

PRISONER OF LOVE: AFFILIATION, SEXUALITY, AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Amy Abugo Ongiri

We should be careful about using those terms that might turn our friends off. The terms "faggot" and "punk" should be deleted from our vocabulary, and especially we should not attach names normally designed for homosexuals to men who are enemies of the people, such as Richard Nixon and John Mitchell. Homosexuals are not enemies of the people.

—Huey P. Newton (1970)

I behaved like a prisoner of love.

—Jean Genet (1981)

French writer Jean Genet revealed in a 1975 interview with German writer Hubert Fichte, "I could only feel at home among people oppressed by color or factions in revolt against whites. Maybe I'm a black who's white or pink, but still black." Apparently, Genet was echoing the views of a generation of elite white intellectuals and artists who articulated a revolutionary subjectivity by identifying with the liberation struggles of oppressed people of African descent around the world.¹ Actors, artists, and intellectuals such as Jean Seberg, Marlon Brando, Bert Schneider, Jean Genet, Leonard Bernstein, Agnes Varda, Jean Paul Sartre, Romain Gary, and political radicals such as Ulrike Meinhof of Germany's Red Army Faction, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin of the Yippies, and Bernardine Dohrn of the Weather Underground all proclaimed an affinity for and affiliation with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and saw the Panthers as providing important models not only for political and social change, but for profound personal transformations.

The Black Panthers became masters at creating a radical visual and discursive language of affiliation and identification that expressed the need for personal involvement in liberatory social and political change. In September 1970 BPP Chairman Huey P. Newton declared at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention that "homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in society. They might be the most oppressed people in society . . . maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary."² Newton was attesting to the complexities that the Panther model of identification articulated as both a theory and

Amy Abugo Ongiri is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

praxis of revolutionary self-making. It is impossible to attribute the widespread appeal of the Black Panther Party to non-African Americans, women, and sexual minorities to the caricatures found in many contemporary accounts that embody a simple phallogentric masculinity and a repository of reductionist racial politics.

This essay examines the ways the models of identification offered by the Black Panther Party created and provoked a radical affiliation among people as far removed from the African American struggle as the openly gay literary artist Jean Genet and Hollywood actress Jean Seberg. It asserts that the Black Panther Party's discourse of affiliation and identification created a space within radical political discourse for gender and sexual outsiders to rearticulate themselves discursively as empowered by their outsider status and association with "revolutionaries." The Black Panther Party differed from other contemporaneous radical political formations of the Black Power era because the leadership was able to promote the empowerment of African Americans while articulating a vision of radical political possibility and change that included the "refiguring of identity" across a broad spectrum of political, gender, and sexual categories.

Black Panther iconography relied on the models of affiliation and identification reflected in the "vanguard model of political activism" proposed by Ernesto "Che" Guevara in *Guerilla Warfare* and later cogently rearticulated by Regis Debray in *Revolution within the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*.³ In *Guerilla Warfare* Che Guevara used the example of the Cuban Revolution to demonstrate the ways in which a small group of revolutionaries could successfully foment revolution in the face of the challenges posed in facing off against a large state-sponsored, professionally trained army. Guevara labeled the heroic group of revolutionaries that he profiled and instructed "el foco" and went on to describe the ways this small committed band of individuals provided a model for those who wished to change history as Guevara and Fidel Castro had done in Cuba. In *Guerilla Warfare* Guevara articulated the "three fundamental conclusions" that "the Cuban revolution revealed."

1. Popular forces can win a war against an army.
2. One does not necessarily have to wait for a revolutionary situation to arise; it can be created.
3. In the under-developed countries of the Americas, rural areas are the best battlefields for revolution.⁴

Regis Debray expanded on the second and third of Guevara's central conclusions by emphasizing the importance of what he would label "armed propaganda." Within Debray's model, reports on revolutionary actions would provoke sympathy for the guerilla struggle and attract people not yet directly

involved in armed conflicts. According to Debray, tactical victories and losses, though important, held less importance than the possibilities the actions would create for mass identification with revolutionary struggle by demonstrating to the dispossessed "that a soldier and a policeman are no more bulletproof than anyone else."⁵ The inevitable losses incurred when a small fighting force encounters a trained army would not necessarily serve as a deterrent in fomenting revolution. Instead, Debray argued that "for a revolutionary, failure is a springboard. As a source of theory it is richer than victory: it accumulates experience and knowledge."⁶ The implication of Guevara's theory of revolution as read through Regis Debray was that win or lose, *el foco* could become a revolutionary vanguard through its exemplary performance.

As the self-proclaimed vanguard party of the political revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panthers placed a high value on "armed propaganda." In an interview Black Panther Chairman Huey P. Newton declared, "We're not a self-defense group in the limited fashion that you usually think of self-defense groups. . . . We think that this educational process is necessary and it's the people who will cause the revolution and we plan to teach the people the strategies and necessary tools to liberate themselves."⁷ Newton continued to echo the primacy of this concern in "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," in emphasizing that "the main function of the party is to awaken the people and to teach them the strategic method of resisting the power structure."⁸ Panther Minister of Education Eldridge Cleaver collapsed the distance between ridicule and revolution when he declared, "A laughed at pig is a dead pig."⁹ Poet LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka in his poem "Black Art" suggested that far from simply being armed propaganda, poems could kill. "We want 'poems that kill.' / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/ guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys/ and take their weapons leaving them dead. . . . / We want a black poem. And a / Black World./ Let the world be a Black Poem."¹⁰ Ultimately, the Panthers, like Baraka, believed in the transformative power of discursive and visual culture not only to define, but to incite political action.

This is a belief echoed and reinforced in Jerry Rubin's 1970 Youth Independent Party or "Yippie Movement" manifesto *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution*, a chronicle of the counterculture movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. *Do It!* included discussions of the Yippies, student rights, antiwar protests, Black Power, and the campaigns to legalize marijuana. Rubin claimed that the Panthers' example represents "far-out guerilla theater" and he emphasized the power of Panther iconography. "Revolution is theater in the streets. The Panther uniform—beret, black leather jacket, gun—helps create the Panther legend. Three Panthers on the street are an army of thousands."¹¹ The Panthers' powerful imagery and discursive culture served as the impetus for an intense identification and sometimes a life-altering affiliation between the Black Panthers and their elite white supporters.

Rubin wrote of the powerful persuasiveness of Panther iconography in translating the experience of Huey P. Newton for a diverse audience:

The Man tried to execute Huey. But millions of people—black people, white people, liberals, radicals, revolutionaries, housewives, doctors, students, professors—identified with Huey. They said black people should arm themselves against the violence of the pigs. Huey's action redefined the situation for all of us.¹²

The Panthers' ability to "redefine the situation for all of us" had already had a transformative effect on the New Left, as Rubin noted in *Do It!* But Panther imagery and ideology impacted political cultures across the globe. Thus on 4 April 1969 when Black Panther Connie Mathews approached Jean Genet, one of the leading European intellectuals of his time, for support, Genet identified so deeply with the Panthers' cause that he left Paris almost immediately for a fundraising tour of the United States.¹³ Genet spent two months in the United States (traveling illegally since the U.S. State Department denied him a visa) speaking on university campuses, often drawing huge crowds. For Genet, the cultural landscape of the United States offered little beyond the radical transformative possibilities that the Panthers represented. In *Prisoner of Love*, his 1981 political memoir, Genet observed, "In white America the Blacks are the characters in which history is written. They are the ink that gives the white page meaning. If they ever disappear, the United States will be nothing but itself to me, and not a struggle growing more and more dramatic."¹⁴

Dismissed as "radical chic" in Tom Wolfe's derisive 1970 bestselling novel of the same name, public and private support for the Black Panther Party among white artists, intellectuals, and sexual minorities was often derided, but rarely examined as a cultural and political phenomenon.¹⁵ To dismiss white affiliation with African American radical causes as "radical chic" is to leave unexplored the complex social, political, and cultural dynamics of the exchange. An exploration of the vanguardism and the politics of representation that brought broad support of the Party from elite intellectuals and artists allows us to examine the ways in which such an exchange was fueled by the seemingly contradictory impulses of Black Panther discourse and iconography. In this instance the connections with the vanguard of the revolution resulted in a deeply personal and transformative identification.

By the late 1960s the combined visual, social, and political power of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements made African Americans potent symbols of political resistance for a wide variety of liberation struggles. Political activist Jerry Farber's popular underground essay, first published in 1969, "The Student as Nigger," differs substantially from novelist Normal Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." Mailer's highly publicized and controversial article explored whites' affinity for African American Jazz culture,

claiming that the African American provided a powerful model for countercultural identification, but not an identification that had an innately political or revolutionary component.¹⁶ Farber, on the other hand, argued that “students are niggers” who have the potential to one day come “up from slavery” into a state of acute anti-authoritarian awareness that mirrors W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous articulation in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) of African American “double-consciousness.”

Students don’t ask that orders make sense. They give up expecting things to make sense long before they leave elementary school. Things are true because the teacher says they’re true. At a very early age we all learn to accept “two truths.” . . . Outside class, things are true to your tongue, fingers, your stomach, your heart. Inside class things are true by reason of authority. And that’s just fine because you don’t care anyway. Miss Wiedmeyer tells you a noun is a person, place or thing. So let it be. You don’t give a rat’s ass; she doesn’t give a rat’s ass.¹⁷

Farber’s use of the African American liberation struggles as a metaphor for student struggles reflected and borrowed from the Panthers’ challenge to the sexual and gender politics of the day. Farber equated social and political disempowerment with psycho-sexual damage wrought by oppression, creating the project of liberation as one that extended beyond the usually defined boundaries of public political culture. Farber claims that the major dilemmas of education originated in the fact that “students are psychically castrated or spayed,” and he declared, “What’s missing, from kindergarten to graduate school, is the honest recognition of what’s actually happening—turned on awareness of hairy goodies underneath the pettipants, the chinos and the flannels.”¹⁸

The Black Panthers challenged the status quo on gender and sexual issues so much that they were the only political group to be named specifically in the initial 1969 manifesto of “The Red Butterfly,” a radical breakaway group from the Gay Liberation Front that published some of the most important manifestos of the early Gay Rights Movement in the United States.¹⁹ The influence of the Black Panthers can even be seen in the choice of the name for the group “The Red Butterfly,” a camp play on the powerful imagery of the BPP symbol of the panther. According to Kobena Mercer, it was precisely the Panthers’ investment in a multilayered politics of position that addressed liberation across a variety of social and political locations that enabled them to gain broad appeal among other liberation movements.²⁰ Mercer argued, “The political positions of the Black Panthers had an empowering effect in extending the chain of radical democratic equivalences to more and more social groups precisely through their dramatic and provocative visibility in the public sphere.”

At the level of political discourse, it was this system of equivalences that helped generate the form of women’s liberation and gay liberation out of strategic analogies with the goals, and methods,

of black liberation, which were themselves based on an analogy with Third World struggles for national liberation. The ten-point platform of the Black Panther Party, articulated by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, formed a discursive framework through which the women's movement and the gay movement displaced the demand for reform and "equality" in favor of the wider goal of revolution and "liberation." The ten-point charter of demands of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1968, and the Gay Liberation Front, 1969, were based on a metaphorical transfer of the terms of liberation of one group into the terms of liberation of others. . . . Black pride acted as metonymic leverage for the expression of "gay pride" just as notions of "brotherhood" and "community" in black political discourse influenced the assertions of "global sisterhood" or "sisterhood is strength."²¹

Nikhil Pal Singh in *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* similarly concluded that "in their dramatic performance of black anti-citizenship, the Panthers necessarily constituted wholly different regions of identification."²² The Black Panthers imagined liberation struggles not merely as the righting of social inequalities, but as a project that would radically reconfigure the cultural, social, and political terrain of the United States and the world. Singh reminds us that "Black Power in its revolutionary instance was what Eldridge Cleaver tellingly called 'a project of sovereignty'—a set of oppositional discourses and practices that exposed the hegemony of Americanism as incomplete, challenged its universality, and imagined carving up its spaces differently."²³ The struggle for black liberation in the United States in general and the Black Panther Party specifically inspired intense affiliation and identification because they promised a transformation of American political and cultural life that was seemingly readily attainable while, at the same time, utopian in scope.

In *Prisoner of Love* Genet was both celebratory and critical of the impulse towards affiliation among intellectual elites. Acknowledging the ambivalence of those who chose to affiliate with radical causes for which others were risking their lives, Genet declared, "If you can dream, calculate, feel pity at the thought of dead or dying heroes, if you can identify with them, it's because you've got time and are comfortable enough to do so. 'Delight me with the sacred cause for which someone else will die.'"²⁴ At the same time, Genet acknowledged that the commitment of those who affiliated with radical causes could extend far beyond a superficial identification towards an unambiguous, if differentiated, commitment which echoed that of the original martyrs.

How far away I was from the Palestinians. For example, when I was writing this book, out there among the fedayeen, I was always on the other side of the boundary. I knew I was safe, not because of my Celtic physique or a layer of goose fat, but because of an even shinier and stronger armor: I didn't belong to, never really identified with, their nation or their movement. My heart was in it; my body was in it; my spirit was in it. Everything was in it at one point or another; but never my total belief, never the whole of myself.²⁵

Genet characterizes his involvement with radicalism and militant struggle by employing the language of a passionate and committed, yet compromised, love affair. Genet's *Prisoner of Love* draws on his time as a spokesperson and fund-raiser for the Black Panther Party and his earlier political work with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), all of which occurred at least ten years before the writing of the memoir. Jean Genet characterizes the white intellectuals and cultural and political activists who affiliated with the Panthers as "prisoners of love." Genet acknowledged in his 1975 interview with Hubert Fichte: "What is more difficult to admit has to do with the fact that the Panthers are Black Americans, the Palestinians are Arabs. It would be difficult for me to explain why things are like this, but these two groups of people have a very intense erotic charge."²⁶ In a 1981 interview with Antoine Bourseiller towards the end of his life, Genet acknowledged of his time with the PLO: "I don't know whether I could have stayed so long with them if physically they had been less attractive."²⁷ He unambiguously acknowledged the underlying passion, tension, and eroticism of his commitment.

In its incarnation as a popular song, "Prisoner of Love," popularized by James Brown, Billy Eckstine, and Etta James, speaks obviously and poignantly, in the way that only pop songs can, to the ambiguities of the experience of love as an experience of possession and transformation. "I long for night tonight to find me/ too weak to break these chains that bind me/ I need no shackles to remind me, I'm just a prisoner of love. From one who messes with my fate now/ I can't escape for it's too late now/ I'm just a prisoner. (Don't let me be) I'm just a prisoner of love."²⁸ Like the popular song, Jean Genet's work dwelt insistently on the ambiguity that exists in the interstices of love, possession, desire, hatred, and identification. Genet's political and artistic work as a poet, playwright, and novelist consistently sought to articulate the process of identification and cross-identification as a possession of the self that sliced both ways, cutting across categories not to erase difference or to eradicate the boundaries that keep difference intact, but rather working to accentuate the artifice that underpins both processes. In the introduction to his play *The Maids*, which many consider Genet's masterpiece, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of the audience's experience of the play as one of deep identity reification as well as profound identity disturbance.

Every evening five hundred Madames can sing out, "Yes, that's what maids are like," without realizing that they have created them, the way that southerners create "Negroes." The only rebellion of these flat creatures is that they rebel in turn: they dream within a dream; these dream dwellers, pure reflections of a sleeping consciousness, use the little reality which this consciousness has given them to imagine that they are becoming the Master who imagines them. They flounder about the intersection of two nightmares and form the "twilight guard" of bourgeois families. They are disturbing only in that they are dreams who dream of swallowing up the dreamer.²⁹

While Sartre notes that “the maids *want* to the point of horror and despair,” he also notes that “each of the two maids has no other function than to be the other, to be—for the other—herself-as-other.”³⁰ In *The Maids* Genet defied the notion that identification occurs in a simple performance of articulating oneself through easily discernible categories initiated beyond the self to keep the self intact. Claire and Solange, the murderous maids, present through carefully staged reenactments their imaginary relationship with their employer, the categories of self and other, maid and master. Rather than being porous, these are guises that can be slipped in and out of only at tremendous cost to the wearer.

In later works such as *The Screens*, written on the eve of Algerian independence from France, and *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, Genet went beyond the notion that cross-identification does little more than enact a simplifying objectification that Frank Chin and Jeff Chan have so appropriately labeled “racist love.”³¹ In a note that proceeds *The Blacks* and its dedication to Genet’s gay, mixed-race lover Abdallah, Genet plays with the notion of race and propriety. “One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is black? First of all, what’s his color?” Genet pushes further the boundaries of racial propriety in the introductory instructions for the play in which he insists that

[t]his play is written, I repeat, by a white man, is intended for a white audience, but if, which is unlikely, it is ever performed before a black audience, then a white person, male or female, should be invited every evening. The organizer of the show should welcome him formally, dress him in ceremonial costume and lead him to his seat, preferably in the front row of the orchestra. The actors will play for him. A spotlight should be focused upon the symbolic white during the performance.

But what if no white person accepted? Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theater. And if the blacks refuse the masks, then let a dummy be used.³²

In *The Blacks* as well as in *The Screens*, Genet insists on exploring the experience of racial subjectivity as a dynamic series of interrelated, power-determining facades much in the same way that Frantz Fanon suggested in *Black Skins, White Masks* that “the black man . . . must be black in relation to the white man.”³³ Genet was interested in not only recognizing the complementary nature of racial division, but also transgressing the absolute binary on which that division relies.

Genet’s work runs counter to the predominant ways in which white affiliation with African American radical causes was received both by those in the Black Power Movement who needed to disavow white affiliation in order to affirm indeed that “Black is beautiful,” but also by the arbiters of mainstream culture who downplayed as “radical chic” the real sacrifices made by those whites who chose to become actively affiliated with radical blackness. Tom Wolfe’s lampooning of the

“radical chic” runs counter to the actual participation in the Black Power Movement by artists such as Jean Seberg (who called herself “the Panthers’ honky representative in Europe”), Marlon Brando, and Leonard Bernstein.³⁴ In both the suicide note left by Jean Seberg in August 1979 and at the press conference held afterwards by her former husband Romain Gary, Seberg’s death, and that of her stillborn child, as well as the destruction of her marriage, were blamed on the persistent harassment by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in retaliation for her support of radical black causes, including most significantly her involvement with the Black Panther Party.³⁵ Romain Gary, the author of a 1973 fictionalized account of his involvement with the Panthers, committed suicide a year after Seberg’s death.³⁶ Seberg’s tragic spiral, from her celebrated status as one of the most distinguished “Americans in Paris” to her lonely miscarriage and eventual suicide, is marked by the risk and consequences of the potent cross-racial identification the Panthers generated. In her autobiography *A Taste of Power*, Panther leader Elaine Brown later insisted, “There was nothing radically chic about Jean Seberg. . . . I felt her genuineness and decency. She really wanted to know about black people, about the nature of our oppression and the price of our freedom.”³⁷ Seberg had been deeply involved in financing black political causes since she joined the local branch of the NAACP as a fourteen-year-old in her small hometown of Marshalltown, Iowa.³⁸ From the start of her film career at age seventeen, when film director Otto Preminger cast her in the politically controversial *Saint Joan* (1957), Seberg became involved in left-wing politics and aesthetics. Shortly after, she became closely associated with the radical film director of the “French New Wave,” Jean Luc Godard, through her starring role in the avant-garde classic *Breathless* (1960).

Just as the Panthers offered new ways to think about race, women like Jean Seberg saw in them the possibility of examining and deconstructing gender. The image of the Panthers as an armed macho militia runs counter to the actual importance of women to the group, not just high-profile women such as Kathleen Cleaver, Erika Huggins, and Elaine Brown, but those among the rank and file as well. Women not only held leadership positions and served as spokespersons for the group, the party also struggled to redefine its relationship to traditional notions of family and gender roles. Panther member Angela Brown mentioned an issue that arose in the attempts to redefine traditional gender roles with results that were not necessarily predictable or progressive.

Ericka Huggins mentioned that someone in the chapter, not necessarily Oakland, suggested they institute socialist fucking, meaning you should be able to sleep with any woman you want. She wrote a position paper about the whole proposal. Women went before a committee, they wrote a letter or physically appeared and described the issue and said that it needed to be resolved, it needed to be dealt with.³⁹

In his position paper on the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation movements, Huey Newton conceded, "We have not yet established a revolutionary value system; we are only in the process of establishing it."⁴⁰

African American women activists celebrated the struggle for black liberation as a cultural as well as a political imperative. In *Assata: An Autobiography*, Black Panther and Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur declared, "I love Black people, I don't care what they are doing, but when Black people are struggling, that's when they are most beautiful to me."⁴¹ Shakur and other activists tied the struggle for black liberation to a political aesthetic that valued struggle, the communal, and everyday transformations and applied aesthetic categories to the social conditions of oppression. In *With My Mind on Freedom: An Autobiography*, Angela Davis wrote of the joy and transformation she found at a community meeting in Watts.

The Second Baptist Church in Watts glowed with colorful African patterns and fabrics—the women wore "traditional" long dresses of red, purple, orange, and yellow; the men wore bubas that rivaled in every way the fiery beauty of women's clothes. The walls of the registration room were alive with poster art that hailed Blackness as an ancient and peerless beauty. It was November of 1967, and my exhilaration was as bright and intense as the colors that dappled the room. I was a stranger to this kind of gathering and found literally staggering the energy and resolve of the people attending the Black Youth Conference.⁴²

African American female activists were far more likely to associate directly the struggle against racism with the struggle against sexism and patriarchy than their white counterparts in the Women's Liberation movement. Black female activists' work during the Black Power era was often marked by the refusal to separate the struggles against racism and patriarchal oppression. In a 1971 essay entitled "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," novelist Toni Morrison asked:

What do black women feel about Women's Lib? Distrust. It is white, therefore suspect. In spite of the fact that liberating movements in the black world have been the catalyst for white feminism, too many movements and organizations have made deliberate overtures to enroll blacks and have ended up by rolling them. They don't want to be used again to help somebody gain power—a power that is carefully kept out of their hands. They look at white women and see them as the enemy—for they know racism is not confined to white men, and that there are more white women than men in this country. . . . But there is not only the question of color, there is the question of the color of experience. Black women are not convinced that Women's Lib serves their best interests or can cope with the uniqueness of their experience, which is itself an alienating factor.⁴³

The Combahee River Collective, an African American lesbian and feminist group,

issued a decisive statement in 1977 in which they concluded, "If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."⁴⁴ For Morrison, Davis, Shakur, and the women in the Combahee River Collective, the roots of the alienation between African American and white women were not only historical, but were based on deeply held aesthetic, social, and cultural differences. From this perspective, alliances between militant African American and white women were potentially problematic due to white women's failure to address racism and because the experiences of women of color with oppression were so different. While political activist Francis Beal recognized that "the exploitation of black people and women works to everyone's disadvantage and that the liberation of these two groups is a stepping stone to the liberation of all oppressed people in this country and around the world," the potential alliances between African American and white women were fraught with conflict and contradiction.⁴⁵

White women had much more to gain potentially from participation in the struggle for black liberation than African American women had to gain from participation in white feminist movements. As Toni Morrison pointed out, the potential contributions of white women to black liberation movements were suspect for many. Morrison's essay "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" included a discussion of the sexual politics for white and black women within the context of the sexual exchanges between white women and black men. For women like Jean Seberg, whose involvement with black liberation groups also often involved sexual and romantic involvement with African American men, the liberation politics of the Black Panthers enabled the articulation of new sexual identities. In Paul Gilroy's *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, the section "Black and White on the Dance Floor" discussed the ways the actual embrace of black immigrant men by working-class white women on London dance floors in the 1940s and 1950s represented "a form of proto-feminism" in its rejection of white men. Gilroy quotes a dance hall participant and activist Ras Makonnen (George Griffith) to support his claim that the experience of sexual and social interaction between black immigrant men and white women was foundational for budding expressions of feminism: "One way of rejecting the oppression of men was to associate with blacks. To walk with a Negro in a posh club like the Atheneum was to make this point. But many of [these women] were vigorously attacked for this."⁴⁶

The sexual liaisons between black men and white women, which were experienced by white women as potentially liberatory, were something very different for black women. Instead, Morrison would argue, it replicated older forms of white patriarchal oppression in which African American women were devalued as sexual and social partners by both black and white men. This is a world in which

"there are strong similarities in the way black and white men treat women, and strong similarities in the way women of both races react," but ultimately African American women shouldered an undue burden of disrespect. Morrison noted the creation of a new pantheon of black feminist icons. "There is a lot of talk about Sojourner Truth, the freed slave who preached emancipation and women's rights, but there is a desperate love for Nefertiti, simply because she was so pretty."⁴⁷

For Morrison, the ambivalent relationship that white women had to African American women's liberation translated into a complicated cultural and political dynamic between black and white women in which "black women have been able to envy white women (their looks, their easy life, the attention they seem to get from their men); they could fear them (for the economic control they have had over black women's lives) and even love them (as mammies and domestic workers can); but black women have found it impossible to respect white women."⁴⁸ The cultural politics involved in "the relationship between black women and black men" is a primary "reason for the suspicion black women have of Women's Lib"; and the complicated political, economic, and cultural dynamic between black and white women made formal political coalitions among them extremely difficult.⁴⁹

In 1970 the women's caucus of the Youth Against War and Fascism noted that although "many attribute the rapid growth of Women's liberation itself at least in part to the inspiration derived from the Black Liberation struggle, . . . the issue of support for them in their life and death struggle against government attack becomes blurred" by issues of gender and sexuality. The statement declared:

At all too many Women's liberation meetings where the question of support of the Black Panther Party is raised, a disagreeable trend is developing. No matter how enthusiastically support for the Panthers is first raised, it often degenerates into an attack on Panther men for alleged male chauvinism. Why is this so?

The statement from the Youth Against War and Fascism's women's caucus ended by declaring the impossibility of coalitions between black and white women's political organizations, and concluding that "the [relationship] between the Black woman and the Black man is something for the Black woman to deal with in the context of the struggle for Black Liberation."⁵⁰

In the face of the difficulties in forming political alliances, romantic and sexual relationships further complicated the sociohistorical dynamics that confronted African Americans and whites who wished to work together for liberation. Jean Seberg was a vocal and visible supporter not only of the Black Panther Party, but also a financial supporter of radical organizer Hakim Jamal, with whom she would later become romantically involved. Jamal met with black British activist Michael X in London and was subsequently involved in the attempt to create a "communal living space" in Trinidad in 1972 supposedly for diasporic people of African

descent. The communal farm was shut down after the spectacular murder of several people, including Gale Benson, a young white woman and British citizen who was also a lover of Jamal and had been brought there by him from London. Michael X was eventually hanged for the murders, while Jamal would die shortly after in an unsolved murder. Benson and Jamal's murders and the failed social experiment became the basis for Trinidadian author V. S. Naipaul's 1975 novel *Guerillas*.⁵¹

In 2001 the Swedish Academy recognized V. S. Naipaul with a Nobel Prize in Literature for creating "works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories."⁵² In presenting a fictionalized account of Gale Benson's murder, Naipaul struggled to maintain a consistent narrative voice for the story of an event he characterizes as a failure to create and maintain effective coalitions across race, gender, and nation. A large part of this fictional work contains "a novel within a novel" that the character based on Michael X is writing in which Michael assumes the narrative voice of Jane, the character based on Gale Benson. For Naipaul's novel itself, the character of Jane remains mostly voiceless even as she is raped and murdered with machetes over a prolonged period of time. She cries out, but only briefly, and not in any way that makes the events in the novel more comprehensible. Even for a Nobel Prize winning author such as Naipaul, who can compel "us to see the presence of suppressed histories," the motivations for the affiliative behavior of Benson, or Jean Seberg, are beyond understanding or representation, except through the exploitative eyes of others for whom these women were little more than an "easy mark." This characterization flies in the face of the actual depth of the affiliations and the extent of the repression that ensued in the aftermath. It would be easy to reduce the affiliation with radical black groups sought by Gale Benson, Leonard Bernstein, Jean Genet, or Jean Seberg to the kind of counterculture affiliation that Norman Mailer identified as "the war of the Hip and the Square" in "The White Negro." Like the concept of "radical chic," however, Mailer's "war of the Hip and the Square" was an encounter that was never actually meant to extend beyond cultural politics. It must be remembered that the confrontation between Black Power and the status quo at many times resembled an actual war, since many of the supporters of radical black organizations were invested in and planning on creating revolutionary change across a broad range of social, political, and cultural practices.

In his biography of Seberg, David Richards charts the actress's fall, from having dinners at the White House with the Kennedys and living as a fashionable expatriate in Paris to her institutionalization in mental hospitals and eventual suicide, through the narrative of her failed attempts to articulate through these radical projects and personal relationships new racial understandings. Richards documented the ways in which the FBI's surveillance of Seberg continuously focused on her sexuality, characterizing her as "a sex pervert."⁵³ Richards quoted an FBI agent who objected to the tone with which the other agents discussed Seberg's involvement with the Black Panther Party.

The giving of her white body to a black man was an unbearable thought for many of the white agents. An agent whose name I will not mention, for obvious reasons, was overheard to say a few days after I arrived in Los Angeles from New York, "I wonder how she'd like to gobble my dick while I shove my .38 up that black bastard's ass?" I was shocked at the licentious talk in the squad room area about the Panthers, Seberg, and Jane Fonda.⁵⁴

The FBI circulated damaging rumors of Seberg's sexual involvement with various Black Panthers, even going so far as to send memoranda to gossip columnists urging them to publicly question the paternity of her unborn child in order to "cause her embarrassment and serve to cheapen her image with the general public."⁵⁵ Seberg translated her success on screen with films like *Breathless* and her public persona as a supporter of radical politics into her status as an icon of the French New Wave film movement as well as transgressive femininity.⁵⁶ But while Seberg was able with her pageboy haircut and avant-garde performance of femininity to challenge and create new parameters for style and fashion on film, she was consistently unable to carry out the performance of racial affiliation off screen. Caught between traditional expectations for the performance of race and gender and the new possibilities created by radical social movements, Seberg was scapegoated into psychosis and eventual suicide.⁵⁷

Though *Prisoner of Love*, Genet's final book, makes no specific mention of Seberg's death, it is one of the few texts that might actually have the power to make sense of her sacrificial legacy. Though Genet is in fact authoring one of the grand histories of the Palestinian struggle, he insisted that the fragmented, non-linear narrative was the result of a very specific constellation of personal experience and investments. "This is," he wrote, "*my* Palestinian revolution, told in my chosen order. As well as mine there is the other, probably many others."⁵⁸ This claim reflects a desire to articulate a situatedness that moves beyond a simple declaration of ownership in the fashion of Sir Richard Burton, who first translated the *Kama Sutra* and *One Thousand and One Nights*, or other European Orientalists who lay claim to the "discovery" of the "Other" through textual articulations of racialized difference. For Genet, the representation of the Black Panthers and members of the Palestinian liberation struggle was always as much about the limitations of representational forms as it was about the representations themselves. "If the reality of time spent among—not with—the Palestinians resided anywhere, it would survive between all the words that claim to give an account of it." With reference to the Black Panthers, Genet noted, "When I said the Blacks were the characters on the white page of America, that was too easy an image: the truth lies where I can never know it."⁵⁹ Genet defends the Panthers' belief in the power of militant images as a vehicle for inducing revolutionary change against charges from New Left journalists at *Ramparts* magazine who suggested that "the Panthers' failure [was] due to the fact that they adopted a brand image before they earned it in action." The

concern that the Panthers' investments in their image were ultimately detrimental to them is echoed by a more recent critic, Russell Shoats, who suggested that "the Panthers were a potentially strong Black fighting formation that was forced to take to the field before they were ready" precisely because they chose a "high-profile operation, characteristic of the Civil Rights movement, that relied heavily on television, radio, and print media." The Panthers floundered, according to Shoats, precisely because they "tried to combine the activities of the political and military workers in one cadre."⁶⁰

In stark contrast to Shoats, Genet vehemently defends the Panthers' engagement with cultural images. "The world can be changed by other means than the sort of wars in which people die. Power comes at the end of a gun but it's also at the end of the shadow or the image of a gun."⁶¹ Pointing out that "the Panthers attacked first by sight," Genet portrayed their assault on the senses as so profoundly primal as to be sexually charged.

When the Panthers' Afro haircuts hit the Whites in the eye, the ear, the nostril and the neck, and even got under their tongues, they were panic stricken. How could they defend themselves in the subway, the office and the lift against all this vegetation, this springing, electric, elastic growth like an extension of pubic hair? The laughing Panthers wore a dense furry sex on their heads. The whites could only have replied with non-existent laws of politeness. Where could they have found insults fierce enough to smooth all those hairy, sweaty black faces, where every curly whisker on each black chin had been nurtured and cherished for dear life?⁶²

Genet credits victory in the realm of visual culture as not substantially different from the types of victories celebrated by Guevara and Debray, who understood propaganda as, at best, little more than a branding and advertising for revolution, rather than a revolution in and of itself. Since "the Panthers' subversion would take place . . . in people's conscience," Genet declared, "the Panthers can be said to have overcome with poetry."⁶³

It is the poetry of primal passion that captivated Genet as he carefully reconstructed his relationship with both the PLO and the Panthers as composed of a complicated web of desire, shared and divergent interests, and the negotiation of a symbolic culture. Genet's use of the language of a love affair describes the radically unsettling interplay between self and "other" out of which his political involvement and affiliation is constituted. "Gradually my feelings changed, especially after the 1973 [Arab-Israeli] war. I was still charmed, but I wasn't convinced; I was attracted but not blinded. I behaved like a prisoner of love"⁶⁴

In *Prisoner of Love* Genet plays with the notion that some whites' involvement in radical causes can be simplistically reduced to the libidinal economy in which it sometimes resides. It is not an accident that Jean Seberg in particular was destroyed by charges from both the far right and the radical left that her interest in radical

black politics was primarily motivated by little more than sexual deviance. As one of the world's most famous former homosexual prostitutes and prisoners, Jean Genet was obviously not afraid to own sexual deviance as a motivating force in his involvement with radical politics. His famous praise of the Panthers in "blue or pink or gold trousers . . . cut so that even the most shortsighted passer-by couldn't miss their manly vigor" stands as both a tribute and an acknowledgement of a political culture in which "a group of black men and women, through every possible act, sign, and gesture, made sure nothing would ever be the same again."⁶⁵ However, Genet was also equally quick to acknowledge that the project in which he was participating in composing *Prisoner of Love* was primarily elegiac.

Ultimately, *Prisoner of Love* represents a somber elegy not only to the fine young men and women who struggled for freedom in the Panther and Palestinian liberation movements, but also to the very idea of a better world which they so earnestly believed they could make whole through armed struggle.

But a book of reminiscences doesn't present the truth any more than a novel does. I can't bring Mubarak back to life. What he said to me that day and other days will never be reconstructed as it really was. I could write a description of Carolina del Norte. But how can you answer a dead man, except with rhetoric or silence? This may apply to all words but it's certainly true of words like sacrifice, self-sacrificing, abnegation, altruism. To write them down as a tribute to someone who dared to live them, and to live them to the point of dying for them, is indecent. Like the war memorials covered with similar easy tributes.⁶⁶

The central importance of *Prisoner of Love* lies in its ability to celebrate the importance of the beliefs and ideals of the fedayeen and the Panthers. The text acknowledges and provides a self-conscious testament to the ways Jean Genet and others could never fully share in the earnestness and belief in the causes that they celebrated. Genet recounts the way in which his Palestinian guide reminds him of the nuances of his positionality vis-à-vis the Palestinian struggle for liberation. "You used to be in the audience, and now you're backstage. That's why you came from Paris. But you'll never be an actor."⁶⁷ In the end *Prisoner of Love* asserts that white affiliation to radical causes is reducible to neither the sexual economy in which it exists, nor to the political culture in which it participates. Rather, the complexities of the exchange exist in a symbolic economy of their own that must be mined for the political possibilities that they might ultimately offer and suggest. In suggesting the complexities of cross-racial affiliation, *Prisoner of Love* ultimately stands as both a significant celebration of and an important corrective to the idea of vanguardism as pursued by Che Guevara and Régis Debray and as masterfully expanded by the Black Panther Party.

NOTES

¹Jeremy Reed quotes Jean Genet's 1975 interview with Fichte to discuss Genet's innate sense of alienation from French culture in his biography of Genet entitled *Jean Genet: Born to Lose* (New York, 2005), 9. The full text of the interview is available in *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews* Albert Dichy, ed. (Stanford, CA, 2004), 118–51.

²Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York, 1995), 153.

³Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare* (New York, 1968) and Regis Debray, *Revolution within the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York, 1967), 1.

⁴Che Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare* (New York, 1961), 1.

⁵Debray, *Revolution within the Revolution?* 51.

⁶*Ibid.*, 23.

⁷*Black Panther*, Third World Newsreel, 1968.

⁸Huey P. Newton, "The Correct Handling of the Revolution," in *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, 1995), 42.

⁹Jerry Rubin, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York, 1970), 9.

¹⁰Larry Neal and Leroi Jones, eds. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York, 1968), 302.

¹¹Jerry Rubin, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York, 1970), 142.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Robert Sandarg chronicles Genet's time with the Panthers in "Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party," *Journal of Black Studies* 16 (March 1986): 269–82. Edmund White writes extensively about Genet's time with the Panthers in *Genet: A Biography* (New York, 1993). Jean Genet himself explores in some detail his encounter with the Panthers in his interview with Hubert Fichte, reprinted in *The Declared Enemy: Text and Interviews*, ed. Albert Dichy (Stanford, CA, 2004) and in *Prisoner of Love* (1981; reprinted New York, 2003).

¹⁴Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 245.

¹⁵Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York, 1970).

¹⁶Jerry Farber, *The Student as Nigger* (New York, 1970), 90; and Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Dissent* 4 (Summer 1957): 276–93.

¹⁷Farber, *The Student as Nigger*, 90–92.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁹Donn Teal, ed. *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969–1971* (New York, 1971), 86.

²⁰Kobena Mercer, "'1968': Periodizing Politics and Identity," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York, 1994).

²¹*Ibid.*, 303.

²²Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 206.

²³*Ibid.*, 205.

²⁴Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 144.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 205.

²⁶Hubert Fichte, "Interview with Jean Genet," in Dichy, *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, 132.

²⁷Dichy, *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, 191.

²⁸James Brown. *Prisoner of Love*, King Records, 1963.

²⁹Jean Paul Sartre, "Introduction," in Jean Genet, *The Maids and Death Watch* (New York, 2005), 18.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 22.

³¹Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan invent the term "racist love" in order to examine the implications of stereotyping for cultural production; see "Racist Love," in *Seeing through Shuck*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York, 1972), 65.

³²Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show* (New York, 2005).

³³Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York, 1967), 110.

³⁴David Richards gives the most complete account available of Seberg's life and her involvement with radical political causes in *Played Out: The Jean Seberg Story* (New York, 1981).

³⁵"Romain Gary Is Dead; Novelist Shot in Head, Apparently a Suicide," *New York Times*, 3 December 1980.

³⁶Romain Gary provides a fictionalized account of his encounter with radical politics in the United States in *Chien Blanc (White Dog)* (New York, 1971).

³⁷Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York, 1992), 231.

³⁸David Richards writes that neighbors openly wondered "where she'd gotten that crazy idea" while Seberg herself would attribute it years later in an interview to "a kind of alienation" she experienced while growing up; *Played Out: The Jean Seberg Story* (New York, 1981), 13–14.

³⁹Karl Knapper "Women and the Black Panther Party: An Interview with Angela Brown," *Socialist Review* 26, nos. 1–2 (1996): 50; see also Robyn C. Spencer, "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 90–113.

⁴⁰Newton's position paper is reprinted in *To Die for the People: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York, 1995), 153.

⁴¹Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago, 1987), 189.

⁴²Angela Davis, *With My Mind on Freedom: An Autobiography* (New York, 1975), 156.

⁴³Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara Crow (New York, 2000), 454.

⁴⁴*Combahee River Collective Statement: Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Albany, NY, 1986), 7.

⁴⁵Francis Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 158.

⁴⁶Paul Gilroy, "There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago, IL, 1991), 163.

⁴⁷Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," 455–456.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 458.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 456.

⁵⁰The Youth Against War and Fascism Women's Caucus, "Women's Liberation and the Black Panther Party," in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 427, 429.

⁵¹Diana Athill explores the complex racial and sexual dynamics at play in the relationship between Hakim Jamal and his white female supporters including Seberg, Gale Benson, and Athill herself in *Make Believe: A True Story* (South Royalton, VT, 1993). V. S. Naipaul's fictionalized account of Jamal's time in Trinidad and the death of activist Michael X can be found in *Guerillas* (New York, 2002).

⁵²The Swedish Academy, *The Nobel Prize in Literature V. S. Naipaul*, press release, 11 October 2001.

⁵³David Richards, *Played Out: The Jean Seberg Story* (New York, 1981), 231.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 237.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁶Fiona Handyside examines the contradictions of Jean Seberg who was embraced as an icon of the French New Wave in "Stardom and Nationality: The Strange Case of Jean Seberg," *Studies in French Cinema* 2, no. 3 (2003): 165–76.

⁵⁷Mel Gussow explores the events surrounding Seberg's suicide in "The Seberg Tragedy," *New York Times*, 30 November 1980.

⁵⁸Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 355.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁰Russell Shoats, "Black Fighting Formations: Their Strengths, Weaknesses and Potentialities," in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (New York, 2001), 129.

⁶¹Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 98.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 252.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 99–100.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 216–17.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 246, 251.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 345–46.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 176.

Copyright of *Journal of African American History* is the property of Association for the Study of African American Life & History and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.