

Nearly 40 years after the first chanting of “Black Power,” long after the Black Panthers ceased being a real presence on the political landscape, and now, when the “Free Huey” buttons and Dashikis are collecting dust in the attic, what lasting imprint has Black Power left on all of us?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Stokely Carmichael. *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (Kwame Ture). New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Jeffery O.G. Ogbar. *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- William L. Van Deburg. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

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Black Faculty and Staff Association

BFSA, founded in 1995, is dedicated to promoting and enhancing identity, sense of community, professional welfare and development among Black faculty, staff and students of the Johns Hopkins University. The organization represents the interest of people of color on all campuses and all levels within the university.
www.jhu.edu/~bfsa.

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LEGACY: Understanding Black Power Forty Years Later

Presented by the Black Faculty
and Staff Association

February 11, 2005 – June 15, 2005

The Milton S. Eisenhower Library

A Generational Perspective

This exhibition, *Legacy—Understanding Black Power Forty Years Later*, is less about a historical period than a whole generation of people. That generation grew up during the period of Black Power and now grows old in a world changed by its ideas. To understand the impact of the movement today, look at the people Black Power shaped, how it affected them, and how, in turn, they now influence what we see each day.

Understanding Black Power 40 Years Later

From 1966 through 1975, a portion of the population came of age in America to be, in the words of the Nina Simone song of the time, “Young, Gifted, and Black.” They encountered a world that ill-appreciated their gifts, exploited their youth, and had no use at all for their Blackness.

The Black Power generation was bequeathed a legacy of civil rights inclusion. They were the first to integrate America’s historically white college campuses in large numbers. That distinction exposed them to a world of new possibilities, frustrated by a reality of White hostility—subtle and sometimes open—to what they had to offer creatively and intellectually.

The Black Power generation fought the war in Vietnam. They returned home from the violence of war to communities ravaged by conditions beyond their control. Their focus was less on the suffering Black people endured than their powerlessness to determine for themselves their own lives.

The prevailing injustice was not the mere unfairness of White-supremacy and anti-Black racism; rather, it was the absence of power in Black people to define success on their own terms and make it happen. For Black Power, justice is the power to make self-assertion and self-determination meaningful.

That generation is approaching retirement age today, having matured, in some instances, to positions of power and influence. Many discovered, in the passion of youth, the power of their identity as Black men and women. A few came to forget it in the expediency of pursuing mainstream success. As this generation bumps its head against the “glass ceiling” of America’s limitations, a number are rediscovering now their early radicalism, tempered by the practicality of experience.

The legacy of Black Power 40 years later reflects youth’s radicalism tempered by experience. To understand that legacy is to see passion maturing into something more lasting. What more lasting today can we discern from this movement some 40 years ago?

The Black Faculty and Staff Association of Johns Hopkins University presents this exhibition on Black Power. Many of its members lived the realities of Black Power then. They present this exhibition for those who did not.

The Back Story

As 1965 ended, the Civil Rights movement had won concessions that did little to make the daily lives of many Black people different. Schools had been legally desegregated for more than 10 years, but many Black schoolchildren still suffered a substandard education in school districts pressed for resources. Legislation had outlawed discrimination, but a large number of Black households were still confined to areas where people wrestled with joblessness and redlining in housing and lending.



As 1966 began, Blacks celebrating the opportunities of the American dream now knew new frustrations with the familiar reality their parents had experienced of dreams denied if not deferred. With mounting frustration borne by expanding and unfulfilled promises of opportunity, many began to question the underlying premise of civil rights that linked progress to assimilation within the mainstream.

Black Power offered new answers to old questions. If paying the price of submerging who you are just to fit in did not produce satisfying change, why not at least enjoy the satisfaction of saying who you are out loud no matter who it bothered?

Black Power thus elevated identity from being a mere incident of distinguishing individuals to an element essential to becoming a whole and complete human being. In the case of Black Power, that meant reconnecting Black people to a heritage reaching across an ocean of water and time.

As whole and complete people shaped by a common legacy that distinguished them from the mainstream, Black Power liberated Black people to say for themselves what they wanted with the expectation that only they could deliver that outcome. Blacks declared, in the words of James Brown, “Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves. We’re tired of beatin’ our heads against the wall workin’ for someone else.” “Say It Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud,” 1968.

The Life Histories of Black Power

Black Power is embodied in the life histories of the Black people who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, clear about who they were, angry about what little it meant to change their prospects and the lives of their children, and moved to do something about it.

In their 20s, doing something might mean screaming out loud, demanding something radical, or even just wanting to hit back. But people who, 40 years ago, might be moved by conditions that, as Marvin Gaye put it, “make me wanna holler,” found other solutions to their predicament.

Black Power—A Vision for Higher Education

Forty years ago, Charles Simmons was a fan of jazz whose passion drove him to help found the Left Bank Jazz Society in Baltimore. His was the image other people used to sell malt liquor to Black folk.

His Black Power destiny was different. It led him to an experiment with Antioch College in urban education that, when he took it over, became Sojourner-Douglass College, the only Black-controlled independent private college in Maryland. The man in the malt liquor ad then is today president of the college he established.

Back in the day, Black students at Johns Hopkins University were forced to demand conditions enabling them to thrive academically and personally. Today, those demands bear fruit in the university’s recently opened Center for Africana Studies.

Black Power—Empowering Words

Black Power found Paul Coates in the Maryland Chapter of the Black Panther Party, a Defense Captain with an interest in books. Today, as co-founder of Black Classic Press, one of a handful of Black-owned publishers equipped with digital printing, he preserves for 21st-century audiences obscure and significant out-of-print works by and about African Americans.

Black Power—Transforming the Face of Hollywood

Black Power emboldened Black filmmakers to take control of the images White America had chosen for their people—sometimes with bad and sometimes with good intentions. With Black people telling their own stories unapologetically from the vantage of their own experience, Black Power continues to transform popular culture.

Collectively, these life histories provide a context for assessing the impact of the Black Power Movement. In the people who shaped and were, in turn, shaped by it, Black Power has present life. Like them, it has matured and grown wiser with age. What then is the wisdom we draw from them 40 years later?

What Did It All Mean?

In a world shaped by Civil Rights to assure that race should never matter, Black Power advanced the idea that being Black has meaning. The idea coincided with growing Black disenchantment with the unfulfilled promise of Civil Rights equality.

Civil Rights delivered for many middle-class Blacks an equality that cost their identity as Black people, and for others, particularly the poor in northern cities, little that approached equality at any price. What followed was anger and resentment. Less obvious was the remarkable creativity it sparked about what being Black meant.

Black Power was racial identity asserted as political power. It also supported comparable assertions of identity that defined new possibilities in other fields.

Authors like Harold Cruse, who wrote *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, developed Black consciousness into a framework for analysis in economics and culture, among other subjects. In art and literature, in scholarship, and, as it always had been, in popular culture, with movies and comedy particularly, Blackness mattered.

Today, the impact of Black Power reaches beyond the affairs of Black people. Its elevation of racial identity now defines the politics of outsider groups, who organize around their own respective agendas without regard for how much their efforts may set them apart from the mainstream.

Even for non-Blacks, Blackness today has reality. It forms its own academic discipline on predominantly White college campuses. It defines an identifiable aesthetic of general appeal to varied audiences. It has palpable value in commercial exchange.

Forty years later, Black Power is more than the faint memory of Afros and Dashikis. It’s an empowering view of the world that has inspired other oppressed groups to assert what is in their own best interests.

—Black Faculty and Staff Association Exhibit Curators,
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