

## **Black Unity, Black Consciousness and Controversy**

### **A Book Review**

*Black Power 50*, edited by Sylviane A. Diouf and Komozi Woodard, with a foreword by Khalil Gibran Muhammad (The New Press: New York, NY, Paper, 144 pp., 2016, ISBN 978-1-62097-148-2, \$24.95.)

In 1966 (50 years ago, hence the “50” in the title), SNCC organizer Willie Ricks uttered the words “Black Power” at gatherings throughout the U.S. In June 1966, Stokely Carmichael used the phrase at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi. The words scared the daylight out of many people – especially Whites and older Blacks. Many associated Black Power with reckless violence, and some older Blacks armed themselves in case it became necessary to confront Black militants. (On the other hand, many of the older Blacks believed in turning the other cheek in the face of violence inflicted upon them by White supremacists. It was this confusing double standard that many Black Power advocates wanted to challenge.)

The phrase “Black Power” came to mean different things to different people. For some it meant the necessity to use violent means to end oppression. To others it meant Black economic and political empowerment. To others it meant Black self-empowerment through the development of pride, the learning of history and the raising of consciousness. To some it meant all three and more.

I feel privileged to have been raised during the Black Power movement. It was the cultural fire through which my identity as a Black person was forged. The movement scared and angered my grandparents and my mother. However, it merely left my father wary.

My father was a member of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), Malcolm X’s organization. He was a body guard for Malcolm’s half-sister, Ella Little Collins, when she took over the organization after Malcolm’s death. (My maternal great-grandfather, who I had never met, was a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, headed by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s.)

When the Black Power movement came to my Black community, Homewood, in Pittsburgh, I was enthralled. There was a Black Power headquarters on Homewood Avenue, and they gave out free hot dogs. They gave speeches on the need for Black unity. They popularized afro hairstyles, which shocked many people. I started wearing tikis (small African sculptures worn around the neck) and dashikis, as well as Black power buttons and red, black and green necklaces.

Later, I had learned about the Black Panthers, mostly through *The Black Panther* newspaper that my father would regularly bring me from Harlem, New York. My maternal grandfather, though worried about the Black Power movement, was fascinated by the Nation of Islam, and every week bought their newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, which I would read from cover-to-cover when he was finished.

As someone once pointed out, just as many of today's Black youth idolize rappers, many young people in the 1960s and 70s idolized Black militants like Huey Newton, Angela Davis, H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael.

When the Panthers finally opened a chapter on Brushton Avenue, I spent much time there. Though I was probably too young (13) to be a member, I was always hanging around. I wore the black beret, black (fake) leather jacket, black shirt and pants, "Free Huey" and "Free Angela" buttons when they were imprisoned, and so on.

*Black Power 50* shows how *diverse* the movement was. One of the book's greatest strengths is that it demonstrates that the Black Panthers were not established upon Reactionary Black Nationalism. They worked closely with progressive Whites, Latinos, Native Americans and any other group committed to progressive causes.

There is some information missing from the book. For example, many Black males and females in the movement, to display unity, referred to Black people as soul brothers and soul sisters. (Later, they shortened the terms to just brothers, or bros., and sisters. Today, even Whites have adopted the term "bros." Similarly, one motion of the Black Power handshake is now used even by Whites.)

In many urban areas, before riots (or “urban rebellions”) broke out, Black-owned businesses would place Black signs with red lettering saying “Soul Brother,” to hopefully ward off looters in the name of Black unity.

The Black Power movement was largely about Black pride. Blacks had been taught to devalue themselves through centuries of White supremacist brainwashing. However, leaders of the Black Power movement resurrected Marcus Garvey’s saying that “Black is Beautiful.” Blacks were taught to see beauty in dark skin, thick hair, full lips and other Black physical features they had been taught to hate and denigrate.

*Black Power 50* gives a very good overview of the Black Power movement without being overly sentimental and without promoting hagiographies. However, there were some negative aspects of the movement that the book does not address. For example, there was the popularization of racial epithets for Whites such as “honkey,” “whitey” and “blue-eyed devil.” There was anti-White hatemongering and violence against Whites. Blacks were only supposed to date and marry other Blacks. Blacks with White friends or that embraced certain aspects of White culture were deemed sellouts. Some Black militants carried “honkey sticks” for beating unsuspecting Whites. Perhaps worst of all, a group of Black men calling themselves the “Death Angels” carried out the Zebra murders (black-on-white) against several White victims in San Francisco from October 1973-April 1974.

We must acknowledge and condemn these excesses if only in the interest of historical accuracy. If and when another fad like the Black Power movement comes along, to paraphrase George Santayana, we must not condemn ourselves to repeat the worst aspects of our history.