

The Stresses of the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement
in the South

by

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"I think that Negroes really do feel that they are inferior and, therefore, they feel that any white woman who associates with Negroes is really less than the 'All-American,' respected woman in white society and that something is wrong with her or she is just down here for sex with Negro men." This declaration came from a somewhat dismayed white female civil rights worker who had been working in the South for over a year.

Whatever the varied motivations that bring white females to work in the civil rights movement in the South, once arrived they find themselves at the center of an emotionally shattering cross-fire of racial tensions, fears, and hatreds that have been nurtured for centuries. Whatever their prior strengths and good intentions, few are able to cope with the personal tensions generated by this cross-fire.

These white girls come to live and work with black people in the home territory of the creators of the myth of "sacred white womanhood." This situation is for them one that is both psychologically nerve-racking and often physically dangerous. These young ladies are completely rejected by the local white community and are sometimes treated with scorn and derision. Because they are violating the most cherished mores of the "Southern-way-of-life," they must sustain the most vile type of verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse from the local whites. This is stress enough for anyone, and to endure it requires a good supply of emotional fortitude and courage.

However, the white female workers, by and large, anticipated this type of rejection by the white community, and for that reason it was a bit easier to deal with than the little suspected difficulties they encountered in the black community. It is the superimposed stresses that come with living and working with the Negro community that send many of these girls scurrying back home.

The white woman stands at the very center of the "Southern-way-of-life," for the Negro she is the tabooed and revered object. It has been in her name and for her glory that the white South has oppressed, brutalized, lynched, and mutilated the black man for centuries. Violation of the socio-sexual taboos surrounding the white woman has frequently meant instant death for the Negro, particularly the Negro male. Against this backdrop, the Negro community suddenly finds a white woman (a civil rights worker) sharing its homes, food, and social activities. What reactions must this call forth from the southern Negro? And, how is the white female worker to withstand and cope with them?

In the first place, the Negro civil rights workers did not want white girls to come to work in the South because they were aware of many of the problems their presence would create. Although white males worked in the "Movement" for many years in the South, white females were not allowed to participate freely until the summer of 1964. Many of the project leaders would not accept white girls in their areas, because of the heightened prospect of racist violence when they were present. Some rejected them because they had the foresight to see them as a disruptive influence in interpersonal staff relations. When the white girls arrived they had to face outright bitterness and hostility

from most Negro workers, who opposed their participation.

To be sure that the white girls do not mistake the type of welcome they are receiving, some of the Negro middle-class joins in rejecting them. Ever mindful of the Southern taboos surrounding white womanhood and protective of their own slightly advantaged position, they become apprehensive and often extend no welcome to the Caucasian workers. Instead they frequently may identify with the local whites in calling them "white trash, beatniks," etc. The white workers who generally come from a middle-class background and have some college education find themselves residing (usually by choice) in the homes of the poverty-stricken and poorly educated Negroes. The white workers must make adjustments to the socio-economic and cultural situation as well as the racial situation. During this initial period they suffer anxiety which can generally be described as a "cultural shock" reaction similar to that experienced by Peace Corps volunteers in foreign countries. Many of the white workers do not survive this early adjustment period and return home, but there are many social tensions awaiting those who remain.

Usually, the Negro family with which the worker resides will make a "fuss" over her. She is treated with adulation and reverence, and frequently over-indulged. Often, the Negro behaves toward her obsequiously. She is addressed with "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am" or by her first name with a courtesy title, such as "Miss Helen, Miss Frances," etc. Needless to say, this makes the white female of a liberal background feel extremely uneasy and guilty. This leads to a degree of anxiety which is in part determined by the worker's own unconscious attitudes toward "colored folks." Sometimes, the worker

is able to handle this situation simply by requesting that she be addressed only by her first name without a courtesy title. However, Negroes frequently will continue to address her as "Miss Ann" because they perceive that it makes her uncomfortable, and thus it is a good weapon for the expression of hostility. It is not uncommon to hear Negro civil rights workers continue to address long-term (over a year) white female workers as "Miss Joan, Miss Lucille, etc." in a jesting manner. However, this jesting is often nothing more than thinly veiled hostility, which serves as a constant reminder to the white female that she is not fully accepted or trusted.

For all the efforts she might make to be treated "just like everybody else" in the Negro community, the white female worker often cannot escape being victimized as a "special person." For instance, she may unwittingly capture a good deal of publicity in the mass media. The national press began paying more attention to civil rights activity in the South after the white female joined it in the summer of 1964. Nearly every major magazine carried a story portraying a young white coed at work uplifting the poor black folks in the South. More attention was paid by the nation and more protection was forthcoming whenever the white female was a victim of any type of racist violence. The national attention given the white female serves to remind the Negro that he is only a "second-class person" within the American culture. A young Negro female worker bitterly exclaimed to me: "We've been getting beaten-up for years trying to integrate lunch counters, movies, and so-on, but nobody has ever paid us no attention or wrote about us. But, these white girls come down here for a few months and get all the publicity. Every-

body talks about how brave and courageous they are. What about us?" This sentiment was expressed frequently by Negro civil rights workers, and was responsible for a generalized resentment toward the white workers, particularly the female.

Feelings that whites "are trying to take over our Movement" were more often directed at the white female than at the male. The white girls were periodically made the scape-goats for most of the difficulties any particular project was having. It was she who was blamed when the program was not running properly or the staff got bogged down in "black-white relations." When resentful feelings were highest among the Negro workers, one often overheard: "Those white bitches should all go home"! This sentiment was sometimes expressed directly to the white girls and attempts were made to isolate them socially and psychologically.

The Negro female workers in particular are unhappy with the presence of the white female. Negro women tend to have a generalized deep-seated resentment toward white women because of society's superior valuation of "white standards of beauty." Negro women must live with the frustration that, no matter how much they straighten their hair or bleach their skins, they can never be quite "white." In addition, they see white female civil rights workers as competitors for "their Negro men;" and since the Negro man has been brain-washed for centuries with "sacred white womanhood," many of the Negro girls see these white girls as "unfair competition." During the summer quite a number of local Negro female workers came to see me, acutely depressed because they had lost their boyfriends to white girls. These young ladies were extremely bitter and hostile toward white

girls and frequently attacked them verbally. The Negro girls were particularly distrustful and suspicious about their motivations. A seventeen-year-old Negro girl who was somewhat upset that her boy-friend had just broken up with her to pay his attentions to a white girl bitterly remarked, "I think all these white girls down here sat up North dreaming about being raped by some big black Negro and came down here to see what it was like!" No matter what the actual personal behavior of the white girl, she is accused by both white and black Southerners of having a perverse sexual interest in Negro men. She, therefore, becomes the target of many lewd and vulgar accusations and insinuations. The white girls thus have to work in an atmosphere in which they are considered "fallen women."

As might be expected, a major part of the stress and tension the white female undergoes has to do with her relations with Negro men. His reactions to her are characterized by ambivalence. The white woman has been the supreme "tabooed object" for the Southern Negro male. Suddenly, he finds a white girl working side by side with him who "accepts him as a person." How is he to deal with the mixture of feelings of adoration, fear, and hate for the cherished symbol of the "Southern-way-of-life"? His first reactions are generally those of fear and uneasiness in her presence. He first treats her with great deference, but views her with distrust. He may adore her "whiteness" and hate her at the same time as the symbol of his oppression. One young Negro fellow blurted out to me, "Whenever I'm around one of these white girls, I don't know whether I feel like kissing her or punching her in the mouth!"

Since, the Negro male generally has come to believe inwardly

many of the white man's ideas of his inferiority, he may tend to think that any white female who associates with Negroes must be some type of outcast or herself some inferior person. Thus, imbued with his own self-hatred, the Negro male paradoxically finds himself hating the white female worker because she is working and living with Negroes. For psychological compensation, he may believe in the myth of his own sexual superiority and come to suspect that the white girls must be "hanging around" for sexual reasons. At the same time, because of the rage he feels toward the white world and the white woman as the "forbidden fruit," the Negro man consciously or unconsciously will come to view sexual intimacy with the white girls as a weapon of revenge against white society. To make sexual overtures to the white female workers is frequently used as a direct expression of hostility and harassment. Some of the Negro men, in a defense against their attraction to the white girls, develop a reaction-formation of anger and beligerence when in their presence.

How do the white females respond to and cope with these reactions to them? Frequently they are overwhelmed by the anger directed toward them. They have frequently come to see me, weeping because they are unable to cope with "black-white relations." Many feel extremely guilty because they develop some "anti-Negro" feelings in response to the anger directed at them. Several white girls left the South saying to me, "I hate all Negroes." Other white females try to deal with their anger or guilt by magical hopes of becoming Negro. One young girl left my office after a discussion of these problems, sobbing, "I wish I was black. Oh! I wish I was black." The white female worker feels continually the acute pain of non-acceptance and rejection.

Some of the white girls, because of the degree of their maturity and insight, are able to handle this rejection and still remain functioning and productive. They usually are not plagued with a pathological guilt that makes it necessary for them to constantly "suffer." They are able to get angry with Negroes as individuals without feeling they are not being "understanding enough." They are, therefore, able to "set limits" and are not totally "permissive" in their relations with Negro co-workers. They characteristically are able to accept unpleasantries of the moment in order to work toward the larger good.

However, a number of white females often contribute to their own difficulties in the Negro community (and I would like to direct particular attention to this problem). They may bring with them certain psychological attitudes (often unconscious and in different degrees) which can generally be referred to as the "White-African-Queen Complex." At the center of this "complex" is commonly found a tabooed and repressed fantasy of the intelligent, brave, and beautiful white woman leading the poor, down-trodden, and oppressed black men to freedom. One white female worker told me she sometimes felt like "the master's child come to free the slaves." Another confided "what an electrifying feeling it is to be worshipped" by the Negroes. Some seem to be overly preoccupied with how frequently they are "propositioned." They see the Negro as someone who has to be "led" and usually, because of their superior office and administrative skills, will work themselves into positions of control and leadership. In their social contacts they want to associate intimately only with the Negro project leaders (or "tribal chiefs," to extend the analogy). Usually their feelings of superiority are exaggerated because of the feelings of inferiority that many of these young women may be struggling with inwardly themselves.

A common manifestation of the "White-African-Queen" complex

is excessive condescension and patronizing of black people. They are over-eager to show how close they are to Negroes, how much they have in common with them, and how "there is really no difference" between themselves and Negroes they encounter. Their manner of speech and behavior around Negroes betrays a note of paternalism (or maternalism, if you wish). They are always doing for the Negro instead of doing with him. One young lady confessed that she felt "very maternal" around Negroes and wanted to do "all I can to help them." Negroes at first tend to see all goodness in the white girls and they may put them on a pedestal and refer to them in an almost holy manner as "such sweet girls." However, as Negroes become aware of their own anger toward whites, the paternalistic condescension of these girls becomes a provocative reminder of the Negroes' "second-class" status in American life, and then black wrath is heaped upon the "white lilies."

Most of the white girls at some point become aware of the secondary emotional satisfaction of being a "white queen" among oppressed black people, and of using the special condition of the Negro to satisfy their own somewhat neurotic grandiose needs. They tend then to react with guilt. The guiltier one such girl becomes, the more she tries to expiate this guilt by distortions in her own behavior which usually involve her in greater difficulty. She may become over-zealous in her work and behave remarkably like a martyr. She may go on a campaign to "prove" herself and to show how committed" she is. This behavior generally leads to accusations on the part of Negroes that she is paternalistic or trying to "take-over" responsibility from black people. In a variety of ways she may pro-

voke verbal attack from Negroes, but she will never respond in turn. She is then accused of feeling Negroes are not "worth enough to fight with" or are to be "understood like psychological cripples." The more she is "permissive" and "understanding" to the Negroes and does not react to them as human beings, the more the invective heaped upon her. Many of the white girls get caught up in a situation where they are "damned if they do, and damned if they don't."

With the Negro workers' support withdrawn and her own emotional resources drained from continued environmental and psychological tension, the white female worker usually finds herself trapped and without strength left to survive emotionally. Most of these girls leave the South in less than six months. Civil rights workers' jargon has it that "they go home all messed up." Those who remain continue to be a focus of outpourings of black anger. These girls aid their survival by withdrawing and remaining as hidden and behind the scenes as possible. Many suffer acute depressions and periodically must leave the scene for weeks or months at a time before they return (if they ever do). The young ladies who unconsciously wished to be "White-African-Queens" have to pay a pretty stiff price for their short reign. Those who remain to work in the South must do so under the tumult of ambivalent, angry black voices shouting, "White girl, go home!"

SUMMARY

White girls who come South to work in the civil rights movement place themselves in a social and psychological cross-fire that for most of them is emotionally shattering. Not only must they withstand the rejection of the southern white community, but the

Negro community as well. Because as white women they are the symbol of the "Southern-way-of-life," their interpersonal relations with Negroes become marred by the scars that centuries of racism have wrought on both their psyche and that of the Negro. They are distrusted, feared, hated, adored, and worshipped all at the same time by their black co-workers.

The more mature females are able to deal with these many difficulties and still remain emotionally integrated and productive. Others may aggravate the situation by neurotic fantasies of superiority which they may bring with them and which can be referred to as the "White-African-Queen Complex." To atone for their guilt, these girls sometimes attempt to be self-sacrificing martyrs; and, given the repressed anger and hatred that white bigotry has created in the soul of the black man, Negroes are more prone to oblige these white girls' fantasies of masochistic atonement. The white female worker becomes the focus (and sometimes scapegoat) for black anger. Most (except the very strong) can only deal with what appears to be a presently irresolvable problem by returning home, and leaving for the time being, the civil rights movement in the South to the Negroes.