



PROJECT MUSE®

The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era (review)

Alyson M. Cole

American Studies, Volume 48, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 139-141 (Review)



Published by Mid-American Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.0.0152>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/375256>

aspect of Canning's argument to the stage. Chapter 1 ("America on the Platform") explores how the Chatauqua circuits self-consciously allied themselves to a national mythology. This national mythos, Canning suggests, was dependent on a specifically pastoral concept of community, the parameters of which are discussed in Chapter 2 ("Community on the Platform"). Just as the physical stage stood for and at the center of the overall Chatauqua experience, the pivotal central chapter ("The Platform in the Tent") explores how the circuits were able to reposition the tent, a sign of transience and questionable virtue, as a symbol of permanence and moral uplift. In Chapter 4 ("Performance on the Platform: Oratory"), Canning turns her attention to the forms of performance form most commonly associated with the Chatauqua: the civic lecture and the elocutionary recital. Chapter 5 ("Performance on the Platform: Theater") explores Chatauqua's curious relationship to theatrical performance. Initially conceived as a morally and aesthetically superior alternative to theater, the Chatauqua movement struggled to maintain its anti-theatrical stance in the face of a growing audience desire for dramatic entertainment. A brief Conclusion ("The Palimpsestic Platform"), looks at surviving traces of Chatauqua in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, from the Chatauqua-themed Elvis Presley movie *The Trouble With Girls* (1969) to the neo-Chatauqua performances conceived and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, state humanities councils (mostly in the great plains), and public and private historical societies.

University of Kansas

Henry Bial

THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT: Rethinking the Civil Rights–Black Power Era.
Edited by Peniel Joseph. New York: Routledge. 2006.

Spike Lee's 1989 film, *Do The Right Thing*, culminates in an eruption of rage and violence. Before the credits begin rolling, the images and words of two great African American leaders appear on the screen. The audience is left to ponder whether the "right thing" is Martin Luther King Jr.'s reproachful "as you promised," or Malcolm X's audacious "by any means necessary."

The idea that these iconic personifications of Civil Rights (CR) and Black Power (BP) epitomize divergent movements is ubiquitous; it has been ingrained in public memory and is presumed by much academic work. This dichotomous splitting of black freedom struggles is precisely what *The Black Power Movement* aims to mend. Each of the essays complicates such simplistic oppositions and challenges the politics that foregrounds the division between a heroic, righteous, nonviolent CR movement, and a deviant, destructive, and politically ineffective BP movement. As the editor Peniel Joseph explains, he intends to undermine the "hegemony" that disassembles "CR and BP as a progressive regression from hope to anger to chaos" (21).

Stokely Carmichael's defiant rallying cry—as he and King continued James Meredith's 1966 "March Against Fear"—has conventionally served as the signpost marking the birth of BP and the death of CR. Joseph offers a different periodization and a more inclusive conception of BP. His elastic "long BP movement" reaches back more than two decades earlier to the ideas of Depression-era radicals. It also stretches forward to current Black Studies scholarship and various incarnations of multiculturalism; and even sideways to encompass parallel movements, such as black feminism, student, labor, and welfare rights activism, and black nationalism "from Newark, NJ, to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, and beyond" (7). Through this framing, BP comes to represent the entire African American struggle (not CR gone awry), revealing continuities and coherences absent in historiographical strictures that sever activism geographically (north vs. south),

generationally (adults vs. rebellious youth), economically (middle class vs. lumpen), and ideologically (rights vs. jobs).

The anthology commences with the 1965 Watts upheaval. By many accounts, Watts signifies a crucial rupture in the CR movement—an outburst of the desperately poor, socially abject, and politically estranged. Jeanne Theoharis charts instead a history of militant activism in Los Angeles (beginning with the 1941 “Alabama on Avalon” rebellion), according to which Watts was a seamless extension of years of CR organizing around issues such as school desegregation and fair housing. Yohuru Williams’s chapter on NAACP leader Roy Wilkins’s variable relationship with BP provides a more equivocal version of CR–BP transition. Simon Wendt’s examination of early 1960s Southern armed defense units complicates the standard CR narrative, though he maintains their militant resistance was a necessary facilitation of nonviolence, not an alternate course.

Whereas Komozi Woodward’s description of Amiri Baraka’s career—from the 1961 pro-Lumumba protest at the UN to the 1972 Gary Convention—underscores the connections between local BP activism and post-colonial struggles around the globe; Jeffrey Ogbar shows how BP symbols and rhetoric inspired other subordinate groups within the United States. Ogbar’s study encompasses the “rainbow radicalism” and “machismo cool” of Chicano Brown Berets, Chinese Red Guards, and the Patriots (white men donning berets and leather jackets adorned with the confederate flag!), among others.

Three essays focus on women. Rhoda Williams explores how welfare mothers, public housing tenants, and nuns in Baltimore, Maryland were “mobilized outside of, but in the context of, Black Power radicals” (81). In a similar vein, Stephen Ward’s history of the Third World Women’s Alliance aims to demonstrate that black feminism and BP were part of the same ideological framework; and, Kimberley Springer analyzes the critical reception of writings by Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, and Michelle Wallace.

The anthology concludes by pointing to the lingering presence and promise of BP. Keith Mayes’s tracking of the growing popularity of Kwanza offers a poignant illustration of the BP movement’s “cultural offspring” and “continued resilience and relevance” (248). Joseph’s final essay presents Black Studies as one of the greatest inheritances of BP efforts to cultivate a new radical intellectual movement.

While there is much to commend in this capacious new historiography, the volume lacks definitional clarity. Is any posture of self-defense, every expression of assertiveness, a subversive performance of BP? Are readers to consider Gandhian *satyagraha* and Fanonian revolutionary violence compatible? Is BP a matter of personality, ideology, strategy, or cultural ambitions? Or perhaps, given the purposeful theatrics deployed by many activists, BP should be viewed as a form of Butlerian drag. The point is not to quibble about particular definitions or to reject conceptual fluidity, but to ask what then is not BP?

The redemptive narrative presented in the book tends toward the celebratory and sidesteps some thorny issues, such as homophobia, anti-Semitism, religious nationalism, black capitalism, as well as protagonists who now disavow BP (e.g., Julius Lester). Moreover, several of the more challenging topics that are addressed merit further probing; for instance, BP’s misogynistic construction of manhood. Black feminism may indeed be best understood as part of a dialectical struggle for black freedom. And, many black feminists, such as the Combahee River Collective, rejected separatism even as they stressed the need to construct a political agenda from their distinctive identities as black, working class, lesbians. However, when reproductive choice is considered “genocide” and BP activists slur feminists as “castrators,” asserting that “black feminists added ideals of gender equality and anti-sexism to the social activist milieu of the BP

era" (118) seems a gloss. After all, the leader credited with first crying for BP is also infamous for another statement about women's role in SNCC, and one would be hard pressed to fashion a womanist reading of Cleaver's depiction of rape in *Soul on Ice*.

Still, as a scholarly undertaking and a political project, *The Black Power Movement* is both refreshing and vital. Dividing the 1960s into the good and the bad is a familiar tactic of political demonology used to blunt other forms of radicalism that developed during the era. More recently, criticism has focused on the alleged *ressentiment* of the oppressed, not unequivocal assertions of power. In stunning contrast to Cornel West's condemnation of "black nihilism" and Wendy Brown's censure of "wounded attachments," these authors affirm the political propriety of anger and the possibility, or even necessity, of a language of identity. Their more expansive view of BP makes evident that claims about suffering and anger at injustice are attempts to enact democratic citizenship. Anger may be reactive but it is politically energizing and, as Audre Lorde observed, creative.

In 1969, Amiri Baraka issued a warning that BP would change African Americans and thereby transform America. This anthology thoughtfully records that (r)evolution. The authors also share a forward-looking concern: namely, current attacks on affirmative action, welfare, and racial politics—all of which they attribute to the demise of black radicalism. Manning Marable once described the field of Black Studies as simultaneously descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive; *The Black Power Movement* certainly satisfies this tripartite mission.

Queens College, City University of New York

Alyson M. Cole

NOT QUITE WHITE: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness. By Matt Wray. Durham: Duke University Press. 2007.

As Matt Wray's survey of thinking about poor whites in America makes clear, the category that will become white trash has a long and convoluted history. Lubbers, crack-ers, and human rubbish, pine rats, hill folk, and dirt-eaters—the terms as well as the exact nature of the characteristics that differentiate these colonists and later Americans from others vary widely. "Crackers, a name they got from being great boasters," a colonial administrator wrote in 1766, "are a lawless set of rascals on the frontiers of Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, who often change their places of abode. They steal horses in the southern provinces and sell them in the northern and those from the Northern they sell in the southern" (35-36). The problem then was one of law enforcement. A Midwestern minister in 1888 saw the difference of a family of thieves, prostitutes, and nomads he described as a "pauper ganglion" dating back to 1840 in much harsher terms. "What can we do," he asked. "First, we must close up official out-door relief. Second, we must check private and indiscriminate benevolence, or charity, falsely called. Third, we must get hold of the children" (77). People this deviant cannot be helped, he argued. They must be stopped. In 1912, the journalist Walter Hines Page had a much more charitable view. "The southern white people are of almost pure English stock," he wrote in the *World's Work*. "It has been hard to explain their backwardness, for they are descended from capable ancestors and inhabit a rich land. Now, for the first time, the main cause of their backwardness is explained and it is a removable cause," hookworm. Poor whites could be cured. "I predict that within five years the whole face of this country will be changed and one will see here a new people and a new earth."

Wray divides his ambitious study into roughly four overlapping periods. From the 1720s through the 1830s, elites' vision of poor people descended from European immigrants changes. In the colonial era, poor whites are described as lazy because they refuse