



Essay

Black Power and Black Identity in Los Angeles: Renaming and Redefining Black Racial Identity Nationally and Locally

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the summer of 2020's social unrest and the call for racial justice after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, many institutions around the country began to champion anti-racist, diversity, equity, and inclusion rhetoric. The attention given to Black students and employees at these institutions, however, has often reduced the broader concerns to a problem of representation. Although representation matters, being Black is more than a matter of representation. Understanding the '60s as a linchpin moment in the creation of a Black racial identity reminds current Black activists, and their allies, that a Black racial identity is about power, culture, and consciousness. This article examines the shift from "Negro" to Black during the Black Freedom Movement exploring Black Power advocates in California, in general, and Los Angeles, specifically. This article draws upon oral histories and autobiographies with content analysis revealing that Black

people in the west contributed to the reconstruction of a positive and reaffirming Black racial identity with a focus on the contributions of Maulana Karenga and the Organization Us. It also reveals the positive psycho-cultural effect the Black racial identity had on Black youth.

Keywords

Black Identity, Black Power, Black Freedom Movement, Black Los Angeles, Los Angeles

Introduction

In the United States, “Negro” and Black, as a racialized category, was imposed on African people and people of African descent as part of a larger social construction of race based on the concept of hypodescent, or the one-drop-rule. Essentially, one drop of Black blood constitutes one as Black.¹ On this basis, a “Negro,” or Black racialized identity, reflected and reinforced European notions of racial hierarchy. Yaba Blay, however, asserts, “Although the one-drop rule may have been created out of bitter racism and ignorance, in many ways it served our community some good. It created the African American community as we know it and gave us some basic criteria with which to even recognize members of our community.”² The Middle Passage marks the beginning of African people and people of African descents’ attempt to redefine themselves, albeit not the last.³ African people and people of African descent possess a peoplehood on the bases of race, and are in constant struggle for racial justice and respect. Blay posits, “Whether we like it or not, the one-drop rule united our community as a people and gave us the parameters around which to mobilize in the organized struggle against enslavement, Jim Crow, and racial oppression.”⁴ In other words, race is not real; but, peoplehood is real, and Black people are a community in constant racial struggle on that basis. As Maulana Karenga asserts, “there are distinct peoples defined more by their culture than their physical features. This is not to deny the peoplehood of persons or peoples as a whole, but race as a social construction to facilitate and justify the oppression, exploitation and degradation of peoples must be

clearly distinguished from the historically evolved cultural communities that are unique and equally valid and valuable ways of being human in the world.”⁵

The Movement for Black Lives, and subsequent national conversations on anti-racism; systemic racism; anti-Blackness; anti-Black racism; anti-Black racist ideas; Critical Race Theory; and related topics, have necessitated a return to an examination on Black racial identity. Part of the quest for racial justice is the respect and human dignity of all people, and African people and their descendants, specifically. Renaming and redefining what it meant to be Black was a powerful political statement. People of African descent in the 1960s sought to redefine the nature of racial power dynamics and relationships as well as create a reaffirming Black racial identity. This does not suggest that all African people and people of African descent agreed, or currently agree, with the use of a Black racial identity. It does suggest, however, that the ‘60s was a critical moment in redefining and renaming Black people in the United States and reconsidering their relationship to Africa. It also reveals a continued desire for the humanity of Black people to be respected as well as to be treated with dignity. Lastly, it reveals the power and creative agency of Black people in Los Angeles and beyond.

In the new millennium, Black racial identity has remained a powerful racial identity. The Black Natural Hair Movement; #Blacknificent; #BlackGirlMagic; #Blackfathersmatter; Marvel’s *Black Panther*; and Karmia 2G’s cover of Hank Ballard’s “Blackenized” are continued examples of Black peoples struggle to reaffirm their Black racial identity in resistance to anti-Black racist ideas and practices. In addition, in the aftermath of the summer of 2020’s social unrest and the call for racial justice after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, many institutions around the country began to champion anti-racist, diversity, equity, and inclusion rhetoric. The attention given to Black students and employees at these institutions, however, has often reduced the broader concerns to a problem of representation. Although representation matters, being Black is more than a matter of representation. Understanding the ‘60s as a linchpin moment in the creation of a Black racial identity reminds current Black activists, and their allies, that a Black racial identity is about power, culture, and consciousness.

This article explores the shift from the racialized designation of “Negro,” along with its related derogatory attitudes and values associated with Blackness, to the more politically and culturally empowering Black racial identity denoting peoplehood. It examines the thoughts, ideas, and memories of Black Power advocates in the ‘60s

revealing why they renamed and redefined their racialized identity to a racial identity, as well as the impact it had on them individually and communally. Content analysis reveals that the redefined Black racial identity was empowering and reaffirming. In addition, this article argues that African people and people of African descent in California, in general, and Los Angeles, specifically, contributed to the reconstruction of a positive and reaffirming Black racial identity developed out of a shared history of racial experiences for people of African descent which produced a politicized racial consciousness and determination to struggle for racial and social justice. It is important to focus on Los Angeles because of the contributions of Maulana Karenga and the Organization Us to the development of a Black racial identity that are often overlooked given the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) inflamed conflict with the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Furthermore, power and creative agency birthed Black Power with Black History and culture as essential components in recreating and redefining what it meant to be Black in America. In Los Angeles, and beyond, Karenga and Us contributed to the development of the highly political Black racial identity that contributed to redefining power relationships and power dynamics between white and Black people.

This article draws upon oral histories and autobiographies from Black Power advocates with a focus on Los Angeles to contribute to the growing literature on the Black Freedom Movement in Los Angeles. There are three primary objectives of this article: first, chronicle the transition from “Negro” to Black from the perspective of Black Power advocates. Secondly, illustrate how the redefined Black racial identity constituted a cultural and political shift in the consciousness of Black people in the United States, in general, and Los Angeles, more specifically. And thirdly, a Black racial identity is a political identity that should not be reduced to representation.

Black Freedom Movement Literature in the West

Recent scholarship has offered critique and diversified reflections on the Black struggle in the mid- twentieth century.⁶ Often times, the scope is narrowed and bifurcated into north and south geographic regions dichotomizing the struggle. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard contribute to the north versus south dichotomy in their edited book, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, despite Theoharis stating, “The North’ sometimes refers to northeastern cities while other times stands in as a larger term for the rest of the country (as we will

use here).”⁷ Although it is clear that the Black freedom struggle includes more than the north and south, this bifurcation framed the book. Bruce A. Glasrud and Cary D. Wintz compiled studies in their book entitled *Black Americans and the Civil Rights Movement in the West*. This compilation reveals the contributions of people of African descent west of the Mississippi River to the Civil Rights Movement.⁸ Book length works on the west such as W. Sherman Savage’s 1976 book entitled *Blacks in the West* and Quintard Taylor’s 1998 book *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* include chapters on the Civil Rights Movement in the west in general.⁹

Literature on Black Los Angeles, more specifically, provides historical accounts and the Black struggle for employment, housing, and against police harassment.¹⁰ Others focus on the cultural arts scene in places such as Central Avenue in the 1940s and 50s; Watts in the 60s and 70s; and Compton and Leimert Park in the 80s and 90s.¹¹ Gerald Horne’s *The Fire this Time*, as well as Mike Davis and Jon Wiener’s *Set the Night on Fire*, focus on the freedom struggles of the sixties.¹² M. Keith Claybrook, Jr. and Martha Biondi provide accounts of the Black Students Movement in Los Angeles¹³ while Scott Brown and Molefi Kete Asante examine the contributions of Maulana Karenga and the Organization Us. This article seeks to contribute to the growing literature on the Black Freedom Movement in Los Angeles.

Power and a Racialized Black Identity

Power is relational, and the struggle for and against power makes it political. Marimba Ani asserts that “in the search for European predilection, temperament, and need,” for “power seeking,” power presents itself as “power over.” That is, it is “predicated on or rather originates in separation. This is the fanatical European objective.” She continues, “‘Power over’ functions only through the modality of control. It precludes cosmic, communal, or sympathetic relationship. It is essentially political and materialistic.”¹⁴ For Ani, the European has an extreme obsession, on a deep cultural level, to divide and control. In fact, in 16th Century England ruling elites created religious cast, persecuted Jews, and developed an expansionist foreign policy based on religion.¹⁵ This is consistent with, and later expands to, the construction of race and resulting racial hierarchy used to justify enslavement and colonialism.

The concept of race was socially constructed by Europeans to create, justify, and maintain power relationships and dynamics based on race for purposes of political

domination and economic exploitation. The social construction of race imposed racialized hierarchies resulting in unequal power relationships and dynamics placing white at the top and Black at the bottom. Europeans ranked, or ordered, groups based upon racialized characteristics (phenotype) while simultaneously associating intellectual superiority and civility on that basis. White (European) and Black (African) racial identities are binaries in the racial construct, which conceptually denies symmetry between Black and white races.¹⁶

The racialized Black category was enforced as part of a larger social construction of race. Greco-Roman philosophy, Biblical accounts, and science constructed the origins of race, and led to the creation of repressive legal, economic, and societal consequences for African people and people of African descent. They were assigned the racialized “Colored” and “Negro” signifiers as part of a global anti-Black racism with their very skin color, hair texture, intelligence, and culture disrespected and devalued.¹⁷ These racialized ideas produced anti-Black racist ideas defined by Ibram X. Kendi “as any idea suggesting that Black people, or any group of Black people, are inferior in any way to another racial group.”¹⁸ These anti-Black racist ideas, thoughts, or suggestions then become the starting point for racialized oppressive, exploitative, and discriminatory practices. Understanding anti-Black racist ideas are important in identifying, analyzing, and understanding how anti-Black racist ideas impact economics, policy, curriculum, legislation, and the resulting effect on societies interactions with, and treatment of, Black people. Ultimately, African people and people of African descents’ humanity was not respected, which contributed to their substandard quality of life and material conditions as a legacy of enslavement and domestic colonialism in the United States.¹⁹ In fact, Collier-Thomas and Turner assert:

Slavery denied Africans their original identity, leaving them with a sense that they were lacking a fundamental wholeness as human beings. Africans were confronted, not only with a condition of loss of freedom, but with the repudiation of the very legitimacy of their culture and human identification. The institution of slavery promoted efforts to deny the Africans a legitimate

foundation for the very nature of their being, in a sense to cast them from being to nothingness. The ultimate human degradation is nothingness.²⁰

The loss of freedom and identity reflects “power over.” The unequal power relationship and dynamics reduced, degraded, and dehumanized enslaved Africans.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, people of African descent were on a quest to redefine themselves with terms such as “Negro,” “Colored,” Anglo-African, Afro-American, Africo-American, Aframerican, Hamite, Tan American, Ethiopian, and Ethiop. Self-naming and self-defining efforts reflect a “power to do,” and yet, people of African descent continued to be hampered by racialized conceptualizations of race and color. Racially mixed and lighter skinned people of African descent championed names that created distance from Africa and enslavement such as “Colored” or simply American. Darker skinned people of African descent advocated for terms that reflected their ethnology. In the early 20th century, the term “Negro” would become the common usage term albeit two different justifications. Collier-Thomas and Turner explain, “On the one hand, there was the Black nationalist and Pan Africanist ideology of the Garvey Movement that claimed Negro as a universal terminology, referring to all peoples of the Black race emanating from Africa.” For Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Negro signified a connection with Africa, embraced those with darker complexion, and united all people of African descent around the world regardless of color. Collier-Thomas and Turner highlight the use of “Negro” by groups such as the NAACP and Urban League who were “primarily concerned with dignifying the term and emphasizing its specific peculiarity as an American phenomenon. To them, the term Negro is less universal in its connotation, as it is distinctive in reference to the American racial experience.” Those arguing this position highlighted that their claim to America, ethnologically and phenotypically, “was a unique product of American culture.” This position viewed people of African descent in the United States as fundamentally American who needed to struggle for full integration into American society. Furthermore, it is this usage of “Negro” that would define the Civil Rights Movement. Although the term “Negro” was accepted, albeit for different reasons, the matter of color remained.

When many of the Black Power generation were coming of age in the 1940s and 50s, the United States' anti-Black racism was overt in both de jure and de facto law. The racialized socialization of Black activists in their youth resulted in many considering being Black as derogatory and insulting. Veterans of the Black Freedom Movement, such as former City Attorney of Compton and Black Power advocate, Legrand Clegg, II, recalls noticing the stigma of being Black very early on when he says:

I was a little boy and I was in church one Sunday and I told my mother I said, 'Mother, mother, mother look. Look at that. That baby is black. She is black.' Mama said, 'Shh.'

'No, she is black.'

So finally, one of my mother's friends took me out...But even then I was beginning to recognize the stigma as it were of blackness...²¹

Clegg remembers this incident and how, at a young age, he had been socialized into understanding the humiliation and shame associated with being Black. In addition to Clegg, Elmeaner Reaves, former Black student activist and retired teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District, remembers, "When I was a kid I went through a lot of turmoil because I was Black and I was the darkest girl in the family and all of that."²² Reaves recalls her dark complexion contributing to anxiety and strife. There was a pervasive attitude of indignity, dishonor, or disgrace about having darker skin in America before the '60s, which impacted Black youths' perception of themselves and others.

On the contrary, Elaine Brown who is Black, but of a lighter hue, former member of the Black Student Alliance in Los Angeles and former Chairperson of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, recalls her mother telling her at a young age that she was the most beautiful girl in the world. Her mother added that she was not like the other "Negro" girls in the neighborhood whose faces were too dark, facial features too African, and did not have "good" hair like hers.²³ Brown attended a Jewish school as a child, and tried her best to become white and identify with the white children and teachers. She recalls the anti-Black racist ideas in the children's rhyme:

If you white, you right

If you yellow, you mellow

If you brown, stick around

If you black, git back

Way back²⁴

Brown notes that everyone on her block knew and understood that rhyme:

Everyone had always known that dark-skinned colored girls with ‘bad,’ or kinky, hair were ugly. Everyone had always known that ‘high-yellow’ colored girls with ‘good,’ or straight, hair were pretty. The rule was simple: The closer to white, the better. We derided girls who had short ‘nappy’ hair, or thick ‘liver’ lips, or protruding, high behinds, or skin ‘so black it’s blue.’²⁵

The anti-Black racist ideas and racialized aesthetic values socialized Black people beyond mere color representation, and added value and meaning to Blackness and, by extension, whiteness. Whites constructed their identity against Black identity reducing the idea of Blackness to a marginalized and “other” status.²⁶ As a result, a skin color and hair texture caste created division among people of African descent with its origins in anti-Black racist ideas that were institutionalized when Europeans enslaved Africans. The racialized aesthetics conditioned Black people to see neither value nor beauty in being Black. To be Black was a burden as it signified a perceived lack of culture, intelligence, and marginalized place in society. A color caste system with related hair texture prejudice within Black communities and families perpetuated psycho-cultural wounds of anti-Black racist ideas.

The racial and color hierarchy reinforced European notions of “power over” as it relates to skin color and its subsequent impact on quality of life and material conditions. Collier-Thomas and Turner explain:

Blacks of lighter color, particularly the victims of miscegenation, manipulated the color stratification of American culture in ways that permitted them to assume social stratification of American culture in ways that permitted them to assume social advantage in the Black community. Light complexion was associated not only with aesthetic value but also with social prestige. Whites accentuated this process among Black people by allowing some favor to lighter complexion African Americans, thereby manipulating this group as a societal

buffer and as a division in the social structure of the African American community.²⁷

There is an intimate connection, then, between race, color, and class. The racialized “power over” affected the quality of life and material conditions of people of African descent. According to bell hooks, a mixture of racist and sexist thinking explains how color caste hierarchies affect the quality of life and material conditions of Black people. Light skin and long, straight hair are associated with beauty, desire, and femininity. Darker skin, on the other hand, is categorized as unattractive, undesirable, and masculine.²⁸ The internalization of racial representations that privilege whiteness results in Black people coveting whiteness at the expense of being Black. Color hierarchy is also linked with class, then, because educational and employment opportunities were more readily afforded to lighter skinned Black people creating further intra-racial divides among Black people based upon anti-Black racist ideas. Complexion potentially influences class status because job opportunities were not extended to qualified dark skinned Black people at the same rate as lighter skinned Black people.²⁹

Racism, in general, and anti-Black racist ideas, more specifically, then, impact Black identity and agency. Barbara J. Fields explains racism, “unseats both identity and agency, if identity means sense of self, and agency anything beyond conscious, goal-directed activity, however trivial or ineffectual.”³⁰ Anti-Black racist ideas reinforce European notions of “power over” as well as negatively affect how African people and people of African descents view themselves, the world, and their place in it. In addition, it attempts to quail the ability of Black people to resist and recreate the world in a more humane way. The coming Black Freedom Movement would eventually address what it means to be people of African descent and reconstruct a Black racial identity in the United States.

Redefining a Black Racial Identity

The 1960s was a pivotal moment in renaming and redefining people of African descent in the United States. It was a political and cultural struggle drawing upon the power and creative agency of Black people. Politics, according to Karenga, is the “*art and process of gaining, maintaining, and using power to create and sustain a just and good world.*”³¹ Politics, then, is a creative and dynamic practice for the pursuit and

maintenance of power. In a political context, power is “the social capacity of a group to realize its will, in spite of opposition from others.”³² By social capacity, Karenga is referring to “the collective and structural character of power as well as to indicate that power as a political concept and fact must be achieved in a societal context as opposed to a family or personal context.”³³ Karenga, then, presents a definition of politics and power different from Ani’s understanding of the European “power-over” approach to power. Karenga’s approach to understanding politics and power is consistent with what Ani refers to as “power to do.” She says, “‘Power to do’ seeks balance and harmony.”³⁴ “Power to do” refers to agency, which Karenga defines as “*the capacity and will to make history, create culture and address critical human concerns in a meaningful and successful manner.*”³⁵ Agency, then, requires the actualization of power. “The power to do” and “address human concerns” requires imagination, creativity, and action to bring about a better world than was inherited. Power and creative agency, here, conceptualizes a process whereby Black people harness their social capacity to recreate and rename their racial group identity, or peoplehood.

The shift from the racialized “Negro” to a positive and reaffirming Black racial identity denoting peoplehood, pride, and purpose intimately connects to the Black Freedom Movement of the ‘60s as part of a cultural renaissance. Karenga identifies two phases within the Black Freedom Movement: the Civil Rights phase (1955-1965), with an integration thrust, followed by the Black Power phase (1965-1975), with a nationalist thrust.³⁶ The civil rights thrust was a struggle for equal opportunity, access, and protection under the law. The goal was integration into American society as “Negroes.” This was an interracial effort because, theoretically, the law should be applied equally to all citizens throughout the country. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) are an example of this position and reflective of a racialized “Negro” identity.

The Black Power thrust, however, was about self-identity, self-respect, self-determination, self-reliance, and self-defense. The phrase “Black Power” was thrust into the Black Freedom Movement on June 16, 1966, at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi by Kwame Ture³⁷ and Willie Mukasa Ricks.³⁸ Later, Ture and Charles V. Hamilton published *Black Power* where they assert that Black Power, “rests on a fundamental premise: *Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks.* By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.”³⁹ For Ture

and Hamilton, Black Power meant Black unity, and the development of an ideology that would empower Black people to improve their quality of life and material conditions. Black Power was the struggle towards having the individual and communal lives, culture, and history of Black people valued and respected. To achieve Black Power, Black people had to struggle and, at the very least, control their own communities. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is reflective of a civil rights organization that redefined and recreated itself as a Black Power organization. They also championed the shift to a Black racial identity. Rethinking and redefining a Black racial identity signaled the coming socio-cultural and political shift among people of African descent during the Black Freedom Movement. To be sure, Black Power was expressed and defined in various ways, as will be revealed in a discussion of Maulana Karenga and the Organization Us later. Nevertheless, as Amilcar Cabral notes, “The study of national liberation struggles shows that generally these struggles are preceded by an increase in expression of culture, consolidated progressively into a successful or unsuccessful attempt to affirm the cultural personality of the dominated people, as a means of negating the oppressor culture.”⁴⁰ In other words, when Black people renamed and redefined themselves in the context of their own cultural personality, or racial group identity, they were undoing and counteracting the racialized “Negro” identity. Examining the shift from “Negro” to Black reveals “power to do” and its resulting psychological implications.

Redefining a Black Racial Identity Nationally

Nationally, in the late 1950s and early 60s, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), with their most high-profile public figure, Minister Malcolm X, influenced many Black activists of the 1960s and 70s. Followers of Muhammad shared his teachings of how whites taught people of African descent to hate themselves. They believed self-hate contributes to idleness, drunkenness, drug addiction, and other social ills. The followers of Muhammad were also told that they were members of the lost Tribe of Shabazz: an Asian Black nation.⁴¹ Even those who were not members of the NOI were empowered by the critique of the term “Negro” as a racialized ploy to further misinform and control the minds of Black people. The adoption of a Black racial identity, then, and related values challenged Black people to respect themselves. In addition, Muhammad encouraged Black people to build relationships with Africa saying, “The best act would be to request the independent

governments of Africa and Asia to help us. We are the ones who need help. We have little or nothing to offer as help to others.”⁴² Even though many African nations were taking part in their own independence struggles, they had land, an economy, political structure, and more to assist their brethren across the Atlantic.

The NOI and Malcolm X were asserting their power and creative agency by renaming and redefining what it meant to be Black in America. The combination of Mike Wallace’s 1959 television show, *The Hate That Hate Produced*, and C. Eric Lincoln’s 1961 book entitled *The Black Muslims in America* popularized the NOI, and Lincoln’s book popularized the use of “Black Muslims.” Lincoln reports, “these Muslims emphasize that they are ‘Black men’- *black* as the antithesis of white.”⁴³ This cultural and political statement reinforces the right to self-determination, as well as the right to be self-naming and self-defining, amid a cultural renaissance. They redefined not only what it means to be of African ancestry in the United States, but also renegotiated power relations and power dynamics with white America. The NOI’s critique of America, Americanness, and a racialized “Negro” identity offered a new and unapologetic assessment of the plight of Black people.

After separating from the NOI and founding the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), Malcolm X continues his critique of “Negro.” On June 28, 1964, he asserts:

When you have no knowledge of your history, you’re just another animal; in fact, you’re a Negro; something that’s nothing. The only black man on earth who is called a Negro is one who has no knowledge of his history. The only black man on earth who is called a Negro is one who doesn’t know where he came from. That’s the one in America. They don’t call Africans Negroes.⁴⁴

Here, Malcolm X comments on the intimate connection between history and identity. If identity locates a people in human history, but “Negroes” have no history to speak of owing to the legacy of the enslavement of African people, then the “Negro” is not human. Minister Malcolm X suggests “A spiritual ‘Back-to-Africa’” when he says, “migrate back to Africa culturally, first try to migrate back culturally and philosophically and psychologically, they would stay where they are physically but this psychological, cultural, and philosophical migration would give us bonds with our mother continent that would strengthen our position in the country where we are right

now.”⁴⁵ This cultural pilgrimage, for Minister Malcolm, contributes to a cultural renaissance, or the rebirth of a cultural connection and identity with Africa.

In the American South, SNCC also contributed to the ushering in of a new Black racial identity. SNCC emerged after the Sit-in movement launched at a Greensboro, North Carolina lunch counter on February 1, 1960. With Black students throughout the South and allies from the North, Mid-West, and West, the success of the sit-ins inspired a new organization. Initially, SNCC was an interracial organization organizing grassroots efforts to dismantle Jim Crow segregation while registering and encouraging Black people throughout the south to vote. In fall of 1964, some SNCC members, including James Forman, Dona and Bob Moses, Ruby Doris Robinson, Julian Bond, and Fannie Lou Hamer, accepted the invitation of singer/ actor, Harry Belafonte, to send a delegation on a tour of Africa.⁴⁶ Hamer recalled:

I had never seen a black stewardess on a plane. When I saw a man come out the cockpit who was black, right away then this meant that it was going to be different from what I had been [used to], what had been taught to me... I saw some of the most intelligent people, you know, because I had never in my life seen where black people were running banks. I had never seen nobody behind a counter in a bank. I had never seen nobody black running the government in my life. So, it was quite a revelation to me. I was really learning something for the first time.⁴⁷

The experiences on the tour of Africa internationalized the Black struggle for these SNCC members broadening their political awareness and activities, as well as increasing their racial consciousness and pride.⁴⁸ Reflecting on the impact of enslavement, Hamer asserts, “We were so stripped and robbed of our background; we wind up with nothing. You know, because we were in a sense neither white nor black and that put us in the center of being Negroes. We just don’t know anymore about ourselves than the names that the slave owners gave us, and you know that was a real crime.”⁴⁹ Traveling to Africa revealed that Black people in the United States had limited self-knowledge, which impacts their cultural identity, consciousness, and purpose.

After internal tensions on a variety of issues, including the role and presence of white people in SNCC, the organization made an ideological shift from integrationist to Black Nationalist and advocated for Black Power.⁵⁰ In 1966, SNCC drafted a

statement on Black Power conceptualizing Black Power as “self-definition as a means toward liberation.”⁵¹ Kwame Ture shares “Our concern for black power addresses itself directly to this problem, the necessity to reclaim our history and our identity from the cultural terrorism and depredation of self-justifying white guilt.”⁵² SNCC connected Black racial identity and power in the formation of the concept of Black Power. Essentially, power and creative agency birthed Black Power with Black History and identity as essential components in recreating and redefining what it meant to be Black. Their agency was creative in the sense that the idea of Black Power and redefining Black identity required originality and imagination. This creative agency, or “power to do,” required envisioning a society that did not exist, and while struggling to create the society, and world, they imagined. The SNCC statement continues, “To do this we shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognized. This is the first necessity of a free people, and the first right any oppressor must suspend.”⁵³ The word “struggle” here suggests resistance against anti-Black racist ideas and practices that relegated Black people to an inferior and subservient position. The struggle, then, was for African people and people of African descent to be self-naming, self-defining, and self-determining. While the NOI and SNCC were critiquing a racialized “Negro” identity and championing a Black racial identity, other efforts were simultaneously occurring in the West.

Maulana Karenga and Redefining a Black Racial Identity in the West

In California, the African American Association (AAA) in the San Francisco Bay area also championed the call for a Black racial identity. In 1962, a group of college students and community members formed the association first as a study group then developed into an action-oriented group. Founding member, Khalid Abdullah Tariq Al Mansour,⁵⁴ recalls the AAA advocating for the use of Black as a racial identity:

We screamed ‘Black people’ from the top of our lungs. The purpose was twofold: (1) By everyone referring to themselves as Black we programed the mind to resist the media induced belief that if your skin is ‘white, you’r alright; if you’r skin is brown stick around; but if you’r Black stay back.’ (2) Black was

widely used on the African continent and our usage would be one more step toward unification.⁵⁵

For the AAA, the redefining of a Black racial identity was essential to developing a racial consciousness, as well as the construction and possession of a positive Black racial identity and self-image. Furthermore, it sought Pan African unification linking Black people in the United States with other Black people around the world. Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland in October of 1966, was an early member of the AAA. He recalls the “purpose was mainly to develop a sense of pride among Black people for their heritage, their history, and their contributions to culture and society.” Newton continues, “We read *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, and *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin.” They would also engage in street speaking in the Oakland and San Francisco area spreading the Association’s message. Karenga chaired the Los Angeles chapter of the AAA, and would later found the Organization Us in Los Angeles in September of 1965 in the wake of the Watts Rebellion. He also recounts reading basic Movement texts such as E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie*, James Baldwin’s *Fire Next Time*, and the works of Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Mao Zedong, the Cuban Revolutionaries, and others.

In Los Angeles, it was the Watts (Los Angeles) Rebellion in August of 1965 that galvanized a generation. Black Los Angeles voiced their frustrations with the hyper-policing and the exploitative business practices in Black communities. A feeling of pride and accomplishment filled the residents of Black Los Angeles in the wake of the rebellion. The Watts Rebellion changed how Black youth in Los Angeles, in general, and Watts, in particular, viewed themselves. Eldridge Cleaver, former Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, writing while still incarcerated in Folsom prison explains:

Watts was a place of shame. We used to use Watts as an epithet in much the same way as city boys used ‘country’ as a term of derision. To deride one as a ‘lame,’ who did not know what was happening (a rustic bumpkin), the ‘in-crowd’ of the time from L.A. would bring a cat down by saying that he had just left Watts, that he ought to go back to Watts until he had learned what was

happening, or that he had just stolen enough money to move out of Watts and was already trying to play a cool part. But now, blacks are seen in Folsom saying, ‘I’m from Watts, Baby!’- whether true or no, but I think their meaning is clear.⁵⁶

Physical damage from the rebellion occurred in a 46.5 square mile zone where Watts is only 2.12 square miles of the total.⁵⁷ Geographically speaking, the rebellion occurred in Los Angeles, including Watts, but encompassing much more of the city. However, Watts became a symbol of Black resistance, purpose, pride, and power. Karenga recollects, “For a brief moment in history, the people had risen up to say ‘no’ to police brutality, merchant exploitation, and systemic oppression, and ‘yes’ to the right to rebel against oppression and injustice.”⁵⁸ Black people had “risen up,” revolted, and sent a clear message that anti-Black interactions with police and merchants, as well as a poor quality of life and material conditions, would be met with harsh retribution by Black Los Angeles. He adds, “The people now walked with a new sense of dignity, identity, purpose and direction. And they defiantly declared their determination to free themselves and perhaps the world, raising the battle, cry, ‘Liberation is coming from a Black thing.’”⁵⁹ These Black people were empowered and inspired by struggle and resistance to disrespect, brutality, and exploitation. They were motivated to engage in a myriad of activities to improve the conditions of Black people. It was empowering to literally, and symbolically, strike a blow at the purveyors of anti-Black racism. In addition, it revealed to Black people that they could resist anti-Black racism through asserting their own power and creative agency. And they did so, in part, by reaffirming their Black racial identity. While the ashes of rebellion were still warm, Karenga founded the Organization Us on September 7, 1965, and, in less than a year, the Organization Us was on the cover of *Life* magazine’s July 15, 1966, special edition on Watts.⁶⁰

Karenga participated in the Civil Rights, anti-War, anti- Capital Punishment, and Peace Movements of the early 60s. Earning his BA and MA in Political Science from UCLA in 1962, in ’65, after transferring from Los Angeles City College (LACC), Karenga left UCLA at the beginning of his doctoral studies and entered the Black Power era well read and politically active.⁶¹ He had been exploring cultural nationalism since his days at LACC, and now developed a new politics of Black identity.⁶² It was the founding of the Organization Us, his creation of the Pan-African holiday Kwanzaa, and the publication of *The Quotable Karenga* in 1967, however, that spread Karenga’s

ideas about Black racial identity and consciousness in Los Angeles and beyond.⁶³ As Molefi Kete Asante states, “*The Quotable Karenga* was his coming-out card, his first wade into the political and social pool that would lead him to the depths of social consciousness.”⁶⁴ Essentially, Karenga was a Black Power advocate, as well as a social theorist. Asante continues, “These were not worked-out ideas in the sense that Karenga had treatises, arguments, and rational discourses; these were maxims, wisdom fragments, proverbs, thinking points that could be used by others to begin the reorganizing of their personal ideas.”⁶⁵ Karenga would elaborate on these thoughts and ideas in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s in speeches, interviews, and essays.⁶⁶

Early in the Black Power Movement, Karenga offered critique of “Negro” in *The Quotable Karenga* when he states, “The ‘Negro’ is made and manufactured in America.”⁶⁷ This is reflective of racialization and “power over” discussed earlier. It is the imposed place and identity of African people and people of African descent in the European social construction of race and racial hierarchy. Karenga states further, “‘Negroes’ still suffer from America’s first concept of us—3/5 of a man.”⁶⁸ Here, Karenga is referring to the 3/5 Compromise where Congress decided that it would count 3/5 of enslaved Africans in the total state population. The objection to “Negro” is explained further in the *Kitabu*, a book of beginning concepts on Kawaida, which is the Us Organizations guiding philosophy. Posing Kawaida as a revolutionary philosophy, Karenga asserts in the *Quotable* “We are revolutionists. We believe in change. We believe in being realistic, but as for reality, we have come to change it.” And he states that Kawaida is an important guide to revolutionary thought and practice because “You cannot have a revolution without direction and that direction can only come through an ideology developed for your own situation.”⁶⁹ The *Kitabu* explains first, that “Negro” cuts Black people off from their identity. Second, the use of “Negro” is inconsistent with other racialized language which equates groups with geography. For example, Caucasoids come from the Caucasus region and Mongoloids come from Mongolia; but, “Negroes” come from Africa and should be called “Africanoid.” Third, “Negro” is connotatively derogatory because the emotional response to the name is not positive. Us contends that a name should provide a positive identity and evoke a positive emotional response, which “Negro” does not. Lastly, “Negro” denies self-determination because “only dogs and slaves are named by their masters.”⁷⁰ Essentially, as Karenga suggests, Black people’s humanity was not

respected, and by extension, “Negroes” continue to operate in the context of the European “power over.”

Along with the critique of a racialized “Negro” identity, Karenga offers solutions grounded in culture. He says, “the ‘Negroes’ main problem in America is that he suffers from a lack of culture. We must free ourselves culturally before we succeed politically.”⁷¹ Karenga explains, “Culture in simple terms is a way of doing and looking at things.”⁷² That is, “Culture is the basis of all ideas, images and actions.” He states, “The seven criteria for culture are: 1. Mythology, 2. History, 3. Social Organization, 4. Political Organization, 5. Economic Organization, 6. Creative Motif, 7. Ethos.”⁷³ Karenga, then, was conceptualizing a broad-based understanding and definition of culture. He, advances a comprehensive understanding of culture when he states:

Everything that we do, think, or learn is somehow interpreted as a culture expression. So when we discuss politics, to US that is a sign of culture. When we discuss economics, to US that is a sign of culture. When we discuss community organization, that to US is a sign of culture. In other words, we define culture as a complete value system and also means and ways of maintaining that value system.⁷⁴

Essentially, culture is not simply music, clothes, food, and hairstyles. Culture informs and grounds thought and behavior. As Karenga states, “Culture is the basis of all ideas, images, and actions. To move is to move culturally, i.e., by a set of values given to you by your culture.”⁷⁵ In a later and expanded definition of culture as a comprehensive system of life, Karenga defines culture as “the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates itself, sustains and develops itself and introduces itself to history and humanity.”⁷⁶

During the Black Power period, culture was seen as in service of the liberation struggle. Thus, in his much-referenced article on revolutionary Black art, Karenga states, “Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution. It must become and remain a part of the revolutionary machinery that moves us to change quickly and creatively.”⁷⁷ Responding to Karenga’s emphasis on the revolutionary role of art and culture and his impact on the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal says, “Karenga welded the Black Arts Movement into a cohesive cultural ideology.” And he asserts that “Karenga sees culture as the most

important element in the struggle for self-determination.”⁷⁸ Viewing culture as the basis of all images, thoughts, and behavior, Karenga’s position is consistent with Cabral, as noted earlier, as well as Malcolm X when he states, in the OAAU charter at a rally June 28, 1964, that, “A race of people is like an individual man; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfill itself.”⁷⁹ Cabral, Malcolm X, and Karenga agree on the centrality of culture when waging a freedom struggle. Being centered in, and affirmed by, one’s own culture, then, is key to providing collective purpose and direction reflecting “power to do” and creative agency.

For Karenga, Black people have racial, historical, cultural, emotional, and political connections with Africa,⁸⁰ and it is from this socio-cultural and historical vantage point that Karenga develops the value system he believes Black people should operate from. He explains, “A value system has three functions. It gives some predictability of behavior, it is an ultimate authority and it serves as a means of security.”⁸¹ A Black value system then would establish a collective ethical basis to organize individual and collective thoughts and behaviors. Karenga offers the Nguzo Saba⁸² (Seven Principles) as “the moral minimum value system Black people need in order to rescue and reconstruct their history and humanity, indeed their daily lives, in their own image and interests.”⁸³ Essentially, Black people are operating from a white value system, which has been developed out of European culture. A Black value system drawing from African culture, then, is needed to redefine, reaffirm, and reconstruct Black people. Accordingly, he states, “Black values can only come through black culture” and “the culture provides the bases for revolution and recovery.”⁸⁴ For Karenga “revolution and recovery” require a cultural revolution. He states, “You can’t have a revolution without culture because culture is the value system that will teach Blacks an appreciation for revolution.”⁸⁵ He says, “Revolution to us, is the creation of an alternative.”⁸⁶ For Karenga, “You must have a cultural revolution before the violent revolution. The cultural revolution gives identity, purpose, and direction.”⁸⁷ Karenga would later refine this discussion of cultural revolution stating:

Cultural revolution is the ideological and practical struggle to rescue and reconstruct our own culture, break the cultural hegemony of the oppressor over the people, transform persons so that they become self-conscious agents of their own liberation, and aid in the preparation and support of the larger struggle for

liberation and a higher level of human life. Thus, the cultural revolution is tied to and part of all forms of struggle for liberation.⁸⁸

Cabral, Malcolm X, and Karenga share an understanding of knowledge and culture as necessary weapons in liberation struggles. As Malcolm X states from the OAAU charter, “Armed with knowledge of our past, we can with confidence charter a course for our future. Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past.”⁸⁹

The cultural revolution was then renamed and redefined from a racialized “Negro” identity to a Black racial identity. Karenga asserts in *The Quotable Karenga*, “We say Blackness is three things—color, culture, and consciousness.”⁹⁰ Explained further in the *Kitabu*, first, color refers to “Black as a prototype based on genetic heritage. We all come from the Black race” by which Karenga understands as Black people have a genetic heritage that connects all Black people to Africa and, in fact, are all African people. Second, culture refers to the “noticeable elements of African culture that makes us Black, for example song and dance.” And third, consciousness, which states “we are aware of these things, we accept them and we apply them by moving to rebuild our culture and perpetuate the building of our cultural nation.”⁹¹ The rebuilding of culture and the building of the cultural nation, then, requires power and creative agency, which is what Ture and Hamilton meant by Black Power.

In the *Kitabu*, Karenga explains Black Power as a means by which Black people can gain three things:

Self-determination- To speak for ourselves, to define ourselves, to create for ourselves and to build and develop alternative political, social and economic institutions.

Self-respect- To create a culture that will legitimize all our actions.

Self-defense- A rejection of non-violence and acceptance of the US policy to struggle against those who struggle against US and make peace with those who make peace with US. It is not a question of violence or non-violence, but one of self-defense. We believe that we must move to defend ourselves from the problems and people that threaten US by any means necessary.⁹²

Black Power, then, was part of the cultural revolution requiring power and creative agency. Part of the cultural revolution was Karenga’s creation of Kwanzaa in 1966

which “give us positive images and events with which we can identify” as well as demonstrates the power of Black people by creating a holiday to celebrate themselves. Karenga explains, “Kwanzaa is a time for ingathering of African Americans for celebration of their heritage and their achievements, reverence for the Creator and creation, commemoration of the past, recommitment to cultural ideals and celebration of the good.”⁹³ Kwanzaa, as a manifestation of “power to do” seeks to enhance the power and creative agency of a people encouraging them to value and celebrate themselves in a culturally relevant and reaffirming holiday. It sought to dislodge anti-Black racist ideas from the minds of Black people while celebrating and reaffirming Black history, culture, and values. The goal here, in part, is to bring about unity among Black people.

Karenga develops and offers Operational Unity as a practical concept towards realizing Black Power. At its most basic, Operational Unity recognizes the diversity among African people and people of African descent and yet, operates according to the values of Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility) and Umoja (Unity). Karenga says, “*operational unity*- unity in our diversity (unity without uniformity.) We need many organizations to reflect and deal with the wide range of interests and aspirations of our people.”⁹⁴ Operational Unity guided three National Black Power Conferences in 1966, 1967, and 1968, as well as Black United Fronts such as the Black Federation in San Diego; Committee For a United Newark; the Congress of African Peoples; the National Black Assembly; and the Black Congress in Los Angeles.⁹⁵ Booker Griffin writes in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*/February 22, 1968:

Operational Unity is a concept that says that all of the degrees of the black circle exist. It says that they must be given equal respect because of their own reality, even if they are not all accorded equal weight in the power decisions that determine the destiny of the Black community. Operational Unity says that militancy is real; Black hilltoppers are real, and even the Uncle Toms are real. They are real because they are a result of the life experiences of Black people and how their daily living has primed them to view the world.⁹⁶

Operational Unity stresses mutual respect and collaboration towards the increased dignity and respect shown African people and people of African descent while struggling to increase their quality of life and material conditions. In Los Angeles, the

Black Congress, founded in 1967 with Karenga serving as a founding member and vice-chair, became a model of Operational Unity serving as an umbrella organization of Black organizations in the area. It was composed of organizational members as opposed to individual members. Chuck Porter, of *the Los Angeles Sentinel*, states on June 9, 1968, “The concept, the congress believes, is the key to black improvement. The congress presently works in conjunction with 75 other groups that strive to create solidarity and equality for the Negro.” The Black Congress sought “to establish a solid black political foundation, housing programs, community development programs, that will need and require the efforts of all the Negro and white community.” In addition, the Black Congress worked to offer programs that would “cover a wide range of activities” and were “geared to the local community and members of other states.”⁹⁷

Karenga and his Organization Us played a key role in the Black Congress’ organizing large scale events such as a rally at Will Rogers Park on November 26, 1966 where Kwame Ture would speak to the crowd about the need for Black Power.⁹⁸ They were also central to the Congress’ organizing and sponsoring a rally and fundraiser for the Huey P. Newton Defense Fund at the Los Angeles Sports Arena on February 18, 1968 where Karenga would join Kwame Ture, Reverend Thomas Kilgore, Bobby Seale, Imam Jamil Al-Amin,⁹⁹ and Reies Tijerina on the speakers platform.¹⁰⁰ As Clayborne Carson pointed out, Karenga and Us’ support “was vital to the success of the Newton support rally planned for the city.”¹⁰¹ Also, Earl Anthony noted that, “The motion to sponsor the Free Huey Birthday Celebration [Rally] was put on the floor by [Karenga]... and in those days the direction in which [Maulana Karenga] swayed was the direction in which the Black Congress swayed.”¹⁰² Elaine Brown recalls sitting in the crowd looking at the leadership of the Black movement:

They were a new generation of black men, divorced completely now from the old, the civil-rights movement of the NAACP and the Urban League and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They were young black men no longer concerned with the business of segregation or integration. They were young black men who were calling for an end, not only to discrimination, an end not only to the denial of civil rights, but to all forms of oppression of blacks- social, political, *and* economic- on all fronts. This new leadership was not begging the question but making a demand, a demand it

declared it was backing up with armed force, as symbolized in the hero of that new movement: Huey P. Newton.¹⁰³

Not only did Brown observe a new breed of Black leadership, but she was also witness to Operational Unity. That is, “the power to do” brought Black leaders of diverse ideological positions together for a common objective. After the rally, however, local and national police agencies undermined the efforts of the Black Congress by creating an atmosphere that would turn ideological differences between the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and Us into violence resulting in injuries, fatalities, imprisonment, and neutralization of both organizations, and by extension, the Black Congress.¹⁰⁴

No women spoke at the rally, and, in fact, Black Power Movement and its leaders, like the Civil Rights leaders at the March on Washington, would be criticized for their Black male chauvinism.¹⁰⁵ However, Ashley D. Farmer, examining the contributions of Black women to the Black Power Movement, asserts, “Black Power activists collectively reimagined black identity and gender constructs by developing oppositional, black centered models of manhood and womanhood.”¹⁰⁶ The reimagining of a Black identity included women in the Organization Us reinterpreting Kawaida and its implications on Black male and female relationships.¹⁰⁷ Also, Tiamoyo Karenga and Chimbuko Tembo explain, from inside the organization, how the women of Us confronted and struggled against sexism, and built egalitarian partnerships in the process of internal and external liberation struggle. The main theorists of Kawaida womanism define it as a philosophy born of struggle and as “culturally grounded thought and practice directed towards the liberation of African women as an integral and indispensable part of the liberation of African people as a whole.”¹⁰⁸ As early as the 1970s, Karenga began integrating class and gender into his analysis.¹⁰⁹ In a 1973 article in the *Black Scholar*, he wrote that:

[t]here can be no real argument against the human equality of man and woman, against the need for liberation and revolution to reach and raise to higher level of life each and all of us, man, woman and child. To argue otherwise is to undermine and remove the human content and strength from our struggle and deny ourselves as Black men an abundant and indispensable source of love, inspiration and power.¹¹⁰

Ultimately, Karenga and the Organization Us would have a tremendous impact on the development of a positive and reaffirming Black racial identity in Los Angeles and beyond. The next section explores the tremendous positive psycho-cultural effect a Black identity had on members of Black Los Angeles.

Black and Empowered

Many Black youth were empowered and became active participants in the Black Power phase of Black Freedom Movement. Joyce Jermaine-Watts, former Black student activist and Director of Village Nation, was 15 during the Watts (Los Angeles) Rebellion. She recalls that “It was very clear that this was an extension of the protests in the South.”¹¹¹ Watts did not see the rebellion as disconnected from other events taking place in the Black Freedom Movement. Thus, she notes that “We felt emboldened, and obligated, some of us did, to assert our identity.”¹¹² Watts felt her sense of pride, identity, and obligations grow over the years, even remembering the crowd at local high school football games chanting, “Ungawa, hey, hey, Black Power, hey, hey!”¹¹³ Black identity and Black Power became integrated into the everyday fabric of Black Los Angeles.

By the mid- ‘60s, Black media outlets such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Sepia* used “black” with a lowercase “b,” as well as mainstream outlets. Clegg notes that not capitalizing Black was denying their right to self-determination, to be self-naming, and self-defining. He says, “it was during that time that they began to change the name and the first thing that occurred to some of us was this word will not be capitalized. It will be ‘black’ and ‘black’ generally is not capitalized. How do we change that? We just decided, we will capitalize it any way.”¹¹⁴ For Clegg, it is critical to capitalize Black and show human respect and dignity for a people. In the English language, proper nouns are capitalized as they are the names of a person, place, thing, or idea. Capitalizing the “B” in Black when referring to Black people, then, denotes peoplehood. Demanding the capitalization of “Black” is yet another blow against anti-Black racist ideas as Black people demanded their peoplehood be recognized and respected.

Ikaweba Bunting, former Black Power advocate, found power and joy in identifying as Black. He recalls:

It was a sense of power. I can say that. It was. also a statement. It was a political statement. At that time, they would call it militant. Those were the two words,

Black militant. They went together. Negro was acceptable. You could be Negro and actually demonstrate for civil rights and equality. If you said you were Black, the way it was perceived, you shifted into a more militant position whether you knew it or not, just by claiming that Black identity. It was a good feeling. I can remember feeling good about it and for once beginning to feel more complete. Even enjoying, and I'll keep the word enjoy, sensing and seeing the fear that it instilled in them when they realized that you were no longer Negro, and you weren't going to accept their definition of it. You could see it, you could sense it and see it like that... There wasn't a sense of loss in that. It was a sense of empowerment.¹¹⁵

This growing sentiment of rejecting “Negro” and accepting Black as a racial identity symbolized and contributed to a cultural renaissance. It brought about a collective sense of self in the waning Civil Rights Movement and emerging Black Power, Black Arts, Black Campus, and Black Studies Movements. Being Black became a unifying and a celebratory identity. Influenced by the growing Black Freedom Movement and the Watts (Los Angeles) Rebellion of 1965, former SNCC activist, James Garrett, called for a shift in name from the Negro Student Association to the Black Student Union (BSU) at San Francisco State College.¹¹⁶ Garrett says of the BSU:

The idea was to politicize this growing consciousness into a formation of a union and the union was because of the connection we thought of the union movement. That it is not simply an alliance or an association, but a union. It is a coming together of a broad base of people. So Black and student and union all had meaning that were connected.¹¹⁷

Drawing upon Garrett, the initial conceptualization of the BSU was a politically oriented and consciousness raising organization. The idea was to consolidate everyone who considered themselves Black, or of African ancestry. Whether from the United States, Caribbean islands, or African nations, if they identified as being a descendent of Africa, then they were Black, and had membership in the BSU. For example, Pamela Porter, shares that when she attended the University of Southern California (USC), the Black Greek sororities were very color conscious and divided. However, when they came to the BSU meetings, events, and activities, it was about Black people-

period.¹¹⁸ Their Black identity and consciousness unified them despite their different sororities and color prejudices.

The desire to create names and images that were reaffirming and empowering is a constant theme. Politically and culturally opposing whiteness and the white power structure, they believed that being Black provided a sense of purpose and pride; gaining some self-confidence that made the Black people feel good about themselves.¹¹⁹ A respondent adds, “A guy who'd been called ugly because he was black, could now stand up and say, ‘I'm Black and I'm proud’ or ‘Black is beautiful.’ To have that kind of transformation in your mind that had been shackled all those years was a good feeling, man.”¹²⁰ Whereas, being Black was derogatory and shameful in their youth, as stated earlier, creatively reconstructing Black racial identities in opposition to the racist characterization of Blackness and being Black reaffirmed their individual and collective sense of self and purpose.

Hair styles were also part of the redefinition. For Black women, it was common to straighten one's hair by pressing or perming. Some Black males would chemically treat their hair as well to get it to straighten. The Natural, or Afro, however, became a visual symbol of a Black consciousness. Along with redefining a Black racial identity, Joyce Jermaine Watts reminds, “it's people no longer pressing their hair... If your mama didn't want you saying, "Black," she definitely didn't want you not pressing your hair.”¹²¹ James (Abdullah) Butler, former Black Power advocate and member of the Nation of Islam, admits using Congolene (conk¹²²). Butler called the shift from conks to Naturals/ Afro's a culture shock resulting in some people having disputes with parents and even losing their jobs. Butler shares a barbershop experience in Los Angeles in 1967:

Councilman Billy Mills was in there one day. There was two young Black guys. I was young myself, but these were like 16 and 17-year-old teenagers ... They came there to get their hair cut. The police had stopped them and told them to go get their haircut, but they had naturals. This was new.¹²³

The Afro was associated with “Black militancy” signifying that they were militants and troublemakers. They were operating outside of the established and approved racialized norms, and the police made them cut their hair. Essentially, not conforming

to white aesthetics and norms, then replacing those norms with Black cultural expression and aesthetics occurred alongside of redefining what it meant to be Black.

The transition to a Black racial identity and Naturals also brought Black peoples very intellect and morals into question. For example, California Secretary of State and Professor of Africana Studies, Shirley Weber, recalls people saying, “you were such a nice girl”¹²⁴ after she began wearing her Afro. Family and churchwomen outwardly questioned Weber’s role and public visibility in the church after donning her Natural. Using her background in argumentation she acquired as a student at UCLA, Weber remembers a church meeting where they were discussing the beauty of God’s creation in all its natural glory and how humans mess up God’s creations:

I said, ‘You know, you’re absolutely correct. Man attempts to tinker with God’s invention, and every time he does, he makes a mess of it.’ And they go, ‘Yes, yes, amen! You’re right! Absolutely correct!’ And we kept talking about it, and I said, ‘Just like....’ And I used several examples of the environment, or this or that, whatever, whatever. And I said, ‘Anything that God creates in its natural form is really its most beautiful form, and we should accept it.’ They said, ‘Exactly.’ I said, ‘Just like my hair.’¹²⁵

Weber’s very character was in question upon sporting the Afro. The Black churchwomen, and others, associated the Natural with radicalism and militancy. They did not want to associate or condone the wearing of a Natural. The Afro hairstyle in this historical moment was a physical demonstration of Black pride, and a rejection of White standards of beauty. The Afro, in other words, was a political statement. It reflected one’s political consciousness and Blackness.

The significance of adopting a Black racial identity is people struggling to rename, redefine, and recreate themselves in the face of racialized oppression. It was part of a broader cultural renaissance signaling a shift in political action. As bell hooks asserts, “Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.”¹²⁶ Essentially, the very act of struggling and resisting the impact and legacy of anti- Black racist ideas is revolutionary. When individuals and communities love themselves, individually and communally, to the point of acting to right the wrongs, correct misinformation, stop exploitation, and

address distortions in their myriad of possibilities, they participate in acts of self and communal love. Given the realities of intergenerational trauma because of anti-Black racist ideas and practices resulting in enslavement, de jure and de facto segregation, institutional racism, state sanctioned violence, and Eurocentric curricula, it is liberating for Black people to be recognized as human and demand to be treated with dignity and respect, as well as struggling for an increased quality of life and material conditions. Current Black activists then should not reduce their struggle to representation. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was clear when he said:

I've seen this in the South, in schools being integrated and I've seen it with Teachers' Associations being integrated. Often when they merge, the Negro is integrated without power. The two or three positions of power which he did have in the separate situation passed away altogether, so that he lost his bargaining position, he lost his power, and he lost his posture where he could be relatively militant and really grapple with the problems. We do not want to be integrated *out* power. We want to be integrated *into* power.¹²⁷

King is clear: representation is not sufficient. Representation must include power, and that power-base is Black people and in their culture. In other words, Black folks want and need the “power to do.” The shift from “Negro” to Black was a renegotiation of power relationships and power dynamics which had positive psycho-cultural effects on Black people.

Conclusion

Harlem with Malcom X; Lowndes County with Kwame Ture; and Los Angeles with Maulana Karenga contributed greatly to the shift from “Negro” to Black. The burgeoning Black racial identity and the Black Power Movement’s impact on the psycho-cultural transformation of people of African descent in the United States must be understood in the context of power. This examination reveals the creative agency of a generation redefining and renaming itself as part of a broader effort to change the racialized power-relationships and dynamics in the United States.

The post-racial discourse of the early Twenty-first century, coupled with countless and continued murders of Black men, women, children, and queer folks, ushered in a return to a highly politicized usage of Black racial identity. Like their Black Power predecessors, contemporary Black activists seek to change power dynamics and

relationships in the United States. The opposition continues their hyper-policing of Black communities, as well as attack Critical Race Theory, the Advance Placement (AP) African American Studies course, and Africana/ Black Studies departments. Liberal allies, consciously or unconsciously, reduce Black racial identity to an adjective reducing being Black to a descriptor making the struggle a matter of representation and not power. Contemporary Black activists should study the history of the formation of the Black racial identity to understand the creative agency that gave it life. Black racial identity is political. Black racial identity reveals and advocates for “the power to do.” Contemporary and future Black activists are charged to continue the fight for Black people’s humanity to be respected and dignity reaffirmed while continuing the struggle to increase the material conditions and quality of life for all Black people. By extension, these efforts will transform society and the world into a better place for all.

Notes

¹ Christine B. Hickman, “The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census,” *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 5 (1997): 1161-1265.

² Yaba Blay, *One-Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race* (Philadelphia: BLACKprint Press, 2014) 258.

³ Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Lerone Bennett, “What’s in a Name?” *Ebony*, November 1967, 4; Donald L. Grant and Mildred Bricker Grant, “Some Notes on the Capital ‘N’” *Phylon* 36, no.4, (1975): 435-443.

⁴ Yaba Blay, *One-Drop*, 258.

⁵ Maulana Karenga, “Revisiting Race and Racism: A Critical Examination of a Pathology of Oppression,” Patricia Reid-Merritt, ed. *Race in America: How a Pseudoscientific Concept Shaped Human Interaction* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017) 28.

⁶ Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

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