The *Wall of Respect* and the Black Power Movement

In 1966, former leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael definitively introduced the term “black power” into popular consciousness at a rally in Mississippi. The Movement that would subsequently take the name “Black Power” evolved quickly, most fundamentally from the philosophy of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) founder Marcus Garvey, who, earlier in the twentieth century, opposed racial integration in favor of a self-reliant black nation. During the 1960s, Malcolm X’s rhetoric of empowerment and the militancy of groups such as the Black Panther Party more directly influenced the character of the Movement. The *Wall of Respect*’s creation bears striking resemblance to the beginning of the Black Power Movement. For as central as the *Wall of Respect* was to the beginnings of the Community Mural Movement in the United States and to redevelopment and beautification efforts on Chicago’s South Side in the 1960s, its cultural significance cannot be addressed as separate from or as merely coincidental to the Black Power Movement. Rather, the *Wall of Respect* was as integral to the evolution of the Movement as the Movement was to the life of the *Wall*. In particular, the condition of the *Wall*’s creation, celebration, and demise reflect the major stages of the Black Power Movement’s development in the 1960s.

Like the Black Power Movement, the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) functioned as a self-reliant collective. First, this group of artists worked exclusively within the 43rd and Langley community on the South Side of Chicago. OBAC’s members intended the *Wall* to belong to the community, and residents were invited to attend and participate in OBAC meetings, where the heroes for the *Wall* were
selected. OBAC’s members also gathered the supplies needed to paint the Wall, and they made an initial agreement not to sign their names to their work—further testimony to the collective, self-reliant essence of OBAC. Later, when the Wall began to receive increased attention in the press, members regrouped and decided not to speak to reporters individually in response to “sensational” coverage the Wall had begun to generate.

Also, the celebration of the Wall paralleled the public presence that surrounded the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s. A black aesthetic was critical to both the Wall and the Movement, and in the fall of 1967, Eugene Eda painted over Norman Parish’s section of the Wall that depicted black statesmen with an upraised, clenched fist—the official symbol and salute of the Movement. The fist, surrounded by painted streaks of light, complimented the celebratory nature of the Wall. For example, the upraised fist paralleled the raised, triumphant arms of Muhammad Ali on the bay window adjacent to Eda’s section.

Furthermore, congregation was central to both the development of Black Power and the celebration of the Wall. For the Black Power Movement, assembly in the form of rallies fostered public solidarity necessary for the formation of a self-reliant black nation. The two principal gatherings at the Wall—the August 1967 rally organized by SNCC and the October 1967 “black festival of creativity” organized by the 43rd Street Community Organization—likewise encouraged solidarity, both within the South Side community around the Wall and within the Black Power Movement at large. “Black unity is the only thing that will save us,” declared speaker Russ Meaks at the SNCC rally.

In addition to serving as a call for solidarity, rallies that took place as part of the Black Power Movement—including the rallies held at the Wall—fostered a spirit of
protest; implicit in the black nationalism espoused by the Movement was the outright rejection of the white, middle-class status quo. As Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) official Lincoln B. Lynch declared at the SNCC Wall rally, “The mood of the people…is…not to beg…but to demand. There’s a black wave passing over us and…we’re not going to take it anymore.” Both the Wall—the primary catalyst for the Community Mural Movement—and the Black Power Movement—one of the most successful efforts at black mobilization—largely redefined the notion and shape of public protest. Whereas the protest movement spurred by U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s located the nexus of “public” protest within college campuses, the Black Power Movement moved outside of the narrow parameters of these institutions to mobilize a larger and more diverse group of people.

Strikingly, both OBAC and the Black Power Movement were subject to constant scrutiny by local police and the federal government. This scrutiny sowed irreparable dissension among members of the former group and contributed to the dissolution of the Movement. The Chicago Daily Defender, for example, reported the presence of undercover police and FBI at the Wall. Jeff Donaldson, one of the founders of OBAC, maintains that he received an anonymous postcard that threatened his life because of his participation in the Wall and that the FBI, under the auspices of its Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) created files to track the activity of each of the artists involved in the project. In much the same way, the FBI kept extensive files on the activity of Black Power leaders like Stokely Carmichael (depicted on the Wall by Parish and Eda).

Although OBAC disbanded and the Wall perished long before the dispersal of the Black Power Movement, the Wall and the Movement existed and flourished almost
simultaneously. Today, these two entities exist as landmarks of history—not only the history of the Community Mural Movement, but also the history of local and national black protest movements, and the history of human rights.

Works Cited and Consulted


Chicago Daily Defender, 30 August 1967, 16.
