

Introduction

New Perspectives on Black Power in the Caribbean

February 2010 marked the fortieth anniversary of Trinidad and Tobago's Black Power uprising. To commemorate these events, a conference, "Black Power: Reflections, Relevance and Continuity," was held at the University of the West Indies–St. Augustine.¹ Many of the conference participants voiced despair about how little public knowledge and information there was on this period of Caribbean history, how Black Power continued to be viewed with suspicion and even hostility, and how young people—studying on the very campus where the sparks of Trinidadian Black Power ignited—knew so little about it. The conference ended with an urgent plea for the preservation of this history as some of those who were involved in the movement grow old and pass away and their personal archives lie unused. Similar sentiments were voiced at two "Internationalising Black Power" conferences, one held at the University of London in October 2007, the other at the University of the West Indies–Mona in February 2008.² These paired conferences sought to bring into comparative and international perspective events and ideologies of the Black Power era that are too often studied in isolation—a consequence, in part, of regional divisions within the academy that in many cases have separated studies of the United States from those of Africa, the Caribbean, and other diasporic locations where Black Power had resonance. By bringing together papers that engaged with Black Power across a number of geographic locations, including North America, the Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, and the United Kingdom, the conferences sought to gain a fuller understanding of the global contexts in which Black Power emerged, the transnational dimensions of the Black Power phenomenon, and the existence of and interactions between parallel and related movements outside of the United States.

At these conferences, it was evident that there were significant gaps and unevenness in the narrative of global Black Power. One such gap relates to

the story of Black Power in the Caribbean, a region that experienced notable Black Power upheavals in the same period as its powerful northern neighbor. This book responds to the need to bring together the disparate threads of the Caribbean narrative—from the Bahamas in the north to the Guyanas in the south—as a contribution both to the wider, global story of Black Power and to the understanding of a significant period of Caribbean history whose legacies are still felt but have yet to be fully explored.

While scholarship and popular perceptions of Black Power have been dominated by the North American movement, the Caribbean has much to add to our understanding of the concept: of what “Black Power” meant in other contexts and the extent to which it had resonance beyond the borders of the United States. Focusing on the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s, this book offers an overview of Black Power in the Caribbean, outlining the particular national and international contexts in which it emerged, its local manifestations, and its relations with the movement in the United States. What did “Black Power” mean in the Caribbean context? What were its principal concerns? What commonalities and differences can be traced across the region? How might an analysis of Caribbean Black Power add to our understanding of Black Power in the global context?

The most famous definition of Caribbean Black Power is that provided by Guyanese academic and activist Walter Rodney, the foremost theoretician of the regional movement. Speaking on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in 1968, Rodney proposed that “Black Power in the West Indies means three closely related things”:

- (1) the break with imperialism which is historically white racist;
- (2) the assumption of power by the black masses in the islands;
- (3) the cultural reconstruction of the society in the image of the blacks.³

While the cultural message of Rodney’s statement was common to most conceptions of Black Power in the region, its political implications were not embraced by all. As the chapters in this volume illustrate, definitions of Black Power in the Caribbean encompassed a broad spectrum of positions, from the “Jamesian insurrectionary socialism” of Antigua’s ACLM to the religious conservatism of the Nation of Islam. One of the primary concerns of this volume is therefore to understand the different meanings and manifestations of Black Power within the diverse contexts of the Caribbean, a region characterized by wide variations in population, size, ethnicity, economy, and political status. In these diverse contexts, no one group could claim a “monopoly of understanding of the black predicament.”⁴

That predicament, in the mid-twentieth century Caribbean, was primarily a crisis of failed expectations. Whether this was the disappointments of “flag independence” in the former British colonies of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Guyana or the limits of self-governance in territories such as Bermuda, the Dutch Antilles, Antigua, Dominica, and Grenada, the early optimism inspired by processes of decolonization and independence was replaced with a sense of increasing malaise focused on the region’s continued dependency and social and economic inequalities, and the persistence of racial hierarchies and discrimination. In the late 1960s, demonstrations and strikes in Anguilla, Antigua, Bermuda, Curaçao, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad, and the Bahamas testified to a groundswell of discontent with conditions for the ordinary citizen in the Caribbean state. In 1970, popular agitation reached its climax in Trinidad and Tobago, where months of massive demonstrations culminating in a dramatic army mutiny constituted the first serious challenge to governance in the postindependence Anglophone Caribbean.

The Trinidad protests (dubbed the “February Revolution”) explicitly invoked the language and symbolism of Black Power. Together with the October 1968 “Rodney Riots” in Jamaica, they hold a central position in the narrative and historiography of Caribbean Black Power. Yet as the contributions to this volume confirm, engagement with and mobilization around the concept of Black Power was not confined to these two states but occurred in multiple locations across the region as well as in transnational interactions within the region and beyond. While “organized” Black Power was primarily to be found in the English-speaking territories, exposure to the ideological currents of Black Power was region-wide. Even in the Hispanic Caribbean, where black mobilization had historically been channeled into other political and cultural affiliations, the relevance of Black Power was debated, not least in Cuba, which famously hosted prominent figures of the North American movement.⁵

While Black Power “as a concept if not a phrase”⁶ might arguably be traced to the first slave rebellions on the soil of the New World, its definition here is limited to the “classic period” in the history of Black Power, spanning from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. “Black Power,” in other words, does not refer here to black government (in the sense of Ivar Oxaal’s *Black Intellectuals Come to Power* [1968]), early black labor organization (in the sense of W. F. Elkins’s *Black Power in the Caribbean* [1977]), or to the intellectual and organizational Pan-Africanism of the first half of the twentieth century, although—as the contributions to this volume confirm—the phenomenon

is impossible to understand without reference to these. For its proponents, Black Power was linked to all these historical moments as the latest stage in the region's long struggle for meaningful independence and black liberation.

Caribbean Black Power in Historiographical Perspective

U.S. Black Power and Black Power Studies

Scholarship on Black Power has been dominated by the North American story. After decades of scholarly neglect, the growth of "Black Power Studies" in the United States has revitalized the field, producing a plethora of new studies performing the work of historical recovery and revisionism, bringing important new insights to the analysis of the U.S. movement. This new scholarship has nuanced the understanding of North American Black Power in a number of important ways.⁷ Firstly, by re-periodizing the struggle to include examples of radical black activism prior to the "classic period" of Black Power (1965–75), these new studies have reconceptualized the relationship between the civil rights and Black Power movements. Challenging the conventional narrative that viewed Black Power as a destructive and violent phenomenon that undermined the achievements of civil rights, the new scholarship has focused instead on the coexistence and common roots of both movements, paying attention to both their overlaps and strategic alliances as well as to their central differences. In this vein, Peniel Joseph argues that the "civil rights and Black Power era" should be viewed as "a complex mosaic rather than [as] mutually exclusive and antagonistic movements."⁸ Secondly, recent scholarship has advanced a revisionist analysis of the major North American Black Power organizations, most notably in new works on the Black Panther Party and the US Organization. These studies have complicated the binary analyses of "race" versus "class" and "political" versus "cultural" nationalism that had been encouraged by the tragic history of sectarian conflicts between these groups.⁹ Thirdly, the new research has expanded the terrain of Black Power Studies to include previously overlooked local and grassroots organizations that "embodied the political imperatives, cultural sensibilities, and ideological commitments of the era."¹⁰ As Joseph argues, this has led to a widening of the geographical lens beyond the urban centers of the northern states and to greater attention to local and municipal organization, a broadening of perspective that has given a space to women's groups, neighborhood community organizations, and working class movements that had previously been obscured from the history of Black Power.¹¹ Exposing the gendered dimensions of the Black Power movement and the