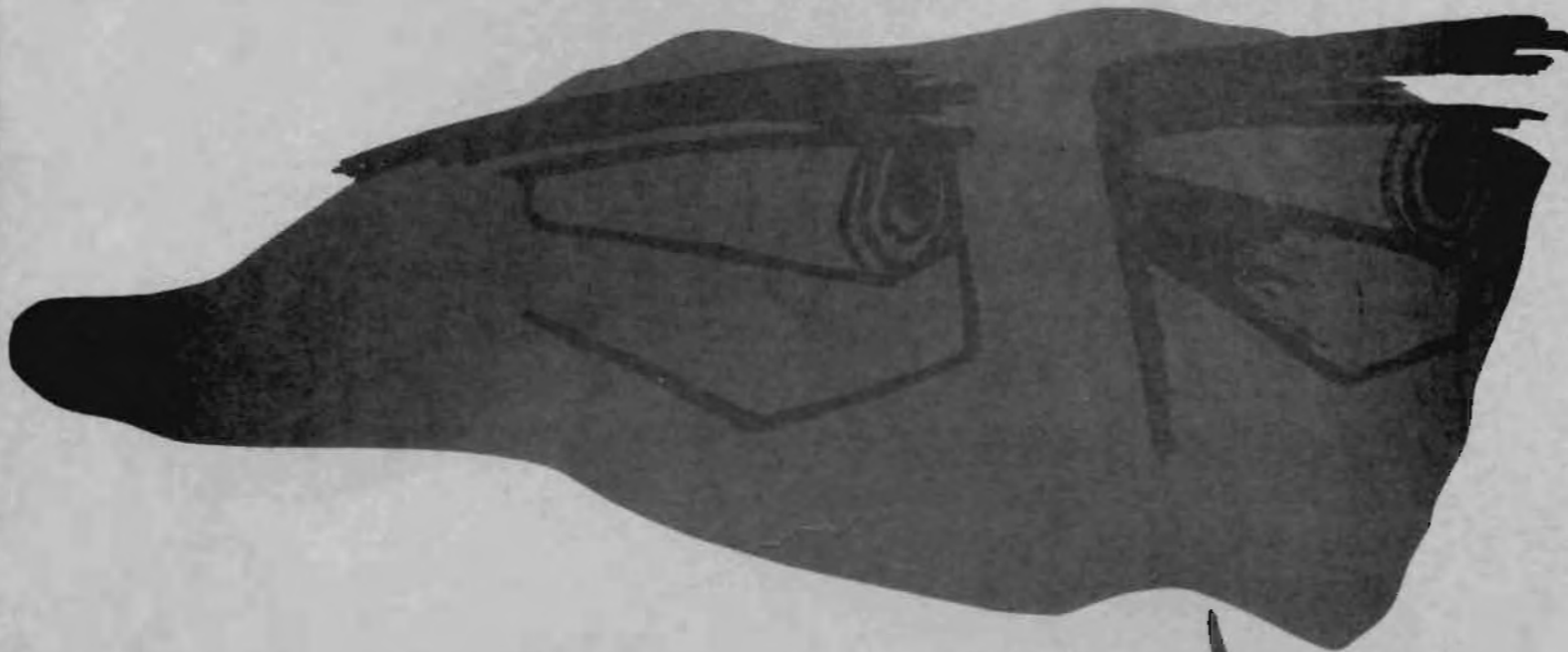


BLACK POWER



A Reprint of a
Position Paper for the
SNCC Vine City Project



UNITED STATES NATIONAL STUDENT ASSOCIATION

This paper is only incidentally about the civil rights movement, though surely its theme is strongly effecting the movement. It was prepared just prior to SNCC's formal statement of Black Power.

If the ideas which the paper contains about the relationships between people are read and understood honestly they must necessarily cause a careful and perhaps painful rethinking of those relationships. If they are misused, as ammunition for misconceptions, then we shall have only heightened antagonism and misunderstanding.

The paper speaks for itself. All that need be added is that it should be read with an open mind.

Stephen Arons
Civil Rights Director
USNSA

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was prepared by several members of the Atlanta Project. The Atlanta Project is an affiliate of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee which is working in the Vine City area of Atlanta on urban ghetto organizing. The position paper is not official policy of SNCC, but represents the thinking of most individuals on the Atlanta Project and some other individuals in the civil rights movement.

The questions raised in this paper are not easy to articulate. Commitment and honesty were necessary for people to take painful experiences and formalize them into the kind of thinking you will find here.

Be responsible about what is said. Be honest in your reactions to what is said. Try to evaluate the experiences you will be having in Mississippi in the light of this paper.

Starkly stated, this paper is asking you to consider at every moment of your presence in the Negro community, whether or not you should be there. Keep asking yourself why you are there, what you can learn, what tensions are created by your presence.

PREFACE

In attempting to analyse where the movement is going, certain questions have arisen as to the future roles played by white personnel. In order to make this issue clearer, we have written a few paragraphs, stemming from our observations and experiences, which serve as a preview to a broader study on the subject.

The answers to these questions lead us to believe that the form of white participation, as practiced in the past, is now obsolete. Some of the reasons are as follows:

The inability of whites to relate to the cultural aspects of Black society; attitudes that whites, consciously or unconsciously, bring to Black communities about themselves (western superiority) and about Black people (paternalism); inability to shatter white-sponsored community myths of Black inferiority and self-negation; inability to combat the views of the Black community that white organizers, being "white", control Black organizers as puppets; insensitivity of both Black and white workers towards the hostility of the Black community on the issue of interracial "relationships" (sex); the unwillingness of whites to deal with the roots of racism which lie within the white community; whites, though individual "liberals", are symbols of oppression to the Black community--due to the collective power that whites have over Black lives.

Because of these reasons, which force us to view America through the eyes of victims, we advocate a conscious change in the role of whites, which will be in tune with the developing self-consciousness and self-assertion of the Afro-American people.

In concluding, we state that our position does not stem from "hatred" or "racism" against white people, but from a conscientious effort to develop the best methods of solving our national problem.

I

The myth that the Negro is somehow incapable of liberating himself, is lazy, etc. came out of the American experience. In the books that children read, whites are always "good" (good symbols are white), Blacks are "evil" are seen as "savages" in movies, their language is referred to as a "dialect", and Black people in this country are supposedly descended from savages.

Any white person who comes into the Movement has these concepts in his mind about Black people, if only subconsciously. He cannot escape them because the whole society has geared his subconscious in that direction.

Miss America coming from Mississippi has a chance to represent all of America, but a Black person from neither Mississippi nor New York will ever represent America. So that white people coming into the Movement cannot relate to the "Nitty Gritty", cannot relate to the experience that brought such a word into being, cannot relate to chitterlings, hog's head cheese, pig feet, ham hocks, and cannot relate to slavery, because these things are not a part of their experience. They also cannot relate to the Black religious experience, nor to the Black church unless, of course, this church has taken on white manifestations.

Negroes in this country have never been allowed to organize themselves because of white interference. As a result of this, the stereotype has been reinforced that Blacks cannot organize themselves. The white psychology that Blacks have to be watched, also reinforces this stereotype. Blacks, in fact, feel intimidated by the presence of whites, because of their knowledge of the power that whites have over their lives. One white person can come into a meeting of Black people and change the complexion of that meeting, whereas one Black person would not change the complexion of that meeting unless he was an obvious Uncle Tom. People would immediately start talking about "brotherhood", "love", etc.; race would not be discussed.

If people must express themselves freely, there has to be a climate in which they can do this. If Blacks feel intimidated by whites, then they are not liable to vent the rage that they feel about whites in the presence of whites--- especially not that one is anti-white, but because the efforts that one is trying to achieve cannot succeed because whites have an intimidating effect is in direct proportion to the amount of degradation that Black people have suffered at the hands of white people.

It must be offered that white people who desire change in this country should go, where that problem (of racism) is most manifest. That problem is not in the Black community. The white people should go into white communities where the whites have created power for the express purpose of denying Blacks human dignity and self-determination. Whites who come into the Black community with ideas of change seem to want to absolve the power structure of its responsibility for what is doing, and saying that change can only come through Black unity, which is only the worst kind of paternalism. This is not to say that whites have not had an important role in the Movement. In the case of Mississippi, their role was very key in that they helped give Blacks the right to organize, but that role is now over, and it should be. People now have the right to picket, the right to give out leaflets, the right to vote, the right to demonstrate, the right to print.

These things which revolve around the right to organize have been accomplished mainly because of the entrance of white people into Mississippi, in the summer of '64. Since these goals have now been accomplished, their (whites) role in the Movement has now ended. What does it mean if Black people, once having the right to organize, are not allowed to organize themselves? It means that Black's ideas about inferiority are being reinforced. Shouldn't people be able to organize themselves? Blacks should be given this right. Further (white participation) means in the eyes of the Black community that whites are the "brains" behind the Movement and Blacks cannot function without whites. This only serves to perpetuate existing attitude within the existing society, i.e., Blacks are "dumb", "unable to take care of business", etc. Whites are "smart", the "brains" behind everything.

How do Blacks relate to other Blacks as such? How do we react to Willie Mays as against Mickey Mantle? What is our response to Mays hitting a home-run against Mantle performing the same deed? Is our interest in baseball ordered by our appreciation of the artistry of the game, or it is ordered by the participation of Negroes in Baseball? One has to come to the conclusion that it is because of Black participation in baseball. Negroes still identify with the Dodgers because of Jackie Robinson's efforts with the Dodgers. Negroes would instinctively champion all-Black teams if they opposed all-white or predominately white teams. The same principle operates for the Movement as it does for baseball: a mystique must be created whereby Negroes can identify with the Movement.

Thus an all-Black project is needed in order for the people to free themselves. This has to exist from the beginning. This relates to what can be called "coalition politics". There is no doubt in our minds that some whites are just as disgusted with this system as we are. But it is meaningless to talk about coalition if there is no one to align ourselves with, because of the lack of organization in the white communities. There can be no talk of "hooking-up" unless Black people organize Blacks and white people organize whites. If these conditions are met, then perhaps at some later date--and if we are going in the same direction--talks about exchange of personnel, coalition, and other meaningful alliances can be discussed.

In the beginning of the Movement, we had fallen into a trap whereby we thought that our problems revolved around the right to eat at certain lunch counters or the right to vote, or to organize our communities. We have seen, however, that the problem is much deeper. The problem of this country, as we had seen it, concerned old Blacks and old whites (and therefore) if decisions were left to the young people, then solutions would be arrived at. But this negates the history of Black people and whites. We have dealt stringently with the problem of "Uncle Tom", but we have not yet gotten around to Simon Legree. We must ask ourselves who is the real villain? Uncle Tom or Simon Legree? Everybody knows Uncle Tom, but who knows Simon Legree?

So what we have now (in SNCC) is a closed society. A clique. Black people cannot relate to SNCC, because of its unrealistic, non racial atmosphere; denying their experiences of America as a racist society. In contrast, SCLC has a staff that at least maintains a Black facade. The front office is virtually all-Black, but nobody accuses SCLC of being "racist".

If we are to proceed towards true liberation, we must cut ourselves off from white people...We must form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops,

political parties, write our own histories. One illustrating example, is the SNCC "Freedom Primer". Blacks cannot relate to that book psychologically, because white people wrote it and, therefore it presents a white viewpoint.

To proceed further, let us make some comparisons between the Black Movement of the (early) 1900's and the Movement of the 1960's--the NAACP with SNCC. Whites subverted the Niagra Movement which, at the outset, was an all-Black Movement. The name of the new organization was also very revealing, in that it presupposed that Blacks have to be advanced to the level of whites. We are now aware that the NAACP has grown reactionary, is controlled by the power-structure itself, and stands as one of the main roadblocks to Black freedom. SNCC, by allowing the whites to remain in the organization, can have its efforts subverted in the same manner, i.e., through having them play important roles such as community organizers, etc. Indigenous leadership cannot be built with whites in the positions they now hold.

These facts do not mean that whites cannot help. They can participate on a voluntary basis. We can contract work out to them, but in no way can they participate on a policy-making level.

The charge may be made that we are "racists", but whites who are sensitive to our problems will realize that we must determine our own destiny. We, as Black people, must re-evaluate our history, our ideas of self, the world, Africa and her contributions to mankind. We must take the credit for our contributions to this society and to the world. Credit will be given to white people where it is due, but surely our contributions must be given credit. These myths (of inferiority and "savagery") must be broken by Black people, so that no mistake can be made about who is accomplishing what for whom. This is one way to break the myths.

As to the charge of "Black racism", as against white supremacy: we can say that the racial makeup of any organization does not make it racist, i.e., supreme court makeup of all white judges, Black churches and Black businesses being all Black.

The naming of the newspaper, "Nitty-Gritty", which served to polarize the feelings of race, illustrated in a very graphic manner the attitudes that whites have towards cultural aspects of our society. The whites were opposed to the name and Blacks ere affirmative on the issue. The alternative was the "Atlanta Voice" surely such a name could not speak to the needs of grass-roots Black people.

Black people can say to the "Nitty-Gritty": I can see myself there. Can say to Mays hitting a home run: I see myself there. Can say to the Atlanta Project: I see myself there!

II

In an attempt to resolve an internal crises that is now confronting SNCC, the Black-White issue (which is causing eruptions that are seriously hampering our struggle for self-determination) must now be dealt with.

In an analysis of our history in this country, we have been forced to come to the conclusion that 400 years of oppression and slavery suffered in this country by our Black forebears parallels in a very graphic way the oppression and colonization suffered by the African people. The questions can be rightfully asked, what part did the white colonizers play in the liberation of independent African Nations; who were the agitators for African independence? Answers to those questions compel us to believe that our struggle for liberation and self-determination can only be carried out effectively by Black people.

The necessity of dealing with the question of identity is of prime importance in our own struggle. The systematic destruction of our links to Africa, the cultural cut-off of Blacks in this country from Blacks in Africa are not situations that conscious Black people in this country are willing to accept. Nor are conscious Black people in this country willing to accept an educational system that teaches all aspects of western civilization and dismisses our Afro-American contribution with one week of inadequate information (Negro History Week) and deals with Africa not at all. Black people are not willing to align themselves with a western culture that daily emasculates our beauty, our pride and our manhood. It follows that white people, being part of western civilization in a way that Black people could never be, are totally inadequate to deal with Black identity which is key to our struggle for self-determination.

When it comes to the question of organizing Black people, we must insist that the people who come in contact with the Black masses are not white people who, no matter what their liberal leanings are, are not equipped to dispel the myths of western superiority. White people only serve to perpetuate these myths; rather, organizing must be done by Black people who are able to see the beauty of themselves, are able to see the important cultural contributions of Afro-Americans, are able to see that this country was built upon the blood and backs of our Black ancestors.

In an attempt to find a solution to our dilemma we propose that our organization (SNCC) should be Black staffed, Black controlled and Black financed. We do not want to fall into a similar dilemma that other Civil Rights organizations have fallen. If we continue to rely upon white financial support we will find ourselves entwined in the tentacles of the white power complex that controls this country. It is also important that a Black organization (devoid of cultism) be projected to our people so that it can be demonstrated that such organizations are viable.

More and more we see Black people in this country being used as a tool of the white liberal establishment. Liberal whites have not begun to address themselves to the real problems of Black people in this country; witness their bewilderment, fear and anxiety when Nationalism is mentioned concerning Black people. An analysis of their (white liberal) reaction to the word alone (Nationalism) reveals a very meaningful attitude of whites of any ideological persuasion towards Blacks in this country. It means that previous solutions to Black problems in this country have been made in the interests of those whites dealing with those problems and not in the best interests of Black people in this country. Whites can only subvert our true search and struggle for self-determination, self-identification, and liberation in this country. Re-evaluation of the white and Black roles must NOW take place so that whites no longer designate roles that Black people play but rather Black people define white people's roles.

Too long have we allowed white people to interpret the importance and meaning of the cultural aspects of our society. We have allowed them to tell us what was good about our Afro-American music, art and literature. How many Black critics do we have on the "jazz" scene? How can a white person who is not a part of the Black psyche (except in the oppressor's role) interpret the meaning of the Blues to us who are manifestations of the songs themselves?

It must also be pointed out that on whatever level of contact that Blacks and whites come together, that meeting or confrontation is not on the level of the Blacks but always on the level of whites. This only means that our everyday contact with whites is a reinforcement of the myth of white supremacy. Whites are the ones who must try to raise themselves to our humanistic level. We are not, after all, the ones who are responsible for a genocidal war in Vietnam; we are not the ones who are responsible for Neo-Colonialism in Africa and Latin America; we are not the ones who held a people in animalistic bondage over 400 years.

We reject the American Dream as defined by white people and must work to construct an American reality defined by Afro-Americans.

III

One point we would like to emphasize is the failure on the part of conscious whites and Blacks in dealing with the American reality in terms of differences. We are beginning to emphasize the analysis of the differences between Black and white people.

There has been an escapist attitude on the part of SNCC of looking at the problem as if race did not matter. This negates the special history of Black people in this country, mainly the slavery period and the inhuman forms of segregation we have been forced to suffer. Another important point is that most Blacks and whites tend to view Blacks in the light of the myth that the power structure has created and perpetrated in this country. Black people are considered as "citizens" along the same lines as white people in this country, when in reality, Black people are a semi-colonialized people, victims of a domestic colonialism. Our introduction into this country occurred during the same time as the partition of Africa and Asia by the European powers, so that the American institution of slavery was, too, a form of Western Colonialism. Therefore Black people in this country react in the same way as do other colonial peoples to their environment and experience; but the myths of America label them citizens, which is an unreal attitude.

Also, one of the main blocks in terms of Black self-recognition and self-identification in this country has been interference from the dominant white society. From the 1900's to the present time Afro-American writers and thinkers have had to contend with the encroachment of white intellectuals upon their culture and upon their thoughts. Not only did the white intellectuals encroach upon their thought and culture but they brought to it their whole American background of racism and paternalism so that Black culture was portrayed as something being base, second-rate or below the culture of the United States, which was considered "serious" or "real". One graphic example of this is modern Afro-American music. This music which is rooted in the whole experience of our people in this country was not even named by Black people. Modern

Afro - American music is named "jazz", which is a term that is derived from white American society. It is white slang for sexual intercourse; so that our music which may be called the mainstream of our culture was looked upon as being base and second-rate or dirty and containing sensuousness, sexuality and other eroticisms. This however says more about the white American psyche than it does about aspects of Afro-American culture.

One of the criticisms of white militants and radicals is that when we view the masses of white people we view the overall reality of America. We view the racism, the bigotry, and distortion of personality, we view man's inhumanity to man; we view in reality 180 million racists. The sensitive white intellectual and radical who is fighting to bring about change is conscious of this fact, but does not have the courage to admit this. When he admits this reality, then he must also admit his involvement because he is a part of the collective white America. It is only to the extent that he recognizes this that he will be able to change this reality. Another concern is how does the white radical view the Black Community and how does he view the poor white community in terms of organizing. So far, we have found that most white radicals have sought to escape the horrible reality of America by going into the Black Community and attempting to organize Black people while neglecting the organization of their own people's racist communities. How can one clean up someone else's yard when one's own yard is untidy? Again we feel that SNCC and the civil rights movement in general is in many aspects similar to the anti-colonial situations in the African and Asian countries. We have the whites in the Movement corresponding to the white civil servants and missionaries in the colonial countries who have worked with the colonial people for a long period of time and have developed a paternalistic attitude toward them. The reality of the colonial people taking over their own lives and controlling their own destiny must be faced. Having to move aside and letting this natural process of growth and development taking place must be faced. These views should not be equated with outside influence or outside agitation but should be viewed as the natural process of growth and development within a movement; so that the move by the Black militants in SNCC in this direction should be viewed as a turn towards self-determination.

It is very ironic and curious how aware whites in this country can champion anti-colonialism in other countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but when Black people move towards similar goals of self-determination in this country they are viewed as racists and anti-white by these same progressive whites. In proceeding further, it can be said that this attitude derives from the overall point of view of the white psyche as it concerns the Black people. This attitude stems from the era of the slave revolts when every white man was a potential deputy or sheriff or guardian of the State. Because when Black people got together among themselves to work out their problems, it became a threat to white people, because such meetings were potential slave revolts. It can be maintained that this attitude or way of thinking has perpetuated itself to this current period and that it is part of the psyche of white people in this country whatever their political persuasion might be. It is part of the white fear-guilt complex resulting from the slave revolts. There have been examples of whites who stated that they can deal with Black fellows on an individual basis but become threatened or menaced by the presence of groups of Blacks. It can be maintained that this attitude is held by the majority of progressive whites in this country.

It is a very grave error to mistake Black self-assertion for racism or Black supremacy. Black people in this country more so than the colonial peoples

of the world know what it means to be victims of racism, bigotry, and slavery . Realizing our predicament from these inhuman attitudes it would be ridiculous for us to turn around and perpetuate the same reactionary outlook on other people. We more than anyone else realize the importance of achieving the type of society, the type of world, whereby people can be viewed as human beings. The means of reaching these goals must be, however, from the point of view of respecting the differences between peoples and cultures and not pretending that everyone is the same. The refusal to respect differences is one of the reasons that the world is exploding today. Also expanding upon the differences among peoples and the respect it should be accorded: if one looks at "integration" as progress then one is really perpetuating the myth of white supremacy. One is saying that Blacks have nothing to contribute, and should be willing to assimilate into the mainstream of Great white civilization, i.e. the west.

A thorough re-examination must be made by Black people concerning the contributions that we have made in shaping this country. If this re-examination and re-evaluation is not made, and Black people are not given their proper due and respect, then the antagonisms and contradictions are going to become more and more glaring, more and more intense until a national explosion may result.

When people attempt to move from these conclusions it would be faulty reasoning to say they are ordered by racism, because, in this country and in the west, Racism has functioned as a type of white nationalism when dealing with Black people. We all know the havoc that this has created through-out the world and particularly among non-white people in this country.

Therefore any re-evaluation that we must make will, for the most part, deal with identification. Who are Black people; what are Black people; what is their relationship to America and the World?

It must be repeated that the whole myth of "Negro Citizenship", perpetuated by the White Power Elite, has confused the thinking of radical and progressive Blacks and whites in this country. The broad masses of Black people react to American Society in the same manner as colonial peoples react to the west in Africa and Latin American, and have the same relationship--that of the colonized towards the colonizer.