

# Radical Americas

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Book Review

Rafael Torrubia, *Black Power and the American People: Culture and Identity in the Twentieth Century*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 336pp., £69/\$110

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## Abstract

Review of *Black Power and the American People: Culture and Identity in the Twentieth Century* by Rafael Torrubia.

**Keywords:** Black Power; race; African Americans; civil rights

For the past decade or so, scholars have reconstructed the origin story for the US's Black Power movement in ways that have accounted for migration outside of the South, long traditions of armed self-defense and shifts in the political programmes of key organisations.<sup>1</sup> Overall, this research has elongated Black Power's timeline. In his first book, Rafael Torrúbia's goal is similar but, in a way, more ambitious. Less interested in the inception of Black Power as a movement that came to prominence in the 1960s and 70s, his wide-ranging *Black Power and the American People* urges us to think instead about the 'long history of Black Power' as a set of cultural ideas and ideals. Black Power must be understood, according to Torrúbia, 'as a series of connected cultural expressions across time' (p. 12), expressions that prioritised 'individual responsibility, group unity and community pride' (p. 46). African Americans have communicated such ideas 'since the earliest days of the plantation' (p. 47), thus forging a 'long history of Black Power'. Torrúbia's book sets out to delineate this long history – from the 'story of the "slave superhero" Big Sixteen' (p. 50) to attempts to found the Black University in the 1960s, from the 'skill, bravado and flair' of the Negro League (p. 139) to the Afrofuturism of Sun-Ra and George Clinton. Torrúbia wants readers to see that 'the cultural Black Power movement existed long prior to and long after the political movement' (p. 27).

Helpful for the ways it insists upon historical continuities in black protest traditions, *Black Power and the American People* makes a good case for seeing the political Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s as one phase within a long tradition of black self-determination. Such continuities not only feed into the efforts to write Black Power's origin story anew, but they also assist in deconstructing the hard and fast lines that are often placed around or between movements – Harlem Renaissance, civil rights, Black Power – or between 'politics' and 'culture'. Torrúbia offers the framework of Black Power for understanding these continuities, but, for this reader, he was more convincing in theorizing this framework than he was in applying it.

Particularly because he addresses such a huge body of evidence from across multiple complex contexts, Torrúbia's framework here is not always convincing. Indeed, the more textured understanding of Black Power that he sets up in the introduction and first chapter melts away early in the book; as he begins to consider his evidence, his analysis often collapses into repetitive couplings of the phrases 'long history of black power' with 'militant' and/or 'empowerment'. While Torrúbia ushers forth a long history of 'empowering' or even 'militant' black figures and events, these phrases begin to lose their meaning and Torrúbia seems to lose hold of the more specific priorities of Black Power – individual responsibility, group unity and community pride.

As a reader, I kept waiting for Torrúbia's rich evidence to be unpacked in terms of these priorities, so that a clear genealogy of Black Power was presented. Instead, it often felt as though the book lost its way and became a general history of the cultural terrain of African American men since the early twentieth century. For instance, the discussion of Harlem Renaissance writers reads like a who's who of that movement, while the consideration of the military offered more of a general overview of black relationships to the draft and Department of Defense than a focused delineation of the Armed Forces vis-à-vis the 'long history of black power'. The problem here might be one of scope. In attempting to cover so much of the ground that culture touches, Torrúbia inevitably spends much time unpacking contexts – lots of them. But in losing sight of Black Power's political priorities that are set up earlier on in the book, Black Power comes to mean both everything (in terms of black protest traditions) and not much at all.

Torrúbia's account also has a gender problem. In it, women play walk-on roles in a long saga in which men have all the speaking parts – David Walker, Claude McKay, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Vincent Harding, Muhammad Ali, penitentiary inmates, Army draftees, and Torrúbia's oft-invoked 'man in the street'. And it isn't just men who populate the 'long history of Black Power' but who also define it and set the parameters for its militancy – Alain Locke, William Worthy, Larry Neal. Some of these men also get to be the ones to communicate the significance of black women's cultural expression, as is the case when Torrúbia ventriloquizes Larry Neal to tell readers about what it means for black women to wear natural hairstyles. The problem here is simple and historians have reiterated it many times: If women do not have a place in an account of Black Power (whether we think of Black Power as a movement or a set of ideas), then that account can only ever be partial and suspect.

Torrubia has offered a potentially valuable theoretical framework for understanding continuities in black protest traditions. Students of Black Power might now consider applying this framework more fully to both the rich examples that Torrubia discusses and the many militant women-led traditions.

**Note**

<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).