

The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field

Peniel E. Joseph

“By all rights, there no longer should be much question about the meaning—at least the intended meaning—of Black Power,” the journalist Charles Sutton observed in January 1967. “Between the speeches and writings of Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),” Sutton continued, “the explanations of Floyd McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the writings of more than a score of scholars and commentators, the slogan and its various assumptions have been fairly thoroughly examined.”¹

Clearly Sutton was wrong. Despite efforts to define it both then and today, “black power” exists in the American imagination through a series of iconic, yet fleeting images—ranging from gun-toting Black Panthers to black-gloved sprinters at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics—that powerfully evoke the era’s confounding mixture of triumph and tragedy. Indeed, the iconography of Stokely Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi, Black Panthers marching outside an Oakland, California, courthouse, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s wanted poster for Angela Davis serves as a kind of visual shorthand to understanding the history of the era, but such images tell us very little about the movement that birthed them.

This fact has been complicated by conventional civil rights narratives, which, until recently, accepted as wisdom the idea that black power undermined struggles for racial justice. Those narratives differed more in their level of condemnation than in their analysis of the black power movement’s self-destructive impact. The embrace, at times, of violent rhetoric, misogyny, and bravado by black power advocates have made them and their struggles easy targets for demonization and dismissal. For instance, black power stands at the center of declension narratives of the 1960s: the movement’s destructiveness poisoning the innocence of the New Left, corrupting a generation of black activists, and steering the drive for civil rights off course in a way that reinforced racial segregation by giving

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¹ Charles Sutton, “A Look at Black Power and Negroes’ Future,” *Independent Press Telegram*, Jan. 15, 1967, p. B3.

politicians a clear, frightening scapegoat. The backlash that followed seemingly destroyed the potential of the civil rights movement to establish new democratic frontiers. This narrative still too often provides the basis for popular understandings, as well as scholarly framings, of black power as an unabashed failure and a negative counterpart to more righteous struggles for racial integration, social justice, and economic equality.²

Given the overwhelmingly negative images associated with black power, efforts to define it have largely been arbitrary. Until recently, perspectives on the movement were shaped primarily by the memory of those who saw it only as an angry response to the slow pace of the struggle for civil rights. Not surprisingly, a clear working definition of black power has proven elusive, especially since it was so often viewed as the civil rights movement's "evil" twin.

The black power era was initially documented as part of the first wave of civil rights historiography, but, especially over the past fifteen years, studies of the black power movement have grown in ambition, complexity, and breadth, culminating in a new subfield that Peniel E. Joseph has called "Black Power Studies."³ This wave of scholarship on the era has begun to demystify, complicate, and intellectually engage demonized, dismissed, and overlooked actors and struggles by providing nuanced, well-researched, and weighty narratives that document the profound implications of black power politics for the study of African American history and U.S. history more broadly. Black power may have been harnessed in black communities, but its manifold iterations challenged the scope of liberalism, democracy, and the nation-state, as well as how we envision the practice of democracy at the local, regional, national, and global levels. This essay examines the evolution of black power historiography, its changing meaning within civil rights scholarship, and its recent growth as a distinct subfield within U.S. history.

Black power's modern expression grew out of two distinct, yet overlapping traditions that shaped black political activism in the first half of the twentieth century: the New Negro radicalism of the 1920s and the subsequent freedom surges—democratic movements that included labor, civil rights, and grassroots activists around the nation—of the Great Depression and World War II era that fueled an expansive vision of citizenship, civil rights, and democracy. Emphasizing racial pride, the connection between civil rights in the United States and in the third world, and political self-determination, through bruising and at times deliberately provocative protests, black militants in the North were simultaneously inspired by the heroic direct action of the civil rights protestors in the South and repulsed by the spectacles of racial violence there. By the late 1950s, those northern militants, cynical about the ability of American democracy to defend black citizenship, had formed a parallel movement with no name. In 1961 New York activists,

² See, for example, Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 1985); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1989); Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey P. Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, 1994); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York, 2000); and Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle against Racism in America, 1909–1969* (New York, 2005). For studies of the radical politics and culture of the 1960s that challenge this view of black power, see Van Gosse and Richard Moser, eds., *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia, 2003); David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson, 2008), 3–51; and Jeremi Suri, "The Rise and Fall of an International Culture, 1960–1975," *American Historical Review*, 114 (Feb. 2009), 45–68.

³ See the special issues, Peniel E. Joseph, ed., "Black Power Studies I," *Black Scholar*, 31 (Fall–Winter 2001), 1–66; and Peniel E. Joseph, ed., "Black Power Studies II," *ibid.*, 32 (Spring 2002), 1–66.

including Maya Angelou, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), and Mae Mallory unleashed chaos on the floor of the United Nations in demonstrations against the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Lumumba's death at the hands of his political enemies outraged Harlem nationalists who viewed him as a heroic martyr killed for defying American foreign policy dictates by promoting African autonomy in world affairs. The following year, radical black college students in Ohio founded the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), which was committed to socialism and armed self-defense and quickly established beachheads in several states. In California, activists associated with RAM founded *Soulbook*, a cultural magazine whose staff members included the future Black Panther Bobby Seale. In Detroit, black militants organized around the Group on Advanced Leadership in 1961 to protest urban renewal plans. These groups all found a measure of unity and a national spokesman in Malcolm X.⁴ At its core the black power movement, in contrast to the struggle for civil rights, privileged a view of black empowerment that was local, national, and international in scope, held political self-determination as sacrosanct, and called for a redefined black identity that connected black Americans to a national and global political project based on racial solidarity and a shared history of racial oppression.

The black power movement, in its challenge of postwar racial liberalism, fundamentally transformed struggles for racial justice through an uncompromising quest for social, political, cultural, and economic transformation. The black power movement's activities during the late 1960s and early 1970s encompassed virtually every facet of African American political life in the United States and beyond, and yet the story of black power is still largely an unchronicled epic in American history. Black college students protested for curricular changes that culminated in the development of black studies programs and departments at universities around the nation. African American politicians tapped into the groundswell of racial solidarity to help build urban political machines that elected black mayors in cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, Atlanta, Newark, and Gary, Indiana, and led to the formation of the Congressional Black Caucus.⁵ Black women utilized the militancy of the movement's urgent rhetoric to articulate a bold feminist vision (one that was often critical of black power's misogyny) and to assert their rights to expansive social services, especially those related to bread-and-butter issues such as housing, education, and welfare.⁶ While civil rights-era legal and legislative victories played a critical role in

⁴ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: Black Power and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago, 1992); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York, 2007); James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 2005); and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, 2005). On the role of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam in the development of black power, see William W. Sales Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston, 1994); and Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York, 1998).

⁵ For a comprehensive history of the era, see Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*. Komofi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Leonard Moore, *Carl B. Stokes and the Rise of Black Political Power* (Urbana, 2002); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights–Black Power Era* (New York, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level* (forthcoming, New York, 2010); Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis, 2007); and Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990* (Jackson, 1990).

⁶ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York, 1995); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement* (New York, 2001); Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*



The first African Liberation Day, May 27, 1972, featured simultaneous demonstrations in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, and the Caribbean that drew a total of sixty thousand demonstrators in support of indigenous rule in Africa. This photo is from the Washington, D.C., demonstration. ©Washington Post; reprinted by permission of the District of Columbia Public Library.

these struggles, black power militancy proved decisive in inaugurating the first generation of black elected officials and producing the eclectic array of multiethnic and multithemed social movements that the historian Jeffrey Ogbar memorably characterized as “rainbow radicalism.”⁷

In their attacks on institutional racism, proponents of black power’s cultural side advocated the building of racially separate schools, communities, even states, to cure systemic problems and also address daily needs. Black Panthers served free breakfast to school

(New York, 1999); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York, 2004); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2005); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York, 2005); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2007); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, 2006); Kimberly Springer, ed., *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women’s Contemporary Activism* (New York, 1999); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, 2005); Winifred Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York, 2006); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana, 2008).

⁷ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 159. See also Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York, 1997); Carlos Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, and Power: The Chicano Movement* (London, 2007); Steve Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles, 2006); Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for the Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis, 1998); and Diane C. Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama* (Minneapolis, 2005).

children in cities such as Oakland, New Haven, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, while they also openly confronted local, state, and federal authorities in fights that escalated into spectacular political theater, from mass demonstrations to violent confrontations. Black sharecroppers in Lowndes County, Alabama, urban militants in Harlem and Chicago, trade unionists in Detroit, Black Panthers in Oakland, Philadelphia, and New Haven, and female antipoverty organizers in Baltimore and Durham, North Carolina, all advocated a political program rooted in aspects of black power ideology.⁸

The meaning of the term “black power” remains contested. Popularized by Stokely Carmichael during the Meredith march in Greenwood, Mississippi—where civil rights leaders led a three-week-long demonstration in June 1966 to the Magnolia State’s capitol following the shooting of the activist James Meredith on the second day of his one-man “march against fear.” The phrase had been used previously by Richard Wright as the title of his 1954 nonfiction treatise about the liberation of the West African Gold Coast; by the activist Paul Robeson who used the term “Negro Power” during the 1950s; and by the Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. early in 1966.⁹ Their use of the phrase defined black political power in general, rather than particular, terms. By 1966, black power defined a movement for racial solidarity, cultural pride, and self-determination. More than that, its urgent rhetoric, militant posture, and defiant tone made the phrase a clarion call for an increasingly revolutionary age. From that vantage point, black power came to be defined as the cutting edge of black activism, a movement whose militancy contrasted with the more measured tone of the civil rights movement and seemed to signal a break from past modes of black activism. Black power echoed through America as a bold call for African American liberation.

Whites viewed the phrase as a declaration of war that inspired the *Saturday Evening Post* to starkly profess: “We are all, let us face it, Mississippians.” *Time* magazine characterized the term as “a racist philosophy” that advocated reverse discrimination, and *U.S. News and World Report* debated its meaning while hoping that black moderates would intervene and calm growing racial anxieties surrounding the term. With its powerful bully

⁸ On the cultural side of black power, see Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York, 1999); Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*; Woodard, *Nation within a Nation*; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*; Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York, 2001); Wayne Glasker, *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Student Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967–1990* (Amherst, 2002); Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965–75* (Urbana, 2003); Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London, 1999); Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis, 2002); Douglas Hartman, *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* (Chicago, 2003); and Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2006). On the Black Panthers, see Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore, 1998); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (New York, 2000); Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy* (New York, 2001); Ogbar, *Black Power*; Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham, 2006); Curtis J. Austin, *Up against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville, 2006); Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa, 2007); Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York, 2007); and Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington, 2007).

⁹ On the Meredith march, see David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1999), 475–89; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York, 2006), 480–94; and Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 132–46. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York, 1954). Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston, 1988), 33–36, 104–8. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. called for “audacious black power” both before and after Stokely Carmichael’s declaration. See Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 57–58.

pulpit, the national media came to define black power as violent, angry, controversial, and antiwhite.¹⁰

In his 1967 book *Black Power*, coauthored with the political scientist Charles Hamilton, Carmichael defined black power as a series of political “experiments” that would utilize voting and electoral politics, and he devoted a chapter to his organizing efforts in Lowndes County, Alabama. “It is a call for black people in this country,” Carmichael said on a separate occasion in 1966, “to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations.” Other activists and organizations expanded on Carmichael’s framing of black power, tailoring the term to fit local and regional needs and using it as a national call for empowerment, the reverberations of which could be felt globally. On this score Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) became the most influential intellectual and cultural history of black radicalism produced during the era, written by someone who participated in early black power activism.¹¹ The media framed black power largely through journalistic narratives that promoted the era’s iconography of militancy, violence, and dangerous sex appeal, while paying scant attention to the movement’s more quiet efforts to transform America. A July 7, 1966, *New York Times* editorial proclaiming that “black power is black death” neatly summed up the perspective of mainstream journalism on the movement.¹²

Scholarly interpretation of the era, like the term “black power” itself, has evolved over time. Almost thirty years ago, in his classic study of the civil rights movement in North Carolina, *Civilities and Civil Rights* (1980), William H. Chafe chronicled black power’s evolution in a local southern city. In Greensboro, the birthplace of direct action in the modern civil rights movement, black power militants initiated community-wide coalitions in 1968 that mobilized high school students, college students at historically black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, campus workers, and poor people “around issues of housing, rent, redevelopment, and jobs.” This local pursuit of political power involved more than angry polemics. “The vehicle for achieving this power” argued Chafe, “was to be *community organizing*.” In Greensboro, black activists who had cut their teeth on civil rights organizing activities endeavored to “seize control of their own agendas, shape their own culture, language, and institutions—in short, take power for themselves, at least to the extent of determining their own priorities and methods of proceeding.” *Civilities and Civil Rights* then, defines black power as both radical and pragmatic, an insurgent movement rooted in (although forced to operate outside of) political struggles that took place during the civil rights movement’s heroic period. Black power

¹⁰ *Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 10, 1966, p. 88; *Time*, July 1, 1966, p. 11; *U.S. News and World Report*, July 11, 1966, p. 52. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 146. Peniel E. Joseph, “Black Power’s Powerful Legacy,” *Chronicle Review*, July 21, 2006, pp. B6–B8.

¹¹ Stokeley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, 1967), viii. For Carmichael’s definitions of black power, see Joseph, “Black Power’s Powerful Legacy,” p. B7. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967; New York, 1984). See also William Jelani Cobb, ed., *The Essential Harold Cruse: A Reader* (New York, 2002); and Jeffrey Gafio Watts, ed., *Harold Cruse’s The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual Reconsidered* (New York, 2004).

¹² Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 146, 151–54. For works that analyzed the still-unfolding black power phenomenon, see Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York, 1968); Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Garden City, 1969); and John H. Bracey Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis, 1970). For the editorial that took its title from a speech by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People leader Roy Wilkins, see “Black Power Is Black Death,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1966, p. 35.

activists in Greensboro, according to Chafe, focused on local issues such as poverty, education, and labor rights that struck at the base of white power.¹³

Chafe's sensitive treatment of black power frames it as inaugurating a style of political organizing and social protest that echoed civil rights—era practices even as it carved out bold new space through urgent polemics, militant posturing, and scathing critiques of racial discrimination. *Civilities and Civil Rights* documents a manifestation of black power politics deeply embedded in the hopes, dreams, and everyday struggles of local people. But historians of the civil rights era, for the most part, largely ignored Chafe's intervention, preferring instead to view black power through the same lens used by the national media in the late 1960s—one that focused on the spectacle surrounding certain black power protests and public meetings rather than the substance of activists' demands and programs.

Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle* (1981) focuses on the evolution of SNCC (pronounced snick) from its integrationist, nonviolent, interracialism of the early 1960s to its advocacy of black power in the mid-1960s under Stokely Carmichael. While Carson offers a complex treatment of the transformation of SNCC, an organization that bridged and operated within the civil rights and black power eras, he still attributes its demise to its ill-fated turn toward black nationalism in the mid-1960s. "As SNCC workers succeeded in popularizing the black power struggle," argues Carson, "they began to lose their ability to stimulate lasting feelings of racial potency as those nurtured by the southern struggle." Coming to the opposite conclusion of Chafe's North Carolina study, Carson judges SNCC's foray into black power as a retreat from its previous, more effective organizing. From this perspective, SNCC's shift to black power, along with Carmichael's ascent as the movement's leading national spokesperson, might have made the organization better known at the expense of achieving more lasting and substantive political change. This view of black power as a rejection of community organizing and an unfortunate media-driven spectacle would dominate civil rights historiography well into the 1980s.¹⁴ The work of the historian Manning Marable is crucial here. In a series of important historical studies of the black radical tradition, Marable sheds important, substantive light, on black power's significance as a political, cultural, and social movement that impacted African Americans at the local, national, and international level. However, much of this work was unable to penetrate conventional interpretations and biases regarding the black power era. For instance, David Garrow's hugely influential *Bearing the Cross* (1986), on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr., positions black power as the outgrowth of frustration that lacked a coherent political program, created organizational divisions, and disappointed King. According to Garrow, King was especially discomfited by "SNCC's descent from nonviolence into the least attractive aspects of 'black power,'" most notably violent agitation. Similarly, Adam Fairclough's *To Redeem the Soul of America* (1987), on the same topic, portrays black power as a confused philosophy that short-circuited the political objectives of the civil rights movement. With the exception of

¹³ William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York, 1981), 175, 173. Emphasis added.

¹⁴ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 233. For the most powerful example of newer civil rights scholarship that focuses on ordinary people rather than charismatic leaders and also condemns black power, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* (Berkeley, 1996). See also Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York, 2003); and Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York, 2005).

Chafé's and Marable's books, then, works in the first wave of civil rights scholarship differed, in this regard, only in the degree to which they condemned the black power movement and its legacy.¹⁵

William L. Van Deburg's *New Day in Babylon* (1992), the first full-length study of the black power movement, broke new historical ground. Van Deburg focuses primarily on black power's tangible cultural impact. He argues that black power successfully helped reshape black identity through black arts activism, the movement for black studies courses and programs on college campuses, and the fiery public enunciations of national black power leaders. *New Day in Babylon* offers an ambitious historical account of black power by upending conventional historiographical wisdom that denigrated black power activists as volatile and misguided, and the movement as an albatross around the neck of black freedom and racial progress. Yet even as *New Day in Babylon* documents the positive influence and tremendous reach of black power, it also reinforces narrow analytic and thematic interpretations. While Van Deburg explicitly refutes an orthodoxy that questioned black power's legitimacy, he reinforces the idea that the movement's primary legacy lay in the cultural realm. According to Van Deburg, black power is "best understood as a broad, adaptive, cultural term serving to connect and illuminate the differing ideological orientations of the movement's supporters."¹⁶ The study frames the movement as primarily cultural rather than political, as driven by charismatic leaders not ordinary people, and as largely spent by the early 1970s.

Shifting the focus from one that highlighted culture to one that centered on political lineage and activist networks, Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* (1999), a political biography of Robert F. Williams, thematically and chronologically expands the historiography of the black power era. *Radio Free Dixie* traces a distinctive tradition of southern black militancy, one with local and international dimensions, that proved flexible enough to embrace self-defense and nonviolence and deft enough to maintain a robust commitment to the politics of self-determination. Tyson provocatively asserts that Williams, the leader of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Monroe, North Carolina, during the 1950s, virtually single-handedly "reinvigorated many elements of the black nationalist tradition whose forceful emergence in the mid-1960s would become known as Black Power."¹⁷ Through this work, Tyson helps map an untold aspect of black power's genealogy and challenges the rigid scholarly demarcation between narratives of the civil rights movement and those of the black power movement.

Williams emerges as both a civil rights maverick and an early and eloquent proponent of black power's ethos of armed self-defense, political and cultural self-determination, and radical internationalism. The most striking part of Williams's story is that it takes place

¹⁵ Manning Marable, *From the Grassroots: Essays toward Afro-American Liberation* (Boston, 1980); Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*; Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London, 1985); and Manning Marable, *African and Caribbean Politics: From Kwame Nkrumah to the Grenada Revolution* (London, 1987). For other works that go against the dominant narrative, see Dan Georgakas, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (New York, 1975); and Adolph L. Reed, ed., *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s* (New York, 1986). Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 475–89, 530. Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens, 2001), 309–31. For a work that describes black power as posturing ("In the face of impotence, one boasts of potency."), see Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1990), 121.

¹⁶ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 10.

¹⁷ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 191.



Albert Cleage addressing the Walk for Freedom, Detroit, June 23, 1963. *Courtesy Walter P. Reuther Library.*

squarely within the heyday of the civil rights era. For Tyson, the civil rights and black power movements “grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom.” Moreover, Tyson finds that “virtually all of the elements that we associate with ‘Black Power’ were already present in the small towns and rural communities of the South where ‘the civil rights movement’ was born.” *Radio Free Dixie* convincingly demonstrates the existence of an indigenous brand of black radicalism in the South, one that consistently deployed armed self-defense and coexisted in an uneasy tension with less deep-seated traditions of nonviolence. Yet shifting the focus of the origins of black power from the North to the South obscures as much as it reveals. Black power’s roots arguably ran deeper in the political activism of Malcolm X and urban militants in Harlem, Detroit and elsewhere in the North than in Williams’s local movement in Monroe, North Carolina. Moreover, while much of Williams’s story goes against the grain of mainstream civil rights narratives, Tyson still views black power as a mid-1960s phenomenon and portrays Williams as an important antecedent rather than early proponent of the movement.¹⁸

Tyson’s study marked a thematic and chronological shift in scholarship on black power. By locating what he characterizes as black power “antecedents” in the mid-1950s, Tyson helped redefine the chronological parameters of black power scholarship. Before *Radio Free Dixie*, civil rights historiography had defined black power as a post-1965 phenom-

¹⁸ Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *Journal of American History*, 85 (Sept. 1998), 541. On violence and self-defense during the civil rights and black power eras, see Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens, Ga., 2005); and Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville, 2007). See also Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

enon, and it did so for at least three reasons. First, the August 1965 riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles had come to signify the end of the civil rights era, punctuated by Martin Luther King being heckled by inner-city residents immune to his eloquent pleas for nonviolence. Second, King's efforts in Chicago, where his advocacy of open housing and slum clearance produced limited results, were interpreted as a harbinger of both the coming wave of black militancy and the purported shift to the north of the civil rights struggle. Finally, Stokely Carmichael's election as SNCC chairman, barely a month before his signature moment during the Meredith march, came to be regarded as the unofficial prelude to black power's national rise. These three events have come to constitute the genesis of the black power era.

In Tyson's narrative, elements of civil rights activism and black power militancy coexisted in complex, combative, and novel ways. Furthermore, his study challenges simplistic binaries that frame the civil rights movement as a moral good in contrast to black power's violent predilections. By positing Williams as an early progenitor of black militancy, and one who was a contemporary of better-known icons such as King and Malcolm X, Tyson opens up new fields of inquiry and invites further study of the complex political, intellectual, and cultural milieu that helped shaped the era.

Shifting from antecedents to origins and documenting black power's political accomplishments became the focus of a more recent wave of scholarship. Komozi Woodard's *A Nation within a Nation* (1999) effectively chronicles black power's impact on a major American city. His study is signally important in helping answer a persistent question about the black power era: What did the movement, in fact, accomplish? Through a combination of urban and social history, Woodard provides intriguing and empirically rich answers that help document black power's practical impact on a large metropolitan center. From the ashes of Newark's catastrophic 1967 urban riot, the poet and activist Amiri Baraka emerged as an effective local organizer and astute national political mobilizer who utilized black power, especially its nationalist and Pan-Africanist impulses, to catalyze large sectors of the city's black community. Woodard's study is significant for illuminating how ideology shaped practical community organizing in the inner city. By 1970 Baraka had become a power broker whose support was critical in the election of Newark's first black mayor. Furthermore, what Woodard characterizes as a "modern black convention movement," a series of national meetings, mapped out a domestic and international agenda for black power activism. In Newark, local black activists defined power through community organizing goals that culminated in the election of the first black mayor of a major city on the northeastern seaboard.¹⁹

Grounded in Newark's particular history yet attentive to larger forces affecting the rise and decline of the city's black power movement, Woodard's study was among the first to take the era seriously as both a political and cultural movement. By examining the way black activists in Newark focused on bread-and-butter issues related to community organizing, *A Nation within a Nation* collapses the false binary of culture versus politics regarding the black power era. Most importantly, Woodard's powerful history illustrates that black power was an indispensable part of the story of postwar America, a revelation that has reverberated in recent community and urban studies of the era that pay special

¹⁹ Woodard, *Nation within a Nation*. See also Daniel Matlin, "'Lift Up Yr Self' Rinterpreting Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Black Power, and the Uplift Tradition," *Journal of American History*, 93 (June 2006), 91–116. For an alternative perspective, see Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York, 2007).



Amiri Baraka, an effective local black power organizer and mobilizer, addresses an audience at Howard University in Washington, D.C., April 25, 1973. ©Washington Post; reprinted by permission of the District of Columbia Public Library.

attention to the way the period's militancy influenced municipal politics, community organizing, and post-1965 racial liberalism in urban metropolitan centers.

Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch's influential 1999 article "Black Like Mao" places the previously obscure Revolutionary Action Movement at the center of early black power-era political and cultural activism. Formed in 1962 by black college students in Ohio, RAM found political inspiration in the politics of black nationalism and socialism, communicated with Malcolm X and Robert Williams, and directly influenced future members of the Black Panther party. RAM's activism helped illuminate the rich intellectual and political radicalism of the civil rights era and directly contributed to black power-era insurgency. For Kelley and Esch, RAM's ultimate significance lay in articulating an expansive global vision of black power radicalism. In locating the hotbed of radical political and intellectual circles that gave rise to black power activism in the early 1960s, "Black Like Mao" critically expands the movement's cast of organizations and characters.²⁰

²⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 1 (Fall 1999), 6–41. For other histories of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), 72–93; Countryman, *Up South*, 139–40, 234–36; Muhammad Ahmad, *We Will Return in the Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations, 1960–1975* (New York, 2007); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008), 315–23. On the global impact of black power, see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); John McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies* (Philadelphia, 1993); Ronald W. Walters, *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements* (Detroit, 1997); Brian Meeks, *Radical Caribbean: From Black Power to*

The black power-era organization that has received the most sustained scholarly attention over the past decade has been the Black Panther party (BPP). From its inception, the Panthers walked a tightrope between hope and fatalism, calling for a Marxist revolution that would be supported through organized violence while simultaneously promoting “survival programs” that, stripped of the BPP’s fiery rhetoric, looked suspiciously similar to liberal antipoverty programs.

Organized in response to brutal and violent conditions in Oakland’s ghettos and inspired by the dignity of black sharecroppers in Lowndes County, Alabama, who insisted on their right to vote (and gave their Lowndes County Freedom Organization the nickname the Black Panther party), the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense represented the most visible face of radicalism in the 1960s. Armed with guns, law books, and menacing bravado, the Black Panthers projected a militant swagger that made their threats of starting a violent revolution for black liberation seem plausible despite considerable evidence to the contrary. It was that public image—along with Stokely Carmichael—that became the foundation for, and the popular face of, black power. The BPP underwent three distinct phases, initially calling for a violent revolution between 1966 and 1971. Faced with withering media criticism and scarred by devastating clashes with police and, occasionally, rival black power organizations, the party entered its second phase, which lasted from 1971 to 1974. This stage included a well-organized, although unsuccessful campaign to elect Bobby Seale as the mayor of Oakland. Between 1974 and 1982 the Panthers operated as a local group in Oakland staffed by overworked members burdened by an undemocratic leadership structure, graft, drug abuse, and a series of sordid ethical and legal entanglements.

The political scientist Charles Jones’s edited collection, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (1998), broke new ground by offering interdisciplinary perspectives that sought to place the group in proper historical context. The anthology marks a crucial turning point in the scholarship on the Black Panthers, which before then had been relatively thin. By offering a critical, albeit largely sympathetic, portrait of the organization, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* heralds a powerful salvo in scholarly efforts to reconsider both the Black Panthers and the black power era in which they participated. Two essays on the BPP and gender are the anthology’s most important analytical contributions. The BPP’s treatment of black women remains one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of the group’s history. Although Kathleen Cleaver and Elaine Brown have achieved iconic status in historical accounts of the group, black women’s participation in the organization’s politics, programs, and evolution continues to be a subject of rigorous debate. Tracye Matthews and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, in their essays, persuasively argue that black women’s increasingly sophisticated understanding of the relationship between racism, economic inequality, and misogyny started a process that changed the BPP’s more static conception of revolution. By the early 1970s, Matthews argues, the Panthers’ survival programs “directly addressed the needs of poor Black women, especially those who were primarily responsible for childrearing.” Black women’s reproductive issues emerged as a central theme of Panther politics, especially during the 1970s when women came to

Abu Bakr (Kingston, 1996); Rupert Lewis, *Walter Rodney’s Intellectual and Political Thought* (Detroit, 1999); Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*; and Fanon Che Wilkins, “The Making of Black Internationalists: SNCC and Africa before the Launching of Black Power, 1960–1965,” *Journal of African American History*, 92 (Fall 2007), 468–90.

dominate the organization's membership. According to LeBlanc-Ernest, as Panthers became mothers, the "growing number of children created additional hardships for a financially strapped BPP."²¹

Building on the idea that the Black Panthers were a community-based organization that affected localities in complex and at times surprising ways, other studies of the Panthers have offered illuminating insights into black power's impact at the municipal level. The historian Yohuru Williams places the Black Panthers within the evolution of postwar black political activism in New Haven, Connecticut. *Black Politics/White Power* (2000) is the first historical study to focus primarily on a specific East Coast BPP chapter. Chronically the way late 1960s black power impulses evolved out of local civil rights activism during the early 1960s in New Haven, Williams's study convincingly frames the Panthers as a neighborhood-based community organization that offered effective social services to some of the city's most aggrieved residents. "From the very beginning," argues Williams, "the BPP in New Haven was a community organization." The Panthers' presence and popularity in New Haven relied more on guile than guns, even as their innovative plans regarding local issues such as poverty became overwhelmed by the group's image as violent revolutionaries and the leaders' self-destructive and erratic behavior. By 1970 Yale University students had organized protests in support of the BPP's extensive legal problems. The protests and the legal problems both drew national attention and, in the process, Williams argues, "turned the spotlight from the issues that had brought the BPP to New Haven in the first place." For Williams, the BPP's most important legacy is their community organizing on the rough streets of New Haven in the face of poverty and misery. On this score, Williams's scholarship amplifies William Chafe's framing of local black power activism as being grounded more in neighborhood-based community activism than in the angry polemics of militants who, more often than not, practiced politics without portfolio.²²

Robert O. Self's *American Babylon* (2003) continues the trend of emphasizing black power's impact at the local level by devoting considerable attention to the Black Panther party's understudied turn toward electoral politics and community activism during the early 1970s. The Panthers' campaign to elect the BPP's cofounder Bobby Seale as Oakland's mayor captured a central dynamic of black power activism in the early 1970s, a time when local urban activists coordinated efforts to gain political power in a dramatically reconfigured urban landscape. The Panthers' practical efforts to control Oakland's municipal politics illustrates *American Babylon's* provocative claim that "black power stood in the main currents of American politics in the 1960s and 1970s." *American Babylon* stands out as a landmark study because it placed black power politics in the large sweep of Oakland's postwar history. In doing so, it helps expand the historiographical terrain for the study of black power and anticipated future urban studies that would focus on the movement's relationship to the evolution of postwar racial liberalism. For the historiography of the black power era, the chief significance of Self's study lies in its sensitive treatment of the movement as not simply a failure of postwar liberalism but as a bold effort by black

²¹ Jones, ed., *Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. Tracye Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is: Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971," in *Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Jones, 267–304, esp. 294; Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966–1982," *ibid.*, 305–34, esp. 319.

²² Williams, *Black Politics/White Power*, 130, 153. See also Lazerow and Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party*; and Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, eds., *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham, 2008).

activists to transform often-hostile institutions in American society. Building on Komozi Woodard's study of Newark and Williams's history of New Haven, *American Babylon* writes the story of black power back into narratives of postwar American history, race relations in the 1960s, and the post-1965 evolution of American democracy.²³

Violence remains the black power era's most controversial legacy. Curtis J. Austin's *Up against the Wall* (2006) was the first full-length historical study to examine the Panthers' use of violence as a rhetorical and political strategy. Austin argues that violence, "whether internal or external, rhetorical or real, psychological or physical, constituted the central element driving the group's decision-making process." As "macho tactics and posturing created obstacles for the Panthers they never surmounted," law enforcement's crusade against the group gained deadly momentum, culminating in incarceration, harassment, and death. According to Austin, the BPP's strategic, at times reckless, deployment of violence doomed the organization, a demise hastened by a sometimes-corrupt leadership and by governmental surveillance.²⁴

Almost as if written in response to Austin's study, Paul Alkebulan's incisive *Survival Pending Revolution* (2007) offers an in-depth study of the Black Panthers as grassroots organizers. By viewing them as a group of committed neighborhood activists, *Survival Pending Revolution* reframes the black power era as a phenomenon guided more by local impulses than by the rhetoric of iconic leaders. Alkebulan's history, unlike most studies of the BPP, is more concerned with the whole than its parts. For Alkebulan, the legacy of the Black Panther party is far removed from the violent confrontations, iconic posters, Marxist rhetoric, and media celebrity that made the group famous. Instead its legacy is in the community work and the daily struggles of the thousands of men and women who made up the BPP's rank and file and the larger black power struggle. Committed to transforming America's social and political institutions, these activists served free breakfasts, staffed medical clinics, drove ambulances, sold newspapers, advised striking tenants, counseled prison inmates, and attended and taught political education classes in hopes of shaping a new world. "The Black Panther Party," insists Alkebulan, "has a legacy of activism, courage, commitment, miscalculation, and missed opportunities."²⁵

Coverage in newspapers, magazines, television, and radio indelibly shaped black power-era militancy. Jane Rhodes's brilliant *Framing the Black Panthers* (2007) explores this phenomenon through a multifaceted history that critically examines the party's contradictions in the context of its relationship with the media. "Once the Black Panther Party became a recognizable media subject through the frames produced by mass media," notes Rhodes, "the simple invocation of its name or image was sufficient to call up a host of ideas and assumptions about who its members were and what they stood for." This selective national exposure proved to be a doubled-edged sword for the young group. Newspaper coverage tended to downplay the more subtle aspects of Panther ideology in favor of promulgating a paramilitary image that many of the Panthers relished. The popular association between black power and violence and urban riots made the Panthers' quest

²³ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2005), 218. For a discussion of liberalism and the Black Panthers, see Devin Fergus, "The Black Panther Party in the Disuniting States of America: Constitutionalism, Watergate, and the Closing of Americanists' Minds," in *Liberated Territory*, ed. Williams and Lazerow, 265–94; and Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965–1980* (Athens, Ga., 2009).

²⁴ Austin, *Up against the Wall*, xxi, 68, 273–348. See also Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York, 1991).

²⁵ Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 126.

for social justice seem, at least to the media, distant from legitimate forms of civil rights protest. Mainstream press accounts “condemned and repudiated” the Panthers even as they positioned them as celebrity antiheroes for a tumultuous new age. But the Panthers were hardly naïve victims of a patronizing and racist press corps. Media-savvy, intelligent, and ambitious members such as Kathleen Cleaver and Eldridge Cleaver turned efforts to free cofounder Huey P. Newton from jail (he faced the gas chamber for allegedly killing an Oakland police officer during an October 1967 confrontation) into an international political campaign—a mission aided by journalists hungry for a good story. Meanwhile, the *Black Panther* newspaper allowed the BPP to narrate its own history, politics, and programs while simultaneously serving as the linchpin for the organization’s uneven efforts to create a “revolutionary culture.” The BPP purposefully crafted alliances with influential white radical organizations, the underground press, and literary provocateurs, all of which helped the Panthers emerge as the best known radicals of the 1960s. Ironically, despite its infatuation with iconic heroes of a global Marxist revolution, the BPP tapped into the nation’s democratic beliefs to create a new kind of social movement that had some success in transforming American society. “The Panthers rejected any identification with the United States, which they deemed the source of black oppression,” argues Rhodes, “yet they embraced the nation’s democratic principals in a hopeful quest for social change.” *Framing the Panthers* effectively portrays black power-era radicalism as simultaneously critiquing and embracing democratic traditions in service of a larger vision of social, political, and cultural change.²⁶

Welfare rights organizers, tenants’ rights activists, and others laboring in movements for poor and working people have tended not to fit in the standard portraits of the black power era. A common thread that runs through recent community and urban studies focusing on black power, however, is the prevalence of black women activists who utilized the movement’s militant rhetoric in their grassroots organizing. African American female activists at the local level, argues the historian Rhonda Y. Williams, “engendered” black power in innovative and unpredictable ways that refute the period’s male-dominated iconography. In a series of important essays Williams provides the most comprehensive historical research to date about black power’s many iterations in Baltimore, and she convincingly suggests that looking at examples of local activism that do not fit standard portraits of black power usefully complicates our understanding of the period. Williams’s innovative research illustrates the process by which black women—“public housing tenants, welfare mothers, and nuns”—utilized the militant rhetoric of black power politics to mobilize grassroots efforts to fight poverty, slum living conditions, and poor social services. Those activities often entailed rejecting male authority, rigid ideology, and racial separatism in favor of a militant, but flexible political agenda that focused on community empowerment.²⁷ In an essay focusing on CORE’s Target City project (an effort to provide

²⁶ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 8, 74, 91–115, 8. On the relationship between the Black Panther party and the media, see also Christian A. Davenport, “Reading the ‘Voice of the Vanguard’: A Content Analysis of the Black Panther Party Intercommunal News Service, 1969–1973,” in *Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Jones, 193–209. On the Black Panthers’ appeal to democratic ideals, see also Singh, *Black Is a Country*; Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 205–40; and Donna Murch, “The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 9 (Oct.–Dec. 2007), 342.

²⁷ Rhonda Y. Williams, “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power,” in *The Black Power*

increased jobs, opportunities, and social services to inner cities), municipal politics, and the way local civil rights leaders interacted with black power activists, Williams argues that militants conceived of the black power movement as providing an opportunity to reshape Baltimore's urban and civic spaces in pragmatic and practical ways.²⁸ Williams's essays on the role of black women as community organizers during the black power era have broken new ground, resituating the period's actors, organizations, goals, strategies, and tactics.

Matthew Countryman's well-researched *Up South* (2005) places black power's emergence within the context of postwar urban development and contestation over liberalism's political scope, economic breadth, and racial character. Countryman's study illustrates how black power advocates effectively utilized local community organizing in one of the Northeast's biggest cities to secure political and economic power. In Philadelphia, black power activists challenged white power brokers and the city's liberal black leadership to forge a local movement that borrowed from the southern civil rights period's "organizing tradition," which focused on grassroots organizing and community decision making over hierarchical leadership strategies. The history of black power in Philadelphia confounds popular and scholarly perceptions of the movement as violent, racially separatist, and politically untenable. Black militants creatively struggled for community control of schools, welfare rights and antipoverty services, and led efforts to curb police brutality and to achieve black elected political power. While leather-jacketed Black Panthers and other militants did populate Philadelphia's black power landscape, *Up South* suggests that the political work of less glamorous grassroots activists had a more enduring impact on the city. Countryman's sweeping study further integrates the narrative of black power into a larger story of postwar liberalism, urban decline, and the ascent of a new class of black elected officials.²⁹

The idea that black power has a richer, more complex, and nuanced history than previously considered is at the core of Peniel Joseph's *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* (2006). The first comprehensive narrative history of the era, this study locates the origins of black power in the radicalism of Malcolm X and black militant groups in the 1950s. By focusing on the intellectual, political, and cultural networks that gave the period breadth and depth, Joseph's work transforms historical understanding of the black power movement in several ways. First, it reperiodizes the era, arguing that the movement's origins—not simply its antecedents—can be traced back to the mid-1950s in the local activism of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. He also contends that the movement was guided by international impulses, most notably the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. Second, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* sees black power activism less as a disillusioned, negative response to postwar liberalism, and more as a movement that grew from a black radical tradition with deep, shared roots in the civil rights movement's heroic period of the 1950s and early 1960s. Third, Joseph's account of the decade between

Movement, ed. Joseph, 79–103, esp. 81. See also Rhonda Y. Williams, "'We're Tired of Being Treated like Dogs': Poor Women and Power Politics in Baltimore," *Black Scholar*, 31 (Fall–Winter 2001), 31–41; Rhonda Y. Williams, *Politics of Public Housing*, 187–91; and Mumford, *Newark*, 149–69.

²⁸ Rhonda Y. Williams, "The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966–1968," in *Neighborhood Rebels*, ed. Joseph. See also Self, *American Babylon*; James Tyner, *The Geography of Malcolm X: Black Radicalism and the Remaking of American Space* (New York, 2005); and Karen Ferguson, "Organizing the Ghetto: The Ford Foundation, CORE, and White Power in the Black Power Era, 1967–1969," *Journal of Urban History*, 34 (Nov. 2007), 67–100.

²⁹ Countryman, *Up South*, 224–327.



The Black Panther party's Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention, Washington, D.C., November 1970. ©Washington Post; reprinted by permission of the District of Columbia Public Library.

the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision (1954) and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 reveals a political landscape where early black power militants and civil rights activists operated alongside each other and forged pragmatic working alliances. This formulation challenges declension narratives that posit the arrival of black militancy in the late 1960s as ending the civil rights era. Fourth, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* details how global events shaped black power's domestic and local activism. Covering two decades (1955–1975) when the Cold War often boiled over into violence that resounded from tiny foreign countries to the United Nations' Security Council, Joseph chronicles how activists made practical use of revolutions in Cuba, Africa, and other Third World locations to inform their domestic struggles for citizenship, self-determination, and political power. Finally, Joseph situates the goals of the black power movement as integral parts of a larger struggle for radical democracy in postwar America. Black power activists attempted to confront, challenge, and transform American democracy in ways that ranged from Stokely Carmichael's nuanced antiwar rhetoric and largely ignored voting rights work in Lowndes County, Alabama, to the Black Panthers' efforts to curb police brutality, ensure quality education, and eradicate poverty, to the "Gary Agenda" of the 1972 National Black Political Convention."³⁰

³⁰ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 132–204, 276–95. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483. See also Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*.

Whereas Joseph situates black power as a wide-ranging national and international saga with local ports of domestic entry, Winston A. Grady-Willis's *Challenging U.S. Apartheid* (2006) builds on Clayborne Carson's classic study of SNCC and places that organization at the forefront of a history of black power in Atlanta. Grady-Willis's analysis resists easy historical dichotomies that equate militancy with anti-intellectual anger and liberal integrationism with a human rights agenda. *Challenging U.S. Apartheid* amplifies and complicates two seminal works of civil rights scholarship, John Dittmer's *Local People* (1994) and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (1995), which were part of an earlier wave of scholarship that paid significant attention to SNCC. Grady-Willis's work was the first case study documenting the impact of black power on a major southern city, and in doing so, it upended entrenched geographical biases that viewed black power as primarily a northern phenomenon.³¹

In the "city too busy to hate," black militants formed dense, well-organized networks of neighborhood activists that concentrated on pragmatic issues related to police brutality, good schools, tenants and welfare rights, and expanded social services. Moreover, Atlanta SNCC organizers successfully connected "the Black freedom struggle and the Vietnam War" in antiwar activism that reverberated nationally. Black power was manifested in Atlanta in eclectic ways, ranging from a radical think tank called the Institute of the Black World to a local Panther chapter to a new class of black political leaders, most notably Maynard Jackson, elected as the city's first African American mayor in 1973. Although black power failed to permanently institutionalize the radical politics envisioned by some of its most ardent proponents, the movement did inspire an impressive combination of "grassroots neighborhood activism, radical Black nationalism, progressive Black electoral activism, and explicitly women-centered activism" that fundamentally transformed the city's race relations.³²

Kent Germany's *New Orleans after the Promises* (2007) posits black power as primarily a radical movement for democracy, one whose militancy rattled an entire city. In the Crescent City a wide range of militants, from welfare rights organizers to reformed urban street toughs to aspiring politicians, utilized black power's ethos of self-determination and community control to gain a foothold in local politics. Black power activists in New Orleans attempted to transform local democratic institutions to secure better opportu-

³¹ Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960–1977* (Durham, 2006). John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1995); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. See also Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984). For two important local studies inspired by the work of John Dittmer and Charles Payne, see J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (Chapel Hill, 2004); and Emilye J. Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

³² Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid*, 101, 169. For scholarship that reconsiders the legacy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "Organizing for More Than the Vote: The Political Radicalization of Local People in Lowndes County, Alabama, 1965–1966," in *Groundwork*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 140–63; Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964–1966," *Journal of African American History*, 91 (Spring 2006), 171–93; Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York, 2009); Wilkins, "The Making of Black Internationalists," 467–90; Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill, 2007); Leigh Raiford, "'Come Let Us Build a New World Together': SNCC and the Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly*, 59 (Dec. 2007), 1129–57; and Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964–1972* (Athens, Ga., 2008). See also Stephen Ward, "Scholarship in the Context of Struggle: Activist Intellectuals, the Institute of the Black World (IBW), and the Contours of Black Power Radicalism," *Black Scholar*, 31 (Fall–Winter 2001), 42–53; and Alton Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of Black Power in the Urban South* (Gainesville, 2009).

nities for the city's poorest residents. While Black Panthers and other colorful characters populated this landscape, the most effective organizers often were black women who used the movement's rhetoric to secure increased social services for their communities.³³ Germany's substantial treatment of black power in his case study of the Great Society's impact on liberalism, community organizing, race relations, and democracy after 1965 represents the profound impact of the new black power historiography.

Similarly, the scholarship of Rhonda Y. Williams on Baltimore, Matthew Countryman on Philadelphia, and Christina Greene on Durham, North Carolina (*Our Separate Ways*, 2005), highlights how a critical examination of black women's participation in the era, in the words of Williams, "has exposed unsuspected or overlooked Black Power formations, sympathies, and alliances, particularly in cities." For instance, in Countryman's study of Philadelphia, black women play particularly vital roles, ratcheting up community-based antipoverty efforts and, in the process, exerting local control over a movement notorious for its masculinist vision of black liberation. Black power-era militancy catalyzed local welfare rights and antipoverty organizers and activists. Indeed, Countryman argues that the "combination of consumerist and maternalist discourse" helped make "the welfare rights movement's emphasis on working-class women's leadership implicitly complementary to black power's masculinist ideology." Greene's incisive community study argues that poor black women formed the backbone of community-minded black power activism in Durham. As part of Durham's Black Solidarity Committee, black women made welfare rights a priority that partly led to a seven-month boycott in protest against widespread racial discrimination. For Greene, Durham's local expression of black power challenges "the tendency of both scholars and the public alike to focus on the more sensational aspects of Black Power and on black violence" while ignoring the era's "more lasting and significant aspects and from projects initiated by women."³⁴ If grassroots activism undergirded black power politics and most black women participated through community-based organizations, smaller numbers of black women, who self-identified as black feminists, formed explicitly black feminist organizations that highlighted the politics of gender and sexuality. Picking up the threads from Matthews and LeBlanc-Ernest's examination of the Black Panthers' gender dynamics, the historian Kristin Anderson-Bricker's 1999 essay "'Triple Jeopardy'" outlines the growth of black feminist consciousness in SNCC between 1964 and 1975. Arguing that black feminism represented "an important legacy of SNCC," Anderson-Bricker illustrates how increasing gender and race consciousness led black women in SNCC to criticize inequality in the organization and the wider freedom struggle. The sociologist Kimberly Springer's *Living for the Revolution* (2005) offers the first substantive treatment of five second-wave black feminist groups. Springer argues that through participation in these organizations, which existed between 1968 and 1980, "several thousand

³³ Kent Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens, Ga., 2007). See also Clarence Lang, "Between Civil Rights and Black Power in the Gateway City: The Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (ACTION), 1964–75," *Journal of Social History*, 37 (Spring 2004), 725–54; and Clarence Lang, "Black Power on the Ground: Continuity and Rupture in St. Louis," in *Neighborhood Rebels*, ed. Joseph.

³⁴ Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 189. Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women and Black Power," *OAH Magazine of History*, 22 (July 2008), 23. Countryman, *Up South*, 273. For histories of the welfare rights movement see Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*; Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*; and Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, 1979). For the politics of masculinity in postwar black freedom struggles, see Estes, *I Am a Man!*.

black women activists explicitly claimed feminism and defined a collective identity based on their race, gender, class, and sexual orientation claims.”³⁵

As its historiography illustrates, black power activism profoundly impacted the shape of postwar urban America, its municipal politics, community organizing possibilities, and political imagination. Black power manifested itself in community-based struggles that forged beachheads in cities, rural hamlets, and neighborhoods across America. Examining black power through community studies challenges prevailing wisdom that black militancy represented a retreat from organizing and that black nationalism inspired an emotional racial separatism that triggered the end of interracial alliances and the collapses of key civil rights organizations, most notably SNCC and CORE.

The maturity of black power scholarship is evident in recent studies that have revisited the movement’s cultural side with a previously unimaginable level of sophistication. Black nationalism formed the basis for much of the black power era’s cultural politics, institutional building, and national success. Scot Brown’s *Fighting for US* (2003) is the first historical case study of one of the most important black nationalist organizations of the era. Perhaps best known for engaging in a series of deadly confrontations with the Black Panthers, the Organization US, a group of black nationalists who adopted African dress, names, and language in service of a larger cultural and political identification with Africa, helped popularize black cultural nationalism. Brown explores the personal discipline and the rituals, including the adoption of new names and the alternative holiday Kwanzaa, that Organization US developed to decisively influence black power-era politics. Locally, the group helped establish working alliances among Los Angeles militants, which initially included the Black Panthers, organized under the notion of “operational unity.” By 1967 the growing influence of Organization US dwarfed its relatively small numbers, and the group issued statements opposing the Vietnam War, advocated black political self-determination in all spheres of life, and began making inroads on the East Coast. The work of US came to a crashing halt in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the victim of escalating violence with the Panthers, misogyny, and sectarianism.³⁶

³⁵ Kristin Anderson-Bricker, “‘Triple Jeopardy’: Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964–1975,” in *Still Lifting, Still Climbing*, ed. Springer, 49–69, esp. 50. Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 2. See also Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004), 76–128; Breines, *Trouble between Us*; E. Francis White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia, 2001); Duchess Harris, “From the Kennedy Commission to the Combahee Collective: Black Feminist Organizing, 1960–1980,” in *Sisters in the Struggle*, ed. Collier-Thomas and Franklin, 280–305; Duchess Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton* (New York, 2009); Valk, *Radical Sisters*; Benita Roth, “The Making of the Vanguard Center: Black Feminist Emergence in the 1960s and 1970s,” in *Still Lifting, Still Climbing*, ed. Springer, 70–90; Stephen Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics,” in *Black Power Movement*, ed. Joseph, 120; Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire*; James, *Shadow Boxing*; Margo Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson, 2001); Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*,” in *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Chicago, 2002), 113–29; Cheryl Clarke, “*After Mecca*: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement” (New Brunswick, 2005); and Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall, ed., *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara* (Philadelphia, 2007).

³⁶ Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York, 2003), 74–130. See also Monique Guillory and Robert C. Green, eds., *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (New York, 1998); Julius E. Thompson, *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960–1995* (Jefferson, 1999); Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa, 2000); Waldo Martin, *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics in Postwar America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Cynthia Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham, 2006); Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville, 2007); Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York, 1995); and Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

The Organization US advocated a cultural politics that saw its fullest expression in the black arts movement, which served as black power's cultural arm. Black arts activists called for a collective black consciousness, politicized art, and independent cultural centers that would imbue the African American community with a sense of racial pride, historical knowledge, and political purpose. The scholar James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement* (2005) is the most thorough cultural history of the black power era. Tracing the black arts' regional development, national influence, and origins in a postwar black Left that subscribed to tenets of race and class struggle, Smethurst's study connects what he characterizes as the "literary nationalism" of the era with political currents that impacted African Americans across the country. *The Black Arts Movement*, then, contrasts with William Van Deburg's *New Day in Babylon* in arguing that the black power era's cultural production had political consequences.³⁷

Black consciousness and cultural self-definition shaped the political and organizational goals of the black power era, accelerating efforts to secure black studies programs at colleges and universities and infusing the quest to redefine black identity with practical roots in communities through cultural centers, independent schools, poetry, dance, theater, and aesthetics. The growth, development, and institutionalization of black studies programs and departments in American higher education remain a defining legacy of the black power era. Although there is no comprehensive history of this movement, several works have offered sophisticated historical case studies of specific campus protests that led to black studies programs, the movement's wide-ranging intellectual, political, and public policy reverberations, and sociological analyses of the field's evolution as an academic discipline.³⁸ While the black arts movement experienced its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, its progenitors lay in an earlier era, when, as Smethurst points out, older generations of black nationalists and leftists "often intersected with each other and with those of the New Left, the civil rights movement, and the new nationalists, especially Malcolm X, in surprising ways." *The Black Arts Movement's* greatest contribution is in meticulously detailing black arts formations beyond the East and West coasts to reveal teeming landscapes of political activism in the South and Midwest. That reframing forces a reassessment of the black power era's geographical range, local influence, and contemporary legacy in black music, art, and expressive culture.³⁹

For an examination of Kwanzaa as a grassroots phenomenon see Keith A. Mayes, "'A Holiday of Our Own': Kwanzaa, Cultural Nationalism, and the Promotion of a Black Power Holiday, 1966–1985," in *Black Power Movement*, ed. Joseph, 229–49; and Keith A. Mayes, *Kwanzaa: Black Power and the Making of the African American Holiday Tradition* (New York, 2009).

³⁷ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*.

³⁸ Glasker, *Black Students in the Ivory Tower*; Donald Alexander Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca, 1999); Williamson, *Black Power on Campus*; Perry Hall, *In the Vineyard: Working in African American Studies* (Knoxville, 1999); Jane Anna Gordon, *Why They Couldn't Wait: A Critique of the Black-Jewish Conflict over Community Control in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, 1967–1971* (New York, 2001); Noliwe Rooks, *White Money, Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (New York, 2007); Fabio Riojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore, 2007); Stefan Bradley, "'This Is Harlem Heights': Black Student Power and the 1968 Columbia University Rebellion," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 32 (Jan. 2008), 99–122; Stefan Bradley, "'Gym Crow Must Go!': Black Student Activism at Columbia University, 1967–1968," *Journal of African American History*, 88 (Spring 2003), 163–81; Dionne Danns, "Chicago High School Students' Movement for Quality Public Education, 1966–1971," *Journal of African American History*, 88 (Spring 2003), 138–50; and Dwayne C. Wright, "Black Pride Day, 1968: High School Student Activism in York, Pennsylvania," *ibid.*, 151–62; Jeanne Theoharis, "'We Were Coming with Action': High School Students and the Development of Black Power in L.A.," in *Neighborhood Rebels*, ed. Joseph.

³⁹ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*, 368–69. See also Martin, *No Coward Soldiers*.

The historian Thomas J. Sugrue's massive history of the northern black freedom struggle, *Sweet Land of Liberty* (2008) offers a powerful example of how the historiography of the black power era has impacted historical approaches to what Jacqueline Dowd Hall has referred to as the "long civil rights movement." Building on recent studies examining the black power era, Sugrue places black power activism within the sweep of postwar American history. Sugrue's approach to black power straddles two interpretive fences. Black power makes its formal appearance in *Sweet Land of Liberty* in 1963, but Sugrue takes care to acknowledge the movement's debt to a larger tradition of black activism, noting that "many of the key figures in black power . . . were products of the previous generation of activism." Black power's novelty, Sugrue argues, was overstated. "Overlooked in the sensationalistic accounts of black power were its roots in a long-running black self-help tradition, its relationship to the deep current of black anti-imperialism that dated back to the 1930s and 1940s, and its appropriation of elements of postwar racial liberalism, particularly psychological understandings of racial inequality." Ultimately, perhaps black power's most powerful legacy was in expanding the nation's political imagination. On this score, black power's insistence on reimagining the range of America's democratic rhetoric and practice contributed to the racial and political climate that ushered in the historic presidential election of Barack Obama.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The evolution of black power scholarship has expansively redefined the meaning of the era with far-reaching consequences for community and urban studies and the historiographies of civil rights and postwar America. The years between 1966 and 1975 represent the black power era's classical period. The decade witnessed the movement's rise as a national and international phenomenon that touched every aspect of American society. It also produced a series of events, demonstrations, and imagery that make up the era's still-potent iconography. Stokely Carmichael's 1966 call for "black power" in Greenwood, Mississippi, remains the starting point for the movement's transition into America's national political scene. Historians have paid insufficient attention to Carmichael's evolution from militant civil rights organizer to black power revolutionary. Moreover, too little is known about Carmichael's subsequent role as a national leader and international icon, between 1966–1968, a period when, he became, among other things, a sought-after campus speaker; a prominent antiwar activist; and a target of the Lyndon B. Johnson White House and J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). He also embarked on a whirlwind six-month trip around the world and helped introduce the Black Panthers to a national audience.⁴¹

Carmichael's complex interaction with civil rights activists, maverick attempts to forge international alliances, and thoughtful antiwar activism challenge the conventional narra-

⁴⁰ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 316, 338; Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91 (March 2005), 1234–63. See also Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York, 2008); and Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918* (New York, 2009). Peniel E. Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (forthcoming, New York, 2010).

⁴¹ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 124–240; Peniel E. Joseph, "Revolution in Babylon: Stokely Carmichael and America in the 1960s," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 9 (Oct.–Dec. 2007), 281–301. See also Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York, 2003).

tive of the black power period. The narrative portrays the movement's energies as largely spent by the late 1960s, burned out in a self-destructive whirlwind of fratricidal violence, FBI surveillance, and tragic decisions to turn away from the slow, patient "organizing tradition" and toward a rhetorically grandiose but practically delusional politics that indulged in racially separatist fantasies and placed a premium on style over substance.⁴²

The new scholarship on black power demands that historians of postwar America take seriously unacknowledged and obscure strains of black activism. This scholarship recognizes black power as an undeniable touchstone for the era's social, political, cultural, and economic transformations and upheavals. Over two decades ago, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein challenged scholars to rethink the largely artificial boundaries that separated the freedom surges of the Great Depression and World War II era from the more widely appreciated heroic period of the civil rights movement. Since then, works published at the intersection of urban, social, cultural, and political history have filled the historical gaps Korstad and Lichtenstein suggestively outlined. The historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall's influential 2005 essay "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" persuasively argued for a more expansive view of the civil rights era. Contemporary historical understanding of the modern civil rights movement recognizes a longer historical continuum and a larger cast of characters, organizations, and conflicts than previously allowed. Black power scholarship is further expanding this historical framework to allow for a better understanding of the history of events and phenomenon that has been mostly shaped, at least since the 1960s, by journalists and first-generation civil rights historians.⁴³

The black power movement took a leading role in shaping, contesting, and transforming postwar American democracy's meaning and political outcomes. Black power took on concrete, tangible meaning at the level of urban politics, community organizing, and cultural and intellectual movements, transforming American social institutions and, at times, creating new ones. In broad terms, black power activists set out to create and implement bold new agendas for American domestic and foreign policy. Several interpretive tendencies in black power studies are already emerging from this new historiography. Social histories and community studies have tended to examine the way local activists and politics shaped black power on the ground. From this perspective the movement becomes less about iconic leaders and more about new avenues for community organizing that feature previously overlooked and understudied groups. Women, largely missing from

⁴² Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 338–90; Clayborne Carson, "Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-revolutionary Era," in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Tony Badger and Brian Ward (London, 1996), 115–27.

⁴³ Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 786–811. On the intersection of urban, social, cultural, and political history, see Singh, *Black Is a Country*; Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); and Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 2007). Hall, "Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." Nikhil Pal Singh first used the term "long civil rights era" in Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 1–14. For a critique of the long civil rights movement thesis, see Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History*, 92 (Spring 2007), 265–88. For other historiographical essays that call for new directions in the movement literature, see Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review*, 96 (April 1991), 456–71; Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, 66 (Nov. 2000), 815–48; Peniel E. Joseph, "Black Liberation without Apology: Rethinking the Black Power Movement," *Black Scholar*, 31 (Fall–Winter 2001), 2–17; Peniel E. Joseph, "Introduction: Toward a Historiography of the Black Power Movement," in *Black Power Movement*, ed. Joseph, 1–25; and Jeanne Theoharis, "Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals," *History Compass*, 4 (March 2006), 348–67.

conventional black power narratives, are central to this new story. Such local studies are transforming historical understanding of how black power affected everyday struggles of grassroots black activists and expanding how historians understand the movement's geography, organization, and political goals.⁴⁴ Black power impulses were perhaps best expressed at the neighborhood level. Contrary to popular conceptions of the shift from civil rights to black power as constituting an evolution from protest to politics, at the local level the era featured both impulses. Black power activists amplified traditions of community organizing to advocate for bread-and-butter issues in the North, Midwest, South, and West. Local studies, at the state, city, and community level will be important to the continued growth and evolution of black power studies.

While this local emphasis promises to uncover significant, previously unacknowledged strains of activism, further investigation of the dynamic tension and interaction between local, national, and global movements for black power will also be vital to developing a more complete history of the era. Critical analyses of the successes, failures, and legacy of the movement's iconic, as well as more obscure, organizations and leaders is also necessary. This is hardly a call for a top-down political history of the movement, but it is an acknowledgement that historians still know too little about the period's key actors and groups. In sharp contrast to civil rights historiography, which benefits from dozens of well-researched biographies of African American and white leaders (and to a lesser extent, other activists of color), black power's historiography suffers from the fact that most important national leaders and icons of the movement (including, surprisingly, Malcolm X) remain shrouded in mystery. The lack of biographies and organizational histories of the black power era's most visible leadership also impoverishes studies of postwar America. Filling in these gaps is vital to writing a deeper, more expansive history of this period. The new political, intellectual, cultural, religious, and organizational histories will provide critical details charting the genealogy, philosophical underpinnings, and social and political forces that shaped the movement's leadership.⁴⁵

The best of the new black power scholarship is already forcing scholars to reassess conventional wisdom by focusing on the impact of community organizing; examining the participation of low-income black women; expanding the movement's geographical contours into the South and assessing its southern character; exploring the roles of, and coalitions with, white radicals; exposing the relationship between militants and civil rights activists; and emphasizing the multiple ways black power was as much about politics as culture.⁴⁶

Buoyed by black power's urgent rhetoric of self-determination and search for political power, black activists sought control over the "community action" side of the Great Society's War on Poverty. At the level of urban policy this meant that black militants aggressively pursued local control over federal antipoverty efforts through the creation of ad hoc groups, while organizations such as SNCC and CORE promoted black power as a com-

⁴⁴ Woodard, *Nation within a Nation*; Williams, *Black Politics/White Power*; Countryman, *Up South*; Joseph, ed., *Black Power Movement*; Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels*; Williams, "Black Women and Black Power." See also Self, *American Babylon*; Greene, *Our Separate Ways*; Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises*; and Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*.

⁴⁵ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*; Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*; Watts, *Amiri Baraka*; Moore, *Carl Stokes and the Rise of Black Political Power in America*. See also Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (forthcoming); and Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely Carmichael: Race, Democracy, and Postwar America, 1941–1969* (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ Williams, "Black Women and Black Power"; Countryman, *Up South*; Williams, *Black Politics/White Power*.

munity organizing effort to alleviate urban poverty in some of America's worst neighborhoods. By the late 1960s, groups such as the Black Panthers expressed open skepticism regarding the capacity of America's vaunted democracy to extend citizenship to blacks even as those activists looked toward the sacred texts authored by the Founding Fathers as guideposts in their quest for a new society. Against a political backdrop that included the constant threat of nationwide urban riots and the nagging fear of a coming race war, black power proponents frequently deployed a carrot and stick approach to political organizing. On the one hand, activists threatened ever-greater civil unrest if poverty and racism were not immediately alleviated. On the other, they suggested that specific democratic reforms might forestall a violent confrontation. Black power's impact on American democratic institutions, ranging from churches to prisons and from schools to legislatures, is an integral, though still largely unwritten, part of American history. The way class, regional, and religious divisions among African Americans shaped responses to black power also offers a fruitful avenue for scholarly research.⁴⁷

Black power activism existed alongside civil rights struggles of the 1950s and early 1960s, and certain activists simultaneously participated in both movements. African American political culture between 1954 and 1965 is proving to be much more complicated, diverse, and heterogeneous than standard narratives of the era have depicted. National civil rights insurgency, coordinated demonstrations, strategic civil disobedience, and legal and legislative victories continue to frame our understanding of this period. While this undoubtedly tells us an important part of the story, there is much undiscovered history to be written.

Although it shared a historical legacy with the civil rights movement, the black power movement challenged prevailing civil rights narratives, and, in doing so, it fundamentally transformed American democracy in the postwar era. Scholars have yet to grapple fully with this reality. Indeed, black power activists found themselves, as Sugrue contends, searching for "a political alternative to the racial liberalism that had prevailed through most of the postwar years."⁴⁸ Yet such a description seems at odds with general understanding of the movement, which continues to identify black power with the politics of racial separatism, cultural pride, and identity politics. But these were never the movement's only or ultimate goals.

Black power also featured notable triumphs rooted in the movement's ethos of self-determination and anchored in a dogged quest for political power. Diverse communities of historical actors actively participated in the movement, while others found inspiration in the era's militancy. A more holistic account of the period will reveal the extent of the movement's multiracial and multigenerational character, its practical influence on black religious and civic groups, its transnational impact, and its continued resonance in contemporary American culture, politics, and democracy.

Even as we recognize the transformative impulses of black power politics in U.S. society, scholars must grapple with and confront the era's darker impulses. Black power activists trafficked in overblown rhetoric, polemical excess, and macho posturing that has

⁴⁷ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 368. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*; Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels*; Rhodes, *Framing the Panthers*; Yohuru Williams, "A Red, Black, and Green Liberation Jumpsuit: Roy Wilkins, the Black Panthers, and the Conundrum of Black Power," in *Black Power Movement*, ed. Joseph, 167–91; Simon Hall, "The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966–1969," *Historian*, 69 (Spring 2007), 49–82; Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*; Self, *American Babylon*; Brown, *Fighting for US*; Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises*; Countryman, *Up South*; Ogbar, *Black Power*.

⁴⁸ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 255.

helped obscure their accomplishments and diminished their historical legacy. The movement's use of violence as a political strategy, its condemnations against whites, and its almost casual misogyny deserve sustained and critical scholarly attention. Black power contains elements of Greek tragedy, including fratricide, incarceration, forced and self-imposed exile, mistaken identity, wrongful deaths, and decades-long political odysseys.⁴⁹

Black power did scandalize America in the 1960s, but its apparent novelty masked a deeper history. Beyond the era's verbal pyrotechnics, racial controversies, and stylistic bombast, it was a watershed moment of social and political transformation. Black power grew out of multiple streams of social, political, and economic struggle. Local, national, and international political events—at times independently, often times in ways that intersected—fueled a broad and eclectic array of social, cultural, and political movements. Ordinary black women and men, trade unionists, black nationalists, preachers, cultural workers, students, teachers, prisoners, and politicians exported black power's radical ethos from American soil to the world's farthest reaches. For an entire generation, black power's community and social activism shaped African Americans' political consciousness, racial solidarity, and domestic and foreign policy imagination.

Ultimately, the new scholarship invites a reassessment of the way black power, no less than civil rights, sought to reshape long-standing notions of citizenship, identity, and democracy. Completing this task will transform scholarly understanding of this period and dramatically reimagine clichés about the 1960s, race, and democracy that continue to inform historical understanding, teaching, writing, and conceptualization of this era. Coming to terms with the black power movement's contradictions, shortcomings, and achievements marks a vital and necessary effort in reimagining postwar American history.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Adolph Reed Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-segregation Era* (Minneapolis, 1999); Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (New York, 2001); Watts, *Amiri Baraka*; Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*.

⁵⁰ On rethinking the black power era, see, for example, the special issue, Peniel E. Joseph, ed., "Black Power," *OAH Magazine of History*, 22 (July 2008).