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# The Historiography of the Black Student Union

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*Introduction To My Work*

Over four decades after the civil rights movement swept our nation, many in my generation see our selves as largely past its related crises and instead marked by the moment of September 11, 2001, popularly referred to as 9/11. In this milieu of figuring out how to relate our selves to our times, another crisis we are facing in the United States is an increased climate of avoidance around matters of race, feeding into a nationalized framework of a “post-racial now.” It is within this framework that I began to notice and feel the weight of silenced histories regarding race relations at Puget Sound. This awareness serves as my experiential entry point to my research on the history of the Black Student Union (BSU) at Puget Sound. As a student of history, I believed the only way for us to move towards understanding this critical moment would be for us to learn how it grew. Part of my attention to historical misrepresentation around matters of race came from my involvement in campus and community organizations, one of them significantly being the BSU. As an important site for co-curricular life, the BSU’s historiography struck me integrally related to the current racial dynamics on campus, as one marginalized student group whose history remains little known to the majority of our university population.

The archival entry point to my project on the historiography of the BSU is the Puget Sound Trail, the University’s student-run newspaper. With the Trail as a predominant source in my production of the BSU narrative, I studied the role of the newspaper as a historical source from different disciplinary and methodological

perspectives. Within the entrails of the newspaper's archives, I found entrenched politics of (mis)representation and articles evidencing the colonial practice of dividing to conquer, which led me to question more critically the degree to which the "new" obstacles we are facing in matters of race on our campus are actually recurring, and in what ways this retrenchment has root in historical silences and lack of historical understanding. In so doing, my project questions the popular idea that we are living in a "post-racial now," and examines how this ideology is politicized to act as a wedge among communities of color. In examining the experiences of the BSU in relationship to these questions, I sought to further complicate the historiographical narrative by increasing the type of primary sources from which this portrait was being drawn. I therefore aimed to uncover names of former BSU members and affiliates, as another primary source.

As I exit the entrails of this research, it is my hope that this complicated picture provides pathways for the extended work that still needs to be done in relationship to my research questions. While my examination of the Trail took me up until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, just before 9/11, the interviews I conducted were primarily of former BSU members who went to school at Puget Sound during the outset of the post-civil rights era, in the first years after the BSU's inception. Therefore, interviews of persons that span over the entire period that I studied still need to be done so as to delve deeper inside of my research questions. The narrative I have produced thus far begins to make visible the routes through which our campus arrived where it has in its current state of race relations and understanding about race, specifically at the level of student organizations. It is my hope that these routes become visible to students who felt similar silences as I did around

them, as well as to those students for whom race relations and racial injustice, problematically, do not typically enter into their consciousness.

### *The Beginnings of Coalition*

In November of 1971, the Trail features an article titled “Black Student Union Gets Chapter Room,” just after the University’s Housing Committee approved the allocation of the former Gamma Phi chapter room as a minority student lounge. The article indicates that the proposal for this lounge, submitted by the Black Student Union, called for “a place on campus where minority students could meet to carry on an interrelation and cultural exchange program.”<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the BSU’s programmatic vision unfolds as the article continues: “The BSU proposal, which was co-sponsored by the Dean of Students office, points out that other ethnic groups might wish to form their own student unions, and hopefully all the ethnic groups will come together and form a *minority students coalition*.”<sup>2</sup> This publicly expressed desire by the BSU for coalition among minority students speaks to both the vision of the organization as a whole, and perhaps to the beginnings of the emergence of student organizations for other students of color. The next reporting relating to the lounge and the BSU’s desire for a minority students coalition appears in the Trail later that school year, on March 17, 1972, titled “Minority student lounge established; will be available to all students.”<sup>3</sup> In its title, this article signifies a first move on the part of the university towards inculcating a space, both physical and relational, for students of color since the inception of the BSU as an

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<sup>1</sup> “Black Student Union Gets Chapter Room,” *The Trail*, November 5, 1971, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> “Minority Student Lounge Established; Will be Available to All Students,” *The Trail*, March 17, 1972, p. 6.

organizational body. Buried in the words after the semi-colon that read, “will be available to all students” also communicates a significant caveat to this lounge: that the movement forward towards social equality for students of color is much bigger than the individual students that the lounge intends to serve; that the interests of black students should be the interest of all students. This sentiment is one that civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer signified the very same year, 1972, in an interview with Neil McMillen for the Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi. Following a discussion on school integration where she expresses that they [white people] need us [Black people], in contrast to how the discussion is usually flipped to be positioned the other way around, Hamer states, “That’s the price for freedom...He is not free until I am free...As I liberate myself I liberate him.”<sup>4</sup> While the creation of the minority student lounge by way of the BSU was intended to provide a place for students of color, it still resonates with Hamer’s notion that this purpose is also one that creates a more just campus for everyone.

Further inside of the 1972 article, the purpose of the minority student lounge is reiterated as providing a place for minority students to “socialize and relate to each other.”<sup>5</sup> The move to establish the minority student lounge, according to the Trail, was initiated by assistant Dean of Students Robert Botley, a UPS and BSU alumni, with the help of the BSU and “other minority students.” What stands out in this article in regards to intergroup relationship building and collaboration is a remark by Ms. Marcie Wynne, identified as a Native American member of the Minority Student Lounge committee,

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<sup>4</sup> Hamer, Fannie Lou. “An Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer.” In *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*, edited by Charles Payne and Steven F. Lawson, 199-209. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> “Minority Student Lounge”

which reads: “[T]he committee composed of Native American, Black, Asian and Hawaiian students has been established to supervise the lounge and to schedule activities for the lounge so that full use may be made of it.” She indicated plans for the lounge as including meetings, art shows, luaus, Back a Brother and Sister recruitment (a minority scholarship program) and films. The establishment of this lounge, and the diverse range of students that made up its committee, marks what seems to be the first institutional move to inculcate a sense of community for students of color, and the first mark of students of color forming bonds across groups organizationally.