

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

SWARTHMORE, PENNSYLVANIA

July 10, 1969

On A Black Cultural Center at Swarthmore

Given the basic racist character of this society, it appears at this point, from the Black perspective, that the most appropriate model for inter-action among the various parts is ^{one} pluralistic in nature. The need for a Black cultural center, to the extent that it addresses a pluralistic social milieu, is not anti-integrationist or segregationist. Indeed, if one wants to promote a meaningfully integrated society, it is imperative that one accept the essential heterogeneity that exists already between Black and White, and that one recognize that integration in any real sense cannot occur until such time as the constituents of these groups are capable of standing independently and determining substantially the course and direction of their own life-style. Black students are not in a position to do so at this time.

A Black cultural center would provide the Black community here opportunities different from, but in addition to, the more general social and cultural life of the College. It would be a means of enriching its cultural/social experience. It is not a move to separate Black students or their interests entirely from the life of the College. Certainly, it would make the Black student feel more involved and less isolated and alienated in this community. The fact is, Black people have trouble identifying with a culture which defines itself as non-Black. And the problem is intensified in an educational institution such as Swarthmore, where powerful deculturation forces are at work on the Black psyche, often contrary to ~~its~~ its wishes and best interests.

What is needed is a base for definition and re-enforcement of Black identity, an anchor in a White sea, a psychological and geographical point of reference. The need will become more acute as the population of the Swarthmore Black community increases, converging a larger number of brothers and sisters who share similar experiences and sentiments (i.e. a strong sense of alienation from the

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predominant cultural dynamics here). The absence of a locale to permit the traditional extended family orientation of Black culture would be potentially disruptive for ^{the} psychological equilibrium of the Black community, which might have dysfunctional consequences for all concerned.

It has been argued that it is 'unfortunate' that Black students want to emphasize a pluralistic model for social interaction, and that integration is the most desirable approach to alleviating 'the problem.' But integration has meant, and still means to the traditional Liberal, that the lines of cultural force be unidirectional, i.e. assimilation. The reality of the present social situation clearly militates against any reciprocity in the de-culturation process.

Moreover, Black students are in the process of defining who they are relative to themselves and to White America. This activity has heretofore manifested itself here with respect to academic concerns. To accept the legitimacy of the grievances expressed previously concerning deficiencies in Admissions and curricular affairs without recognizing the legitimacy and urgency of this grievance is to ignore that ^{these} issues are inextricably related. To ignore the legitimacy of this deficiency is to ignore the fact that Black people are social beings, with distinct and often unique needs, and as such, need adequate and comfortable facilities for ~~their~~ their social welfare, as part of Swarthmore College.

Clearly, present facilities are inadequate and inappropriate. Witness: the recent 'trial' of Domingo and White (charged with creating noise and disturbances in the girls' dorm) ended with a verdict of 'no opinion' because ^{the court} ~~it~~ came to the realization that there are at least two distinctly different life-styles on this campus. In many instances, elements of one cultural pattern may conflict with the other. When this ^{is} aggravated by underlying racial/racist factors, the state of affairs is less than desirable. The inadequacy and inappropriateness of the dormitories ^{have} ~~has~~ caused undue tension on a racial basis in the past when attempts were made to make use of their facilities for social purposes. Cultural pluralism is

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a reality at Swarthmore. The question at this point is if the College will, in creating a healthy situation, recognize its legitimacy, and not permit the perpetuation of the suppression of the cultural patterns of ~~the~~ ^{its} Black community. The 'court' even recommended that social facilities be provided.

More specifically, the physical facility itself would be most functional in helping Swarthmore establish stronger and more effective ties with the surrounding Black communities, in that it could be ^a resource area for information (studying, rapping, etc.) for those persons who found it appealing. The parameters of such a relationship have few boundaries in that SASS and the College would be able to establish healthy relationships with Black youths, adults and parents.

In addition, such a facility would be a major step in providing a situation conducive to meaningful cultural inter-action (or rather, mutual de-culturation), in that it might be utilized periodically as a center for programs geared for the entire College community (e.g. art exhibits, Afro-Am History Week, etc.) and also as the focus for Black freshmen for Orientation Week. The advantages accruing from the former being the absence of scheduling conflicts and related hassles involved with procuring regular facilities, and the rather obvious aesthetic advantage of partaking in activities that would be engendered in an authentic Black Milieu.

Finally, the establishment of a Black cultural house would be visible proof to prospective Black freshmen that Swarthmore is indeed in the process of ridding itself of its cultural arrogance, is earnestly attempting to redefine itself with respect to Black people and their needs, and in so doing, adapting itself to a new situation in the Swarthmore tradition of solid progressivism: vision.

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