

I.B.TAURIS

BLACK POWER AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF
BLACK RADICALISM



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This book would not exist without the help of many people, but very particularly my wonderful PhD supervisor and mentor, Professor Gerard DeGroot, and my unfailingly supportive parents, who remain inexplicably proud to have raised an historian.

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

Writing a preface to a new edition of this book, which seeks to touch on the connections between Black Lives Matter and the long history of Black Power and the American people, is something of a Sisyphean endeavour. The America that I wrote about just a few short years ago, which already seemed on a knife-edge of conflict, has had its racial divisions sharpened and broadcasted by four years of a white supremacist presidency which has treated the lives and liberties of black Americans as inconsequential. Much like their Black Power predecessors, protestors in this environment have found themselves reckoning with 'an American empire that demands black death for its functionality'.¹

As Angela Davis warned, freedom remains a constant struggle.² Within this struggle, the American police, the active power of the state, have provided a litany of torture, cruelty and state-sanctioned murder almost daily to newsrooms and social media around the world, which has inevitably coloured the act of composition. As I attempt to pull this preface together, the roll of disappeared names shifts like the tide, threatening to erase the individuality of each life lost. In this high-speed age, the preservation of loss is an ongoing contest, with each news cycle threatening to cast aside the bodies of the previous days' dead. Walter Scott, Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain have all been casualties of the American policing system since I began to write. I have started and restarted this opening dozens of times, and each time, I've returned to the outset, as the American political landscape has convulsed,

first with the election of Donald Trump, then under his four years of truly spectacular racial brutality, and yet again with the victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 election, followed by a predictable, and dispiriting, wave of desperate Republican litigation, culminating in the storming of the US Capitol by a group of neo-fascist insurrectionists, conspiracy theorists and Nazis, encouraged by the departing incumbent himself.³

I have had to start telling this story over and over, because the story America tells itself about race is constantly reiterated, and the 'truths' it holds sit uneasily against the historical record. Part of that story is familiar now, depressingly so. Black Lives Matter (BLM), like much of the preceding Black Power movement, was catalysed by a communal response to state violence – specifically the July 13, 2013, acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin.

Eight impossibly long years ago, Mark O'Mara, Zimmerman's attorney, fretted over the presence of a 'fringe element' of protestors, bent on seeking revenge against his client.⁴ The founders of BLM, however, were less concerned with revenge than with justice and, like Black Power advocates before them, with access to the basic dignities of survival under the American regime. One of those founders, Alicia Garza, then a community organiser with the National Alliance of Domestic Workers, now principal of the policy organization Black Futures Lab, watched the Zimmerman verdict live, before writing a Facebook post which concluded: 'Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.'⁵ Her friend, the prison reform activist Parriske Cullors, commented '#blacklivesmatter' on Garza's post, and from that, a new addition to the American protest lexicon was born.

Now, as Confederate monuments tumble and with the death of George Floyd, BLM protests have erupted around the world and the slogan itself has been daubed in massive yellow letters on the approach to the White House.⁶ Steered by Garza, Cullors and immigration activist Opal Tometi, BLM has grown from a hashtag into an international protest movement. With more than forty chapters worldwide, it's important to note that BLM is one of around fifty organizations in the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). Even here in the UK, campaigns such as BLM in the Stix seek to build on the June and July protests over George Floyd's death in over 260 UK towns and cities stretching from South Wales to Shetland.⁷

Somewhat feverishly positioned by commentators as an uprising which 'spans from Ferguson to Baltimore ... Minneapolis to Salt Lake City ... London to Tokyo',⁸ the success of the M4BL is founded, like Black Power, on direct, grassroots action and community solidarity. As with their forebears, integrating with local networks, 'being able to show up and work alongside the activists leading the way' was key.⁹ Following the 2013 Martin case, BLM found itself on the ground protesting the murder of Mike Brown in August 2014, bringing over six hundred activists to coordinate actions in Ferguson and St Louis.¹⁰ Participating in a series of October protests dubbed the Ferguson 'Freedom Rides' by Tometi, using tactics that consciously moved in the shadow of the 1960s civil rights movements, BLM's work in Brown's name catapulted it to national prominence.¹¹ By July 2015, the first ever National Convening of the Movement for Black Lives took place in Cleveland, Ohio, attended by more than two thousand activists and organisers.¹²

Despite its structured approach, much of the early reportage around BLM treated it as a movement which emerged from nowhere. For anyone conscious of the long history of Black Power in America and the parallel history of white oppression, it was apparent that this was not the case. However, acknowledging connections and inheritances does not come without complications. Since its inception, there has been a rush to position BLM as the vanguard of a new civil rights movement, styling it as the successful inheritor of the partially unfulfilled legacies of twentieth-century struggles.¹³

There are elements of truth to this. Tactically, BLM sits somewhere between the Panthers and Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), working immediately at the grassroots via community chapters, but with a functioning, well-funded network at the national level to lend organisational assistance to local direct action. These strategies are evident in everything from BLM's protest of the Cleveland Republican convention and presidential debates, through transit shutdowns and police defunding protests, to their operations in solidarity with Native protests contesting the Standing Rock pipeline on the Sioux reservation.¹⁴

BLM is primarily differentiated, both from its opponents and its Black Power predecessors, by its intersectionality. Key BLM figures like Tometi exemplify this shift, advocating for action against police violence and for black empowerment but also for the political mobilisation of women and expanded labour rights.¹⁵ Tometi is only one of many BLM members who are veteran community organisers with long experience bridging the interlinked battles over immigration, accommodation, incarceration, gender, class and medicine which exemplify the experience of being black in America.

Another major point of difference between earlier Black Power movements and BLM lies in the latter's reception. On the one hand, achingly familiar narratives have been mobilised – right-wing pundits have labelled BLM a terrorist organization as recently as May 2021.¹⁶ This comes despite the production of statistics showing that BLM protests are overwhelmingly peaceful, with the main source of violence coming from conservative counterprotestors and the police.¹⁷ However, others have taken issue with its queer-friendly focus – an issue which has been extant since the 1960s Black Power era organisations, which often had a complex and contested relationship with gender and sexuality, seeking allies in other oppressed minorities, and reliant on women, but mixing this with a culture of machismo, and the internalised homophobia and misogyny which accompanied it.¹⁸

Some superficial similarities are similarly complicated – the Panthers, a party consistently reliant on the leadership of women, whose membership was 60 percent female,¹⁹ and which had a stated policy of gender equality from the outset, struggled to centre those same women. The group wrestled with a hypermasculine image, elevating prominent sexual offenders and misogynists like Eldridge Cleaver to influential positions within the party. Conversely, BLM owes its existence not just to the three women behind its foundation but also to the countless others who have sustained it in local chapters and affiliated organisations in the years since.²⁰

BLM, in its diversity, inherits a more authentic and, until recently, more often obscured legacy of protest in America – protest guided and catalysed by Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker, by Marsha P. Johnson, Silvia

Rivera and Storm De Larverie, by Ernestine Eckstein, by Barbara Jordan and James Baldwin, and all those other queer activists who are rarely mentioned in the same breath as Dr King and Malcolm X.

What has emerged is a profoundly inclusive twenty-first-century organisation – BLM has been outspoken about violence against the black queer community and has consistently centred LGBTQ members, whether in the Black Trans Lives Matter rally of June 2020, one of the largest transgender-focused protests in history, or the Juneteenth celebrations of last year organised by The Blacksmiths art collective, which culminated in a reading of Linda LaBeija's 'Vogue, bitch', an incendiary call to action against transphobic violence.²¹ This focus places the M4BL squarely as an intersectional, modern iteration of the civil rights and Black Power movements.²² In response, BLM's critics have included both expected sources like Fox News and Breitbart hacks, and the unexpected: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leaders struggling to reconcile with the movement's direct action tactics²³ and even former Black Panther chairperson Elaine Brown, who accused BLM of having a 'plantation mentality' as a consequence of their reduced focus on self-defence and decentralised structure.²⁴

Accordingly, much of BLM's energy, as befits an organisation birthed in the disinformation age, is devoted to providing credible counter-narratives to the dominant hegemony, from both white and black America. Unsurprisingly, their efforts in this direction mirror those of Newton, Carmichael and other Panthers who tried to advocate for their organisation, as well as cultural commentators such as Muhammad Ali and Larry Neal who placed their careers on a collision course with American assumptions.

While it's overly glib to place the Black Panthers and the BLM movement as points on one single historical continuum, there are numerous points of connection between the two organisations that situate them as part of the long history of Black Power. Both these movements emerged from the experience of American racism – from its political and economic frameworks and its cultural milieu. It's no coincidence that both the Panthers and BLM originated in Oakland, which experienced some of the sharpest points of contact with the racism of the American state, or

that the Panthers' Ten-Point Program advocated for self-determination, education and the cessation of police brutality, while the M4BL issued an analogous agenda, demanding 'an end to the criminalization, incarceration, and killing of our people' and calling for the 'accountability of entire police departments'.²⁵ The demands are the same, because the problems remain the same – they began with the American slave system, and they have remained unaddressed since.

Connection is sharpened by retrospect. From the outset, both the Black Panthers and BLM placed themselves in confrontation with the foundational structures of American racism. Both groups sought intersectional alliances in order to resist these structures and were international in their outlook. The key here is context – while both the Black Panthers and BLM are part of the long history of Black Power, their contexts are profoundly different. The Panthers came to prominence following decades of decolonisation struggles in the Global South, capped by the advent of Cuban independence, while BLM has been shaped by decades of neoliberal scouring of black communities, coupled with a contingent expansion of the for-profit prison system and a concomitant evisceration of support for public education.²⁶ Thus, while it's tempting to see linear continuities between historic Black Power struggles and BLM, often the river we follow is more like a delta, a shifting net of overlapping influences and confluences demarcating ongoing efforts for liberation, streams of resistance that have moved over American soil since the first slave revolt.

For some activists, BLM is not just an inheritor of the Black Power era but a clear evolution, part of a chain of connected cultural and political expression through time.²⁷ In this respect, earlier iterations of the Black Power movement are both inspiration and cautionary tale, providing lessons in direct action but also warning against allowing the fractures and divisions that undercut earlier manifestations of Black Power protests to splinter these more modern movements.

The internal and external stressors on the late-1960s Black Power movement are well documented, from its patriarchal, misogynist culture to its internecine strife, exacerbated by FBI surveillance and COINTELPRO sabotage.²⁸ For today's protestors, technological evolution has meant increasingly sophisticated repression. The firehoses of Selma have been

replaced by a panoply of near science-fiction interventions, from sonic disruptors²⁹ to signal harvesters, with DC police requesting the use of a heat ray against BLM protestors, months before some in their own ranks opened the gates to allow armed white rioters into the Capitol.³⁰

This technological brutalisation has been met with technological innovation – the real-life manifestation of the sonic warfare which Underground Resistance dreamed up in the Detroit music scene. In this new protest parallel, audio engineers like Dave Rife and Gabe Liberti, designers of an audio shield against sonic cannons, are as valuable and essential as medics, mouthpieces and mantras.³¹ Science fiction is real, and it's on our streets. This should come as no surprise. BLM exists at the nexus of direct action gone digital – the interface of street-level protest, grassroots organisation and technological resistance.

Protest via direct action has been an intrinsic component of resistance since the colonial origins of the United States, but the flavour of the direct action served by BLM has proven unpalatable to centrist commentators, when placed in comparison to disingenuous recollections of the classic 'non-violent' civil rights movement. Photogenic artefacts of the Freedom Rides, the sit-ins or the Montgomery boycott become anaesthetised into a false dichotomy between the acceptable, justified protest of the past and the supposedly unwelcome, disruptive protest of the present.³² One need only take note of the varying degrees of treatment afforded the recent Capitol rioters, alongside shooters like Kyle Rittenhouse, in comparison to activists like Tiana Arata, to see that America treats its disruptions very differently and gives white terrorism a far longer leash than black protest.³³

If BLM protest is held in a different reality to that of the civil rights and Black Power era, the essentials of the struggle are the same. BLM has had to revisit historic strategies for survival, what the Panthers called their 'survival programs', in order to persist in our fraught modern context. Consequently, part of BLM's work is advancing policies and social strategies that ameliorate the oppression of life in America, perhaps most recently seen in the launch of the BLM Survival Fund, a program which often moved more swiftly than federal aid when reaching affected communities during the pandemic.³⁴

We cannot deny the deep challenges of modern protest. We exist in a world which burns every summer, wildfires scouring California.³⁵ We exist in a world wracked by viral plague.³⁶ We exist in a world of rising rents and eviction notices. We exist in a world of water poverty, and historic red line delineation and defunding.³⁷ For protest to succeed in this world, life must be sustainable. As the Panthers put it, the possibility of struggle predicates the need for survival.³⁸ That struggle for survival is constantly scrutinised. The praxis and politics of black empowerment, as this book discusses, are often conducted under the lenses of the American media, and for a variety of audiences.

We have moved beyond Gil Scott-Heron's admonishment that the revolution will not be televised. Not only is the television of the M4BL an inevitable factor in our daily lives, the broadcast of these protests, both consensually and non-consensually, by media at all levels places protestors' identities and lives into profound jeopardy. In both Trump's and Biden's America, protest exists in a virulently confrontational information battleground. Companies and agencies attempt to recruit journalists to record, document and disclose the identities of BLM activists, and to disclose or fabricate links with anti-fascist protest.³⁹

Where most historic Black Power adherents had to contend only with television, radio and print media, the M4BL is a product of the internet era, mycorrhizal in its reach, and also correspondingly diverse and open to manipulation. Historically, groups like the Panthers courted and positioned themselves within the relatively limited media frames available to them, and were able to base their protests on enshrined constitutional rights.⁴⁰ One need only contrast this with the recent attempts by state governors and legislatures to restrict camping on state property and dial up the cost of bail funds to realise that even the right to protest is a debated possibility in what remains of American democracy.⁴¹

In order to defend this right to protest, BLM activists, like the Panthers, have chosen to place themselves in front of a varyingly sympathetic American audience in an era which erodes anonymity and promotes retribution against legitimate protest.⁴² To survive this gaze, BLM protestors have been obliged to inherit and adapt a range of protest

tactics, ethics and aesthetics from their Black Power predecessors, and by extension from the long history of Black Power and the American people.

Much of this book charts the centrality of the cultural inheritances of the Black Power movement to its late-1960s tactics. This long history of resistance conditioned the relationship between the politics, poetics, ethics and aesthetics of groups like the Panthers, and their successors in BLM. Black Power, perhaps even more so than the 'mainstream' civil rights movement from which it emerged, thrived on dramatic, highly stylised conversations, declarations and protest actions, grounded in an extended heritage of black resistance to oppression. This set of tactics constrained the Black Power movement at the time but presents a much wider set of communication possibilities, for those elements of the M4BL bequeathed similar strategies. Symbol, song, art and poetry place BLM squarely in front of its audience and define its shape as much as its concrete protest actions.

This engagement heightens as many Americans become increasingly cognisant of the tightening grip of Republican hegemony over the past four years, aided by the fact that, despite being a country with marked and dramatic historical farragoes, the United States until recently was helmed by a president so mercurial and venal that he prompted comparison with the Third Reich, the Reagan era and the original civil rights struggle simultaneously.⁴³

Having a thinly veiled white supremacist in office has perhaps had the concomitant effect of a partial reckoning with the white supremacy stitched into American history. Visible protest actions around sites of history, memory and oppression in the current moment create the impression of an apparently seismic shift in how individuals, corporations and institutions are engaging with that history, suggesting a mass effort to reckon with America's endemic racism.

Progress towards this reckoning is halting. High-profile cultural repositories like the British Museum and the Met – both with substantial historic ties to colonialism – comfortably adopt the BLM slogan while moving in fits and starts to address their own roles in the euphemistically phrased 'race problem'.⁴⁴ While some institutions such as the Walker Art Center in George Floyd's Minneapolis have stopped contracting local

police for events, the move to divest America's cultural institutions from the grip of the police has a long way to go, as demonstrated by the recent Whitney Museum controversy.⁴⁵

Control over culture remains central to the attainment of equality. The following chapters demonstrate that the persistent presence of Black Power's cultural legacy in American history inflected art, music, dance, painting, poetry and theatre. It informed the secular religion of sports, and more conventional theologies. It occupied the diners of America via soul food, and the clothes and hairstyles worn on nights out. It changed the language of its adherents, from *Black Is Beautiful* to rap, and some of its gestures have become eternally enduring, none more so than the raised Black Power fist, which has found itself emblazoned on citizen shield walls in the later round of protests, and misappropriated immediately thereafter.⁴⁶

Writing now, decades into the twenty-first century, there is a base parallel to be drawn between the inheritances and targets of the Black Power movement, and its successors in the M4BL. Both sustained their immediate survival by deploying a multitude of cultural forms, often with profound historical connections. Both groups also demanded substantial shifts in the forms and exercise of American power in order to ensure the continuance of that survival within the American state. This is most clearly seen in the growing efforts amongst BLM advocates to defund or abolish the police, channelling the egregious amount of money currently allocated to most state police budgets into community support and security funds.⁴⁷ While many of the more ossified elements of the American political spectrum have dismissed these attempts as a pipe dream, the popularity of politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Stacey Abrams and Ilhan Omar, along with the ire they draw, speaks to the groundswell in support of some fundamental change.⁴⁸ Several city budgets have already adjusted in the wake of recent protests, and it seems that more may follow.⁴⁹ As Damon Williams of the *#LetUsBreathe* collective puts it, 'Redistributing resources away from carceral institutions and militarism now feels achievable in ways I did not expect to see in my lifetime.'⁵⁰

Such optimism can be hard to sustain. As I write, we are just over a year out from the paralysis of Jacob Blake, shot seven times in the

back while opening a car door – an act described by Wisconsin police as ‘within policy’.⁵¹ Daily news shows convoys of American police rolling through the communities they ostensibly protect, macing protestors from behind riot shields and out of the windows of military-style vehicles designed to evoke the machismo and fascist strength-signifiers of a failing regime. Were these scenes happening in a country which more readily fits Occidental notions of instability and collapse, we would be quick in recognising the protest sweeping America as a profound new phase of direct action against an abusive political regime. Regardless of whether observers are sympathetic or not, the conflict itself is undeniable. A change is being sought, and the brutality of the American policing system has advanced to a point where it is impossible to ignore. The police, as the Panthers recognised since their inception, are both ‘a reflection of antiquated systems that have for too long been in place’ and the most immediate point of contact and control utilised by the state.⁵² Accordingly, confrontations with the police are the most immediate staging ground for the ethics and aesthetics of the Black Power movement to be exhibited within the M4BL.

As will be seen, the drama and flair of Black Power’s leaders and demagogues, coupled with a groundswell of community support, propelled the movement front and centre by 1967, on the back of a series of summer riots in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit and Newark. The Kerner Commission assigned to investigate the riots concluded that they marked the emergence of ‘two Americas, one Black, one white’.⁵³ The protest divisions exhibited in today’s BLM movement are perhaps more complex. On one side are ordinary Americans who have been brutalised on multiple fronts, first through the economic impacts of the last century, from the legacy of redlining through to the subprime crash, later via the vampiric tendencies of the American medical system, such that the sight of a GoFundMe to save a desperately ill person is now par for the course. These same Americans daily witness acts of horrendous brutality in their communities as black bodies are asphyxiated, beaten, hung and shot by a police force which often appears to have entirely abandoned its purpose as a tool of community security, and enshrined itself as a paramilitary complex for authoritarian, majority white interests. On the other side

of the divide, we have an American plutocracy which appears to be positioning itself to bleed America dry even as it burns.

Much as the Black Power movement attempted to give shape to the rage and fury which had fuelled the riots of the late 1960s, the M4BL has striven to turn anger, heartbreak and desolation into powerful political action. These efforts are partially similar to early Black Power drives because so little has changed. In the early 1960s, Black Power figureheads spoke out against systematic degradation across the American system, a death of a thousand cuts that played out through racism, substandard provision in education, accommodation and healthcare, and persistent, unrelenting police brutality. Little has changed, save that the mass-mediated age we've moved into has brought the edges of this system into even sharper relief.

The following pages are not comprehensive, but they hopefully provide a sense of the evolution of the struggle for empowerment in America by examining a series of connected cultural expressions across time – aggregate streams in the wider delta of the struggle for black empowerment. The M4BL stands as an inevitable modern iteration of these struggles, and an inheritor of the historic legacies of American racial violence. It is in many ways perhaps uniquely placed to effect fundamental change in American society – it has at points held a more sympathetic audience, and it has a greater range of digital and conventional tools at its disposal than its predecessors. BLM arguably holds the presence in popular culture that groups like the Panthers strove for, combined with significant political influence and grassroots, street-level power. The directions it takes now will be influenced by both its inheritances from the long history of Black Power and its ability to navigate the particular alchemies of the modern moment. It's evident that BLM strives for a liberated, inclusive, intersectional future – whether Americans choose to embrace this or whether American society is held back by an atavistic attachment to the divisive power structures and systems established over the last few centuries remains to be seen.

INTRODUCTION

‘QUESTION: What is Black Power, Daddy? ANSWER: ?’ So began the Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Charles H. Fuller’s eponymous piece, published in 1979 as the Black Power movement faded from America’s political consciousness.¹ Yet while Fuller put pen to paper almost forty years ago, it’s a question we still have trouble answering even today. In part, this book hopes to address that issue. Post-Ferguson, in an increasingly racialised America where the lines between black and white Americans seem once more to be thrown into stark relief the legacy of the Black Power movement is on the rise. While the mainstream media remain mostly content with the occasional dewy-eyed retrospective on philosophers and demagogues softened by the passage of the time, and while the more thoughtful outlets might remark upon the political and economic legacies left by the Black Power movement’s political heyday, the quiet legacy of Black Power; its long history in American culture and its profound influence on the American racial imagination remains something of a whisper, barely heard beneath the microphone static and ghost-gun rattle of a political and social revolt too quickly dismissed in our collective recollection, or too easily blended with the broader sweep of the civil rights struggle.

Black Power was both part of, and distinct from, the more familiar civil rights milieu. Its adherents drank from many of the same wells, but also ranged widely, voraciously and creatively in their search for new identities of resistance. This book hopes to take you down some of the paths they trod, and to give you a sense of the diversity

and complexity present in the evolution of Black Power's relationship with the American people.

There is, perhaps, no better time to do so. The long history of the Black Power movement, evidenced in a series of connected cultural expressions across time, has been and continues to be instrumental in defining America's relationship with its citizens of colour. Its images of community, beauty, strength, empowerment and resistance inform today's dialogues. Its emphasis on controlling the means of culture creation to control your identity remains ever more relevant. When protestors today chant 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot', when they walk the streets bearing signs asking 'Am I next?', there remains the sense of a society in opposition with itself. When those same chants change into 'Hands Up, Shoot Back', they echo present and past frustrations alike. We also see in the mass protests that have swept the country the interaction between local and national solidarity which lay at the heart of Black Power, and the wider civil rights movement. Black Power, at its root, was an ideology of self-defense. Adherents sought to protect their community, their loved ones, at base, their life and identity from an inimical dominant society. It was an ideology which emphasised the creativity, beauty and potential of America's people of colour and their ability to drive society forward in a multitude of unexpected and essential ways. Yet it was also an ideology which divided and terrified much of late-1960s America.

Writing now, it seems ever more pressing to understand where these fears came from and to develop a more coherent picture of Black Power's place in American history. Not to teleologically shape our actions in the present, but so we can act and react with an understanding of past struggle which includes the long history of the Black Power movement as an essential component of the changing dynamics of the American people and American society.

While we cannot and should not draw easy parallels with a complicated past, the relationship between Black Power and the American people is a strong strand in a tapestry of racial oppression, resistance and reconciliation which still affects us all today. Understanding the ways in which Black Power has manifested through American history gives us a clearer sense of its enduring appeal, and a more lucid lens with which to examine the events in America today.

Constructing that lens requires some delicate work. The evolution of Black Power is an historical puzzle that has created confusion from its first 'official' utterance on the Meredith March in 1966 to the present day. This book seeks to explore Black Power's long history; to trace its evolution through American culture and society by reconsidering the growth of Black Power sentiment as a series of connected cultural expressions across time. In this endeavour, I am not alone. There have been innumerable attempts to encapsulate these two incendiary words and understand their meaning for the American nation. So, how should we think about this mercurial historical phenomenon? When he strove to answer his unsettling question, Fuller himself reinforced the most accepted interpretation of the political movement. He wrote, 'The concept of Black Power embodies a clearly thought out, step by step process, which if initiated by the national Black community, will put control of those areas of government, which directly relate to us, into our hands.'² However, painting Black Power by its politics has only ever provided part of the picture.

Defining Black Power at its political zenith was comparatively simple – defining it over the course of its long relationship with the American people is substantially more complicated. Historical assessment has reached the point where Black Power as a political term is comparatively well-defined, but Black Power outside the political sphere, and its attendant black militancy, remains amorphous. In January 1967, Black Panther Party member Stokely Carmichael remarked that, 'the first need of a free people is to define their own terms', and if any reassessment of the long cultural history of Black Power in America is to be undertaken, we first need to ask ourselves what exactly we mean when we say those iconic words. Black Power.³

Black Power is not a static term. Nothing ever entirely is. The associations we ascribe to a phrase change with the decades, with deaths, with triumphs, with historical reflection. Yet even in its earliest years, some of Black Power's pertinent qualities were clearly and lucidly enunciated. Perhaps the simplest definition was retrospectively provided by Solomon P. Gethers, executive director of United Neighbors for Progress, a community organisation based in Wilmington, North Carolina. Writing in the December 1969 issue of *Negro Digest*, Gethers reasoned 'Black Power is a call to Black people to rediscover the richness of their own possibilities; to open themselves spiritually, morally, and

psychologically to the true meaning of their lives as expressed in the Black man's own unique historically evolving culture.⁴ For activists, this personal development was a logical parallel to the political thrust of the movement, which was equally pithily defined by the National Coalition of Negro Churchmen (NCNC) as 'the power to participate.'⁵ Yet to many observers, there appeared to be a clear contradiction between the practicality of political Black Power and the apparently ephemeral nature of cultural Black Power's demands for psychological and spiritual reinvention. As the social critic Harold Cruse wrote, there was an apparent gulf between the connotative and denotative meanings of Black Power, a 'conceptual gap between shadow and substance'.⁶ As one of the pivotal figures in the growth of the African-American studies movement, Cruse was better placed than most to view the tensions at its heart, but even he conceded, 'Whatever Black Power is supposed to mean to its adherents and its foes, its implications cannot be clearly understood unless one examines the slogan's aims and origin.'⁷ In part, that is what this book aims to do.

This is no easy task, primarily because America itself was unsure of Black Power's aims, nowhere more profoundly than in the heart of the civil rights establishment. At the 1966 convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in Los Angeles, the group's Vice President Hubert Humphrey declared, 'we must reject calls for racism, whether they come from a throat that is white, or one that is black'.⁸ Echoing Humphrey, Executive Director Roy Wilkins excoriated the Black Panther Party as, 'a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan ... the father of hatred and the mother of violence'.⁹ Panic amongst the luminaries of the civil rights establishment was mirrored in the breathless response of the white mainstream media, but while the horror and indignation present in the press may have varied in its conviction, it undoubtedly made good copy.¹⁰

This makes the historian's task particularly daunting. To observers at the time the Black Power aesthetic was often magnetically alluring, but it was also overwhelming, a sensory assault from 'an alien world'.¹¹ To be young, black and militant at this point in time was to be 'all of white America's nightmare of the black revenge come chillingly to life'.¹² The heralds of the new creed, *Newsweek* wrote, were foreign, strange and hostile 'bitter young men who lounge at every corner ... the dynamite in

the ghetto – the likeliest to be ignited'.¹³ The politicisation of young black America, then as now, was an unsettling prospect. As Elaine Brown recalled on the formation of the LA Black Panther chapter, 'those ... gritty young Brothers ... sent chills through everybody'.¹⁴

White America needed to beware – according to *Life* magazine, the main concern of young African-Americans was 'How to Get Whitey'.¹⁵ In the fevered world of early Black Power journalism, it seemed somehow plausible that 'Red-Hot Young Negroes Plan a Ghetto War'¹⁶ or that 'Young apostles of violence' nurtured in 'hate-filled ghettos' could give rise to 'a strutting band of hyper militants'.¹⁷ In the absence of palatable information, the white media filled in the blanks with fear.

This confusion was compounded by the fact that the same media outlets delineated acceptable forms and frames of protest. By the time the Black Power movement emerged, articles were less about reprobation and more salivation. A new language of crisis and conflict characterised the 1960s commentary.¹⁸ A growing dichotomy was created between the 'Responsible Negro Leaders' and the emergent, allegedly novel, Black Power delinquents. Surrounded by vociferous media judges, and suffering dissension within its own ranks, the established civil rights movement suffered an uncertainty over how to respond, summarised by Bayard Rustin who declared, 'we are in the valleys of confusion'.¹⁹ It is into this polarised swamp of memory and interpretation that any historian of Black Power must plunge, confronting a nation afraid of itself, afraid of the consequences of its own history, and a civil rights movement unable to fully grasp the speed and extent of its own evolution. Somewhere in these murky waters, we need to fish for a definition of Black Power. Good luck down there. It is strange, deep and weird.

How to proceed then? Well, despite the title of the book, and while Black Power is logically often presented as an American phenomenon, emerging from American circumstances, the view from across the pond was often clearer. In the closing years of the decade, a multipart series by *The Times* described the Black Power movement as 'efforts by the Negro to discover his own cultural and historical origins, long buried beneath white civilization'.²⁰ Yet even as the estimable journalists of *The Times* were wrapping their heads around Black Power, it seemed all too familiar to ordinary black Britons who saw the televised clash between Black Power activists and the American state unfold with such drama

that they got to know the names and faces of American militants 'better than the next door neighbours.'²¹ Media familiarity and ready iconography had created a new transatlantic protest connection. So, our definition has to recognise that by virtue of its long history, Black Power was eminently transmissible. Again *The Times* skirted close to the truth in its predictions for the movement's future, when it speculated that, '[Black Power activists] may well have the effect of creating folk heroes ... particularly among the young, who are ardently in search of manhood and self-respect.'²²

This search paid little heed to conventional geographical boundaries. On both sides of the Atlantic, the sensation generated by the movement's emergence guaranteed activists an attentive national audience, and the ear, if not yet the heart, of the man in the street. The stark nature of the movement's soundbites matched the blunt impact of their alien style. Carried on waves of iconoclastic language, Black Power hit the evening news, bringing black militancy into the living rooms of America. On the screens of a stunned nation, Stokely Carmichael warned that America stood 'on the brink of becoming a nation of murderers' while the Congress of Racial Equality's (CORE) National Director Floyd McKissick spat that, 'The greatest hypocrisy we have is the Statue of Liberty. We ought to break the young lady's legs and point her to the Mississippi.'²³

Here lies the next problem for the historian of Black Power – the theatrics and hyperbole initially favoured by many of the movement's speakers were not easy for contemporary observers to distinguish from any tangible threat. The potential of Black Power was feared more than the reality of its existence. Here was Cruse's gulf between shadow and substance – as former Black Panther press secretary Kathleen Cleaver explained: 'frequent television exposure subtly legitimised the image of the Black Panthers but its sensationalising made the Panthers loom far more glamorous and ferocious than they actually were.'²⁴ As the most voluble and iconic of the early Black Power groups, the problems faced by the Panthers mirrored those of the movement as a whole.

However, we also have to realise that despite the predominantly negative nature of the media coverage, young African-Americans appeared to be profoundly influenced by the images of Black Power dissent presented by the media. Looking back on his life before the Party, former Black Panther Minister of Culture Emory Douglas reminisced it

was 'like being in a movement you'd seen on TV and now you could participate and share in that movement; when you'd seen Malcolm on TV, when you heard talk about Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown ... to become part of that brought a sense of pride'.²⁵ To view the movement on print or on screen was simply another way to feel part of the movement, a foretaste of things to come.

We need to find the meaning and origins of a movement which was terrifying, yet alluring to white observers. Confusing yet familiar to black observers. Empowering yet already reaching beyond its physical scope. Black Power, virtually from the outset, became an umbrella term, but one which often obscured. It was the blanket draped over the budgie's cage. Who needed to worry about the frantic cries from beneath, when the general shape of the thing could be seen at a glance?

Black Power advocates rapidly issued bitter complaints about the media's inattention to the root causes of the movement. This was perhaps unsurprising. The white gaze of the media inevitably narrowed the range of commentary. As McKissick remarked to newspaper editors in 1967, 'all you can hear are two words: "Black Power." You would like us to stand in the streets and chant "Black Power" for your amusement ... You'd rather know us by Black Power than by our programme'.²⁶ According to McKissick, any attempt to analyse the militant African-American struggle in detail was punished by news blackouts.²⁷ Here lies a key reason for our current incomplete understanding of the movement. Black Power was only fit for print when it sold papers, and it only sold papers when it was loud, alien, frightening and violent.²⁸ To the militants, it seemed the media invariably twisted any statement made by a Black Power spokesperson to suit this purpose. As Malcolm X ruefully noted, 'If I had said "Mary had a little lamb", what probably would have appeared was "Malcolm X Lampoons Mary"'.²⁹ Similarly, *US News and World Report* happily recorded Carmichael's strident declaration that "We're Going to Shoot the Cops' but less diligently omitted was Carmichael's qualifier '(who are shooting our black brothers in the back)'.³⁰ So, we need to define a movement which relied on a media outwith its control. We need to find the ethos of a protest form which was being edited even as it was being born. Can we then look to its great figures?

Hardly. The icons of the movement drew attention, but narrowed focus. Stories structured around leaders such as H. Rap Brown, James

Forman, Floyd McKissick and Stokely Carmichael, offered little exploration of context and often painted them as little more than, as Forman ruefully noted, 'monsters thirsting for the blood of whites'.³¹ During the 1967 Sacramento State Capitol protest, Bobby Seale recalled stupefied white observers muttering 'Niggers with guns, niggers with guns'.³² This maudlin mantra typified a larger problem.

New media framing strategies which placed the emphasis on individual personalities offered no context for Black Power's origins, nor any attempt to situate them in the long history of Black Power. Reporters were too focused on trigger fingers to see where they were pointing, and they generally had no intention of looking back past a gun-wielding man to divine his inspirations. This was compounded by the fact that almost all of these gun-wielding men came from that most iconic of Black Power organisations, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Founded in Oakland, California on 15 October 1966, the Black Panthers have become virtually consanguineous with the Black Power movement. Tough, macho and articulate, the Panthers, led by Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and David Hilliard have stormed our hearts, minds and historiography.

While there's been a lot of great work done to add detail to this picture – examining the role of women within the party, its grass roots diversity and its community origins, the fact remains that when we talk about Black Power, we talk about the Panthers. This is partly, a legacy of their '60s emergence. For all the complaints levelled at the movement, the mainstream media rapidly enshrined Black Power and the Black Panthers as 'subjects worthy of popular attention'.³³ As this cult of celebrity developed, the Black Panthers increasingly functioned as a signifier for black militancy. This is problematic for historians as it obscures the growth of Black Power sentiments not directly linked to the Panthers. Nonetheless, America's media loved the voyeuristic thrill provided by Black Power's violent image and when it was not readily available it was manufactured, as noted in the 1968 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (informally, the Kerner Report), which exposed the propensity of reporters to encourage black youths to act up for the cameras.³⁴

This desire for drama is partially explained by the fact that aspects of Black Power culture inevitably resonated with the splits in white America. A generation in the throes, or in fear, of rebellion inevitably

found great fascination with the photogenic images and tropes which spattered the nightly news. As this coverage expanded, definitions evolved and changed with startling rapidity, shifting to fit immediate imperatives or contorting themselves around pre-defined frames of interpretation and understanding. As George Krowter, a reporter for Selma's WBWC confessed, the facts of Black Power events could be bent, hammered and beaten to fit whichever agenda would draw the most listeners.³⁵

The stakes were high. African-American identity was part of a malleable set of representations which were fought over by the media like jackals. Simplified organisational frameworks allowed commentators not only to reinforce perceived stereotypes of blackness, but also to distil and refine threatening ideologies into more easily dismissed ciphers. Challenging these existing frameworks, and constructing new, more empowering bases for identity construction was a continuing theme throughout the long history of Black Power, with its participants empowered and inspired by a series of connected cultural expressions throughout time.³⁶

During this period, the media not only controlled what Americans saw, but how they saw it. The emergent Black Power movement, in part, seemed so startlingly violent only because the media's construction and presentation of the preceding comparatively non-violent movement had carefully elided any more militant response which did not fit the myth being constructed. The extent of this revision has only recently become clear. Studies, such as Simon Wendt's *The Spirit and the Shotgun* have examined the presence of violence in the non-violent movement, while commentators such as Jenny Walker have argued that 'the press underrepresented the relatively high incidence of black violence ... that occurred around the edges, and occasionally in the midst, of the putatively non-violent movement.'³⁷ A nationally constructed illusion of calm and moderation made the Black Power movement seem, frenzied, aberrant and removed from historical connection.

In the drive to alternately glamourise and demonise the demonstrations convulsing America, little attention was given to the concerns behind this dramatic upsurge in militant action or to analysing the results.³⁸ Accordingly the initial explosion of Black Power sentiment received shallow, disjointed and manipulated media coverage, which warped mainstream America's subsequent perceptions

of the movement. Within a span of months, political Black Power was trivialised, marginalised and pigeon-holed. Cultural Black Power however, was an altogether trickier beast to cage. Pushing beyond Du Bois's 'veil' – that great conceptual divide which distorted views of race in America – required cultural expressions of unusual potency and permanence, appropriated by average African-Americans trying to define their identity outwith the perceptions of the white media and white society, and also by political groups who sought to construct the separate realm of 'blue sky and great wandering shadows' from which Du Bois looked down on white America in despair.³⁹

Their success in doing so is highlighted by the way in which Black Power persists vibrantly in our collective memory. However, this memorialisation tends to settle at a surface level. Commentators have mourned the passing of the Black Panthers, alongside their apparently ephemeral political rhetoric and symbolism and ignored the deeper roots which helped give rise to these expressions. The long history of Black Power was a formative part of the attempts by innumerable black activists to give the techniques and tools of representation to people previously denied them.

Scholars like Jane Rhodes have noted that political groups like 'The [Black] Panthers ... invented themselves and delivered the goods' but the *tools* with which these groups invented themselves and the *frameworks* within which they did so stemmed from the long history of Black Power.⁴⁰ The political Black Power movement existed within a complex cultural matrix that was intimately connected to a series of cultural expressions across the American and African-American past: the long history of Black Power.

Thus when the political arm of the movement gained prominence, it was inevitable that, as Rhodes noted, it would exist in 'a hyperreal state in which it was unclear whether the meaning ... [the Panthers] embodied was ... replaced by the signs, symbols, and rhetoric that swirled around them.'⁴¹ The Panthers argued that it was the reality of their politics which defined them, rather than their immediate cultural context, but they were shaped by a pre-existing cultural and historical inheritance which lent their politics a rootedness and relevance which it otherwise might have lacked. The Panthers' emergence was not the culmination of Black Power's long history, but their political

existence was a significant shaping period which would colour and constrain the forms and frames it took thereafter.

By examining the long heritage of the political Black Power movement this book will explore how historically developed forms of cultural expression served to broaden the appeal and facilitate the acceptance of Black Power tenets in everyday life. Cultural forms of advocacy contributed significantly to making the Black Power movement a lasting influence in American society – one whose presence could be discerned long after its exclusively political agenda had disintegrated and which was instrumental in shaping changing notions of ‘American’ identity. Considering these connected cultural expressions across time and acknowledging the existence of Black Power’s long history elevates the 1960s movement to a position where it can be effectively compared to other areas of the civil rights struggle and provides a novel perspective for discourse on culture, identity and group definition.

Recent works have situated the roots of the late twentieth century black aesthetic in the political movement of the same time, but it is increasingly useful to consider the politics of the 1960s as a phase of black cultural development, rather than its genesis.⁴² Political Black Power was the ideological articulation and attempted implementation of certain persistent cultural tropes and images of African-American freedom via a structural programme. Cultural Black Power was the evolution, expression and adaptation of these persistent tropes across time which created a framework for political articulations. This cultural framework was in turn modified by the twentieth century political movement during the period where the two intersected.

A delineation needs to be made between the late 1960s manifestations of cultural nationalism and the long history of Black Power which this book seeks to examine. While cultural nationalism sought to provide an immediate, systematic and politically constructed antidote to the alleged omnipresence of African-American self-hate and self-destruction, examining the long history of Black Power offers an alternative perspective in which independent and evolving African-American identities have persisted across time in a series of connected cultural expressions. These expressions produced a legacy of resistance which informed the political Black Power movement, in both its cultural, nationalist and less overtly Africanist aspects. Black cultural

nationalism, with its new approaches to and images of blackness, was an *aspect* of the complex network which comprised the cultural inheritance of the Black Power movement, but was not its sole component.

However, cultural nationalism not only predicated the reshaping of that inheritance into an African-centred world view, but the repudiation of, and separation from, American mainstream culture. Conversely, the book, by examining the long history of Black Power, does not limit itself to instances of repudiation, but seeks to explore the far more complex process of infiltration, adaptation, dissemination and intermingling of African-American cultural life with white cultural forms. Viewing the evolution of Black Power as a series of connected cultural expressions across time not only presents it as a contiguously present aspect of American culture, but demonstrates the manner in which the forms and iterations of cultural Black Power provided a framework for the political movement.

However, this is itself deceptive – these cultural forms both *shaped* and *were shaped by* their political contexts. Examining cultural Black Power requires a consciousness of the persistence of cultural tropes, but also of their remarkable evolution, adaptability and appropriation. The long history of Black Power consists of a series of connected cultural events across the time that both condition and are conditioned by the political forms arising alongside them. These connected cultural events share a set of tropes, symbols, ideas and icons which provide a common well of empowering identity construction tools.

As a consequence, cultural Black Power falls somewhere between the more familiar poles of cultural nationalism and political nationalism, but wholly cleaves to neither. However, it does provide an overlapping form which can bridge these two often virulently opposed ideological standpoints. The heterogeneous process of transmission and infiltration of cultural tropes was often an immersive phenomenon for its participants and is accordingly hard to trace. Cultural Black Power did not travel simply via lines of political discourse but rode these chains of rhetoric and surrounded (or appeared to surround) its adherents. Transmitted via tropes and symbols, history seemed to be repeated via not just aspirational figures, but ascriptional avatars onto which and from which ordinary black Americans could place and draw a new sense of identity. These more personal identities were not only constructive, but protective structures against the dangers of modern mass society.

As Toni Morrison explained, they functioned as 'strategies for survival' fashioned in 'response to predatory western phenomena'.⁴³

As cultural expressions of Black Power were more malleable, they were therefore more capable of adaptation and utilisation by different facets of the Black Power struggle and, importantly by black Americans lacking a sense of identity and agency. Cultural Black Power was an individualised, personalised revolution, a revolution of the mind which could be experienced differently by each person and which could also be partially tailored by that person's choice of reference points. These reference points were in turn tailored by their emergence from a series of connected cultural expressions expressed across Black Power's long history. Thus, gaining an interest in the long history and cultural aspects of Black Power did not always occur in the same manner for every black American, nor did it produce the same results, beliefs or affiliations. What it did provide was a vast and potent reservoir which individuals could draw upon to create a new identity which they found to be empowering, liberating and uplifting, with their blackness situated as a central aspect of that identity, alongside their gender, belief, ideologies and ethnicities. Analysing the use of that reservoir and its interactions with the political dynamics of race in America requires some caution.

Often these days, historians speak of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the same breath, but conflating civil rights and Black Power damages the history we write by obscuring its complexity; conflating the political and cultural aspects of the Black Power movement injures it still further. To avoid this reductionism we need to pay more attention to the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the black liberation movement. Civil rights activists could shoot guns, and Black Power adherents could run candidates for political office. Yet superficially similar protest practices served different goals and long-term plans and the people involved thought about them differently. Whereas civil rights activists saw culture as a sustaining force to aid resistance to oppression in the freedom struggle, most notably expressed in the freedom songs of the movement, Black Power activists saw culture as a means to craft a separate identity both on an individual and a group basis.⁴⁴ For Black Power adherents and their militant predecessors culture was a weapon rather than a sustaining force for passive endurance, a tool for shaping a new identity in opposition to an existing system, rather than for reinforcing an established identity within that

system. While many advocates of Black Power saw cultural forms as a necessary aspect of resistance, they were always, to paraphrase the Black Panther maxim, a means of 'survival pending revolution', in this case, a revolution of the mind.⁴⁵

When historians favour 'Civil Rights' as an umbrella term, Black Power is cast as simply a militant episode in civil rights history. This reduces it to a set of tactics at best, and virtually erases it at worst, removing its leaders, followers, symbols and cultural legacy from our narrative. This book seeks to argue that the Black Power movement drew upon a particular set of cultural forms seen in a series of connected expressions across time and that the long history of Black Power, although intertwined with, *is distinct from* the history of civil rights in general.

To maintain this distinction, I have tried to respect Adam Fairclough's injunction that to avoid descending into 'homogenized mush' the civil rights and Black Power movements need to be presented as distinct waves within a wider struggle.⁴⁶ While the Black Power and civil rights movements both sought a clearer identity for African-Americans, the ways in which they did so and their conceptions of freedom were fundamentally different. This difference can be acknowledged even as the chronology under assessment is extended backward to consider the precedents, antecedents and heritage present in the long history of Black Power. This history was not simply a structural underpinning for the political movement of the 1960s, but an evolving series of cultural expressions that both shaped and was shaped by the political Black Power movement during the historical space when the two existed concurrently.

To explore these expressions, our interpretation of culture needs to be open to a much wider range of chronological and conceptual influences from the plantation forward. Future work requires an analytical framework which considers not simply the Africanist leanings of cultural nationalism, but the unconscious as well as the conscious selection of elements from the African-American past. Groups like the Panthers may have dreamt Africa, but they lived America and it was from their shared American experience that the bulk of their tropes, imagery and charismatic power stemmed. Moreover, it bears repeating that while scholars have a natural tendency to position the Black Panther Party as the zenith of Black Power expression, in reality they were simply

one of a selection of expressions in the long history of the Black Power movement. Potent, charismatic and powerful, yes, but neither an end point nor a lacuna.

Even after setting aside the differences in contemporary interpretations, 'culture' is itself a problematic term. Like many others before me, I find that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz provided a solid foundation from which to begin approaching the concept and in many respects, a significant portion of this discussion will treat culture 'as the "webs of meaning" within which people live'.⁴⁷ However applying Geertz's relatively static conception of culture (penned as it is within a particular locale, period or social group), to the turbulent milieu of the 1960s and the decades that followed is difficult, if not impossible. The 1960s saw the rise of mass media and mass mediated culture, and exploring Black Power's relationship to the American people within that chronological framework requires flexibility.⁴⁸ Gently put, Geertz's concept 'needs some creative stretching to fit mass-mediated lives'.⁴⁹ On one level, this book attempts, albeit roughly and imprecisely, to translate Geertz's static story sources into the long history of Black Power by presenting them as a series of expressions linked throughout time, which became particularly pronounced in the 1960s due to the critical catalytic combination of the mass media upsurge, the stress of domestic politics and the growing national and transnational pressures of the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and third world movements. Looking at the long cultural history of Black Power helps us partially understand why late twentieth century African-Americans felt as they did and what role cultural forms played in the formulation and reformation of militant identities in response to these events.

Culture, most of us are likely to agree these days, at least provides us with a shared system of meanings, and in the process 'dictates what we pay attention to, the way we act, and our value presumptions'.⁵⁰ The world we are immersed in, along with its past, shapes the way we respond to it, the way we think about it and the way we think about ourselves. At the most basic level 'culture sustains us'.⁵¹ Many Black Power activists would have gone one step further and declared that culture could be used both as a sustaining force and as a weapon. So, where is this 'culture' to be found? In his recent work, communications theorist Fons Trompenaars sensibly stresses the relationship between an 'observable reality' which he takes to include 'language, food, buildings,

markets, fashion, and artefacts', and a deeper level of culture of which these things are symbolic.⁵² If we allow ourselves to think in this manner, the explicit realities of African-American culture can be tied to their chronological place, be that in the 1960s or earlier, but may also hold a deeper layer of symbolic meaning which is applicable in a more mediated, anachronistic form. The long history of Black Power provided a set of tools to solve the political problems of the 1960s but it also shaped the way in which those problems would be solved. The ensuing interaction created a new framework and a new set of tools, as did each point of cultural expression across time.

To show these interactions, any consideration of the long history of Black Power has to combine the visible realm of artefacts, rituals, practices and myth with the invisible, internal realm of values, beliefs and perceptions. This is a balancing act. Culture remains a complex phenomenon, especially in today's transnational environment.⁵³ While Geertz's webs of meaning likely still exist, they are expansive and complex beyond easy reckoning. Accordingly, rather than enumerating static instances of resistance and difference, this book seeks to trace the development of cultural Black Power through the long history of black militant expression, evidenced in a series of connected, reciprocally evolving and influential cultural expressions throughout time.

When examining this expression, it is important to realise that the theoretical and ideological lenses through which people viewed their actions matter as much as what they actually did. During the late 1960s, African-Americans' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world changed fundamentally. To periodise the black liberation movement, to write its history, we must take these mental changes into account. The civil rights movement tempts us toward easy generalisations, which we need to add complexity to by looking at the personal, cultural, intellectual and social motivations behind activism. Working with the cultural legacy of the movement is particularly challenging, as cultural creators can express events with a passion, vehemence and often imprecision which is outwith the traditional purview of historical analysis.

Matters become clearer if we accept that between 1965 and 1975 there was not a geographical shift in the movement, or a sea change in its protest activities, but that ordinary Americans understanding of the goals, ideology, discourse and symbols surrounding those activities changed fundamentally. The fervid climate of the 1960s and early 1970s

partially explains why the long history of Black Power emerged with such force and potency at the time. The impact of federal anti-poverty programmes and spreading urban riots combined with a society in which segregation was legally outlawed, but racial oppression was practically implemented. Working in an environment where there was a backlash not only against the movement, but against the perceived dominance of federal intervention, some protestors inevitably gravitated to radical nationalist ideologies. With the war in Southeast Asia, American foreign policy was far more overtly hardline when dealing with revolutionaries and nationalists abroad, enabling Black Power activists to see themselves as part of a wider anti-imperialist movement. Facing increasingly draconian conditions, young militants found themselves seeking alternative responses to oppression, many of which could be found within the cultural history of Black Power, a wellspring of available and accessible tropes. Importantly, the long history of Black Power not only provided the means for that expression and resistance but conditioned the forms it would take.

When examining Black Power's long history it rapidly becomes apparent that none of the political actors of the 1960s functioned separately from their historical and cultural context – the images, stereotypes, tropes and myths produced across the long history of Black Power were firmly etched into the American nation's conception of race and identity. The relationship between Black Power and the American people which received such dramatic expression in the late 1960s, was only one iteration in a much longer process of racial confrontation, which merits further analysis. This is what the book hopes to achieve; to steer our conception of Black Power towards a longer history which both acknowledges the distinctiveness of the 1960s political phase and more sensitively places the roots of that political phase in the long history of African-American cultural militancy – the relationship between Black Power and the American people.

With this goal in mind, the book provides a broad-based reappraisal of the Black Power movement's relationship with the American people which operates on several levels. In the process of writing, I found that any such reappraisal must be an aesthetic as well as a utilitarian history. Accordingly, the book takes a wide-angle view of American history, emphasising the continuity of militant sentiment from its earliest expressions, exploring the impact of this political and cultural heritage

on the formation of Black Power concepts during the traditional 1965–75 period and reconsidering why a Black Power movement developed during the latter half of the twentieth century.

To do so, I have sought to reorient our historical emphasis towards the long evolution of Black Power and to explore the way militant and iconoclastic sentiments manifested in a series of linked cultural expressions across time. In reconsidering the evolution and formation of differing beliefs, the book shows that the self-definition at the heart of all Black Power ideology was culturally driven – shaped, bounded, promulgated and formulated by cultural expression and production. In the process, I have tried to trace the emergence of a plurality of Black Power perspectives in the streets and on the campuses, in schools and town halls, far-flung barracks and simmering Southern towns.

By redefining militancy in a cultural context it becomes possible to consider iterations of Black Power on campus, in labour, in sports, film and the performing arts, in speech and thought, in music and science-fiction as well as in the ‘Total Institutions’ – the military and the prisons. Expanding the historical definition of Black Power and building on our existing concepts of militancy, enables a far more significant demonstration of how these individuals and their ideologies interacted with the broad-based cultural infrastructure of the movement.

Black Power and American mainstream culture experienced a mercurial historical relationship and this book seeks to document and explore these shifting perceptions. Changes in political and personal perspectives often manifested in everyday life and accordingly this book offers a series of connected vignettes which demonstrate the revolution of the mind occurring for ordinary Americans as Black Power infiltrated their consciousness. This book charts a course through the growth of the literary and the performing arts, the evolution and adoption of novel cultural definitions, the gradual surge of militancy in Hollywood, its explosive arrival in the sporting arena and most crucially the redefinition and cultural reappropriation of history by the Black Power movement, culminating in the creation of a new mythology of empowerment, the strategic use of history as a tool for liberation and the acquisition of African-American culture as a potential road map to a more empowered future.

Although any analysis of the Black Power movement must acknowledge its political decline in the 1970s, reading the movement’s