

Chapter 8: 1969-1970

“Whit Soul”

Whatever hopes African American students may have had for fall semester in 1969 regarding their demands expressed during the previous spring, it is likely that most continued to be disappointed. In a letter addressed to Black student Gerald Toney, Acting President Clarence Simpson expressed frustration at not being able to hire a Black professor. Until late in the summer, Simpson had hoped that Dr. Harold Thompson would join the Whitworth faculty. “We had assigned Dr. Thompson to the Admissions Committee, to the Afro-American course and to a part of our faculty orientation program.” However, Simpson attempted to convince Toney and other Black students not to give up on Whitworth. Simpson explained to Toney how Whitworth was attempting to raise money for support of African American students through the Seattle Presbytery, and that Dave Morley was working closely with the Spokane School District to provide employment opportunities for Whitworth’s Black students. Simpson further confirmed efforts on the part of Dr. Archer to get the Black Studies program off the ground. He finished his letter with a commitment to continue efforts to work with Toney. “I look forward to the time when we can get together and talk person to person about these and other matters.”¹

In spite of Simpson’s best efforts, struggles continued into the semester. Later that fall, Lew Archer sent a letter to the faculty regarding the state of the Black Studies program. Archer

acknowledged that there were challenges ranging from the lack of overall faculty support, to the role that Black students might play in teaching the curriculum. However, as Archer stated,

the key issue—black students want the college—students, faculty, and administrators—to respond to them. Blacks are tired of initiating actions repeatedly and receiving only minimal response. They are as tired as white persons with repetition. No matter what we faculty think, the feedback that black students get from faculty and white students is that their efforts (which are serious and time consuming in their view) are being met with minimal responses. The lack faculty enthusiasm over black studies is just one example of this.²

If African American students were in fact losing hope that enough Whitworth faculty were unwilling to adapt their courses to include a component of Black history or culture, several students decided to use the student newspaper to express their opinions. In fall 1969, African American students on the Whitworth campus began to express themselves in a regular column in the student newspaper called “Whit Soul.” These columns provide a remarkable record of how several Black students described what it was like to be a student of color at Whitworth, but perhaps as importantly how they articulated what it meant to be Black in America in the late ‘60s. Clearly the influence of the Black Power movement is evident in a number of these columns.

While there is grittiness and grimness about much that they described, they also reveal a flicker of hope for the future. The response of several white students to the columns also provides a first-hand account marked by backlash and frustration, as well as a genuine effort to

understand what it meant to be Black in America. The columns are presented here for the most part in their entirety with hope that they provide insight into the complex experiences of African American students at the time.

The first column, in October 1969, entitled “Don’t Call Me Negro,” written anonymously, set the tone for future columns. The author provided a history lesson to Whitworth students regarding descriptions of African Americans employed by whites from the beginning of slavery to the present. The column certainly reflected the influence of Malcolm X and subsequent spokespersons for Black Power. “ Black people today, throughout America, have broken the shackles [sic] of slavery and are, for the first time in American History, defining who and what they are. They are no longer accepting the labels that white society have so generously given them.” In a show of defiance, the author stated, “Black people will not sit back any longer and let an insane nation, who has tried to destroy their existence, attempt to place any more labels on them. Nor will Black people let such a racist nation poison the minds of the Black children. . . .”³ Furthermore, “Black people can no longer accept the ideals, conceptions and so called moral values of white society because it has already been proven to us that they were not meant for Black people but whites only. Most important of all is that Black people will no longer deny their magnificent and dynamic African Heritage, because we know that it is in this heritage that our true identity lies.”⁴

A week later, white student Lee Matson responded with a column that reflected some defensiveness as well as different assumptions around the use of the word “Negro.”

I will be the first to admit that the whites don’t really understand the blacks, but I feel that the Whit Soul article . . . proves that blacks also lack understanding of the whites. I am more than willing to use the word black instead of negro, but I can’t accept the accusation

that the word negro has been used by whites to imply inferiority, laziness or ignorance on the part of the blacks. The vast majority of whites have used and still use the word negro purely out of respect and attach none of the connotations that Whit Soul accuses them of, to the word.⁵

Matson's column reflects the challenge that Black students faced when trying to explain why language was such a critical factor in white complicity in racism; at the same time, the article reveals the difficulty that white students, who believed they were trying to be respectful toward African Americans, had in understanding concerns of the Black community.

A second "Whit Soul" column appeared in that same October 10th issue and was entitled "Maybe You Don't Care, if you do, show Us!" In this column, also anonymous, perhaps out of fear of backlash from Whitworth students, the author offered a critique of a speaker in a Whitworth Forum on Africa. According to the writer, there were too many generalizations about the continent of Africa and a general ignorance of diversity in Africa. "Take your fingers out of Viet Nam for awhile. Put some bite in your embargos on Rhodesian and South African fascist economies by ceasing your hypocrisy. Re-affirm the fineness of your humanity or face alone the distrust and hatred of non-whites and some whites of the world. Show us!!!" Clearly Black students at Whitworth were finding their voice regarding issues of importance to them.⁶

The following week, a third column appeared that was meant to explain and defend actions of Black students since their arrival on campus a year earlier.

Last year the Black students at Whitworth went all out of their way to educate the Whites on campus about themselves. Individual confrontations, dorm forums and faculty forums are only a few of the things that came down. Yes, we of the Black Students Union were

on our jobs (or at least we thought we were) and in return for our actions were only kicked in the ass. Not only did our studies suffer but so did we, mentally as individuals.

Maybe you don't realize or remember why we did those things in an attempt to educate you about our problems as Blacks living at Whitworth. Do you remember hearing stories about Blacks being run off the roads or how their lives had been threatened in one way or another? Do you remember how you laughed it off as just practical jokes, yes, you students, faculty, staff and resident counselors? Do you remember how you continued all year to insult us with stares and snide remarks while always keeping your fixed smiles on your faces? Do you remember how you fooled us into thinking some of you had come around to our way of thinking and then you let us down in the end? Yes, some of you were sincere in your actions, but in most instances your sincerity only hurt or hindered us in some way.

So in light of all that came down last year, even when we tried to open your eyes to a real world, we have decided not to get up off of anything for free again. Our time is precious. Our knowledge you so want of the "Ghetto" is priceless and so anything you get from us from now on will be paid for in advance. The price will be decided by us, be it money or otherwise. If our price is too steep, remember you still have your choice as an "American"!⁷

The column reflected the sense of many Black students that Whitworth had recruited them to share their experience of being Black in the inner city. It is difficult to tell whether those expectations were formally communicated by faculty or students, but it seems plausible, given the charge from William Stringfellow two years prior, that white students were generally ignorant of what it meant to be Black. If so, the challenges of the first year led many Black

students to feel that they were being used, yet white students were not ready to hear what they had to say.

The rhetoric and accusations continued to escalate as the semester progressed. The following week's column, entitled "You Can Wait," asserted that white people in general were hypocrites. "It is psychologically and sociologically borne out that the oppressed gets to know the oppressor far better than the oppressor knows his victim. Whitey, we know you and it's hard to separate the individual indignities and atrocities of over 350 years, from the corporate actions of then, right into today." The author further challenged white students to be more self-conscious of the many ways in which they were duplicitous from the perspective of many Black people. "The question is, whether you (white missionaries, ministers, liberals, intellectuals, drop outs, bigots and pigs) really believe we're going to sit by and let you destroy our lives and dreams while you insanely chase after your 'technological progress?' The answer is unconditionally NO! – We and those like us will do our utmost to stop any B.S. action which even seems related to your unnatural goals."⁸

On November 7th, sophomore Ernest Bligen from New York City published the fifth "Whit Soul" column entitled "Until Then." Bligen used vivid imagery to convey his frustration with anyone who suggested that Black people needed to be patient regarding progress toward social equality and justice.

Have patience, my boy, until then. But Sir, when is then? Oh you dare question me? I said wait until then. Well I am not sure you understand but my shoes are out worn and my clothes are torn. And you still say have patience and wait until then? Sir the walls of my apartment are crumbling down. And the landlord is threatening to put me out. My child was bitten by a rat last night. And Con Edison is going to turn off my lights. Shall

I still wait until then? My patience is about at end. . . . Our schools are inadequate, store prices are too high, Taxes keep rising which our income can't provide. But you say, have patience, my boy, and wait until then, . . . There can be no more waiting for then or them. So many beautiful black men for this worthy cause and twenty two million more are willing to fall. So white America make your move now or never for Black People will not wait until forever.⁹

In that same issue, Vietnam Veteran Dave Cumming fired back at Black students at Whitworth. "I was never prejudiced against the blacks until I came to Whitworth.' If I had a dime for every time I've heard that statement, I'd be in a totally different income bracket. Although I'm not ready to say it yet myself, I have been tempted a few times. It may be that I'm frankly prejudiced, though I believed my Marine soul buddies would be the first to laugh at that." While Cumming did not deny that racist acts had occurred at Whitworth, he angrily responded to the generalizations regarding all white people. "It further PO's me that a blanket characterization is applied to (all) or almost all the whites at Whitworth. I keep hearing wails and protestations of a desire to be treated as people, persons, individuals. But then the wailers turn right around and say I can't be an individual, a person. No, I have to be a chuck dude, one of the prejudiced because my skin is white."

Cumming continued, "My ass! Nobody on Whitworth's campus from the top on down is going to deprive me of my individuality, group me, stamp me, or label me! I've paid too dear a price for that identity. It's ironic that by allowing or seeking the reduction of everything to strictly 'I'm black, you're white' (or vica versa) relationships we destroy any hope for individuality. . . . The blacks have bagged it according to 'Whit Soul.' We're to get nothing free

anymore – no knowledge of ourselves or the ghetto. Presumably, we have to pay something. Don't hold your breath.”¹⁰

Cumming's column generated a response from Frenchy Lamont, who took issue with Cumming. “The white majority here is just waiting for fools like you to defend them with some b.s. bravado and some pseudo intellect. You're a colorful little Marine, stick your chest out. . . . you 'valiantly' went to battle for good old Whitworth. We can't dismiss as lightly as you have the rumors, threats to life, vigilante groups . . . and hit and run attempts made this year and last.”¹¹

Another Black student, Gerald Toney, responded to allegations that all the Black Student Union did was to complain about Whitworth and disrupt campus life.

We conducted dorm forums, a Malcolm X convocation, a fashion show, a large amount of the Black Studies format, worked extensively with Afro-American History in its preparation and continuance, engaged in personal as well as group encounters, marched from office to office negotiating participating in off campus speaking engagements, and finally, produced demands which led to a demonstration and ended in a rally.

Don't tell me that you are afraid to interact with me. How can you know until you have tried? Don't write rebuttals to articles in the Whit Soul column, if communication is your aim. Confront us. You will find that we are no more than people, with a different skin pigmentation and a background molded by a variety of experiences, indignities, suffering and values which make us what we are.

In essence, if you want to become involved, if you want to interact, if you want to understand—Confront us.

Let us not repel the very things which we supposedly live for.¹²

The conflict among students percolated in varying ways. Another white student, Rob Gleeson, decided to challenge some of the assertions as well as the manner of communication through the “Whit Soul” column:

Last year at Whitworth there was a demonstration. A small number of black people, after experiencing the cultural shock of an all-white college, decided that they were being unfairly treated. After much thought, debate, listening, and yelling, I decided that my black friends had some valid points so I grabbed a sign and demonstrated with them.

Through this type of interaction, I came to know many black people and I became familiar with the program of the B.S.U. To my knowledge, all of those programs were well thought out. For the most part, reason prevailed. It is because of these observations that I am amazed by the poor quality of the Whit Soul articles in the *Whitworthian*.

Whit Soul has been, in my opinion, an emotional and self-righteous condemnation of Whitworth. The many wrong things about this school should be condemned but not through emotionalism. The intent of the articles seems to be that through insults, whites at Whitworth would become angry enough to respond. Responses should come from reason rather than from emotion. Social change (short of revolution) has no room for hotheads. Those who will not or cannot respond through reason should not be purposely antagonized. They can only make trouble, as we almost saw last year.

At best, Whit Soul has been a poorly written, name-calling article. At worst, it is the type of insulting, anger-arousing article that could help elect George Wallace in 1972.

I demonstrated last year because reasonable arguments and logic convinced me that the demands were just. Now I hear that all whites at Whitworth are lumped together and called ‘white missionaries, ministers, liberals, intellectuals, drop outs, bigots and pigs.’ This is neither convincing nor logical.¹³

In March 1970, the co-chairmen of the B.S.U., Claude Brown and Leonard Dawson, wrote a “Whit Soul” column in which they critiqued Whitworth culture for what they believed were too many rules regarding student behavior. Most notably they objected to rules regarding smoking and dorm rules relating to the hours that men could be in female’s rooms. They also raised the issue of interracial dating. They suggest that, “if Whitworth is seeking people from all walks of life we had better start making it comfortable for these people to get along here, by removing some of the obstacles and barriers.”¹⁴

The final “Whit Soul” column of the year was authored by Leonard Dawson, who wrote a long critique of the role that violence had played in American history. The tone was angry and frustrated. Dawson called not just Whitworth but white America to awaken to the racial crisis in this country:

We as Blacks have a war to fight also. A war this society and this school has forced us to fight, a war against racism, against continued oppression and exploitation. We feel that this school and all other educational institutions across the nation should give us the tools with which to better ourselves, and our people, and should not crank out people whose only interest is the maintenance of the status quo. Education should not inspire you to be middle class materialistic vultures but should inspire you to do some real thinking about the world around us and the conditions people live in and how to end those conditions. Black people will no longer tolerate the irrelevancy of this institution to our lives.¹⁵

Certainly, Dawson did not speak for all African Americans at Whitworth during the spring of 1970 but he did speak for many. His challenge to Whitworth was echoed on most college campuses across the country.

The late 1960s and early '70s were volatile years in America regarding both race and the war in Vietnam. Many Black voices such as Eldridge Cleaver, H. Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael expressed a much more militant message than had Martin Luther King Jr. although many forget that even King, later in his life, had grown extremely frustrated with the failure of white America to address fundamental issues of poverty, injustice, and the war in Vietnam.

Many African American students at Whitworth felt those frustrations; most became more self-conscious of their identity as Black individuals and became convinced that Black Power provided a way forward. To a great extent, Whitworth faculty and staff struggled to meet the expressed needs of these students. On the whole, however, Whitworth continued to move onward, if somewhat hesitatingly, rather than retreat. They would soon proceed under a new president who brought renewed energy not just to race relations but to a whole array of social issues students faced during the 1970s.

¹ Letter, C. J. Simpson to Gerald Toney, August 15, 1969, Whitworth University Archives, Black Studies file Box 1, Folder 13.

² Letter, Lewis Archer to the faculty, November 18, 1969, Whitworth University Archives, Black Studies Box 1, Folder 13.

³ *Whitworthian*, October 3, 1969.

⁴ *Whitworthian*, October 3, 1969.

⁵ *Whitworthian*, October 10, 1969.

⁶ *Whitworthian*, October 10, 1969.

⁷ *Whitworthian*, October 17, 1969.

⁸ *Whitworthian*, October 24, 1969.

⁹ *Whitworthian*, November 7, 1969.

¹⁰ *Whitworthian*, November 7, 1969, p. 2.

¹¹ *Whitworthian*, November 14, 1969, p. 2.

¹² *Whitworthian*, November 14, 1969

¹³ *Whitworthian*, November 7, 1969, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Whitworthian*, March 6, 1970.

¹⁵ *Whitworthian*, April 24, 1970 p. 2