

TODAY IT IS NOT REMARKABLE that Kenya Robinson,¹ an engineering major, is active in the National Society of Black Engineers, minored in African American studies, socialized at the Black Cultural Center on campus, and graduated with a kente cloth stole from a major flagship university. Nor is it odd that she jumped the broom when she married Jamal, a journalist who tutors teen writers through the National Association of Black Journalists. Though their lives have been indelibly shaped by Black Power, they are remarkably mainstream as African Americans go.

In 1966, however, civil rights leaders like NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins called Black Power a “reverse Hitler and a reverse Ku Klux Klan.” Not to be limited to comparisons to mass murders and terrorists, the leader of the oldest civil rights organization also referred to Black Power as the “mother of hate and the father of violence.” The objectives of the Black Power movement were wrong-headed and pernicious, he and other civil rights leaders argued. They insisted that black studies programs would leave students ill prepared for the workforce and that black student unions were promoting dangerous “re-segregation” on college campuses. The various black professional organizations that sprouted like wildfire in the late 1960s “reversed the progress” of the civil rights movement, they reasoned. Yet Black Power, as an ideological phenomenon, was so significant that its effects pervade not just black America but the country itself. It has even shaped other communities of color in important ways. Among African Americans in particular, its legacies are so ubiquitous that they are often

overlooked and ignored—even by the very scholars who explore the black freedom movement.²

Scholars have been examining the scope and impact of the black freedom movement in the United States in ever more sophisticated ways over the past decade. Prior to the mid-2000s, the grand narrative among historians of the civil rights movement positioned Black Power as a fundamentally disruptive force to a beloved community created by a multiracial group of activists who sacrificed their lives to dismantle codified forms of white supremacy. Despite revisions to this narrative, the conventional history remains unchanged up to a point. Civil rights activists, the narrative goes, strategized and boldly challenged the hatred and violence of an intractable system of racism and oppression. Hospitals, schools, and public accommodations such as pools and parks were exclusively white throughout communities in the South. White supremacists in local, state, and federal legislatures urgently attempted to defend these discriminatory institutions, as local authorities also beat, maimed, and jailed activists who sought to secure voting rights. Southern states banned and repressed civil rights groups in innovative, intimidating ways. Not to be deterred, grassroots activists met in churches, schools, and basements and forged a new vision of America. National civil rights groups—including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League (NUL), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), also known as the Big Five—represented a strong, sober, hopeful, and disciplined struggle towards integration. They were a striking contrast to the brutish, violent, and ugly agents of some of the most explicit forms of white supremacy represented by terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The above remains an essential part of the new narratives on the black freedom movement, as well. But complications and nuances to this narrative arise when scholars address the role of black nationalism and Black Power in the black freedom movement. Moreover, one of the most fundamental elements to pivot on this conversation was the efficacy of integration itself as an essential goal of black uplift.

No figure represents this “heroic era” of the black freedom movement more than the Reverend Dr. Martin L. King Jr., co-founder of the SCLC. His commitment to integration and nonviolence is iconic. King and others presented to the world powerful images of well-dressed men, women,

and children being beaten and attacked by white law enforcement officers or white civilians. This positioned civil rights activists on the moral high ground in the court of public opinion. Nevertheless, as the modern civil rights movement unfolded in the late 1950s and early 1960s, another foil emerged in the landscape of racial politics in the United States—the Nation of Islam. Called the “Black Muslims” by the white and black press alike, the Nation was the largest black nationalist organization in the country and had a national spokesman with incredible appeal as a new construction of black defiance. Malcolm X was tall, good-looking, and forceful yet also charming, with impeccable oratory skills and a conspicuous cadre of stern, upright black men as security. The Nation of Islam proved anathema to the civil rights movement in many ways. It rejected the legitimacy of racial reconciliation, integration, and even American citizenship for black people. It also forcefully and vituperatively denounced the efficacy of nonviolence and integration with whites. It celebrated self-defense, self-determination, and black pride in ways that no civil rights organization had ever. It celebrated the beauty, history, and abilities of black people. The organization simultaneously offered a cathartic space for anger to be expressed at white supremacy without any particular deference to any “good whites” who were as committed to see blacks free, as they were to see themselves free. The Nation was *sui generis*.

Though historians have downplayed the significance of the Nation of Islam, by the early 1960s, Malcolm X had become the country’s most interviewed black person. By the late 1960s, the Nation of Islam had become the richest black organization in the United States and published *Muhammad Speaks*, the most widely read black newspaper in America. One member, Muhammad Ali, was heavyweight champion of the world and one of the most famous black people alive. In fact, Ali’s own colorful style and defiant politics made an indelible imprint on an entire generation of African Americans. The Nation was the first major organization to insist that “black” exclusively replace “Negro,” helping to retire the word “Negro” in the Anglophone world. More importantly, the Nation was a chief benefactor to a new style of political expression and social activism that became known as the Black Power movement.

While the Black Power movement had many sources of influence, the Nation was essential in developing a framework for resistive politics that (1) privileged black self-determination, and (2) did not see integration as

the panacea for exigencies faced by black people. The Nation, however, was no activist group, and most black people were not willing to believe in universal white devilry or sacrifice their right to expect and demand civil rights. Black Power also inherited important elements from the civil rights movement, including a belief in activism as a means to affect change within white-controlled institutions. This point of activism was a distinct difference between black nationalists who typically rejected activist politics and insisted on creating black institutions—social, religious, cultural, economic, etc. From the Universal Negro Improvement Association through the Nation of Islam, territorial separatism—the creation of a black nation state—had been the cornerstone of black nationalism. And while they sought a black nation state either in North America or Africa, nationalists created a veritable black nation through networks of black institutions designed to meet the basic needs of black people. From schools, to supermarkets, restaurants, factories, and farms, “nation building” was a pervasive dictum in nationalist circles. U.S. citizenship was not the ultimate ambition, nor was the realization of civil rights. Black Power, however, assumed and asserted civil rights, even as it insisted and organized around black self-determination within a context of being both black and American. It was a merging of two seemingly irreconcilable beliefs—black nationalism and racial integration—that forged a new politics which permeated black America. Moreover, despite what historians and others have argued, it was Black Power, not the dream of a racially integrated America, that ultimately became a dominant expression among African Americans.

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It is from this departure that Joyce Bell adds considerable depth, dimension and sophisticated analysis to the scholarship on the development of black professional associations during the age of Black Power. By focusing on the National Association of Black Social Workers (NASBW), she contextualizes the emergence of these groups during an era of unprecedented black access to white professional groups. What becomes abundantly clear in this study is that groups like the NABSW, though undoubtedly affected by the victories and thrust of the civil rights movement, owe their existence to the ideological force of Black Power. It was the call for a conspicuous celebration of blackness, racial pride, and black self-determination that spawned scores of black professional groups. Though civil rights leaders saw integration as

the Promised Land in the early 1960s, by 1970 many African Americans came to a significant shift in the way in which they envisaged the racial landscape of a new America. In fact, many who were reared in black schools and churches, attended black colleges, and belonged to black fraternities, sororities, and social clubs could not come to see black organizations and spaces as inherently inferior to white ones. From fashion and hairstyles to music, to literature, sports, religion, academia, and even to the naming of children—no facet of black life went unaffected by Black Power. While the afro, James Brown's "Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)," Kwanzaa, black studies, and the Black Panther Party are obvious outgrowths of Black Power, many have only recently begun to explore the degree to which black professional associations, from the Afro-American Patrolmen's League to the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), were as well.

As Joyce Bell so eloquently demonstrates, the manner in which Black Power emerges in institutional spaces "is the most understudied outcome of the movement and social scientists' dismissal of it has led to an underestimation of the transformatory power of the movement." As a social scientist, she contributes to the scholarship on both the civil rights and Black Power movements by framing much of her discussion around social movement theory. She explores the process of civil institutionalization, defined as "the implementation of movement goals, ideas, and practices in the institutions of the civil sphere—those that exist between the level of the household and the exercise of state power." Using the NABSW as a primary subject, this study gives important nuance and depth to an organization that represents professionals with considerable visibility in the black community. Examining leadership models and the role that intra-organizational dynamics have played in shaping the NABSW, this study offers a new point of analysis for understanding social movements and the development of black professionals who—like students, prisoners, athletes, musicians, academics, and even publicly elected officials—were touched by a new framework of thinking about race and power.

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