

Who is "Black" at the University of Illinois, 1965-1975

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During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the proponents of the Civil Rights Movement encouraged African Americans to petition for the protection of their constitutional rights. Securing equality of social and educational opportunity was seen as a key to success and this was pursued through non-violent means. By the late 1960s, a new development, the Black Power Movement, advocated a more aggressive posture as some Blacks were becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of change. Some African Americans opposed the non-violent strategy adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the more moderate Civil Rights leaders in favor of more confrontational methods. Blacks on university campuses across the United States gathered to discuss and plan ways they could more aggressively combat the inequalities Blacks experienced.

This paper describes the impact of the beliefs associated with Black Power at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). I will draw on various student publications at UIUC in discussing Black UIUC students' conceptions of "Black" and the ideology of "Blackness." While I recognize that not all Black students participated in "Black Power" or agreed with its objectives and ideologies, evidence indicates that a majority of Black UIUC students were involved with the Black Power Movement.

Black UIUC students from 1965 to 1975 participated in the Black Power upsurge across the nation. When asked about their own definitions of Black Power, UIUC Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) chapter President Paul Brady and his friend Rodney Hammond stated in a 5 October 1966 article, "CORE Touches Racial Issues," appearing in *The Daily Illini*, that Black Power was racial pride, Black consciousness, and the development of "political, economic self-determination in the Negro masses." This sentiment was instrumental in organizing the Black Students Association. In 1967, within a month of its inception, BSA initiated a Black student newspaper, *Drums*. The following March the paper proclaimed that *The Daily Illini*, the general student newspaper, was the "voice of the White student on campus," and that Black students needed an outlet to publish articles relevant to their experience. An editorial published in the October 1968 issue of *Drums*, "While Their Parents Waited. . ." revealed the activist nature of the paper. The editorial asserted that the older generation was apathetic, ignorant, and "white-washed." Frustrated by their parents' inaction, the Black students decided to take the reins, "it appears that the days when black students waited for their parents to take action against the racist school policies are over." While their parents engaged in "habitual things" such as cooking, cleaning, reading the newspaper, and watching television their children were "organizing themselves to form a united front against the system to which their parents had become so well adjusted." This view was harsh as many of these parents had fought for freedom and equality decades before the 1960s. Nonetheless, this view of a new generation seemed to be necessary in order to break with the mainstream Civil Rights Movement.

In harmony with their Black Power ideology, Black UIUC students followed the shift from racially integrated civil rights organizations to predominantly or all Black civil rights organizations and from non-confrontational or moderate methods to aggression. By the later 1960s, the NAACP and other integration-minded organizations still existed on campus but faced fierce competition for Black members from newly formed Black Power-minded organizations. As noted earlier, not all Black students joined this movement. However, Black Power-minded organizations gained momentum and claimed a significant part of the Black student population as adherents. By 1967, Black Power was the prevailing ideology among Black students on the UIUC campus.

This does not, however, mean that all Black students in the movement held identical beliefs with regard to tactics and solutions to Black America's problems. One point of contention was "who is Black?" According to those in the Black Power Movement "Black" was more than pigmentation. "It is the soul, heart, mind, physical spirit," stated John Lee Johnson, a Black Champaign community activist closely affiliated with BSA and who had a significant influence on Black students, in an interview published in the 7 December 1968 issue of *The Daily Illini*. Blackness became an ideology--a state of mind--and implied a degree of awareness, appreciation, and celebration of the African/African

American self. BSA students, in their publications, often berated Black students whom they felt were not participating in Blackness. This resulted in a campus split among Black UIUC students. Those who did not follow BSA aims and policies were deemed not "Black" enough or committed to the struggle by the organization. Many BSA authored articles and publications were aimed at convincing the dissenters that their understanding of Black Power was the proper road toward Black liberation.

Like others in the Black Power Movement, Black UIUC students threw off the term "Negro" in favor of Black. While still being used in the general student newspaper, *The Daily Illini*, none of BSA's newspapers used the word "Negro" as a descriptive racial term. Instead, they reinterpreted it, assigning a pejorative definition to the term. Negroes were those who had not embraced Black Power and Black Consciousness. As John Lee Johnson stated in a 17 February 1966 interview published in the 17 February 1968 edition of *The Daily Illini*, "I resent the word 'Negro'; it means second class fool and one who does not want to be free. I am black and black means just the opposite." This statement not only addressed the "Negro" versus "Black" dichotomy but revealed the tone of the Black Power-minded Champaign-Urbana community and Black UIUC students. While some used Negro and Black interchangeably to describe people of African descent (based on pigment), Black UIUC students used the terms to denote particular ideologies of liberation.

Students in BSA embraced this new interpretation of Blackness and adopted the mandate to promote Black consciousness and Black unity. The fundamental beliefs and mission of the BSA was clearly stated in "Goals Are Black Unity and Black Consciousness," appearing in *Drums* (November 1967). Its goal included the establishment of a *racially-based* campus group mirrored after racially-based national groups. An example is that they supported SNCC when they expelled all Whites from the national organization in 1966. In addition, Black UIUC students declared that Blacks needed to 'stick together' to protect their interests, "If it is logical that we as black students must 'stick together' in order to promote and protect our own interests, it should be equally logical that we as a people must stick together to protect and promote the interests of our people." Furthermore, the Black Power Movement's push for more aggressive means and tactics for liberation was mirrored in BSA's advocacy of direct confrontation "with any institution within or outside the University" and the use of "any tool necessary" in fighting against apathy and for liberation. Finally, Black students stated their connection to the larger Black Power Movement and the BSA took it upon itself to insure that all African Americans on the campus and in the Champaign-Urbana community were aware of the Black Power Movement.

Blackness was celebrated and promoted through the student organizations and activities such as *Black Chorus*, *Black Mom's Day*, *Black Weekend*, and *Black Homecoming*. Using Blackness and Black culture as a basis for their organizations and activities demonstrated to the University that Black students valued their culture, heritage, and experiences. No longer would they participate in established organizations that did not cater to Black needs.

Poems and articles indicative of Black UIUC student conceptions of an ideology of Blackness were found in each of BSA's publications. For example, in an effort to convince African Americans to "get serious" about Black liberation, including psychological liberation, former BSA Vice Chairman, Christine Cheatom, berated Black women who used hair straighteners in the December 1967 issue of *Drums*. She stated, "No one with straightened hair is an enlightened Black. You may be militant, you may be intelligent but if you can not see any beauty in the average black woman's unstraightened hair, then you are still brainwashed." This was a statement in favor of Blackness and against assimilation or Whiteness. The use of hair straighteners, "processes," and skin bleaching creams was interpreted as a sign of weakness, desire to assimilate, and denigration of the African heritage. It was viewed as the internalization of standards of beauty consistent with the phenotypic traits of Whites. Students were told to break away from the long-held preference in the Black community for "good hair" and light skin, to stop mutilating their bodies for the sake of Whiteness, and to embrace their African/African American selves.

The October and November 1968 issues of *Drums*, carried "Know Your Black History" quizzes. The questions were designed to help Black students learn about African roots and the diasporic component involved in Blackness. Questions included, "[Name] three old kingdoms of Africa," "[Name] the 'Black Moses' of the Underground Railroad," and "[Name] the Black U. S. Senator from Mississippi during the Reconstruction." Other questions focused on important Black leaders. These included Marcus Garvey, leader of the early 20th century "Back

to Africa" movement; W. E. B. DuBois, NAACP founder and Pan-Africanist; Imhotep, the 2nd century Egyptian "father of medicine"; and the Queen of Sheba. The goal was to educate and give a more prominent place to significant Black heroes and heroines.

A second BSA newspaper, *Black Rap*, appeared in 1969. Its pages referred to Black men and Black women as "brothers and sisters", called for "Umoja"—unity within the Black community, declared themselves the "vanguard," and demeaned Black men who dated White women. The paper proclaimed that *true brothers* would never date a White woman or voluntarily choose to socialize with Whites instead of Blacks. BSA member Paul Chandler published a poem calling for Black men to practice what they preached and criticized integrationist practices. Black unity and power were manifest in the relationships between *Black* men and *Black* women, not Black men and White women; the desire for Black liberation and the pursuit of a White woman could not co-exist in the heart of a *real* Black man.

Similar themes and sentiments regarding the ideology of Blackness continued in 1970 editions of *The Black Rap*. For example, in a poem indicative of the era and meant to chastise those who did not fully participate in the celebration of Blackness was published in a 21 October 1970 issue. Blackness was deeper than pigment; it was a commitment to Black liberation, celebration of the Black aesthetic, and immersion in Black culture. Total and full participation in Blackness was required. Having unstraightened hair did not necessarily mean "true Blackness;" one had to fully appreciate one's Afro. This was part of the psychological criteria of true Blackness.

The 2 December 1971 issue of BSA's third newspaper, *Yombo*, contained two poems, "Negro" and "Black". The poems depicted the Negro as an "aged" person afraid to take a step forward and emasculated, "a Negro not a man . . . a Negro, boy, not a man." I believe this characterized the feelings toward those in the Civil Rights Movement. Just as in an earlier edition of *Drums*, Black Power advocates continued to ridicule Civil Rights adherents for being of another generation with outdated methods for gaining Black liberation. Blacks, on the other hand, were no longer seeking an integration based on assimilation with Whites. Underscoring the point that Negroes and Blacks were fundamentally different kinds of people and redefining "integration," Black students cited Don Lee, a Chicago poet and Black activist in the March 1968 issue of *Drums*, "I seek integration of negroes and black people." This was the "correct" manner in which to gain liberation. "Black is like a treasure inside of a chest . . . beautiful, sweet, loving, and strong. . . Black is where it's at, it's about time we should realize that." *Negroes* outlived their usefulness; *Blacks* had to take the reins.

A poem in the 1972 Black student yearbook, *Irepodun*, described the transformation from Negro to Black. Black UIUC students were called to "experience the warmth of belonging to a race of Beautiful Black People."

The birth of Blackness through becoming AWARE;
The killing of the Negro, the birth of Blackness;
The killing of Whitey in your soul and
The birth of Blackness in your mind.

The Negro—the assimilated, complacent, timid, "white-washed," and pre-Black Power advocate—part of the self had to be "killed" before the transformation could occur. One also had to annihilate White influence. The process was like death and rebirth, kill the Negro, kill the White indoctrination and Blackness was possible. The search for and attainment of true Blackness was a resurrection of the mind and soul which allowed for a new political and cultural awariness.

An important question was, who had the authority to determine who was "Black?" Answers varied depending on which person or which group was asked "who is Black." The ingroup-outgroup dichotomy often was falsely (and hurtfully) drawn. BSA often wielded its "thou art Black enough" sword hastily and judgmentally. If a Black student did not fit all the criteria expected of a true "brother" or "sister"—both physical (wearing an Afro, having a Black girl/boyfriend) and psychological (appreciating the Afro, wanting to pull away from White influence and integration)—and fully participate in BSA events, s/he was called a Negro, sell-out, or Uncle Tom. This tactic often pushed away potential allies and alienated others.

Another problem in the Black UIUC student movement was that "Black" often meant *Black man*. "Black" was interpreted as Black men reclaiming their masculinity. Yes, Black women were a target audience (Black women were told to stop straightening their hair) and were critical to disseminating the new Black ideology, but never was

the sexism in the Black Power Movement or the emerging definition of Blackness discussed in the Black student publications. Perhaps sexism was discussed outside the publications, but as the primary source of information and the outlet for the Black student voice its omission was glaring. Gender issues, or issues of equity between the sexes, were ignored in discussions of Blackness though Black women played varied and critical roles in the UIUC Black Power Movement.

In Fall 1968, BSA delivered a list of 35 demands to the administration. The demands, published later in the 18 February 1969 edition of *The Black Rap*, included: establishing "a Black Cultural Center large enough to accommodate all Black people which will be run by the Black Students Association," hiring 500 Black faculty within a four year period beginning with 150 by September 1969, and establishing an autonomous Black Studies Department with a major emphasis on Afro-American and African Studies. It was in this list of demands--and their implementation--that the redefinition of "Blackness" began to be tangibly manifest on the UIUC campus through Afro-American Studies and the Afro-American Cultural Program.

In early 1969, a student-faculty Commission on Afro-American Life and Culture moved to recommend the development of an Afro-American Studies Program and the possibility of pursuing minors in the field. Like many Black students at predominantly White institutions, some Black UIUC students voiced dissatisfaction with the development of the Afro-American Studies Program. In a 18 March 1969, *Daily Illini* article, BSA member Michael Wilson pointed to a class bias in the proposed program. In his article entitled "Class Bias," he stated that the focus on teaching Black history, literature, and culture was only relevant to middle-class Blacks. He stated, "A Black Studies Program based on Black history and culture alone will not help the masses of Blacks who are preoccupied with the problems of jobs, housing, and education. . . . More particularly, our Black Studies Program must provide the tools that will enable us to work with the people in our communities." Classes on housing rights of the poor and consumer fraud in low income communities were proposed. This focus on the tangible benefits for a larger number of Blacks was a shift from the Civil Rights Movement of the early sixties, which was seen as a movement for and by middle-class Blacks.

Courses established in Spring 1971 were published in a flyer distributed to students. Some of the courses included Afro-American Lectures, Black Curriculum Methods in Early Childhood Education, Introduction to African Languages, Cultural and Political Revolution, and Police-Black Interaction.

One Black student demand, the establishment of a Black cultural center, was accepted and put to committee in March 1969. This center was called "the Afro-American Cultural Program (AACP)" and was established in the Fall semester of 1969. The AACP was not just a recreation center or meeting place for Black UIUC students and Black Champaign-Urbana residents. Workshops were held; speakers were invited; performances were sponsored. It served as the campus locus for the promotion of Black culture and Black pride. Demonstrating their deep respect for Malcolm X and his teachings, students named the AACP reading room the "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Reading Room" in December 1969. By late 1970, AACP weekly activities included three dance workshops, a writers workshop, a drama workshop, and music classes and rehearsals.

Around 1975, Black Power waned. Possible factors in influencing this were that prominent Black Power figures strayed from the cause, the police actively and purposely helped disintegrate the Black Panther Party, and the government effectively declared war on Black Power. At UIUC Black student enrollment decreased which impacted the presence of Black Power on the campus. According to a report, "The Recruitment, Admission, Enrollment, and Retention of Minority Students at the University of Illinois" (University Office of School and College Relations 1985), Black UIUC enrollment rose from 330 in 1967 and peaked at 1,439 (4.2 percent of the UIUC population) in 1972. After 1972, the numbers dropped off. By 1984, the number of Black UIUC students had declined steadily to 1,160--equal to the number of Black UIUC students between 1969 and 1970. After 1975, most registered Black organizations focused on providing academic support. By the late 1970s all three BSA newspapers had folded.

Although I mark the end of the Black Power era in 1975, lasting benefits to Black students are evident. The Black students of the late sixties and early seventies forced the University to seriously commit itself to the recruitment and retention of Black students and faculty. Black residence hall councils, of which the first was formed in early 1969, remain active and chose Swahili names such as Ewezo, Eusa Nia, and Solongo. Black Mom's Day

celebrations, which still include a Black Chorus concert and a fashion show, are still held the same weekend as the University Mom's Day celebrations. Black Homecoming activities, including the election of a Black Queen and King, continue to thrive. Black Chorus grew from four students to over one hundred members and now performs in churches and educational institutions around the state of Illinois. The African American Cultural Program continues to provide several different workshops and activities including Omnimov (a dance group), Theatre 263 ("Theatre of the Black Experience), the Griot (a newsletter), and WBML (alias "Where Black Music Lives," a radio station housed in the AACP and run by students). Students may now minor in Afro-American Studies and take a variety of courses on the African American experience in several disciplines. The first dinner to recognize Black graduating seniors was transformed into the Black Congratulatory Ceremony, a more personal event for Black graduating seniors, graduate, and professional students held in addition to the University graduation ceremonies.

A less tangible result of the Black UIUC students' labors was the fact that their struggle was taken up by other ethnic groups. Their push for an autonomous Afro-American Studies Program and more African American professors paved the way for other groups, especially Latino/a students, to follow in their footsteps. The ideas of psychological liberation, cultural nationalism, and self-determination were not unique to African Americans. Several ethnic groups experienced a resurgence of cultural pride and expression in the mid 1960s and early 1970s; but, African Americans led the way. Following in the path of African American UIUC students, Latino/a student groups began to demand courses relevant to their experience, increased Latino/a enrollment, more Latino/a faculty, and a cultural center for student support. Currently, there are University sanctioned efforts to establish a Latino/a Studies Program and an Asian American Studies Program. A Women's Studies Program was established some years after the Afro-American Studies and Research Program. The Black students created a climate conducive to the demands of other ethnic groups.

Whatever their limitations, the Black students' drive to implement programs and policies in line with their own conceptions of Blackness helped shape the UIUC campus. Although all of their demands were not met, Black Power era UIUC students accomplished a broader goal—they enriched the academic and social lives of Black UIUC students for years to come.

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