supporter of the

Black Power movement that took American inner-city ghettos – and many college

campuses – by storm in the late 1960s. An upper-middle-class white student from Seattle

who began attending Yale in 1964, Howard arrived in New Haven with "the Bible in one

hand and a copy of Barry Goldwater's platform in the other"[1] – hardly the image of

revolutionary fervor associated with black power and '60s-era student activism.

However, the same religious impulses that seemingly separated him from the increasingly

violent Black Power movement in the late '60s initially drew him into the inner-city

communities where Black Power started, as he began community service work in a New

Haven community known as "the Hill". The Hill was an impoverished, largely African-

American ghetto ripe with simmering anger towards white establishments and general

frustration with and distaste for the incremental approach to civil rights with which they

associated "do-gooder" whites such as Howard. After living amid the desperation and

chaos of The Hill for three years, and attending a Black Identity and Leadership summer

camp where Howard was confronted with his legacy of white privilege that he had

previously ignored, Howard came to identify strongly with the Black Power movement

and the Black Panthers in particular, "see[ing] the water of White dominance as a highly

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[1] Gary Howard, "White Man Dancing: A Story of Personal Transformation." *In* Christine Clark and James O' Donnell (Ed.) <u>Becoming and Unbecoming White</u>. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1999, page 214.

selective poison that continually steals the life blood from those people who have not been marked with the genetic code of whiteness."[2]

What caused a white religious pacifist such as Howard, a champion of the coalitionist approach to race relations formerly popular in organizations such as SNCC in the mid-1960s, to identify with divisive, violent groups such as the Black Panthers and to ultimately shun his race altogether? This question, along with the question of why many other whites similar – and not so similar – to Howard joined ranks with the Black Power movement in the late '60s, is one I will attempt to tackle in the course of this paper. It is necessary, of course, to first examine the social environment in which Black Power and other radical movements took root. In the late '60s, the legal gains of the pacifist civil rights movement in the South had begun to be muted by more intractable and pervasive humiliations in the North such as housing and job discrimination, giving rise to ghetto rebellions and the growth of militant groups such as the Black Panthers. At the same time, formerly optimistic and progressive New Left organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were also undergoing a similar crisis and radicalization, as frustration with the limits of participatory democracy transformed formerly focused protests and actions into often-violent and senseless actions intended to merely provoke a reaction. The air in liberal bastions across the country, participants observed, was ripe with talk of revolution – but a revolution that often precluded rational discussion and assumed violence. The liberal nation, black and white, seemed to be turning its back both on the earlier generation of their parents and on the very goals and methods used by many of their own generation – in fact, in some cases, by them -- just a few years earlier.

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[2] Ibid, page 217.

It seems, thus, that much of the bedlam and, ultimately, destruction of many radical late '60s movements was a reaction – a reaction against the propriety and social conservatism of the '50s and against the frustration and perceived failure of a democratic, incrementalist approach towards progress. The same could be said of much of the white support for the Black Power movement. Many of the whites with posters of Huey Lewis on their bedroom walls were the same students who had attended nonviolence workshops with SNCC and other previously pacifist and coalitionist organizations. However, once no further legal victories for civil rights could be obtained, and once it became clear to many that the legacy of racism in America could not be solved by merely court decrees, many students changed their strategy, seeing nonviolence as ineffective and, more importantly in the scheme of the Sixties psyche, passé. For many students, Black Power, in its absolutism and action, was an effective antidote to the frustration and inaction of participatory democracy.

Much of the gendered nature of the Black Power movement – support was much stronger among males, both black and white, and any women who were involved were typically relegated to supporting roles – was also a reaction, against the redefinition of gender roles in the early '60s upon the arrival of feminism and of the softer, more accommodating man promoted in works such as the Port Huron Statement. Black Power demanded that men "take one's life in one's own hands", and white men in particular, imbued with a complex of impotence particularly in the wake of the failures of participatory democracy, were extremely attracted to this restoration of traditional manhood. The trendy nature of the Black Power movement also cannot be discounted in its appeal to many white students. In an era where the desire for television coverage

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often overshadowed the practical goals of movements, and where "television created myths bigger than reality"[3], seeing became believing. Many white students became entranced by the beret-wearing, gun-toting, uncompromising image of the Black Panthers and other Black Power organizations – without giving as much thought to the actual implications of the Black Power message and actions. The Huey Newtons and Eldridge Cleavers of the world rose to mythical status, their firm defiance filling the void left by the fallen heroes of the previous generation.

To a certain extent, thus, a tale about white students in the Black Power movement is a tale about the late '60s at large – the discontent, disillusionment, and denial of the future that propelled formerly progressive and motivated citizens towards destruction. However, applying merely an exploration of the late '60s to white student involvement in Black Power leaves much to be desired.   After all, it seems strange that whites would associate with a movement that essentially excluded them – or at least, in the case of the Black Panthers, devalued them -- as a matter of policy. What were white students doing, espousing self hatred? Did this movement even have anything to do with them? In fact, it did. At the same time that many students were rejecting the careerism and political norms of the adult majority, they were also rejecting the race of the majority – one that they happened to share.

While much of the senselessness of the radical '60s was a reaction to the failures of the Civil Rights movement, in many ways, the Civil Rights movement did *not* fail. One of its most powerful consequences was the exposure of the legacy of white oppression pervading the United States for centuries. Images of police brutality in Alabama and church burnings in Mississippi caused many whites to become painfully

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[3] Rubin, page 106

aware of the global history of oppression and persecution at the hands of the dominant white class. For some, the only way to reconcile that past with their personal integrity was to reject their race altogether. Indeed, as Black Power encouraged blacks to respect and celebrate their race, many whites took it as an exhortation to *reject* their race. What resulted, thus, was a white involvement in Black Power that resulted from a psychological rejection of their own racial identity, a condition that prevented them from fully examining the political merits of Black Power *or* contributing to the cause of racial justice in the best way possible: preaching its merits in the very white middle-class communities they had rejected.

"What Do You Want?" "BLACK POWER!"

The first utterance of the Black Power slogan coincided with one of the more disillusioning moments of the '60s, an event that would soon come to be defined as one of the turning points between the determined, martyr-like optimism of the Civil Rights '60s and the vehement self-defense of the Black Power '60s. James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran who had simultaneously cracked the segregation of the University of Mississippi and invoked one of the ugliest white mobs of the era with his enrollment four years earlier, began a "March Against Fear" across the state of Mississsippi in an effort to encourage black voting registration.[4] The goals of Meredith's march certainly seemed more in line with previous pacifist Civil Rights efforts such as the Selma march than with the violent protests that would later come to define Black Power. However, despite his

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pacifist aims and lack of desire to become a historical emblem, perhaps Meredith was a perfect spokesman for the soon-to-become Black Power movement. Meredith, unlike many of the civil rights activists that preceded him, was fiercely independent of any organizations, believing instead that it was his personal "divine mission"[5] to eradicate segregation. Furthermore, Meredith at times seemed to lack the quiet stoicism in the face of humiliations that seemed essential to the deliberate non-violence of the Civil Rights era; he remembers learning from his father as a boy that "death was to be preferred to indignity"[6] . When he was shot by a white sniper only two days into his march, both Martin Luther King and Stokey Charmichael continued his march – but it was Charmichael, the new chairman of SNCC and the first voice of Black Power, who attracted the most attention. To some, King's rhetoric had grown tired, especially in the face of increasing tragedy and anger. King observed later that many younger blacks during the march's singing of the classic Civil Rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" fell silent during the song's mentioning of "black and white together." One militant member of the march also recommended to King that the phrase "We Shall Overcome" be replaced by "We Shall Overrun".[7] Charmichael, a fresh face with fresh ideas, more embodied and channeled the restless discontent of the emerging militant class. To raucous cheers and applause, Charmichael announced:

> "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is
> to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got
> nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is *black power*."[8]

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[5] James Meredith, as quoted in James Silver's "Review of Books: *Three Years in Mississippi*." *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 36 No. 1 (Winter 1967), page 71.
[6] Ibid, page 72.
[7] George Feaver, "Black Power". *In* Maurice Cranston's <u>The New Left</u>. London: Bodley Head Publishing, 1970, page 141.
[8] Stokey Charmichael, cited in Ibid, page 141.

While Meredith himself did not become a major player in the Black Power movement, his march holds great significance in illustrating the emerging chasm between the civil rights and militant groups – and the consequent dominance of the militant rhetoric and mission in public discourse of race relations.

While the Black Power *movement* may have been born in the wake of the Meredith shooting, black power as a concept was not necessarily as new in the '60s as it may originally appear. As George Feaver points out in his essay on Black Power, "Nat Turner is, after all, as much of the black American experience as is Uncle Tom and Marcus Garvey no less so than Booker T. Washington."[9] What was most significant – and salient – about this strain of Black Power is that it came after an era in which coalitionism and gradualism were promoted as the best solutions to decades of racial segregation. Only a few short years earlier, in 1963, Martin Luther King had delivered his renowned "I Have a Dream Speech", which seemingly cemented him and his message of Christian pacifism as the dominant figures in '60s race ideology. In it, he declared,

> "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-holders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood…I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama…will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers…I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character…It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."[10]

Thus, by envisioning a society in which racial distinctions disappear altogether, Martin Luther King preached an ideology in which not only were nonviolence and patience were the means, but also – and more importantly – assimilation was the goal.

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[9] Feaver, page 142

[10] Martin Luther King, from transcript found on http://www.mecca.org/~crights/dream.html

To many young blacks in particular, the Civil Rights era seemed to assume that

interchangeability with whites was the ultimate measure of success – and that blacks

could succeed in the Civil Rights era only by striving to be a part of the white world.

This message of "colorblindness" was one that permeated many facets of Civil Rights-era

America. Take, for example, the book *Let's Face It*, published by Elsie Archer in 1959.

Promoted as a "guide to good grooming for Negro girls", the book discusses the

"problem" of typically African-American curly, nappy hair, but ultimately concludes that

"no hair problem is so great that it can't either be corrected or greatly improved",

ultimately advocating the use of straightening products.[11] Indeed, Ms. Archer was

promoting the dominant point of view that typically African-American traits were

unattractive – and typically white traits, such as straight hair, were the ultimate standard

of beauty. This application of "white" standards to blacks during the Civil Rights era

extended far beyond the realm of personal grooming and appearance, and was one that

many blacks publicly decried, particularly in the wake of Black Power. Wrote author

James Farmer of the idealized "colorblind" society:

> "We learned that America couldn't simply *be* colorblind. It would
> have to *become* colorblind and it would only become colorblind
> when we gave up our color…Thus, we would usher in the Great Day
> with an act of complete self-denial and self-abasement. We would
> achieve equality by conceding racism's charge: that our skins were
> an affliction; that our history is one long humiliation; that we are
> empty of distinctive traditions and any legitimate source of pride."[12]

Black Power, thus, was not just merely frustration with failed civil rights laws and

ghettos, culminating in senseless violence and what some deemed organized crime – it

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[11] Charles Fager, *White Reflections on Black Power*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing
Company, page 21.
[12] James Farmer, as quoted in Ibid, page 22

was an assertion of black racial pride after decades of promoting colorblindness. It was the belief that embracing black *differences* from the white majority was more important in reversing the legacy of racism and African-American exploitation than their similarities. Black Power advocates, in a larger sense, were fighting against the idea supported by assimilation advocates that "all the characteristics of middle-class, white (mainly WASP) American society are the primary objects of aspiration."[13] This emphasis on difference, on rejecting the goal of assimilation with white-middle-class society, is one that is strikingly similar to the developing ethos embraced by many disaffected white college-age youth at the same time. Integration with middle-class society was no longer desirable to many blacks *and* whites, and many mainstream-dropout white students claimed they, too, were minorities in the oppressive American system. As Jerry Rubin declares in his book of ramblings *Do It!*, "Long hair is our black skin. Long hair turns white middle-class youth into niggers. Amerika is a different country when you have long hair. We're outcasts. We, the children of the white middle class, feel like Indians, blacks, Vietnamese…"[14]

While most Black Power groups shared the same goal of promoting black consciousness and fighting power structures that had proved oppressive to blacks for centuries, considerable conflict and disagreement arose among splintering Black Power groups about how to best promote this change in racial consciousness – and how or whether to incorporate whites into the struggle. As the leader of SNCC, and as the initiator of the expulsion of whites from the organization, Stokey Charmichael believed that blacks needed to compose and control their own organizations in order to avoid the

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[13] Fager, page 23
[14] Jerry Rubin, *Do It!* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970, page 94

inevitable imposition of white standards and white control that he claimed resulted when

blacks and whites were in the same organizations. Furthermore, and much more

importantly, Charmichael believed – or perhaps recognized -- that much of the white

interest in the Black Power movement was metaphorical; part of a personal quest for

meaning and excitement different from the middle-class tedium of the '50s rather than a

sincere desire to change the nature of race relations in the United States. As he put it,

"Too many young middle-class Americans, like some sort of Pepsi generation, have

wanted to come alive through the black community; they've wanted to be where the

action was – and the action has been in the black community."[15]

However, some Black Power groups falling under the category of "revolutionary

nationalists" (of which the Black Panthers were the most notable) directed their energies

and anger towards oppressive American power structures in general, not just *white* power

structures – and thus believed that alienated revolutionaries of all colors could join

together in the struggle to, in the words of Eldridge Cleaver, "overthrow the system of

Capitalism, Imperialism, and Racism."[16] For these black militants, black power took on a

form that demanded action over debate and revolution over reform – aims that both

matched with and appealed to the newfound objectives of the frustrated white student

New Left. As Christopher Lasch put it,

> "Black Power is itself, in part, a manifestation of the New Left. It
> shares with the white Left not only the language of romantic
> anarchism but several other features as well…a pronounced distrust
> of people over thirty, a sense of powerlessness and despair, for
> which the revolutionary rhetoric serves to compensate, and a
> tendency to substitute rhetoric for political analysis and defiant
> gestures for political action."[17]

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[15] Ibid, page 89.

[16] Eldridge Cleaver, "An Open Letter to Stokey Charmichael. *Ramparts*, September 1969, page 31.

[17] Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left.* New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1969, page 131.

Furthermore, there was a mutual symbolic attraction between Cleaver in particular and the New Left; while in Folsom Prison, Cleaver wrote wistfully, "I'd like to leap the whole last mile and grow a beard and don whatever threads the local nationalism might require and comrade with Che Guevara and share his fate, blazing a new pathfinder's trail through the stymied upbeat brain of the New Left…I'd just love to be in Berkeley right now, to roll in that mud, frolick in the style of the funky revolution."[18] Whether the reason was perceived shared philosophies, as was the case with Cleaver, or perhaps mere opportunistic entrepreneurship and a quest for new markets -- Huey Newton and Bobby Seale did, after all, sell copies of Mao's Red Book outside Berkeley's campus in order to raise money to buy guns – some militant Black Power organizations, the Black Panthers being the most notable, began to incorporate white revolutionaries into their intoxicating force field of defiance and illusion. Whites never held an equal role in the movement, but any role was considered preferable to the alternative: being cast off from the vanguard of race struggle forever. As Eldridge Cleaver associate – and self-proclaimed "blond Jew from Brooklyn" Stew Albert said, "We wouldn't exactly be joining hands in a loving community. The Panthers would remain an all-black outfit…But this represented the best news white radicals had heard from Black America in quite some time."[19]

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[18] Eldridge Cleaver, as quoted in Rubin, page 195
[19] Stew Albert, "White Radicals, Black Panthers, and a Sense of Fulfillment." In *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas. New York: Routledge, 2001, page 188.

Impotence

*"Some of my friends started playing with guns as a way to forget
their own hopelessness…The talk of moving guns to the ghetto was
the hopeful nonsense of young white men who could not admit that
we actually had nothing to offer the people in Detroit."[20]*
--Frank Bardacke

"For the New Left," '60s radicalism participant/observer Todd Gitlin writes in
The Sixties, "the summer of love was the summer of desperation."[21] In June, July, and
August of 1967, urban violence was rapidly and frighteningly becoming as much of a
surety as the humidity, as ghetto riots and rebellions consumed the lives of eighty-three
and injured thousands more. And the New Left – only a few years before certain of its
historical destiny as a catalyst for change, achieved through not virulent, goading
uprisings but participatory democracy and mutual respect – was paralyzed, both horrified
and transfixed by the escalation of violence among many of the nation's young blacks.
Participatory democracy had failed to achieve social change on the scale its proponents
had imagined, and many of its former champions, Tom Hayden among them, felt self-
critical and desperate. The former SDS-SNCC alliance had long soured with the
expulsion of whites from the organization, and many students felt their influence waning.
Hayden wrote anxiously that the new SNCC had "turned itself into the revolution we
hoped for, and we didn't have much to do with its turning at all…[they're] miles ahead of
us, looking back , chuckling knowingly about the sterility of liberals."[22]

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[20] Frank Bardacke, as quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties.* New York: Bantam Books, 1993, page 247.
[21] Gitlin, page 244.
[22] Tom Hayden, as quoted in Ibid, page 128

This sense of utter powerlessness among the nation's New Left may seem largely

due to the political circumstances of the time; based on the failings of the Civil Rights

movement and the seeming lack of a role for whites in the burgeoning Black Power

movement. However, as some scholars have pointed out, a sense of powerlessness and

impotency was always one of the major motivators of the mainstream-middle-class-

phobic New Left – and one that they shared with the architects of the Black Power

movement. Charles Fager argues that this sense of weakness was instilled in the radical

New Left by the "patterns of life in the middle-class white world."[23] He posits that the

corporate world that most white middle-class youth were expected (and still expected) to

subscribe to – and that most New Lefters consequently rebelled against – becomes central

to the lives of those who join it, instills a sense of frustration and impotency, as most

workers rarely see any power in changing the institutions to which they dedicate most of

their lives. This powerlessness and the consequent rebellion against it, Fager argues, is

one that the New Left and Black Power had in common – but there were crucial

differences between the two groups' situations. As he says,

> "Both [the New Left and Black Power] postulate powerlessness,
> inability to move institutions, or to 'speak to needs' as a basic
> characteristic of their constituencies. They differ in the point of
> view from which they see the situation: for blacks, powerlessness is
> accompanied by overt oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and
> brutality; for whites powerlessness can be comfortable, well-paid,
> and tempting…But to repeat, the central fact about each community
> is that *it does not control the institutions around and through which
> its life is organized and controlled.*"[24]

As we can see, thus, militant Black Power advocates and radical white New

Leftists shared more than just a penchant for romantic revolutionary rhetoric; they shared

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[23] Fager, page 93
[24] Ibid, page 94

a similar motivation behind the goal of "overthrow[ing] the system of capitalism,

Imperialism, and Racism", which was a belief that they had no power as members of the

mainstream society – and that the bafflement and media attention caused by them

"dropping out" of mainstream society gave them considerably more power. Both

rejected assimilation to the mainstream system of capitalism and middle-class conformity

because of the lack of individual and group control it afforded them. However, this

quotation also illustrates the differences between the powerlessness of the black

community and the powerlessness of the white community: for blacks, Black Power was

largely a response to the lack of power in determining one's own destiny in the face of

housing discrimination and police brutality, whereas for whites, the interest in

revolutionary theories such as Black Power was a response to a sense of powerlessness

and search for meaning in a life that often could be cushy and comfortable. Furthermore,

Fager and others argue that there was another unique aspect to the constant sense of

incapacity among New Lefters, even before the expulsion of whites from SNCC. Many

white liberals turned to action in the black community – whether it was voter registration

in the South during the Civil Rights movement or allying with the Black Panthers during

armed struggles in the late '60s – because they were incapable of enacting true change in

their own communities. Stokey Charmichael was acutely aware of this fact, and it was

perhaps one of the reasons why he was so opposed to alliances with whites. As he

observed, "It's important to note that those white people [who] feel alienated from white

society and run into the black society…are incapable of confronting the white society

with its racism where it does really exist."[25] Indeed, the Tom Haydens and Jerry Rubins

of the world – overeducated, often radical Northerner liberals – would be powerless in

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[25] Charmichael, as quoted in Fager, page 90

enacting racial change in ways that would most likely be the most helpful: addressing and confronting the prejudice so prevalent among entrenched rural Southern whites – or even, the prejudice entrenched in their own middle-class communities. Instead, thus, white liberals sought meaning and change by "identify[ing] with Negro communities"[26], whether Southern sharecroppers or Northern militants.

In many ways, thus, the white interest and involvement in the Black Power movement can be explained by a lack of power – power to lead meaningful lives or enact change in their middle-class communities, power to be full members in influential social change groups such as SNCC in the face of white purging. Involvement in vanguard groups such as the Black Panthers – even the second-class involvement that Stew Albert described – gave frustrated, alienated whites a newfound sense of authority, authenticity, and meaning.

The exhortation to "manliness" that the Black Power movement demanded also gave newfound power to New Left males, long effeminated by the burgeoning feminist movement and the "softer" form of masculinity neccesary in Port Huron Statement-era participatory democracy. Indeed, the concept of manhood – and the responsibilities and implied roles that came along with it – had been undergoing a rapid revolution among the nation's young activist whites in the early '60s. As part of their rejection of typical middle-class values and aspirations, many young males also rejected the view of manhood promoted by their fathers' generation: that of the breadwinning, emotionally static head-of-household, who supplied economic support in place of any emotional nurturing. Instead, many young activists (particularly those who were a part of the SDS, the organization responsible for the authorship of the Port Huron Statement) embraced a

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[26] Fager, page 91

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more humane and emotionally conscious manhood, one that viewed men not as stoic and

hardworking but as, in the words of the Port Huron Statement, "infinitely precious and

possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love."[27] They insisted "that

work should involve incentives worthier than money or survival"[28] and, perhaps most

tellingly in the later transformation of manhood, rejected violence, declaring it

"abhorrent" because "it requires generally the transformation of the target, be it a human

being or a community of people, into a depersonalized object of hate. It is imperative

that the means of violence be abolished and the institutions – local, national, international

– that encourage nonviolence as a condition of conflict be developed."[29] Indeed, as

Michael Kimmel observed, it appeared that the Port Huron Statement was "an anxious

plea for a new definition of manhood"[30] that rejected careerism and the glorification of

violence in favor of a concern for social causes and a greater emotional sensibility.

        With the increasing splintering of groups such as the SDS and the radicalization

of many formerly peaceful protest movements, however, many white men began to

reconsider this new definition of manhood, finding satisfaction and meaning not in

democratic debate but in thrilling, often-violent protests; these actions, and the bravado

they invoked, in turn began to define a new litmus test of manliness. Says Tom Hayden

of the shift of many groups from protest and debate to revolution: "[These groups] had

started, characteristically, as idealistic and benign people…and then something

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[27] The Port Huron Statement, as reprinted in Tom Hayden's *The Port Huron Statement: The Visionary Call of the 1960's Revolution.* New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005, page 51.
[28] Ibid, page 54
[29] Ibid, page 55
[30] Michael Kimmel, as quoted in Judith Newton's *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Man's Movement.* Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005, page 108.

happened…it became a matter of whether or not you were a man, which was measured by how outrageously subversive you were willing to be."[31]

Much of this reconsideration was brought about by the emphasis on manliness and "taking one's life in one's own hands" that militant Black Power advocated. After all, Black Power, in all its often-violent, honorific glory, is inextricably tied to a restoration of the dignity of the black man that its proponents saw as having been lost in the era of slavery and segregation. The clash of ideals between liberal participatory democracy and militant Black Power is evident in reports of the 1968 Columbia University protest, when young white student radicals and, later, members of a black caucus, many of whom were unaffiliated with Columbia, showed their distaste for the school's plan to build a gym in the local Bronx community by staging a seizure of one of the school's administrative buildings. The black caucus, certain that the white students would 'vacillate and panic'[32] in the face of the increasingly violent protest, eventually rejected any help from whites in the blockade, leaving them to only gawk at the militants' reckless defiance and mantra of 'first action, then words' – and question their own resolve and dedication. Remarked one white male Columbia student, "Some of those black guys were willing to die…that really frightened me. It made me wonder how far I'd go. They certainly have more guts than we do."[33]

The emergence of Black Power alpha-males made many white radicals self-conscious of their lack of the same kind of masculinity they had been so eager to shed five years ago– and eager to reaffirm their manhood by association with such radicals.

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[31] Tom Hayden, as quoted in James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, page 311
[32] James McEvoy and Abraham Miller, *Black Power and Student Rebellion*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1969, page 41
[33] Ibid, page 42

When militants such as Huey Newton, who once remarked that "the original bias [of Black Power militants] was to think of long haired men as being effeminate"[34], accepted white men as compatriots in the struggle, many boasted of such friendship as proof that they, too, were "men's men". After describing his involvement and close friendship with the Black Panthers, Stew Albert writes, "And blond Jewish me who made himself tough by pumping iron in his Brooklyn basement. No mama's darling here. Huey [Newton] has given me special recognition and grace. The strongest and best of men has said I'm the genuine article."[35]

"White Guilt"

From the self-deprecating, desperate comments made by white Black Power supporters regarding increasing white impotency in the political arena and the white man's inability to "put his life on the line", we can see how the white infatuation with the Black Power movement was one deeply rooted in profound insecurities and so-called "hang-ups". Stokey Charmichael, it appears, was correct: many whites used the cause as a sort of "action therapy"[36] to quell and counteract deep anxieties about their own characters – anxieties that, often, the Black Power movement itself had raised. The largest insecurity many white militants faced, however, was not one associated with just their newfound political impotency or perceived lack of manly valor; it was one associated with their very race that had granted them privilege for their entire lives. To

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[34] Albert, page 190
[35] Ibid, page 190
[36] Fager, page 89

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many students, it was not just the government or the ruling elite that had lost its credibility in the tumult of the '60s – it was the white race itself.

As author Shelby Steele points out, one of the most dramatic achievements of the civil rights movement was to expose ordinary Americans to the scope and pervasiveness of racial discrimination in the U.S. This exposure had an incredible effect on how whites then viewed their own racial identity. From TV-broadcasted images of violent Southerners jeering black schoolchildren during the bussing of elementary schools in Little Rock, Arkansas to increased discussion of the U.S. historical legacy of racial oppression in schools, universities, and other public forums, whiteness for many gradually "became more of an icon of racial evil than of racial supremacy."[37] This transformation of the American white identity and experience, from bland yet comfortable to a source of immense stigma and guilt, was even more dramatic during the Black Power movement. While organizations like the Black Panthers often accepted whites into the fray of their movements, they didn't shy away from confronting whites with the realities of their racial privilege – and the cost it had inflicted on African-American communities for centuries. In the New Haven "Black Identity and Leadership" camp that Gary Howard attended, for example, Howard describes being taught that "even though my family was hanging by a toenail to the lower rungs of the middle class, our limited success had been achieved through the land we stole from the Indians and the labor we stole from Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics."[38] The effect of these accusations, Howard describes, was profound. As he reports,

> "I had entered the period of rejecting my racial identity. I had
> learned what it meant to be White in America, and I did not want to

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[37] Shelby Steele, *White Guilt*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006, page 106
[38] Howard, page 216

> have anything to do with it. I had broken the seal on my own
> cultural encapsulation, blown away many of the old images, and did
> not want to be identified with White folks anymore. I had opened
> the door on understanding my own complicity, privilege, and racism
> and wanted to put this in the face of other White folks who had not
> yet paid their dues. I wanted to be different, not one of them."[39]

It was this desire to be "different", to distance oneself from the white race because of its shameful legacy, that ultimately motivated many whites to ally themselves with the Black Power movement. The Black Power movement was attractive not just because of its rebel-chic leather jackets or its dramatic absolutist rhetoric: it was appealing because it allowed whites to shed themselves of not only their "square" middle-class upbringing, but also – at least temporarily – their newly guilt-ridden White identity altogether. As Jerry Rubin put it, "'White' was a state of mind. Hippies were seeking a new identity."[40] With the white power structure having lost virtually all its moral authority – and white students, by racial association, having lost some authority as well – through the newfound public acknowledgement of segregation and oppression, many students sought to regain their authority and personal pride through association with a revolution that ultimately sought to overturn all that was corrupt.

Steele makes this precise identity crisis the focal point of his most recent book *White Guilt*. Many whites, previously accepting a code of silence and denial concerning the U.S.' legacy of slavery and de-facto apartheid, began to acknowledge – and despise – the connection with bigotry and oppression that merely being white entailed, and thus began to either ally themselves with Black Power leaders -- or merely accept the authority of Black Power -- in order to distance themselves from that connection. Black

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[39] Ibid, page 217
[40] Rubin, page 195

power was only as widely supported and noteworthy as it was, Steele argues, because of what he terms the "moral vacuum" and "white guilt" created by the exposure of white cruelty, particularly in the mass media. He refers in particular to Dean McCabe, who presided over Steele's university in the late '60s when Black Power was at its height. Dean McCabe, and the actions he took in the face of a petition from the black caucus on campus, reveals the powerful effect that white guilt had on not only rebellious students but also their seemingly "square" elders.

In the late '60s, Shelby Steele, along with about thirty other students who shared Steele's association with the newly-militant black caucus on his campus, marched into McCabe's office with a list of "nonnegotiable" demands for black students at his school. Steele, ever the image of goading defiance quickly becoming fashionable in those days, recalls carrying a lit Kool cigarette into McCabe's impeccable office, letting the cigarette ash fall on the previously unsullied carpet. Knowing he was breaking every standard of propriety normally imparted to a college dean, Steele expected anger, shock, discipline – a normal reaction to the audacity and lack of respect for authority displayed by the students. However, the Dean's response was different. While he said that he was wasn't content with the "nonnegotiable" nature of the demands, he said that he recognized the circumstances behind the protest and insisted that the University was willing to take the protests seriously – a remark that proved itself true when, as Steele reports, most of the caucus' appeals were later put into practice. What, Steele wondered, caused a university dean – five years ago a figure of staid inflexibility – to capitulate to the desires of a rogue Black Power university group? He attributes it to one factor: knowledge. Dean McCabe recognized the legacy of oppression that caused the seemingly offensive outburst; he

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realized "that behind [their] outrageous behavior was a far greater American outrage."[41] This mere knowledge that African-Americans had been horribly mistreated for all of America's history and that, as a white in a position of authority, Dean McCabe himself in a way represented that oppression – a simple realization that had successfully been suppressed until the '60s – caused McCabe to simultaneously lose his moral authority and want to regain it by fulfilling the demands of the black caucus. As Steele explains, "Dr. McCabe simply came to a place where his own knowledge of American racism – knowledge his personal integrity prevented him from denying – opened a vacuum of moral authority within him…He found himself without the moral authority to reprimand us for our disruptive behavior."[42] Steele calls this "vacuum of moral authority" white guilt -- and argues that it is virtually the same thing as black power, as the power lost from the historical oppressors then shifts to the historically oppressed – *in the form of black power*.[43] In this way, we can see many of the psychological reasons why even an ageing university dean – not just merely a trend-following radical student – would sympathize with, surrender to, and maybe even support the Black Power movement. Perhaps more importantly, we can see that although black power, as it was originally conceived by many, excluded whites, it perhaps owed much of its influence to the so-called "hang-ups" of white students and authority figures alike.

The role that white guilt played in the support of the Black Power movement is further evident when one examines the 1967 New Politics Convention in Chicago, which brought together largely white peace organizations and Northern black militants under the guise of devising a plan to end the war in Vietnam and ensure Johnson's defeat in the

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[41] Ibid, page 24.
[42] Ibid, page 24.
[43] Steele, page 24

upcoming presidential election. However, before the groups could begin to discuss their

mutual interests in national politics, the black caucus introduced "tests of the social

barometer"[44], meant to assess the white radicals' dedication to the cause of black power

and ensure the militants' needs would be heard by the white majority. One such test was

a thirteen-point resolution insisting, among other things, that the black caucus get 50% of

the vote (although they were greatly outnumbered) and that the conventioneers support

all the declarations made in the recent Newark Black Power conference. As journalist

Richard Blumenthal reported:

> "the 2,100 delegates debated the thirteen-principle black power
> resolution without once discussing the merits of the Newark
> pronouncements…They concentrated instead on their own
> responsibility for centuries of oppression, the failure of civil
> rights legislation, the hypocrisy of their fathers, brothers, etc."[45]

The delegates decided, by a 3 to 1 ratio, to unconditionally approve the resolution.

They did so, however, not because they genuinely shared the political sentiments echoed

in the resolution but because, put quite simply, they felt guilty. One Maryland delegate

commented, "I don't agree with any of [the resolution]. I just think we have to make

some gesture."[46] Indeed, the only common ground that the white peaceniks and the black

militants ended up finding related not to policy issues, but to a mutual contempt for the

white power structure specifically and whiteness generally. Blumenthal commented that

"what the whites [at the New Politics convention] offered the blacks was contempt for the

white middle class – springing from self contempt – that affirmed something about the

power of being black. But", he continues, "that self-contempt…would cut the whites off

[44] Richard Blumenthal, "New Politics at Chicago". *The Nation*, September 25, 1967, page 274
[45] Ibid, page 274
[46] Ibid, page 274

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from their potential constituency,"[47] average Americans who did not share their distaste for the white race.

As Blumenthal observed, the concept of "white guilt" as a driving force behind white support and sympathy for the Black Power movement thus also exposes the fundamental problems with white involvement in Black Power. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and self-doubt, and fearing opposing uncompromising Black Power resolutions or violent militant tactics out of unwillingness to be deemed a "wimp" or, worse, a "racist", many whites let their own emotions – rather than genuine consideration and support of Black Power policies – dictate their involvement in the movement, precluding any rational discussion of the merits of Black Power among whites. This was not just true of weary college deans or guilt-ridden conference delegates, who did not actually involve themselves in the Black Power movement but rather accepted its authority; this was also true of many white radicals who enthusiastically became part of the Black Panther fray. While Stew Albert refers to the mutual rage towards cultural repression that white radicals and black militants shared, he spends most of his essay on his involvement with Black Power referring not to shared political tendencies but to the sense of masculine fulfillment, release from his insecurity about being a "mama's darling", and pride he got from being involved with a "hot Black organization"[48] such as the Black Panthers. Accusations from Black Power leaders that whites were merely "play[ing] in the doll's house of revolution"[49] contributed to the emotional insecurity of whites and made them more likely to involve themselves in violent Black Power protests that wouldn't have appealed to them 2 years before. In *Black Power and Student*

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[47] Ibid, page 274
[48] Albert, page
[49] McEvoy and Miller, page 42

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Rebellion, Daniel Bell describes how the 1968 Columbia protest was transformed from a SDS-led sit-in to an institutional siege by the addition of black militants into the struggle. The militants, playing on white insecurity about their revolutionary merit and their general sensitivity about race in general, were able to draw whites into the mantra of "first deeds, then words". Says Bell, "What mattered at the time was that the blacks had 'acted'. Given the touchiness, fear, sensitivity, and guilt about the blacks that is so predominant in liberal society, their action provided a guise of legitimacy for the extreme tactic of uncivil disobedience."[50]

As Peter Collier and David Horowitz argue, one of the lasting legacies of the Sixties was the creation of "splinter groups, special interest organizations, and newly minted 'minorities', whose only common belief was that America was guilty and untrustworthy."[51] This was particularly true about the tenuous merger between white radicals and liberals and Black Power militants: they shared a mutual anger towards the American power structure and, ultimately, rage towards the deceits and oppression of the white race altogether. Indeed, the Sixties was the first time the white race had been exposed to its failings on a mass scale: a significant moment because it ultimately created the "liberal guilt" in race relations that is so omnipresent today. However, equally – if not more – significant was what the white radicals and black militants did *not* share. Much of the success of the Black Power movement in black communities was due to the overt brutality blacks in ghettos had suffered for decades: the uncompromising arms-bearing and power-seizing of the Black Panthers was appealing because it offered an alternative to the powerlessness of unjust policing, as well as a way to seize back the

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[50] Bell, page 43
[51] Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties.* New York: Summit Books, 1989, page 15.

dignity of being black after years of self-denial. For many whites, however, Black Power offered an alternative to the white society that they had been a part of for so long: a society that some like Jerry Rubin claimed treated them like outcasts, but a society that they could always rejoin and have considerable power in nonetheless (perhaps evidenced by Rubin's later conversion from a radical Cleaver-compatriot Yippie to an enterprising yuppie). For these whites, Black Power was appealing more for its glamour and "badass" revolutionary aura than for the actual policies it promoted – in fact, like even the overeducated liberals at the Chicago New Politics convention, few actually could articulate the political stances of Black Power and its organizations. As Peter Collier, former member of *Ramparts* magazine and Newton supporter, put it, "[My radical actions were] all the political equivalent of a fashion statement; all this had to do with how I wanted to be *seen*."[52] The always-fuzzy lines between political and cultural dissidence, between selfless activism and selfish activism, had become even vaguer in the self-conscious revolutionary fervor of the late '60s. This was especially true of white involvement in the Black Power movement, as it represented self-consciousness not only about revolutionary merit but also about racial identity altogether. Whites' search for meaning and exodus from the white middle-class showed itself in the form of Huey Newton posters on dorm-room walls and denouncements of "pigs" in university halls.

Clearly, what emerges is a class of white students and older liberals who were sure about the corruptions of their race – but unsure about how to remedy them. Their flight from white culture is aptly described by Theodore Roszak, who was writing about college students dropping out of college to join social movements generally but could be referring to whites' flight from the white race altogether. He said, "One may flippantly

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[52] Collier, page 255

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construe this exodus as the contemporary version of running off with the circus, but the more apt parallel might be with the quest of 3rd century Christians (a scruffy, uncouth, and often half-mad lot) for escape from the corruptions of Hellenistic society: it is much more a flight *from* than *toward*."[53] And, often, this flight towards the supposed "authenticity" of black culture in the form of Black Power was rife with naïve racial assumptions: many white males, for example, were drawn to the hypersexual image of the black man promoted by Eldridge Cleaver in his book *Soul on Ice*, a view which merely perpetuates the long-held stereotype of black males as primitive and primal. If whites truly wanted to work towards racial equality, they perhaps should've done what Stokey Charmichael had demanded all along: work towards justice and racial understanding in the very white, middle-class communities they had abandoned. Such a venture, beyond just being more fruitful in the cause of racial equality than violent Black Power protests, would have also given the white activists an identity greater than the incomplete and often stereotype-based self-conceptions they derived from involvement with Black Power. Even Gary Howard, after being made to realize the evils of white dominance, came to acknowledge that he would be most helpful to the struggle working not with Black Power leaders, but in the belly of the beast: white suburban America. He observed,

> "I saw that my intense identification with the "Other" had been part
> of a continuing effort to distance myself from the distasteful aspects
> of being White. I had spent my adult life looking for meaning in
> other people's culture, and now it was time to find it in my own."[54]

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[53] Theodore Roszak, "Youth and the Great Refusal". *The Nation*, March 25th 1968, page 401.
[54] Howard, page 221

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