

From the Crown to the Cornfields
Perceptions of Students of Color and English Students at the University of Illinois

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Perceptions and portrayals of minority groups in the mainstream US media have constructed a false reality about American minority groups. African, Latino, Asian, and Arab-American groups have been portrayed as criminals, deviants, and unruly members of American society in magazines, television, music, and other forms of entertainment. With the globalization of entertainment, and America's Anglo-targeted audiences, these perceptions of US minorities have extended far beyond the borders of the United States. In my research, I have examined how identity, race, and space impact the racial perceptions students have of others on the University of Illinois campus. By engaging into the perceived notions and understandings of these particular groups, I intend to illustrate the effects of media portrayals of groups, and bring about discussion on these stereotyped issues.

With the help of several English foreign exchange students, I have investigated the perceptions English students have of US minorities, and compared these perceived images to the students' experiences on the Illinois campus. To make this investigation more complete, I interviewed several African and Latino-American students on campus, gauging their perceptions of English students and whether or not they differ from Anglo-Americans on campus. By gaining the thoughts of all three groups of students and comparing their responses, I intend to further understand the construction of race, the use of space, and cultural understanding at the University.

To gain a better understanding of the University's racial-ethnic make-up, I have decided to use data from the Class of 2009, the University's largest class (also, my graduating class), and compare these numbers to that of the Class of 2012's.

Through this comparison, we can see not only the fluctuation in the number of minorities represented on campus over a three year period, but also the number of international students on campus.

Of the 18,987 graduating seniors who applied in 2005, 14,236 were admitted, and 7,685 accepted; 7,584 enrolled. Ethnically, 25 identified themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 499 as Black or Black, 991 as Asian, 510 as Hispanic or Latino, and 5,046 as White, 184 unknowns, and 329 international¹. From 2001 to 2005, the number of Black students enrolled remained relatively the same, averaging about 507.6 per year, with 515 enrolled students in Fall 2001 and 499 students in Fall 2005. Mexican or Latino students averaged 473 per year, with 433 students enrolled in 2001 and 510 in 2005. The White students averaged 3813.6 per year, with 4,150 enrolled in 2001 and 5,046 in 2005. The international students averaged 206.6 enrolled annually, with 205 in 2001 and 329 in 2005. Between 2001 and 2005, the University increased its freshman class by 1363 students.

In Fall 2008, there were 7,299 enrolled undergraduate students, and a total of 2,225 international undergraduate students². Compared to the Fall 2005 data, there are 5 less Native Americans or Alaskan Natives, 26 more Blacks, 39 more Asian or Pacific Islander, 7 less Hispanics or Latinos, 708 less Whites, 385 more

¹ University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Office of Admissions and Records. "New Freshman Profile for Fall Semester 2005".

² University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Office of Public Affairs. "Facts 2009: Illinois by the Numbers". <http://illinois.edu/about/overview/facts/facts.html>

international students, and 15 less unknown students in Fall 2008³. Overall, the Class of 2012 has 285 fewer students than the Class of 2009.

I present this data to not only shed light on the University's student profile, but to also highlight the number of minorities on the Illinois campus, and how this affects the student body. When compared to the each other, Black and Hispanic/Latino group numbers are relatively the same, hovering close to 500 students per year. Black and brown students, respectively, make up about 6 percent of their entering class. So when a student of color enrolls in the University, s/he is expected to be one of two students of color in every group of 16 students.

Students

For this study, I interviewed 9 students, 3 of whom identified as Black, 3 Latinos, and 3 English students. In each group of students, there were 2 males and 1 female.

Minority Students

The Black students interviewed are all graduating seniors from the University of Illinois. The two male students – identified here as Pat and Francisco – are residents of the north suburbs of Chicago, and attended a predominantly White high school. The female student, Rachel, is a resident of northern Chicago/southern Evanston, and also attended a predominantly Black magnet high school.

³ University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Division of Management Information. "On-Campus Fall 2008 New Beginning Freshmen 10-Day Profile".

The Latino students interviewed consisted of two juniors and one sophomore. Johnny, a junior, grew up near Rockford, IL, and attended a predominantly White high school. Jose, the sophomore, grew up in south suburban Chicago (Aurora), and attended a predominantly Black and Latino high school. Jasmine, a female junior, grew up in Normal, IL, and attended a predominantly White high school.

I included the ethnic predominance of their high schools as to establish a link between perceived ideas of 'whiteness', a socially constructed ideology that all people of European descent share similar views of the world and its inhabitants.

English Students

Of the three English students interviewed, two (Lawrence and Mattie) came from the University of Nottingham, situated 110 miles north of London. Lawrence is a junior, and Mattie is a senior. One of the male students, Robert, is a junior at the University of Manchester, roughly 160 miles northwest of London.

To facilitate an easier analysis of the responses of each group, I have divided the interviews into two sections: Blacks and Latinos. In each section, I will uncover the perception that group has of the English and how the English view that particular group. Concluding these sections will be a discussion of identity and place, where ethnic, geopolitical affiliation and areas of access are discussed.

Blacks

Black Perceptions of English Students

When asked what their perceptions of English people/students were, I received varying answers.

Rachel understood English people to be fun-loving individuals, enjoying life. She alluded to the English having a rich and ancient culture, a culture that is cemented in their easily recognizable accent (a sexy accent in her view).

Francisco took a more pessimistic route, arguing that the 'uppity' English class system has the English looking down upon Americans. The English stoic culture makes the English more distinguished and elite than Americans, giving them the 'right' to look down upon non-elites. Other than possessing a funny accent, Francisco mentions that the English are 'classically thinking', an allusion to medieval times. Kings, queens, princes, princesses and nobility are a significant portion of their history, and the centuries-long governmental structures such as the Crown and Parliament have given the English enough reasoning to feel superior to others.

Pat, on the other hand, took a more analytic approach. Pat, first, stated the obvious: English students on campus are foreigners. As they are foreigners, Pat elaborated on how they do not understand the racial and social constructs that have oppressed and marginalized people of color. He contends that because the English have not been formally oppressed they lack the necessary knowledge to understand the racial divisions in American society. Alternatively, he argues that the English are more communal than American, and agrees with Rachel in that the English are very social. Pat also mentions that the English tolerance of race is a result of the multi-cultural, multi-racial make up of modern English society, claiming they have a sense of social nationalism.

The stereotypes of the English include bad teeth, drinking tea daily, eating horrible food, and marginalized, under sexualized women, according to Pat.

When asked if heraldry and monarchs come to mind when thinking of England, Pat disagreed citing that the royal, monarchical system does not come to mind as Parliament has taken most of the monarch's power, making the Crown a figurehead.

Pat also mentioned that English comedic culture is relegated to slapstick comedy, styles similar to that of Benny Hill and Mr. Bean. He mentioned that English comedy and American comedy are very distinct.

When asked if they considered English people to be white, Rachel and Francisco agreed, using practically the same rationale. Both said that when one thinks of an English person, white automatically comes to mind. They both acknowledged that while non-white English exist, the white English overshadows their existence. Pat's disagreement sprang from the understanding that the black-white racial distinction in America is not prevalent overseas, and that the English are white in the European sense of the word, not the American.

English Perceptions of Blacks

Constructed through movies, magazines, and other forms of media that have reached across the Atlantic, the English students perceived Blacks to be very athletic, loud, and outspoken. They all agreed that Blacks tend to make up a majority of professional basketball and football players in America, and that a majority of Black males participate in these sports, making strong connection to athleticism. The images portrayed in films tend to criminalize Blacks, and make them appear rebellious and against the social order due to their vocal opposition to the racially structured society.

According to the English students, Blacks are considered American, and not a separate sub-group within America.

Latinos

Latino Perceptions of English Students

When asked about their perceptions of English people, Jasmine, Johnny, and Jose all identified the distinct accent first, which was quickly followed with the idea of English being intellectuals. Jasmine identified kings, queens, and her attractions to current princes Harry and William in her elaboration. Johnny and Jose talked about the English's bad teeth, citing Mike Meyers' *Austin Powers* as a priming agent for their impression of dental hygiene. Jasmine mentioned that they were rich, proper, clean cut while Jose argued that they were imperialist racists who were at odds with the Irish.

Similar to the Black responses, the Latino students all agreed that the English students were white, but in the European sense of the word. They also agreed that they could easily blend in with the White student population on campus.

English Perceptions of Latino Students

As with the Black students, the idea of Latinos is crafted through what images and reports that are filtered into their media. Images of South and Central America, and drug-smuggling were ideas that came to mind when asked about perceptions of Latinos. Working menial jobs at restaurants was another perception that surfaced. Lawrence mentioned how on his recent visit to a nearby McDonalds, English was used at the counter, but Spanish was used in the back

kitchen area. He also alluded to the idea that Latinos take the jobs that no one else would be willing to take.

Identity

As with anyone, ethnic and racial identities are areas of great importance to one's mental and social development. Having a sense of belonging and community provides a similar sense of unity and protection than a religion or last name. The interchanging of these titles may seem insignificant or frivolous to some, but these terms have significant meanings to the members of these groups. What I discovered is what I would call the 'triumvirate of identity'. This concept consists of an individual, when given two options of classification, chooses the first or second option, or embraces both classifications.

Black or African American?

All three had different responses to whether they consider themselves to be Black or African American.

Pat considers himself for the sole purpose of the sense of empowerment derived from the word black and that it is a label that he, not a bureaucrat, owns. Even though he has a French surname (with an assumption of Haitian descent), he is a product of his black grandparents from Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi.

Rachel is mixed, with a White mother and a Black father, and considers herself African American and Black, with the label being used during certain situations.

On applications when asked for her ethnicity, she checks 'multi-racial' if it is an option. If not, she selects both Caucasian and African America. 'Other' is checked if other and selecting two ethnicities are not an option

Francisco considers himself to be both black and African American, citing that black is a blanket term describing all members of African descent around the globe; essentially, diasporic in nature. He further argues that Jamaicans are black and Brazilians are black, but Blacks are blacks living in America, and usually have ancestors who also lived in America.

Latino or Hispanic?

Considering that the term Hispanic refers to people of Spanish heritage, Jasmine considers herself Latino, a more inclusive statement of Latin American nations and peoples. However, she mentions that she would not be offended if someone called her Hispanic.

Jose and Johnny both consider themselves to be Mexican, taking pride in their ethnicity. Johnny stated that he would only use Hispanic or Latino titles in an academic setting. He then cites that there is no difference between Hispanic and Latino, and that they are one in the same.

English or British?

Although being half Filipino, Lawrence considers himself to be English. He argues that Americans mix English with British, which ignores the Welsh, Scottish, and Irish. When he talks about the United Kingdom as a whole, he uses the term British.

Mattie, alternatively, considers herself to be British even though she is half Chinese. Her mother grew up in Hong Kong, a former British territory, and therefore grew up with Western ideals. She also mentions that she does not align herself much with her Chinese side due to a lack of knowing her Chinese heritage.

Her support for the government, its systems, and England's contributions to the United Kingdom makes her feel more British than English.

Robert identifies more with the term British, but applies it to the English. He mentions how the British have been at odds with the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh for centuries, and that these nations are currently envious of the successes of the British.

Space and Place

Black Space

According to the English students, Black space on campus includes black fraternities and sororities, AFRO classes, C.O. Daniel's, and Speak Café.

Latino Space

They could not identify Latino space on campus.

White Space

The Black students have identified everything sans FAR-PAR, the Black House, the Cotton Club, and the patio on the Union as being White space, areas where blacks either have difficulty accessing or receive ill-treatment for being there.

The Latino students have, similar to Blacks, identified most of the campus as being White space. Latino students also mentioned Campustown, an area that holds a majority of campus-area bars and restaurants.

Analysis

The results of the interviews that were conducted surfaced several topics regarding the University, the race debate, and the student population.

The presence of English students, and foreign students in general, validates the international appeal of the University of Illinois. Having these students travel many miles to attend a school in central Illinois makes me conclude that nothing but good things are said about the University and its reputation. While the University's College of Engineering and College of Business are renowned internationally, the English students are taking courses in Liberal Arts and Sciences, further validating the appeal of the University's other colleges. It also compels me to ask why Illinois? While we are one the nation's leading public universities, why did these students not choose UC-Berkeley, Virginia, UCLA, Michigan, or North Carolina, all of which are ranked higher than the University of Illinois? Without jumping to conclusions or invading their privacy, I can only conclude that there are some intangibles and substance that attracted these students here.

Secondly, I think that the responses here shed light on the continuing race debate, especially surrounding the black-white dichotomy that has plagued this nation since its inception two hundred and some years ago. I noticed that the Black students and the English students had a lot to say about each other, citing depictions and stereotypes through film and experiences. In my opinion, these lengthy commentaries were shaped through history's exposure and study of American black-white relationships . However, when it comes to Latinos, the negative descriptions and portrayals, coupled with their lack of interaction, hints at the absence of the recognition of Latino contribution to Western Anglo society. We can look to the media and politics for reasons for this occurrence. Latino representations in film are few, commonly recognized as a seducing, suave

individual, a poor farm hand, gangbanger, or the leader of a multinational drug cartel. By relegating images of Latinos to the lower rings of society and criminalizing them through the close relationship between reality and media, viewers extract fact from fiction. Although a broad generalization, one cannot dispute that portions of reality are injected and internalized in fiction.

The attendance of foreign students at the University, while validating the prestige of the University, divides the campus into more groups. While it is healthy to have a diversified campus, isolation and seclusion further separate us, fostering the creation and use of myths when dealing with other groups. This “us” versus “them” mentality on campus mimics the design of Chicago, making the campus a community of many diverse ethnic, academic, cultural, social, and other neighborhoods. It is neither harmful nor detrimental to have some many communities on campus for the lack of diversity and variety would inhibit personal and mental growth. However, groups choosing not to interact with others limit their own potential, deliberately detaching themselves from the learning process.

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