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Why Now?: Recent Writings on Black Power and the Black Panther Party

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The book is not without its merits. It is a smoothly written, lively piece of scholarship which has a lot of interesting and important things to say about medical practice in a place of great world-historical importance about which few of us know nearly as much as we should. Furthermore, Weaver raises some intriguing questions about the centuries-long representation of Saint Domingue/Haiti as a toxic island, and that picture's continued deployment in relation to the spread of the AIDS virus in the late twentieth century. But for readers whose principal interest lies with the history of slavery, resistance, and revolution, *Medical Revolutionaries* represents something of a missed opportunity.

—Natalie Zacek

Why Now?: Recent Writings on Black Power and the Black Panther Party

Austin, Curtis J. *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2006.

Johnson, Cedric. *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007.

Lazerow, Jama, and Yohuru Williams, eds. *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

Three recent texts offer a dazzling breadth of perspectives on black power and the Black Panther Party (BPP), and that is their most visible common ground. Curtis Austin's *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* builds a narrative based on oral histories. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams's volume *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* offers scholarship from diverse perspectives and disciplines. Cedric Johnson's *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* charts the path from black-power politics of the 1960s to contemporary "black ethnic politics" (xxv). These texts expand our view of the BPP and other manifestations of black power in the 1960s and 1970s. Though varied in their methodologies, each of these recent writings on black power restores debate, a large cast of participants, and ideological nuance to a particular historical moment. These authors enter a burgeoning conversation about black power among historians, literary scholars, sociologists, and cultural theorists. The years 2005 and 2006 alone saw the publication of books about black arts, black power, black feminist organizations, and the panthers by James Edward Smethurst, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, Kimberly Springer, and Peniel E. Joseph. On the wave of current scholarly passion for the radical racial politics of two decades of tumult and possibility, Austin, Lazerow, and Williams unpack and complicate the seductive but narrow image of the BPP as a short-lived, militant group of radicals in

Oakland. *Up Against the Wall* and *In Search of the Black Panther Party* illuminate in particular the many community works of the BPP, especially its free breakfast programs, work to combat sickle-cell anemia, study groups, and newspaper *The Panther*. They locate the BPP in context on an historical continuum where social justice and daily wellbeing, rather than primarily separatism or violent revolt, were central goals. This is not an attempt to elide violence perpetrated by and on the panthers, or to erase the problematic gender politics in many black-power groups, but rather a layering of lesser-known narratives on top of more established ones. *Up Against the Wall* and *In Search of the Black Panther Party* correct the black archive, locating the panthers as not a radical break in the history of African-American activism in a single location, but as a geographically varied moment in the larger, long tradition of self-determination and cultural nationalism among African Americans.

Revolutionaries to Race Leaders also reexamines the black-power period and argues for cultural nationalism, but Johnson's book adds a note of urgency to the conversation. Every page of this volume is saturated with the call to make use of early black-power tactics in current political activism. These three new volumes, with their emphasis on the daily work of black-power activists, many of them women, suggest the current usefulness of a particular brand of cultural nationalism and militancy. Gloria Naylor defines *cultural nationalism* thus: "That means that I am very militant about who and what I am as an African American. I believe that you should celebrate voraciously that which is yours [. . .] So that's what cultural nationalism means to me. To be militant about your being." Naylor's daily sense of self and community, rather than an image of African-American militants as misogynist instigators of violence for its own sake, characterizes the cultural nationalist stance of recent writings on black power.

In his preface to Curtis J. Austin's *Up Against the Wall*, former panther Elbert "Big Man" Howard asserts that Austin's book, unlike other writings on the BPP, will be neither a "tell-all about irrelevant personal situations within the party" nor a collection of "autobiographical sketches of prominent party members" (x). Though much of the book is, despite Howard's preface, given to "autobiographical sketches," they are not of the people we might expect. Austin has pulled together an extensive oral history; years of interviews with rank-and-file panthers paired with scholarly rigor make this volume an exciting meeting of reportage, narrative, and interpretation. Austin's interviews reveal the BPP as happening all over the United States, from the Louisiana Deacons for Defense and Justice to party chapters in Omaha, Buffalo, and Winston-Salem. Even the name and image *black panther* originated not in the bay area, but with the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama (34). Austin also attends briefly to the transnational connections and aspirations of the party, particularly in its later years. In re-mapping the BPP and stitching together many oral histories, Austin not only revises the geography of the party, but locates it in grassroots movements of daily activism as well as the more visible spectacles like armed panthers entering the Sacramento state capitol building in 1967. Austin reaches from the years of the BPP back to antebellum acts of resistance to illustrate his assertion that "The central theme of African American history has been the struggle for freedom" (xvii).

Such contextualizing gestures, of which there are many in *Up Against the Wall*, are generally less compelling than the wealth of concrete information Austin offers about the events of 1966–72, the lifespan of the party. He does well to include a detailed timeline, the full text of the panther's "Ten Point Program: What We Want, What We Believe," a

list of party chapters and affiliates, and a bibliographic essay guiding the way toward further research. These documents, along with Austin's narratives of many minor players in the BPP as well as Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver, make *Up Against the Wall* a good starting place for a scholar interested in the BPP. Ultimately, the stories of party members, many of whom migrated at a young age from the South to the urban North and West finding a kind of new family in the party, linger in the mind far longer than Austin's framing question about the role of violence in the rise and decline of the panthers. Austin's methodology, his clear investment in creating a collective portrait of the BPP based on previously unheard voices, sets the reader up to be less interested in the way Cleaver, Newton, and Seale variously viewed or used violence than in the details of many other figures in this collective story. Kathleen Cleaver writing for the party paper; Aaron Dixon joining the BPP after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination; eighteen-year-old Brenda Davis shot in the FBI raid on Fred Hampton; Cleo Silver living on the ten cents she earned from each panther newspaper sold; and Austin's encounters with party leader Elaine Brown (told in a fascinating biographical essay appended to *Up Against the Wall*) are what remains with the reader. Though Austin's interpretive work is compelling, stories are the real meat of this volume, which is fitting as he ultimately wants neither internecine conflict nor violence to be the legacy of the BPP. The other works considered here inhabit the space Austin opens up with the claim that, "Historians would do well to dissect the various elements that made up this chameleon-like organization. In the process, they might find that ordinary people discovered a way out of no way to do some truly extraordinary things" (333). *Up Against the Wall* offers a solid beginning for study of black-power activism, but it is not enough on its own. *In Search of the Black Panther Party and Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* fill the gaps in Austin's text, offering more thorough accounts of "ordinary people" and "extraordinary things" in order to uncover the high stakes of black-power history that remain mostly obscured in *Up Against the Wall*.

While Austin creates his narrative from many voices, Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams achieve a similarly choral effect in selecting authors from various disciplines for *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. This volume grows out of a 2003 academic conference, demonstrating further the current critical mass of scholarly interest in the BPP. Like Austin, Lazerow and Williams wish to complicate, indeed correct, earlier accounts that narrowly "celebrate or vilify" the BPP (3). Legal scholar Bridgette Baldwin, in her notable contribution to this volume "In the Shadow of the Gun: The Black Panther Party, the Ninth Amendment, and Discourses of Self-Defense," for example, draws out a current nascent in Austin's book, illuminating the panther's use of the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, which the panthers employed as "weapon[s] equal to the gun" (69). Baldwin's essay points to the ways in which, like David Walker over a century before, the panthers were invested in their Americanness, wielding the language of this country's founding documents as part of an argument for equality and liberation within the United States. Williams, an historian, also invites a fresh look at the panthers in his essay "White Tigers, Brown Berets, Black Panthers, Oh My!" which considers a "politics of style" that forged surprising relationships among the BPP and the elderly Gray Panthers, the Caucasian White Panthers, the militant police of the White Tigers, and the Puerto Rican Young Lords. Williams insists we expand the story of the BPP to account for the cultural

ripples it created in terms of how coalitions of all kinds formed after the panthers' rise to prominence in the late sixties. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, author of *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (2005), begins the work Williams calls for with an essay on Latino radicalism in the era of the BPP. American-studies scholar Davarian L. Baldwin points to the stakes of *In Search of the Black Panther Party*: "We are at a stage where it is hip to consume black culture, but it is no longer hip to be black. Black thinkers/scholars are in vogue when their ideas can be abstracted, universalized, and then expunged of their provincial black experiential roots/routes" (291). Pairing an interdisciplinary approach and historical specificity, *In Search of the Black Panther Party* restores debate, tension, and nuance to narratives of the BPP and black-power thought. Lazerow and Williams invite us to look to those "roots/routes" in their particular contexts partly to understand how we might overturn our moment in which ideas that are "abstracted, universalized," indeed deracinated, have such traction that mainstream news commentary regularly cites support for Newark mayor Cory Booker, President Obama, and Tennessee politician Harold Ford as evidence of a new politics "beyond race."

Cedric Johnson is keenly attuned to the dangers of such rhetoric. In *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of American Politics*, Johnson approaches this moment of "abstracted, generalized" readings of African America's political past and future, calling for "the renewal of political antagonism" (xxiii) in response. Indeed, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* reads like a story of how America got to a moment where the Obama-Clinton primary presidential race, thrilling as it was, threatens to alibi a growing failure of the left to dismantle institutional racism and sexism. Johnson laments an "ideological consent" that diffused the possibility of dramatic social change offered by black-power politics. He writes, "Whereas the phrase 'Black Power' conjured up the possibility of a revolutionary reckoning in American society, the actual conversion of movement activism into an elite-driven, black ethnic politics from the late sixties onward negated that radical promise" (xxv). *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* is Johnson's attempt to chart that "conversion" by tracing the rises, declines, and conflicts among various strains of black-power ideology. *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* advocates a turn away from "black ethnic politics" in favor of the revolutionary promise of black power, which for Johnson includes an increased focus on economic oppression. In other words, Johnson advocates a new social order in which leaders need no euphemisms for socialized medicine, reparations, or racial identity.

Rather than the rigorous historical narrative offered by Austin's study of the panthers, Johnson's is a history of intellectuals, from Harold Cruse to Karl Marx, Franz Fanon, Amiri Baraka, and African-American politicians at all levels of government. Baraka emerges as a hero of this narrative; he looms large in Johnson's volume not as a poet, but primarily as a political thinker and activist. Among Johnson's own valuable contributions to this discourse of radical politics, which manifest largely as African-American cultural nationalism focused on community control, is the distinction he draws between "racial solidarity" and "racial unitarianism." These terms arise in Johnson's discussion of the 1972 Gary, Indiana, Convention organized by Baraka and the Congress of African Peoples. In one of his many eloquent turns of phrase, Johnson calls the convention, "a shotgun wedding of the radical aspirations of Black Power and conventional modes of politics" (129). Hammering home the double entendre of "conventional politics," Johnson marks the Gary Convention as a turning point toward the institutionalization of black radical thought.

The “spontaneous form of consciousness emerging from racial stratification” Johnson terms “racial solidarity” gives way to the “discrete political aspiration of Black Power politics” he calls “racial unitarianism” (88). While the other authors considered here are at pains to dismantle a declension narrative of sixties radical politics, put forth perhaps most prominently by Todd Gitlin, Johnson revises this stance, writing a story not so much of decline as of homogenization and institutionalization. The fallout of the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) is not, as in Austin’s account, primarily direct and violent action to unravel the BPP, Ron Karenga’s US Organization, and other black-power groups, but rather the insidious promotion of “moderate forms of black politics” toward a “more conservative direction” (101). In the early seventies, electoral politics become the source of leadership for African Americans, and it is this shift, according to Johnson, that ensured a narrowing horizon of possibility for social change in the United States.

Following Johnson’s careful intellectual history, we must ask what is lost in the turn toward “conventional politics.” Though he may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater (i.e., the logical extension of Johnson’s claims would be to reject voting altogether, even for one’s local council member or school-board chair), the costs of turning toward a politics of elections and gestures, rather than protests and resistance, merit serious attention. Among the losses are the oscillation between vocal opposition and temporary, powerful alliance that characterized the relationship between Karenga’s US and the BPP in the 1960s. Lost too is the dissent and diversity of opinion available to “racial solidarity” politics able to adapt spontaneously to the needs and participation of a given local community. As we have seen in the recent presidential campaign, electoral aspirations often rely on eliding or obscuring the wide geographical, experiential, political, and ideological variation that exists among African Americans. Johnson’s revised declension narrative locates ideological and political debate locked away in an ivory tower, extracting Marxism and cultural nationalism from grassroots organizations where they once informed reading groups, breakfast programs, art classes, child care, and other daily local activism. Rather than become the grounds for a social theory toward racial justice, “the Marxist-nationalist” debate “derailed” (170) black radical politics and ended up sequestered in the academy, leaving direct work toward social change in the historically questionable hands of American electoral politics.

The change “from protest to politics” (177) that Johnson narrates begins to suggest why the history and analysis of black power has garnered so much attention in recent years. Johnson’s elegy mourns not just the radical early Baraka, *The Panther* newspaper, or local demonstrations, but a way of experiencing United States citizenship. In attempt to situate the BPP and black power in the long tradition of international black radicalism, many of these authors turn to Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* as a touchstone. The appearance of Kelley’s work repeatedly in the body and footnotes of this scholarship reveals something about why interest in the BPP and other black-power movements seems at a fever pitch these days. Published just before Obama’s bid for the presidency invited visions of particular kinds of political change (though Bill Clinton appears in Johnson’s book as the epitome of “progressive gesture and conservative politics” [214]), these books respond to a moment when the possibility of freedom dreams seems to be foreclosed. Like Toni Cade Bambara’s 1980 novel *The Salt Eaters*, this scholarship looks back to the recent past in all its complexity as a model for radical imaginings of alternative

modes of resistance and coalition in ways that are local, daily, and intensely *possible*. Writing against previous scholarship that may have, in historicizing the panthers and black power, diffused and contained activism of the 1960s and 70s, Austin, Lazerow, Williams, and Johnson reinvigorate black power and African-American cultural nationalism, looking to their aims and tactics as models for radically re-imagining how we might practice citizenship in our current moment. None of these authors locate the grounds of radicalism outside the United States, but they all suggest we plant something new in that soil.

—Courtney Thorsson

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Casa-Grande e Senzala, the seminal text by Gilberto Freyre, continues to be cited as an achievement in a wide variety of fields, including anthropology, sociology, history, literature, and cultural studies, both in Latin America as well as in the United States. Published in 1933, the text served as a response to the notions of racial degeneracy that had dominated American thought since the nineteenth century. In his study, Freyre set out to detail the varied components of Brazilian society, revealing the contributions made by indigenous inhabitants of the land, Portuguese settlers, and their African slaves in the colonial period. As Thomas Skidmore writes, with the publication of this tome, "readers were being given the first scholarly examination of Brazilian national character with an unabashedly optimistic message: Brazilians could be proud of their unique, ethnically mixed tropical civilization [. . .]."¹ Skidmore later concedes that Freyre's analysis "served to reinforce the whitening ideal by showing graphically that the (primarily white) elite had gained valuable cultural traits from their intimate contact with the African (and Indian, to a lesser extent)."² That is, Freyre's construction of hybridity does not include genuine reciprocity in its accounts of the (often-violent) interactions between the indigenous, African slaves, and European immigrants. Rather, in Freyre's work, the conquered served to improve, enhance, and develop the existence of the conquerors. It is from this critical perspective that this collection of ten essays (four about Brazil, two about Haiti, one on Algeria and Martinique, and one on the Americas in general) begins. In her compelling introduction, editor Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond clearly states that the compilation examines the "complex, often contradictory ways that slavery informs theorizations of national community in the region that has alternately been called the Black Atlantic,