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Dan Freeman's Transformation to Cultural Nationalism

The fight for civil rights and social equality for Black Americans during the mid twentieth century consisted of many different fronts. For instance, the peaceful protests and ideologies of early Martin Luther King, Jr. completely contrasted with the militant viewpoints and actions of the Black Panther Party. Further, fights also took place in a non-political setting as Black Americans contributed to the movement within their own professions, such as those who worked to establish uniquely Black genres of music, writing, and visual arts. Cultural Nationalism, where people would embrace ideals unique to their culture as a form of rebellion, was also a popular way to fight against the constraints of integrationist America.¹ In Ivan Dixon's 1973 film *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, many common forms of fights for civil rights take place. Although most characters in the film adhered to a single model of rebellion, Dan Freeman realizes that in order to achieve his goals of Black American freedom, he must transition away from integrationist ideals, eventually subscribing to a militaristic cultural nationalism.

In the beginning of the film, Dan Freeman joins a group of other Black Americans who are working hard to become members of the Central Intelligence Agency, knowing that they are those chosen by the government for the purposes of “integration.”² Throughout the group's interactions, it can be seen that Freeman is mostly left out. Later, he is found studying alone. Freeman's choice to seclude himself from others in order to study shows his seeming dedication to the idea of integration within the government. Of course, it may be argued that Freeman's master plan was to become a CIA officer for

¹ Daniel Widener, Lecture. November 4, 2015.

² *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, directed by Ivan Dixon (1973; United States: Monarch Home Video, 2004), DVD.

the sole purpose of learning their techniques. However, it must be noted that even historians such as Manning Marable, who clearly establishes himself as a critic of integrationist policies, uses the number of publicly employed coloured people as a sign of progress in terms of civil rights.³ Thus, at the time, Freeman may have felt that he was legitimately going to make an impact on the views of the nation, where his hard work would challenge the “artificial” racist preconceptions against Black Americans.⁴ These feelings are quickly shown to be irrelevant, however, as Freeman is assigned a copy machine job and used as a tool to show visitors “that we’re [the CIA] integrated.”⁵ He is also told that he is performing “better than expected”, showcasing the low expectation for Black American labor. After working for five years, the only promotion Freeman received was sitting closer to the door.

Tired of the treatment he received at the CIA and wanting to make a change, Freeman returns home, where the first aspect of his transformation begins. Indeed, his work at the CIA made him fully aware that governmental and legislative action would not quickly end the racism he was a victim of. This feeling is not unwarranted, either, as many historians, such as Manning Marable⁶, attest to the ineffectiveness of government action toward social change. Thus, Freeman quickly transformed his ideals into an extremist militaristic view, where he vowed to teach his newly acquired skills to members of the militaristic Cobra group.⁷ The enemies of this militaristic action become obvious as Freeman calls black Americans his “brothers” and white Americans “the enemy.”⁸ On one of their first largescale military acts, Freeman seems to act on his animosity toward White Americans by executing an act of “reverse-racism”, where he uses the lone white member of the Cobras to disguise the entire group. This act, of course, is almost a direct parallel to the treatment he received during his CIA job, where he was only used as a symbol to disguise the lack of integration at the CIA. Freeman, much like

3 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 117, 119.

4 Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions* (California: University of California Press, 2010), 31.

5 *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, directed by Ivan Dixon (1973; United States: Monarch Home Video, 2004), DVD.

6 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 91.

7 *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, directed by Ivan Dixon (1973; United States: Monarch Home Video, 2004), DVD.

8 Ibid.

Daniel Widener in hindsight⁹, also recognizes the importance of a parallel cultural front, as he hires a member of the Cobras as a propagandist who speaks “in a language they understand.”¹⁰ This marks an additional aspect in Freeman's transformation.

The effectiveness of Freeman as a leader takes a leap when he realizes that not only should he be militaristic, but should also appeal to the culture of himself and his “brothers”. He emphasizes to another member of the Cobras that it is not about “hate”, but instead about “freedom”: a true application of a cultural nationalist. This is emphasized during the town's riots following the shooting of a fleeing innocent Black American. Instead of purely encouraging violence, Freeman uses cultural appeals to the people in order to calm them and prevent disorder for a cause he does not deem righteous enough.¹¹ Contrasts between Freeman's old integrationist views and his new views of cultural nationalism can be seen during his conversations with Joy and Dawson, where both characters notice a change in Freeman's thought process. The conflict that this contrast causes is not unprecedented and mirrors the problems that occurred in the Black Power Movement of the mid twentieth century. Although all parties are fighting for equality, the ways in which they go about this fight remain unclear, and differences in opinions cause conflict.¹² This conflict is climaxed during the violent meeting between Dawson and Freeman, where Freeman's militant cultural nationalism met Dawson's integrationalism face-to-face. The conflict ends with Dawson's death and Freeman's survival, signifying the effectiveness of Freeman's strategy of militant cultural nationalism. To finalize Freeman's transformation, he wears a dashiki, a traditional garb of African culture, for the first time – a true sign of cultural nationalism.¹³ Dressed in traditional cultural attire, he makes a speech urging for violence against those who follow the government's integrationist policy, even if the follower is Black. This

9 Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West* (United States: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

10 *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, directed by Ivan Dixon (1973; United States: Monarch Home Video, 2004), DVD.

11 Ibid.

12 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 93.

13 Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West* (United States: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

seeming betrayal marks a completed shift in Freeman's attitudes.

Thus, in order for Freeman to be effective in fighting against the racist attitudes of the United States, he had to shift his ideals away from the traditional integrationalist views and into a new militaristic cultural nationalism. He did so by commanding a group of Black Americans, in a very similar vein as the Black Panther Party, to institute violence onto those who stood for racist policies. The film ends with the Cobras being declared a national threat, much like the Black Panthers¹⁴, showing that his shift in ideals indeed allowed him to have a widespread effect.

14 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 109.