according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." It's no surprise that a man whose previous books include *The Diversity of Life* would direct our attention to those "endless forms most beautiful."

Recently I spoke about all this with Ed Wilson. From previous acquaintance I know him to be a sweet-spirited and generous fellow, gracious in his manners, quite accessible. We discussed Darwin as an author, the convergent volumes, and the peace settlement of the molecular wars. Instead of stressing diversity, though, Wilson talked about unification—the unification of biology that has occurred over the past two decades, bridging the schism that opened when he and Watson were young. Do molecular biologists tackle evolutionary questions? I asked. "They do now," Wilson said. The role of molecular genetics in charting evolutionary phylogenies, and in illuminating the way natural selection works bit by bit to assemble complex structures and elegant adaptations, has become huge. Astonishing evolutionary insights emerge from molecular laboratories every month. Aware of that trend but feeling mischievous, I asked Wilson: So who owns Darwin? His answer was judicious. "Darwin will be owned by a unified biology."

Several days later I heard similar thoughts from James Watson. Just as the twentieth century saw a unification of biology and chemistry, he told me, our new century will be notable for the unification of biology and psychology. Understanding the human brain, not just the gene, will be the great challenge. Molecular biologists will explore the sources and mechanics of emotion. That's why a book such as *The Expression of the Emotions* is still worth reading. "These are important issues now," he said.

I had braced myself to find that James D. Watson might be a difficult interviewee, brusque, dismissive, dangerously smart and aware of it, as per his old reputation. But he was affable and chatty. He bounced genially from topic to topic—Gregor Mendel, politics, religion, Schrödinger, Irish history, human violence, the Duke lacrosse team—until I brought him back to the matter of scientific rivalry, the old schism, and my dumb little question, intended to stir the embers of his competitive instinct. Who owns Darwin, molecular or organismic? "The world owns Darwin," Watson said. "He was our greatest citizen. No one owns him."

And if a reader can have just one of these two valuable compendiums, I asked, how should that reader choose? "Well," Watson said, "mine is cheaper." ■

ON THE LOWER FREQUENCIES

Rethinking the Black Power movement

By Scott Saul

Discussed in this essay:

Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America, by Peniel E. Joseph. Henry Holt and Company. 399 pages. $27.50.
The Black Panthers, by Stephen Shames. Aperture. 152 pages. $35.

In the forty years since Stokely Carmichael first chanted "Black Power!" at a Mississippi freedom march, the Black Power movement has largely been understood as the alter ego of civil rights, its quick-to-anger doppelganger. Whereas the civil rights movement was devoted to the spirit of nonviolence, Black Power was drawn to the cult of the gun. Whereas civil rights demonstrated that unlettered sharecroppers in the rural South could organize themselves purposefully and peacefully, Black Power revealed that out-of-work African Americans in the North were liable to express themselves through spasms of rioting. And if civil rights took on de jure segregation and successfully dismantled it through intricate coalition building, then the Black Power movement attacked de facto segregation but was stymied by the societal backlash that it provoked. The contrast between the two movements easily hardens into a morality tale, with Black Power held responsible for causing the financial collapse of inner cities across America, the election of Richard Nixon, and the end of an heroic era of activism, which had lasted from the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision in 1954 to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. As Peniel Joseph writes in his *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, the best historical synthesis of Black Power to date, the movement "is most often remembered as a tragedy—a wrong turn from Martin Luther King Jr.'s hopeful rhetoric."

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This reading of Black Power, reductive as it may be, stems in part from the movement's own blunt strain of rhetoric. "When you talk of black power," Stokely Carmichael would say not long after Mississippi, "you talk of bringing this country to its knees." Black Panther H. Rap Brown declared in 1967 that violence was "as American as cherry pie," so it was only natural for African Americans to take up arms and defend themselves. In the revolutionary oratory of Black Power's partisans, politics was a brutal zero-sum game and the American racial drama was an unfolding apocalypse. The movement thus spurred roiling debate about the very nature of American political reality, pressing countless panic buttons.

As Black Power gathered momentum in the late 1960s, it also sought to

create gripping political theater, making its points through dramatic displays of defiance and force. In 1967, with California set to enact a statute banning the public possession of loaded firearms, the Black Panthers appeared on the steps of the state capitol brandishing rifles. The Panthers hoped that the act would call out the fears of conservative white America while at the same time rallying their supporters to an image of the black man as a tough-minded revolutionary. The strategy worked on both scores: J. Edgar Hoover would name the Black Panthers "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country," and the Panthers became urban folk heroes to large segments of the black community and the young white left.

Yet this theatricality also opened Black Power to the charge that it was *mere* theater. In his 1970 essay "Radical Chic," Tom Wolfe famously lampooned Black Power as a performance of militant cool, a pose in great part designed to titillate the fancy and loosen the purse strings of guilt-ridden white liberals. Reporting from composer Leonard Bernstein's Upper East Side penthouse, where a fund-raiser was being held for Black Panthers on trial for conspiracy, Wolfe played up the social abyss that separated Bernstein's circle from the rough-hewn Panthers. "Wonder what the Black Panthers eat here on the hors d'oeuvre trail?" Wolfe asked puckishly. Maybe "little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled in crushed nuts" or "asparagus tips in mayonnaise dabs"? Reveling in such culinary ephemera, "Radical Chic" skipped over the details of the legal case that inspired the fund-raiser in the first place, instead lavishing attention on Panther fashion, as if that were the crux of the movement's meaning: "Christ, if the Panthers don't know how to get it all together, as they say, the tight pants, the tight black turtlenecks, the leather coats, Cuban shades, Afros. But real Afros, not the ones that have been shaped and trimmed like a topiary hedge." In Wolfe's estimation, the politics at the fund-raiser were "only radical in style"—not simply theater but theater of the absurd.

Even historians who might take issue with Tom Wolfe's easy mockery have often surrendered to the gravitational pull of "Radical Chic," reinforcing its conclusion that Black Power was more concerned with tight turtlenecks and fists gloved in leather than real political substance. In Todd Gitlin's landmark account of the era, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Black Power arrives with the emergence of the Black Panthers (there is no mention of the 1966 Mississippi march) and then appears as a succession of iconic images: crowds chanting "Free Huey" on the steps of an Oakland courthouse, bulletholes in the window of a Black Panther Party office, the surprisingly pussycat-like cartoon that became the party's emblem. These two-dimensional associations give little sense of the movement's grassroots political origins, the complicated history it shared with civil rights, or the social realities that

Photograph of children of party members attending school at the Intercommunal Youth Institute at the house for Panther children, Oakland, Calif., 1971 © Stephen Shames/Polaris Images

fueled its indignation. Black Power is summed up by Gitlin's memorable phrase: those "intelligent brothers in black leather jackets, James Dean and Frantz Fanon rolled into one." The move in Gitlin's *Sixties* is typical of much writing on the period, and the effect is to reduce Black Power to a momentary flare, part of the late-Sixties fever dream—a series of photo ops set to the *whacka-whacka* guitar of a blaxploitation film soundtrack.

The scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., recalling the magnetism of the Black Panthers he met while an undergraduate at Yale, explained that "you handed them money because they were working for a better tomorrow; because they were strong, proud, and black; because they had a wardrobe you could only dream about." But too often the recollections stop with the dreams of "soul style," and little thought is given to how Black Power worked for a better tomorrow. "To assess its values, its assets and liabilities honestly," wrote Martin Luther King Jr. in a surprisingly nuanced appraisal of Black Power in 1967, "one must look beyond personal styles, verbal flourishes and the hysteria of the mass media."

Peniel Joseph's *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour* takes up King's injunction by rejecting the simple dichotomies that have allowed for the beatification of civil rights and the demonization of Black Power. Starting his narrative a decade or so before the usual start of the Black Power story, Joseph illustrates how Black Power was incubated within and alongside King's movement. The black radicals and Cold War skeptics who are at the center of this early history were inspired both by King's tactics of direct action and by the anti-colonial examples of Fidel Castro's Cuba, Patrice Lumumba's Congo, and Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana.

Joseph begins his account in 1957—the "year Negroes fought back," as the *Amsterdam News* dubbed it. That winter Ghana gained its independence. A month later in Harlem, hundreds of members of the Nation of Islam lined up in strict military formation outside a local police station when one of their own was bludgeoned by officers; the disciplined Black Muslims marched off—and the much rowdier crowd that had gathered dispersed—only after Malcolm X gave word that the beaten man was assured proper medical care. A short time later, Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* appeared on Broadway; the play portrayed a black family struggling to integrate an all-white Chicago neighborhood and a young female character who longs to rediscover a lost African past. Around this time as well, Robert F. Williams, a World War II veteran and the head of the NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina, led black men in gunfights against local Ku Klux Klansmen. "We must be willing to kill if necessary," Williams told startled reporters afterward. What Joseph characterizes as "Black Power" in the late Fifties, therefore, was less an organized movement than a set of impulses revolving around black liberation: to put the police in check, to dream of Africa, to return fire with fire.

The movement first coalesced as such—or at least gained national media attention—on February 15, 1961, when a group of Harlem-based activists took over a United Nations Security Council meeting to protest Congo President Patrice Lumumba's assassination, which they correctly suspected was the result of intrigue between Lumumba's internal enemies and the governments of Belgium and the United States. Wearing the black armbands and veils of a funeral procession, the group of demonstrators—which included writers Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka—entered the meeting, chanting "Lumumba! Lumumba!" before being hustled off by security. Later the protesters defiantly proclaimed to the press that "Negroes" were now "Afro-Americans," their newly hyphenated identity speaking to their reclaimed African roots. The protocols of the civil rights movement, semantic and otherwise, were being supplanted by something more confrontational. A year before, four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, had initiated a wave of sit-ins at a Woolworth's lunch counter, but the U.N. protest was a new type of sit-in, where the activists came in full costume and aimed, through spectacle, to disrupt business as usual, even to embarrass the United States in the court of world opinion. The high Sixties, one might say, had arrived.

One of the rewards of Joseph's catholic definition of Black Power is that it provides room for people and events that otherwise tend to fall out of standard accounts of the black freedom movement. The year 1963, for instance, is often defined in these histories by the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, with its stirring evocation of a hoped-for future of interracial harmony. Joseph identifies the Detroit Walk for Freedom, spearheaded by the Reverend Albert Cleage earlier in 1963 and attended by a largely black crowd of 125,000, as an equally apt measure of the movement's mood that year. Although the March on Washington was carefully choreographed to pull off a high-minded tone (John Lewis, representing the student wing of the civil rights movement, was allowed neither to criticize the Kennedy Administration nor to threaten to "burn Jim Crow to the ground"), the Detroit march carried more militant accents. Signs proclaiming WHITE MAN WAKE UP, OR WAKE UP DEAD jostled alongside FREEDOM NOW placards. Labor leader Walter Reuther promised to "keep the freedom marches rolling all over America," and Cleage pointedly declared, in the face of local officials who shared his dais, that the movement had "served notice on the state of Michigan and the city of Detroit." King did headline the event, but the early version of "I Have a Dream" he delivered there also made the point that continued oppression of African Americans would spell the ruin of the United States as a nation. For Joseph, the Detroit march suggests the conflicting currents that ran through the civil rights movement at high tide: the belief in King's "dream" was always checked by a realpolitik appraisal of white resistance to black equality, and by a search for forms of protest that went beyond those advocated by King.

It takes Joseph almost half of *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour* to arrive at Stokely Carmichael's first incantation of "Black Power!" in 1966. Tellingly, the slogan was floated on a two-hundred-mile, twenty-two-day trek through Mississippi in the sweltering summer heat—which is to say, on the actual

tics with a heavy dose of machismo, arguing that socialism could be achieved, and "black manhood" reclaimed, only by picking up the gun. Here the police were the declared enemy, but the full name of the Panthers—The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense—suggested that violence was not an end in itself but a means to protect the community. In the Panthers' first community program, Newton and his fellow Panthers patrolled the streets of Oakland with both shotguns and law books in hand, ready to pounce on any instance of police brutality; officers pulling over black motorists were stunned to find themselves surrounded by a Panther posse, whose members informed suspects of their rights by reading aloud from the California penal code.

Newton had the disconcerting experience of being behind bars when his ideas really took flight. During a three-year imprisonment as he was on trial for the 1967 killing of a police officer, the Black Panthers exploded into a national organization with a membership of several thousand. To Newton's exasperation, other Panthers began appropriating his talk of self-defense to advocate for guerrilla violence and a worldwide socialist revolution. Privately, Newton sent messages to his colleagues warning against reckless actions. Publicly, he served as a poster boy for the idea of armed resistance, his militant image (rifle in one hand, spear in the other) festooning dorm rooms and low-rent apartments nationwide.

Upon his release from jail in 1970, Newton made a series of bizarre and contradicting moves. He decried sexism and aligned the Panthers (rhetorically, at least) with the Gay Power and women's liberation movements; he reappraised the formerly lambasted black church as a critical resource of the black community; and he expanded the Panthers' community services, including its free-breakfast programs and subsidized health clinics. Simultaneously, he initiated a purge of "revolutionary cultists" that was so self-destructive it might as well have been designed by the FBI. (As, in part, it was: the FBI's COINTELPRO, driven by a directive to head off the emergence of a "black messiah," ran 360 different operations focused on undermining black nationalist organizations.) Newton expelled Eldridge Cleaver, then in exile in Algeria, and even talked of pressuring the Algerian government into sending Cleaver back to the United States. Across the country, members were kicked out, often arbitrarily, leading still more members to quit the party in disgust, and many died in intraparty violence. By 1972, Newton was shaking down legitimate and illegitimate black businesses to pay for the Panthers' community-service programs, freely exercising the prerogatives of an urban Robin Hood. At what was yet another of his successive low points, he was arrested in 1974 for beating his tailor and shooting a prostitute. Throughout these years the dashing Newton, often high on drugs, lived in a heavily guarded penthouse apartment in Oakland: a metaphor for his isolation, or his penchant for bird's-eye theorizing, or maybe his appetite for self-aggrandizement.

Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour does not attempt to explain the failed promise of Huey Newton, but its larger portrait of Black Power suggests that Newton's difficulties arose from the hothouse intellectual climate of the late Sixties, when bold theories of "the system" were a badge of radical commitment. Newton proposed, in short order, "revolutionary nationalism," "Intercommunalism," and "revolutionary suicide." Stokely Carmichael coined the more resonant phrase "institutional racism" to explain why "prejudice" alone could not account for the ongoing inequities experienced by African Americans in areas such as housing, schools, and medical care. The ambition of such theorizing, which offered startling descriptions of the world, whetted the appetite for startling transformations of that same world. But the melancholy truth was that the world didn't budge so easily. Although "institutional racism" was there to label the structural problem, the structures endured. (African Americans still own only a dime in wealth for every white dollar; the average black man in America will live six years less than his white counterpart.) Like other movements from the Sixties, Black Power offered a far-reaching diagnosis of American injustice but had little power to administer a remedy. Black Power's intellectuals lived, then, with a troubling rift between theory and practice. Their radical styles of will—which expressed both their commitment and impatience, and which, in Newton's case, soured into a self-destructive narcissism—were their attempt to bridge the gap.

Stephen Shames's photography collection *The Black Panthers*, just published after being shelved for thirty-odd years, offers still more palpable illustrations of the heady, confounding atmosphere that *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour* explores.[2] Although not officially a member of the Panthers, Shames served as their in-house photographer, and his work regularly appeared in the party's newsletter. He followed the Panthers from 1967, when he met Newton and Bobby Seale on the Berkeley campus as they were hawking Mao's *Little Red Book*, to 1973, when the party threw its energies into running Seale for mayor of Oakland.

Some of Shames's photographs offer up the dramatic illustrations of Panther militancy that the effusions of Tom Wolfe or Todd Gitlin might lead us to expect. These are no doubt powerful images, but they also feel at this point pre-scripted, their moral seriousness ensured by the cut of the Panther uniform and the regulation steely-eyed look. Other photographs in the collection, however, show the less celebrated side of the Panthers—the parts of Black Power that Joseph seeks to recover in his description of its political complexity and its human dramas. In one picture two older women sitting on a Palo Alto bench look at the camera with a blend of fatigue and curiosity, each holding a stuffed grocery bag from the Panthers' free-food program; another shows a boy in Toledo, Ohio, beaming while trying on a winter coat as part of a Panther-sponsored clothes giveaway. In a less-than-iconic moment, Bobby Seale is photographed,

[2] *According to Shames, a major publisher signed the book in 1970, but Vice President Spiro Agnew later met the chairman of the publishing house over golf and successfully convinced him to kill the project and fire the editor who had commissioned it.*

Continued on page 98

hard road of a highly symbolic struggle whose symbolism had become increasingly difficult to bear. By Joseph's account, the idea of Black Power was born not out of some utopian dream but out of the messy combination of courage and fatigue that suffused those in the trenches of the civil rights movement.

The march's quixotic route across rural Mississippi was the brainchild of James Meredith, best known as the black student who had integrated Ole Miss four years earlier. Meredith had undertaken the walk alone, in a pith helmet and sunglasses, but he was felled by a sniper's buckshot two days into the journey. King, after meeting with Meredith in his hospital room, decided to continue the walk as a mass demonstration. Along the route, Mississippi state troopers, shouting epithets and threats, shoved civil rights marchers to the shoulder of the road; vigilantes waved guns and pelted protesters with bottles and rocks.[1] On June 16, after a camping permit was rescinded and the weary marchers were left without a place to sleep, Carmichael, then head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, announced that tents would be set up anyway. He was promptly handcuffed and arrested. Six hours later, an angry Carmichael, back from the local jail, jumped on a flatbed truck and addressed the restless crowd of some six hundred, many of whom he knew from earlier voter-registration drives in the Mississippi Delta. "This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested," Carmichael said, "and I ain't going to jail no more! The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start sayin' now is Black Power!"

With "Black Power," Carmichael was both announcing a new set of tactics and renouncing the images of black suffering that the civil rights movement had worked so hard to sear into America's conscience. No longer would black demonstrators be ever-calm and ever-principled when spat upon, beaten by billy clubs, or pounded by fire hoses. After years of fighting for the most basic rights in Mississippi, Carmichael had reached the bitter conclusion that segregationists could not be moved by argument or goodwill. There was no shame in wanting power, he declared, and nothing to be gained from acting the humble petitioner. "We have begged the president," said Carmichael. "We've begged the federal government—that's all we've been doing, begging and begging. It's time we stand up and take over." Later on the Meredith March, King's and Carmichael's camps traded back and forth their respective chants of "Freedom Now" and "Black Power"—a sign of the division that now seemed to wrack the movement.

"Black Power" triggered such a violent set of polemics that it has arguably taken several decades to appreciate its more subtle effects. The mainstream press was quick to interpret the slogan as a "racist philosophy" and grounds for "a new white backlash." But many activists, even those affiliated with the civil rights coalition's more moderate wing, took the questions raised by Black Power as a provocation to sharpen their strategic thinking. Writing in his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, King admitted that "in past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power"—a confession that seemed to rise out of the same frustrations expressed by Carmichael in Mississippi. King added that "power is not the white man's birthright; it will not be legislated for us and delivered in neat government packages." Here he was speaking the language of Black Power, even if he never officially endorsed the motto. The sense of power as everyone's birthright, the refusal to think of government legislation as the end of activism, and the calling out of the "white man," which forced all Americans to be as self-conscious about their race as black Americans had long been—all these were part of Black Power's intellectual impact on King's mind and on the culture at large.

After the Meredith March, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour* becomes more gripping, as the better-known icons of Black Power snatch center stage and are tossed hither and yon by the heavy weather of the late Sixties. Stokely Carmichael was praised by the middle-of-the-road *Ebony* magazine in 1966 as a leader "who walks like Sidney Poitier, talks like Harry Belafonte and thinks like the post-Muslim Malcolm X." But by the end of the decade, he would break with his old colleagues in the civil rights movement, embrace socialism, renounce it for Pan-Africanism, ally himself with the Black Panthers, then censure their tactics as "vicious and dishonest." In 1968 he moved from the United States with his wife, the South African singer Miriam Makeba, to Conakry, Guinea, where he studied at the feet of the then-deposed Kwame Nkrumah.

The trajectories of other Black Power leaders—Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton—follow a similarly bewildering zigzag. Critics of Black Power have seized upon these ideological conversions as evidence of the movement's weakness of principle: proof that its leaders were opportunistic, or intellectually gullible, or thuggishly spoiling for any sort of fight. Unfortunately, Joseph does not tackle these issues directly. Perhaps out of a desire to establish the movement's bona fides, he muffles many of Black Power's controversies: Was the call to take up arms courageous or foolhardy? Was Pan-Africanism a noble dream or a hollow fiction? How to draw the line between cultural pride and racial chauvinism? Joseph's restraint on these questions marks his distance from his subjects. Although they thought everything was at stake in the answers, he seems content to admire them for having wrestled with the questions in the first place.

Joseph is at his critical best when grappling with the political career of Huey Newton, cofounder of the Black Panthers and the figure whose "lurching, unfinished, and often painful" trajectory shapes the second half of the book. Under Newton's guidance, the Panthers spiked their Marxist dialec-

[1] *King was guarded on the march by members of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a group of working-class African-American men outfitted with rifles, pistols, and walkie-talkies. The Deacons were founded in Louisiana two years earlier, in the spirit of Robert Williams, to protect black neighborhoods from nightly marches of the Ku Klux Klan, and soon chapters began appearing throughout the South. Joseph writes that the Deacons "represented an ever-present but hidden feature of the civil rights era: armed resistance." Indeed, the group's very name signaled that godliness and guns could be effective partners.*

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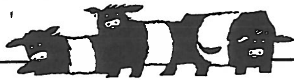

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REVIEWS

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in suit and tie, pitching his mayoral candidacy to passengers on a city bus who seem only half tuned to his message. These are, indeed, disarming images: they relieve us of the need to match the Panthers' revolutionary cool with the appropriately cool response.

One photograph from 1971 (see page 93) raises the question of the Panthers' legacy: what was passed down, as it were, to the next generation. Twelve young children, wearing identical black berets and light button-down shirts, stand at attention next to desks. The setting is clearly an academy for molding young revolutionaries—an image of Huey Newton presides over the classroom. What's striking about the photograph is the variety of expressions on the children's faces. The cast of light from the room's sole window draws our attention to a boy in the foreground who stares ahead intently with the expected bearing. But a boy in the back row looks sleepy-headed, his shoulders slumping, and the boy next to him appears to be fighting some thought of mischief. A girl nearby seems simply to be having a bad day, her eyes cast downward, her beret about to slide off her head.

Black Power told its partisans to stand tall, to take pride in the black community, and these children were clearly groomed both to represent that pride and to absorb it for themselves. The message was impeccable on an abstract plane, but the devil was in the details; even the most affirming message can harden into dogma and orthodoxy, and Black Power struggled to balance what could be achieved by tightening discipline with what could be achieved by loosening it. The first half of *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, which traces the coalescing of the movement, suggests discipline's rewards; the second half, which traces its starburst and decline, suggests its dangers. All of which is to say that, looking at this image, it's hard to decide whom to be drawn to: the children who modeled a pride that was taken to be revolutionary, or the children who, after putting on the uniform, couldn't help but do their own thing. ■