

Wilfried Raussert, Matti Steinitz (Eds.)

Black Power in Hemispheric Perspective

Movements and Cultures of Resistance in the Black Americas

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Movements and Cultures of Resistance
in the Black Americas

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Introduction: Black Power in Hemispheric Perspective

WILFRIED RAUSSERT AND MATTI STEINITZ

“1968” was a generation-defining year for millions of young radical activists who took part in a series of simultaneous, and often interrelated, protest movements for social and racial justice, peace, gender equality, and liberation from colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy around the world. In tune with global events, 1968 was also a watershed year in the African American freedom struggle, which was perceived by many contemporaries as the vanguard of the global 1960s youth rebellion. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, a series of urban rebellions across the United States, and the escalation of the Vietnam War accelerated the rise of the Black Power movement and black nationalism as dominant forces among African American youth who had lost faith in the outcome and the prospects of the Civil Rights movement’s moderate leadership and their integrationist and non-violent approach to resistance. The release of James Brown’s “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” in August of the same year gave voice to a new mood of black pride, militancy, and assertiveness, quickly reaching the status of a Black Power anthem not only between Watts and Harlem, but also among Afrodescendants in Rio de Janeiro, Montreal, Kingston, and Panama. When U.S. fast-track athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos – a son of Afro-Cuban immigrants from Harlem – raised their black-gloved fists during a medal ceremony at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, they reinforced the widespread feeling of connectedness and identification with the black liberation struggle in the United States. As Afro-Colombian writer Manuel Zapata Olivella remembers in *¡Levántate Mulato!* (1990), “the shout of the black revolution,” thus broadcast worldwide on television, “shook the slumbering minds of blacks” across the diaspora, “each time the human lightning bolts ascended the winner’s podium to raise the victorious fist of ‘Black Power’” (Zapata Olivella 331, authors’ translation).

In October 2018, marking the 50th anniversary of “1968”, a group of scholars, activists, musicians, and artists from Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Germany, Great Britain, Jamaica, Peru, Puerto Rico, Suriname, and the United States gathered at the Center for InterAmerican Studies (Bielefeld University, Germany) for the conference “Black Power – Movements, Cultures, and Resistance in the Black Americas.” The conference provided a platform to discuss the multifaceted meanings and legacies of Black Power which “radically altered America’s social, political, and cultural landscape” and constituted “one of the twentieth century’s most important, and controversial, movements for social justice” (Joseph, “The Black Power Move-

ment” 27), human rights, and radical democracy. The meeting was hosted by the Black Americas Network,¹ an international network of scholars, artists, and activists who explore and express the development of black movements, cultures, and histories through a hemispheric lens and who share the belief that “the production of knowledge can only be understood comprehensively if its specific historical-political plurilocal context is taken into account” (Kaltmeier, “General Introduction” 2). The essays collected in this volume are intended to deepen some of the transdisciplinary dialogues on the manifold dimensions of “Black Power” in the Western Hemisphere initiated at the 2018 network conference and its forerunner “Entangled Black Americas” (2017). These paired conferences sought to bring into comparative and international perspective manifestations of cultural, social, and political resistance in the Black Americas that are too often studied in isolation. According to Kate Quinn, this has been “a consequence, in part, of regional divisions within the academy that in many cases have separated studies of the United States from those of Africa, the Caribbean, and other diasporic locations where Black Power had resonance” (Quinn, “Introduction” 1).

Whereas there is an increased interest in the transnational dimensions of the movement in the ever-growing field of Black Power Studies, it is quite surprising that its broad impact in the Western Hemisphere has not been addressed more specifically. While a growing concern with Afrodescendant cultures can be noted throughout the Americas, an attempt to capture a comprehensive tapestry mapping Black Power and its hemispheric presence is still missing. The present book wishes to fill this gap by highlighting how the slogans, symbols, and sounds provided by Black Power heralded a new era of Afro-diasporic defiance, militancy, and cultural awareness which transcended the U.S. national boundaries and left its footprints throughout the Americas. As we aim to show, the United States, while certainly a very important center of Black Power activities, was not the only national territory in which influential black movements embedded in transnational, translocal, and transcultural dialogues emerged. This volume sheds light on the very diverse ways Black Power encouraged the emergence of musical genres, antiracist movements, and border-crossing networks of solidarity among Afro-descendants in the Caribbean, Latin and North America, which continue to shape the political and cultural expressions of the Black Americas in the twenty-first century.

In a sense, this volume focuses on the transnational, transcultural, and intergenerational impact of Black Power on movements and popular culture in the Americas and the rich traditions of resistance it was built upon, addressing the following ques-

1 Black Americas Network is a platform for transnational exchange between activists, artists, musicians, and scholars whose research, artwork, or activism is related to the Afro-diasporic presence in the Americas. The network was launched by the editors of this volume in 2016 as part of the project “Between Spanish Harlem, Black Rio, and Funky Colón” (funded by DFG-German Research Community), whose findings will be published in *Soul Music and the Rise of Black Power in Afro-Latin America* (2022) by Matti Steinitz.