

STOKELY CARMICHAEL, "BLACK POWER"  
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Kalen M. A. Churcher  
Niagara University

**Abstract:** Stokely Carmichael's 1966 speech at the University of California at Berkeley brought the phrase "Black Power" to an audience of white, middle-class college students. Carmichael did not ask for the students' help, but rather urged them to organize their own communities. Defining Black Power as a psychological struggle for black liberation, he established common ground between himself and white student activists, while clearly differentiating between the Black Power movement and the student movement at Berkeley.

**Key Words:** Stokely Carmichael, UC-Berkeley, Black Power, black liberation, student movement

What becomes of an individual's beliefs when he or she realizes that they are no longer effective in promoting a particular cause? Should those beliefs be abandoned or altered? Stokely Carmichael was confronted with this very situation when participating in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Even after witnessing the beatings and killings of black demonstrators, Carmichael continued in the footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr. for a time, defending nonviolence as the best strategy for advancing black civil rights. He rebutted those who characterized nonviolence as too passive and encouraged them to examine more closely the pacifist teachings of King, which were reflected in Carmichael's rhetoric. As Carmichael explained in his autobiography:

(O)n one level, nonviolence *is* a philosophy of life, an ethical principle, a way of being in the world verging on the religious. On another level, however, it is merely a strategic approach to struggle. But on both levels it is a very stern discipline. And no discipline is ever "passive." That's the first thing. Which is what Dr. King (peace be unto him) had meant when he explained to me, "Stokely, you have to understand one thing. The beauty of nonviolence is that you never let an outside force, nothing outside of yourself, control what you do." Check that out. That's discipline, Jack, and self-control . . . . Nonviolence as a strategy of struggle, as personified and pronounced by Dr. King, gave our generation—particularly in the South—the means by which to confront an entrenched and violent racism. It offered a way for *large* numbers of Africans to join the struggle. Nothing passive in that.<sup>1</sup>

By 1966, however, Carmichael had begun to question the effectiveness of King's nonviolent strategy. When James Meredith, a demonstrator who led a 220-mile "March Against Fear," was shot trying to prove that white violence was not to be feared, Carmichael came to the realization that perhaps violence *was* sometimes necessary—at least in self-defense. Ironically, the twenty-five year old Carmichael was elected to head the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) just as he began to have doubts about nonviolence as a strategy. He continued to admire King, but as the leader of SNCC, Carmichael began to talk about "Black Power" rather than nonviolent civil disobedience and to shape the group into a "more militant organization."<sup>2</sup>

During a demonstration late in 1966, Carmichael was arrested and jailed for a short time just prior to a Greenwood, Mississippi rally. In "no mood to compromise with racist arrogance,"<sup>3</sup> he emerged from jail a changed man and told his followers that the only rights they would ever have would be those they "took for themselves."<sup>4</sup> A witness to the speech he delivered after his release recalled his new attitude:

Realizing that he was in his element, with his people, Stokely let it all hang out. "This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested—and I ain't going to jail no more!" The crowd exploded into cheers and clapping.

"The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nuthin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" . . . The crowd was right with him. They picked up his thoughts immediately. "Black Power!" they roared in unison.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after this incident, Carmichael gave perhaps his most famous speech—an address about Black Power on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. The speech reveals how Carmichael adapted his message of Black Power—a message usually targeted toward his fellow blacks—to an audience of white, middle-class college students. Why did Carmichael even bother to address such an audience? And how was he received? Though the mainstream press was critical of both the speaker and his audience, the alternative press and those in attendance generally praised Carmichael for his bold political message and his charismatic delivery. *The Berkeley Barb* reported: "Stoke sic is a dramatic speaker but not in the tradition sic oratory. He uses some change of pace, some dry humor, some rhythmic repetition suggestive of poetry. But what grips his audience and frightens the phonies is his plain stark statement of exactly how this country's acts and pretensions look to a black man who refused to yield one inch to opportunism."<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, I argue that Carmichael's "Black Power" speech was an attempt to define Black Power as a "psychological struggle" for black liberation, separate from the student movement and devoted to more revolutionary change in American politics and culture. Rather than asking for help or support from his predominately white audience in Berkeley, Carmichael condemned "white America" and distinguished his cause from both the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement and the student-led antiwar movement. At the same time, Carmichael identified some common concerns of both Black Power and student activists, including the war in Vietnam and the corruption of American ideals and institutions. By speaking in dramatic, hyperbolic terms and oversimplifying complex issues, he encouraged student activism and

attracted media attention to his speech, which lives on today as the most memorable statement of his Black Power philosophy.

In order to understand Carmichael's "Black Power" speech, it is important to know something both about Carmichael's life and about the events taking place within the Civil Rights Movement and on the Berkeley campus around the time the speech was given. After looking closely at the speech itself, we will consider its impacts and legacy. Like many important speeches in history, Carmichael's "Black Power" speech is captivating to read and hear. Its blend of emotive appeal with specific proof —albeit seemingly exaggerated at times—provides a glimpse into how Carmichael became such a force for change at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was reevaluating its goals and strategic philosophy.

### *Stokely Carmichael*

Stokely Standiford Churchill Carmichael was born in Port of Prince, Trinidad on June 29, 1941. For much of his childhood, he was raised by his grandmother, Cecilia Harris Carmichael, in the family home at 54 Oxford Street. Tired of living under the domineering hand of her in-laws, Stokely's mother, Mabel Florence Charles Carmichael, left Trinidad for her parent's home in the Bronx, New York when her children were young. Stokely's father, Adolphus Carmichael, followed more than eighteen months later.<sup>7</sup> In his autobiography, Carmichael comments that his first love was always politics, and even as a young boy, he displayed that penchant for political affairs. When he was only seven years old, he nagged his aunt, Tante Elaine, to vote in a local election. When she said she did not want to bother with politics, the young Carmichael took matters into his own hands. Carmichael quotes Tante Elaine recalling the incident in his autobiography, "On election day sic, what you suppose the boy did? He dressed himself up in the suit with the big lapels that his parents had sent him from New York. When he went to church in that suit with his bow tie and pocket handkerchief, people used to call him Little Man."<sup>8</sup> When Carmichael was told he could not vote for fourteen more years, he ran home crying until Tante Elaine succumbed to his harassment and agreed to vote.

After Carmichael's grandmother died in 1952, he and his sisters were reunited with their parents in New York. Eventually settling in the Bronx, the Carmichael family was the only "African family" in an Italian neighborhood. In 1956, Stokely Carmichael began attending the elite Bronx High School of Science, where he was reintroduced to politics by a communist classmate, Gene Davis. With Davis, Carmichael attended Young Communist League meetings, study groups, and rallies. Later, at Howard University, Carmichael joined the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), which was affiliated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It was at a Washington demonstration against the House Un-American Activities Committee that Carmichael became acquainted with NAG, which was the beginning of his career as a black political activist.<sup>9</sup>

When Carmichael formally enrolled at Howard in 1960, he planned to study medicine. After becoming involved with NAG, however, he became fascinated with the nonviolent philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and committed himself to the cause of civil rights. Initially, he agreed with King "that the sight of racists beating people who did not fight back would arouse the conscience of the nation."<sup>10</sup> While many students became involved in politics at this time, Carmichael devoted his whole life to the Civil Rights Movement. As a member of

SNCC, Carmichael joined with Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) in a series of Freedom Rides from Washington D.C. to New Orleans. Despite being beaten, hospitalized, jailed, and almost killed, Carmichael remained steadfast in his commitment to nonviolence. He spent a stretch of time, which included his twentieth birthday and a nearly one-week hunger strike, locked up in the Mississippi Delta's Parchman Farms state penitentiary after being arrested during a Freedom Ride. Carmichael wrote:

Well, Parchman was a farm, I guess it had cattle. The metal cylinders contained powerful batteries, and the three little points were terminals emitting a strong electric charge. We would meet these cattle prods again, a favorite tool of law enforcement in parts of the Delta and Alabama.

When those points touched your skin, the pain was sharp and excruciating, at once a jolting shock and a burn. You could actually see (three puffs of smoke) and smell (the odor of roasting flesh) your skin burning.<sup>11</sup>

After being imprisoned at Parchman Farms in a cell next to CORE leader James Farmer, Carmichael emerged from jail a wanted man. This time, however, he was wanted for his rhetorical skills. He began speaking at CORE fundraisers, and while following the money, often found himself in the midst of "rich white folk."<sup>12</sup> By explaining the oppression of blacks and revealing the gruesome details of places like Parchman Farms, he appealed to the sympathies of liberal philanthropists, although it is unclear how much money CORE actually collected.

Carmichael's charismatic style made him popular among civil rights activists, and he quickly rose to a leadership position within SNCC. In his twenties, he began meeting with movement leaders and supporters, including King, Malcolm X, and actor Sidney Poitier. Despite continued beatings and even deaths within the movement, SNCC remained committed to nonviolence and to fighting against segregation and discrimination in the South.

In his autobiography, Carmichael identifies 1965-1966 as a turning point for himself and the SNCC. After the shooting death of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, the movement lost a great leader who "had the natural authority, the style, language and charisma, to lead and discipline rank-and-file urban youth."<sup>13</sup> In 1966, after demonstrator James Meredith was also shot (but not killed) during his 220-mile "March Against Fear," Carmichael began to seriously question whether nonviolence was leading blacks where they needed to go. The concept of black power, alluded to by past black nationalists like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, became Carmichael's new mantra. What had been a nonviolent movement was evolving into a militant crusade. While still working with the SNCC, Carmichael became an honorary leader of the Black Panther party, a radical organization popular among young, urban blacks. In sharp contrast to the mainstream Civil Rights Movement, the Panthers "preached a doctrine of self-defense and revolutionary nationalism."<sup>14</sup>

Carmichael had been elected to head SNCC at only twenty-six years of age, defeating John Lewis in an election early in 1966. Shortly thereafter, Lewis resigned from the organization, reportedly "at odds with some of the committee's leaders over the 'black power' emphasis and meaning."<sup>15</sup> The meaning of "Black Power" was even less clear to others, so Carmichael spent much of his first year as head of SNCC explaining and justifying the concept. Carmichael's speech at Berkeley in October was just one of many speeches he delivered on the

subject. Although Carmichael actually said little about the Berkeley speech in his autobiography, it eventually became perhaps his best-known statement on the meaning of Black Power.

### *Free Speech and Black Power*

To say that the 1960s was a turbulent decade would be an understatement. Movements of all sorts—civil rights, women's liberation, gay rights and anti-war—sprung up across the country and fueled the development of an entire counterculture that rejected traditional values and established institutions. Though activism touched all corners of the nation, much of the protest activity took place on college campuses, where young people organized around a variety of causes, ranging from free speech, to black civil rights, to the war in Vietnam. The University of California at Berkeley epitomized student protests and free speech; its reputation as a hotbed of student activism inspired Ronald Reagan, as a candidate for Governor, to include the elimination of "wickedness" on campus in his campaign platform.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that Stokely Carmichael delivered one of his most famous speeches on the Berkeley campus, nor is it surprising that officials both on and off the campus might have feared reactions to the speech. On September 8, 1966, one month before Carmichael delivered his famous Berkeley speech, the activist was arrested on disorderly conduct and riot charges following an incident at Atlanta University. After Atlanta Police shot a black individual suspected of stealing a car, Carmichael spoke to a crowd of hundreds about the "racist white police" and threatened to "tear this place up."<sup>17</sup>

Even before the Free Speech demonstrations of 1963-1964, as Seymour Lipset has noted in *Rebellion in the University*, Berkeley had more left-wing groups than any other school in the country.<sup>18</sup> After the Free Speech demonstrations, civil disorder became common on the Berkeley campus, with most of the demonstrations directed against the war in Vietnam. Following the sniper attack on James Meredith in 1966, fears of racially motivated violence became more prevalent across America, and the slogan "Black Power" made many white Americans uncomfortable. As the chief proponent of that slogan, Carmichael was widely feared and associated in the minds of many with racial hatred and violence. Carmichael did not invent the phrase "Black Power," but he did "serve as the charismatic catalyst to commence the black power phrase of the evolution of the movement."<sup>19</sup>

Decades earlier, black nationalists like Marcus Garvey had advocated black power by glorifying all things dark and calling upon blacks to join in a back-to-Africa movement.<sup>20</sup> Like Garvey, Carmichael had come to view integration as hopeless and instead now called for the "liberation" of blacks. As he explained in his autobiography, "Let's be clear. For me, integration was never a goal, a principle, or an absolute value. It was never our reason for existing. It was for a while a consequence of the work, and at times pleasant, at times problematic by-product of struggle sic, but never a *goal*. The goal always was liberation, the ending of our people's oppression, period."<sup>21</sup> For Carmichael, integration meant little more than reinforcing the belief that white was better than black, and he had no interest in seeing just a few blacks accepted into the white man's world. As he wrote in 1968, "integration allows the nation to focus on a handful of Southern children who get into white schools, at great price, and to ignore the 94 percent who are left behind in unimproved all-black schools."<sup>22</sup>

The 1960s will forever be remembered as the era of student activism. Nevertheless, Carmichael was not interested in leading only a student movement. Instead, he set his sights on something much more revolutionary, even global in scope. He would carry his Black Power message throughout the world, motivating activists in other countries to support his cause and to take up their own campaigns for black liberation. Whether his demands for Black Power accomplished anything more than scaring whites continues to be debated. But there can be no doubt that Carmichael's call for blacks to take up their *own* cause took the Civil Rights battle in a fundamentally new direction.

### *Carmichael's "Black Power" Speech*

Described by some as a "black ogre of choice"<sup>23</sup> and by others as "cool and very hip,"<sup>24</sup> Stokely Carmichael was a man of varied rhetorical talents. From an early age, his charismatic style made him a favorite among his fellow Civil Rights activists and a national leader in the Civil Rights Movement. When he first talked about Black Power in Mississippi in 1966, he did so with the fiery passion of a Southern demagogue—a type of speaker he loved to hate. With just a few words, he was able to rally the crowd that came out to see him in Greenwood, Mississippi into a chorus of voices shouting, "Black Power! Black Power! Black Power!" His ability to tailor his speeches to different audiences was one of his greatest talents, as Carmichael himself boasted in his autobiography:

I had a standard-English speech reserved for the merely affluent and curious. Many times these people would say or write that they had expected an "antiwhite diatribe" or a "raving militant rap." Only to be so pleasantly surprised to get a reasoned argument that—even if they didn't agree with it—was "thought provoking." . . . Then too I had a harder, more analytic, and ideological argument for more serious political and intellectual forums. . . . Then there was a down-home, nitty-gritty idiom in a style I mostly borrowed from the Harlem street corner nationalists and the Southern black preachers. This I saved for the brothers and sisters on the block. But the political message stayed the same, whatever the audience, language, or occasion. Only the style changed.<sup>25</sup>

While Carmichael himself claimed never to use obscenities or vulgarities, rhetorical critic Pat Jefferson notes that his speeches were often laden with risqué sexual innuendos and four-letter words.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the case, Carmichael was always careful to adapt his language to his audience. A speech at Boston's Episcopal Theological School was fashioned very differently from one before a group of young, black street kids or Civil Rights activists.

Despite Carmichael's claim that his political message never changed, scholars have observed that his definition of Black Power was in fact ambiguous and constantly changing. According to Robert Allen, for example, Black Power meant different things to different people and could even vary from situation to situation: "It could mean electing more black politicians; . . . or forming all-black organizations to fight for community needs; or forming black caucuses in predominantly white organizations; or forming black cultural and educational organizations to promote black consciousness, including pride in black culture and knowledge of black

history."<sup>27</sup> Even the press caught on to Carmichael's changing definitions, ultimately creating their own, often unfair, definitions of Black Power.<sup>28</sup> Carmichael was not the only victim of skewed news, of course. One radio reporter, George Krowter of Selma, Alabama's WBWC, admitted that information could easily be manipulated to portray a cause, event, or individual—Carmichael included—in an unfavorable or favorable light, depending on the station's or reporter's views. He explained: "I wouldn't even recognize the copy as it comes through here. You know, there are ways to report the facts and still distort the news."<sup>29</sup>

So how, then, did Carmichael choose to present his concept of Black Power to a predominately white audience of faculty and students at the University of California? Clearly, these were not the young, black militants he was accustomed to addressing, nor were they the white, middle-class adults who feared black violence any time they heard the phrase "Black Power." Instead, they were students who were, for the most part, sympathetic to the Civil Rights cause, perhaps even looking for ways to help Carmichael in his efforts. For more than two years, students at UC-Berkeley had been battling with the university administration over free speech on campus, and students at Berkeley led the way nationally in protesting against the war in Vietnam. Yet few of these white, middle-class students had a clear notion of what Carmichael *meant* by Black Power, nor could they relate personally to the issues of racism and discrimination.

According to the *New York Times*, Carmichael's speech at Berkeley's outdoor Greek Theater on October 29, 1966, lasted for nearly an hour.<sup>30</sup> Approximately 10,000 people attended the event, and they listened to more than six hours of "white and Negro organizers" prior to Carmichael's appearance. Although Carmichael promised a wide-ranging speech, addressing a variety of issues, his podium was draped with a sign reading "Black Power and Its Challenges."<sup>31</sup> He did talk about the Vietnam War and other issues, but he devoted most of his speech to explaining and rationalizing his concept of Black Power.

Carmichael began his speech by disparaging all the "intellectual masturbation" (2) over the meaning of Black Power and pledging to set the record straight.<sup>32</sup> Defining Black Power as a "psychological struggle" (16), he contrasted it with the integrationist philosophy of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement, dismissing integration as an "insidious subterfuge" (6) designed to maintain white supremacy. He also denounced the Civil Rights bill of 1964 as a "failure"(10), recalled how white missionaries had tried to "civilize" (13) blacks, and finally arrived at what he characterized as the essential question about race relations in America: "Who has power" (15)? The answer, of course, was that white people had the power; hence, the need for "Black Power." Only through Black Power could blacks protect their civil rights, obtain decent educations, and create "new political institutions" (20) that met their needs.

Returning to the "psychological" nature of the struggle, Carmichael noted how every time blacks tried to do something to improve their own situations, whites came around to show them "how do to it" (25). That, according to Carmichael, only contributed to their feelings of inferiority and inequality. "If we are going to eliminate that for the generation that comes after us," Carmichael declared, then black people had to "be seen in positions of power, doing and articulating for themselves, for themselves" (25). Liberal student leaders who had been involved with the Civil Rights Movement eventually seemed to accept the ideals behind "Black Power," recognizing that blacks wanted to lead the fight for their rights, as opposed to following white civil rights organizers.<sup>33</sup>

About half way through the speech, Carmichael addressed the question of what white student activists might do to help the cause of blacks in America. He asked them about a controversy on campus, then challenged them to carry their activism beyond the "ivory tower" (31):

There is then in a larger sense, what do you do on your university campus? Do you raise questions about the hundred black students who were kicked off campus a couple of weeks ago? Eight hundred? (eight hundred) Eight hundred? And how does that question begin to move? Do you begin to relate to people outside of the ivory tower and university wall? Do you think you're capable of building those human relationships, as the country now stands? (31)

Carmichael told the students that they were naïve to think they could join hands with blacks in efforts to reform America. What was needed was revolutionary change in America's political institutions: "You're fooling yourself. It is impossible for white and black people to talk about building a relationship based on humanity when the country is the way it is, when institutions are clearly against us" (31). Finally, Carmichael reflected on the question of nonviolence, concluding that "white society" (40) was to blame for the failure of nonviolence and offering his explanation of why "Black Power" scared white Americans:

But the question of, why do black people...why do white people in this country associate Black Power with violence? And the question is because of their own inability to deal with "blackness." If we had said "Negro Power" nobody would get scared. Everybody would support it. Or if we said power for colored people, everybody'd be for that, but it is the word "Black," it is the word "Black" that bothers people in this country, and that's their problem, not mine—their problem, their problem. (46)

In concluding his speech, Carmichael reiterated that Black Power referred to a "psychological battle" for the right of black people to "define their own terms, define themselves as they see fit, and organize themselves as they see it" (58). White activists might contribute to efforts to build a new, more "civilized" (60) society, but ultimately Black Power was about black people calling their own shots. "We are on the move for our liberation," Carmichael concluded. "We have been tired of trying to prove things to white people. We are tired of trying to explain to white people that we're not going to hurt them. We are concerned with getting the things we want, the things that we have to have to be able to function" (62). For Carmichael, the only question was whether white people could "overcome their racism and allow for that to happen" in America. If not, he warned, blacks would have no choice but to say "very clearly": "Move over, or we're goin' to move over on you" (63).

Scholars have long debated Carmichael's purposes in delivering his "Black Power" speech. According to Charles J. Stewart, Carmichael did not seek to create "a new social movement," but rather to transform the existing civil rights movement.<sup>34</sup> Gallagher agrees, calling it wrong to label Carmichael a "radical black separatist" and pointing to his efforts to reach out to white audiences.<sup>35</sup> Yet unlike some civil rights leaders, as Gallagher notes, Carmichael did not "appeal to white audiences for assistance or civic hand-outs but instead



attempted to tell them what they needed to do to correct *themselves*<sup>36</sup> and their civic culture."<sup>37</sup> In other words, Carmichael did not pander to his white audience. Denouncing America as a racist society, he insisted that Black Power remain a movement *of blacks for blacks*. As a psychological struggle, it was all about blacks acquiring the *power* to do things for themselves.

Yet throughout the speech, Carmichael also hinted that the student and Black Power movements *might* work together—or, at least, that they shared some common goals and ideals. Identifying with the student activists in his audience, Carmichael pointed to some common concerns of the student and Black Power movement, most notably the war in Vietnam. Then, by using hyperbolic language and oversimplifying some of those issues, he challenged his audience to *act*. Carmichael may not have appealed to his predominately white audience for assistance, but he did at least imply that the student and the Black Power movements could fight against common enemies: racism, poverty, and the greed of the ruling class in America.

#### The Possibilities of Coalition Politics?

In his Berkeley speech, Carmichael made no excuses for abandoning integration and calling for a separatist Black Power movement. By late 1966, he would exclude whites altogether from working with the SNCC, and that move was foreshadowed in the Berkeley speech.<sup>38</sup> In the Berkeley speech, Carmichael emphasized how blacks needed to follow their own separate path toward liberation. Student leaders eventually began to understand the rationale behind his argument. "It boils down to the fact that black people organize black people more effectively than white people organize black people," stated one student activist quoted by the *New York Times*.<sup>39</sup> In his Black Power speech, Carmichael declared that blacks were tired of having to prove or explain themselves to whites, and he announced that blacks were "on the move" (62), shaping their own future by "doing and articulating for themselves" (25).

With that said, it is interesting to see how the twenty-five-year-old revolutionary also identified with his student audience in what he called the "white intellectual ghetto of the West" (1). Immediately noticeable is Carmichael's use of the words "we," "us," and "our" throughout the Berkeley speech. While one might expect an "us-them" dichotomy to emerge in a speech announcing a separate black movement to a predominately white audience, Carmichael used first-person plural pronouns approximately three times as often as the pronoun "you." This suggests that Carmichael identified with his audience of white college students—at least at some level—as part of a common crusade.

Carmichael sometimes clearly used "we" to refer to blacks, as when he spoke about those who traveled to Mississippi to protest against Southern segregation: "(W)hen we went to Mississippi we did not go to sit next to Ross Barnett; we did not go to sit next to Jim Clark; we went to get them out of our way; and that people ought to understand that; that we were never fighting for the right to integrate, we were fighting against white supremacy" (6). Later in his speech, however, Carmichael at least made it possible for his audience to include themselves in his use of "we," even though he still may have been referring specifically to blacks: "We have taken all the myths of this country and we've found them to be nothing but

downright lies. This country told us that if we worked hard we would succeed, and if that were true we would own this country lock, stock, and barrel—lock, stock, and barrel—lock, stock, and barrel" (32). Considering that many college students also had come to reject the foundational "myths" about America, it is not difficult to imagine students of all races identifying with such statements. Indeed, anyone disillusioned with the course of the nation might have identified with Carmichael's declaration that the American Dream was a lie.

Carmichael also seemed to distinguish the whites in his audience from those he criticized in his speech: both white racists and white liberal advocates of integration. At one point in the speech he said: "If you believe in integration, then we're going to start adopting us some white people to live in our neighborhood" (19). Carmichael might have said "we're going to start adopting us some of *you* to live in our neighborhood." By referring to "some white people," Carmichael separated his audience from those hypocritical whites who advocated integration but would never accept his invitation to "come live in Watts" (17).

Carmichael, a young man himself, also utilized language familiar to his college-aged audience. Phrases like "dig yourself" (2), "get hip to that" (20), and "ain't that a gas" (39), coupled with his description of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Bobby Kennedy and Wayne Morris as "supposed-to-be-liberal cats" (36), placed speaker and audience on the same level linguistically. According to Pat Jefferson, Carmichael's "hip style" appealed not just to blacks but also to "youthful audiences" of all races. For the students at Berkeley, Carmichael was "a national figure who spoke *their* language."<sup>40</sup> That linguistic identification implicitly suggested that they were part of the same cause.

Finally, Carmichael directly urged his audience—once again using the pronoun "we"—to join *with* him in opposing U.S. foreign policy. "We are going to have to speak to change the foreign policy of this country" (41), he declared before his audience in Berkeley. And while Carmichael emphasized the need to "hook up with black people around the world" (42), he also gave the anti-war, anti-imperialist college students in his audience another way to identify with the Black Power movement. Indeed, their shared opposition to American foreign policy was just one of several appeals to common concerns in Carmichael's speech.

### Appeals to Common Concerns

Why would Carmichael speak to a predominately white audience of college students in Berkeley, California? From a practical standpoint, Carmichael was paid for many of his speeches, and perhaps he simply viewed the speech as a fund-raising opportunity. Yet Carmichael also suggested that the student and Black Power movements shared a common commitment to social justice and revolutionary change. While he made clear that Black Power was to be a blacks-only movement, he still suggested that students might do their part to change the world for the better. By advancing their *own* movement in their *own* communities, they would leave the Black Power activists free to organize themselves.

Thus, Carmichael urged the students to "move into the white community." "We are in the black community," he noted; "We have developed a movement in the black community" (45). Yet white activists had "failed miserably" (45) to do the same, and the result was that blacks were left on their own to fight for revolutionary change in the system. Carmichael thus issued a challenge to the crowd: "And the question is, can we find white people who are going

to have the courage to go into white communities and start organizing them" (45)? The students could not become Black Power advocates, but they could still join with Carmichael and other Black Power advocates in bringing about revolutionary change in America.

Although Carmichael's remarks in Berkeley are commonly referred to as the "Black Power" speech, he addressed a variety of other concerns, including the Vietnam War and American foreign policy in general. He began by questioning how the United States could push for democracy in Vietnam, South Africa, Puerto Rico and elsewhere when it did not support genuine democracy at home. He described the United States metaphorically as a rapist and declared that SNCC wanted no part of America's crimes around the world:

We must question the values of this society, and I maintain that black people are the best people to do that because we have been excluded from that society. And the question is, we ought to think whether or not we want to become a part of that society. That's what we want to do.

And that that is precisely what it seems to me that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is doing. We are raising questions about this country. I do not want to be a part of the American pie! The American pie means raping South Africa, beating Vietnam, beating South America, raping the Philippines, raping every country you've been in. (37-38)

Finally, Carmichael addressed the question of violence, emphasizing that he shared his audience's commitment to nonviolence. Unfortunately, he suggested, the issue of violence, like many other issues, had been defined solely in terms of black versus white. An overarching fear of blackness permeated the white culture, he argued, with whites advocating nonviolence only for blacks, whom they feared. But what about all the other violence in America, Carmichael asked: "Black people cut themselves every night in the ghetto," he observed; "Don't anybody talk about nonviolence." He continued: "Lyndon Baines Johnson is busy bombing the hell of out Vietnam—don't nobody talk about nonviolence. White people beat up black people every day—don't nobody talk about nonviolence" (56). When black people began to assert themselves, of course, "the double standard" began to emerge, Carmichael complained (56). Carmichael, thus, blamed white society for the failure of nonviolence. Not only did white society fail to practice what it preached, Carmichael urged, but it even exported its racist violence abroad to places like Vietnam.

### Hyperbolic Language

What would a Stokely Carmichael speech be without fiery, dramatic, and emotionally charged language? After all, in characterizing the "oratory of the black speaker" during the 1960s, Finley C. Campbell talks of "theatrical inputs" that created a "multidramatic ambience."<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most engaging aspect of the Berkeley Black Power speech is Carmichael's dramatic and hyperbolic language—language that evoked powerful imagery and emotion. From his sexualized references (for example, "intellectual masturbation") to his accusations of "white supremacy" (6), Carmichael's language seemed intentionally designed to provoke, even offend.

Carmichael's linguistic provocations began early in the speech, when he first invoked an analogy that he would return to throughout his remarks: the comparison of 1960s America to Nazism and the Holocaust. Halfway through the speech, he returned to the analogy to explain why the U.S. government was not meeting the day-to-day needs of its people: because it was more concerned with putting police on the streets than with helping the disadvantaged. Additional police were not what was needed, Carmichael explained, but rather good housing and job opportunities. "That's what they need, not Gestapo troops," he explained in typically provocative language, "because this is not 1942 and if you play like Nazis, we playing back with you this time around" (20).

Carmichael's word choices reinforced the urgency and hyperbolic tone of the speech. In the Berkeley speech, Carmichael described white supremacy as running "rampant" (12), while overseas America was "stealing and plundering and raping everybody in its path" (13). He described the United States as a "nation of thieves" that "stole everything it has, beginning with black people" (30). And if it continued on its present course, Carmichael concluded, the United States would go down in history as a criminal nation: "It stands on the brink of becoming a nation of murderers" (61).

According to Patricia Roberts-Miller, demagogues are defined by their use of polarizing rhetoric.<sup>42</sup> By this definition, Carmichael might be labeled a demagogue. Yet unlike Louis Farrakhan and other later black nationalists, Carmichael did not use polarizing and hyperbolic language to "undermine our ability to fully understand his message."<sup>43</sup> In his Berkeley speech, he defined black power as a psychological and nonviolent movement aimed at liberating blacks, and he clearly stated his movement's purpose: to empower blacks to better their own lives. Some continued to hear threats of violence in his hyperbolic language, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) even feared that Carmichael's provocative language might inspire a white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement, costing the movement gains already made.<sup>44</sup> Yet while his tone may have incited such fears, Carmichael directly disavowed violence as a strategy and dismissed white fears as irrational prejudices.

In the months before the famous Berkeley speech, Martin Luther King Jr. began to distance himself from the "Black Nationalist" stance being taken by groups like SNCC. He also insisted that there was no major trend among blacks toward embracing a more radical and separatist stance.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Carmichael found himself constantly explaining his distinction between non-violence and self-defense, acknowledging that if provoked, he would protect himself.<sup>46</sup> "Nonviolence has always been a tactic to us, not a way of life. I am 150 percent American, and America has never opposed violence."<sup>47</sup> For Carmichael, Black Power was *not* about violence, but his ultimatum was clear: either allow black Americans control over their own lives and destinies, or face continued agitation. And if attacked, blacks would respond in kind. In the Berkeley speech, Carmichael expressed exhaustion and frustration over the need to continuously reassure whites that "we're not going to hurt them" (62). Yet he also warned that there were certain nonnegotiable items on his agenda and that his patience had run thin. "We are concerned with getting the things we want, the things we have to have to be able to function" (62), he told his audience in Berkeley. And if white people could not "overcome their racism and allow for that to happen" (63), they would have no choice but to simply *take* the things they needed. There was no direct or specific threat of violence in his speech in Berkeley,

but in closing Carmichael warned that blacks might soon have "no choice" but to say: "Move on over, or we're going to move on over you" (63).

### Over Simplification of Issues

Carmichael also dramatized the need for Black Power by oversimplifying issues and events. In describing the rationale behind the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, for example, he suggested that there was nothing complicated about the issues at stake. It was simply a matter of codifying the obvious:

I maintain that every civil rights bill in this country was passed for white people, not for black people. For example, I am black. I know that. I also know that while I am black I am a human being, and therefore I have the right to go into any public place. White people didn't know that. Every time I tried to go into a place they stopped me. So some boys had to write a bill to tell that white man, "He's a human being; don't stop him." That bill was for that white man, not for me. I knew it all the time. I knew it all the time. (8)

Carmichael likewise oversimplified the problems of more impoverished black communities in the United States, criticizing the "modern-day Peace Corps missionaries" (14) who advocated liberal social welfare programs for failing to grasp the simple reason that the people in the such communities were poor: "cause he does not have money—period. If you want to get rid of poverty, you give people money—period" (14).

Carmichael similarly poked fun at those who didn't grasp why blacks were discriminated against. Again, to his mind, the answer was simple: "We are oppressed as a group because we are black, not because we are lazy, not because we're apathetic, not because we're stupid, not because we smell, not because we eat watermelon and have good rhythm. We are oppressed because we are black" (17). For Carmichael, the whole racial problem in America boiled down to a cultural bias that equated white with good and black with bad. And that distaste for all things "black" also accounted for accusations of violence against the Black Power movement. In reducing the entire racial problem in America to a fear of blackness, of course, Carmichael oversimplified the issue. Yet that oversimplification was part of what made Carmichael's Black Power speech so dramatic, newsworthy, and memorable.

### *The Legacy of Carmichael's Berkeley Speech*

After Carmichael stepped down as SNCC chairman in 1967, he traveled around the world promoting Black Power and Pan-African solidarity. His travels took him to Cuba, North Vietnam, Guinea, and Ghana, and he spent time with Fidel Castrol, Ho Chi Minh, President Sekou Toure of Guinea, and President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. His respect and admiration for Toure and Nkrumah led him to ultimately change his name to Kwame Toure.<sup>48</sup>

Carmichael's revolutionary attitudes further solidified on April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King was shot down in Memphis, Tennessee. Writing in his autobiography, Carmichael recalled the rage felt by all black Americans upon hearing the news: "This time you went too

far, killing this good, decent man, this man of peace. When you killed Dr. King, you killed nonviolence. Man, all the way to Atlanta, every station that came over the radio, more reports of riots, insurrection, disorder. Black folk signaling America, when you killed Dr. King, you killed nonviolence."<sup>49</sup> In the aftermath of King's death, President Lyndon B. Johnson called upon the nation to "reject the blind violence that has struck Dr. King" and concluded: "We can achieve nothing by lawlessness and divisiveness among the American people. It is only by joining together and only by working together that we can continue to move toward equality and fulfillment for all of our people."<sup>50</sup> But for Carmichael and many other African Americans, the assassination of Dr. King was a watershed moment, demonstrating the futility of nonviolent protest in a racist society.

After King's assassination, Carmichael and his wife, Miriam Makeba, moved to Guinea, West Africa, where he wrote one of several books. There he also continued his relationship with Toure, who he worked for as an official aide. Makeba and Carmichael eventually divorced, and in 1980, Stokely married Marlyatou Barry, a Guinean doctor. The two had one son, Bokar Ture, before they divorced in 1986.<sup>51</sup> In the 1990s, Carmichael was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and on November 15, 1998, he died at home in Africa. Friends and dignitaries from 39 countries paid formal respects to his family in Guinea.

Rhetorical scholars agree that Stokely Carmichael's 1966 Black Power speech was among the most important speeches given by a militant black activist in the 1960s. James R. Andrews and David Zarefsky point out that the speech proved so effective that Carmichael used it as a model for future speeches before white audiences.<sup>52</sup> That the speech came only a few months after James Meredith was shot in Mississippi only added to its significance.

Following the Berkeley speech, Carmichael continued spreading his message of Black Power on campuses across the nation. Speaking at Morgan State College in Baltimore on January 28, 1967,<sup>53</sup> Carmichael displayed the very different style he used when addressing a predominantly black audience. Joking about how he partied at the school and participated in a sit-in near campus when he was younger, he also gave his audience at Morgan State a serious charge: overcoming the negative connotations of "black" that he had talked about in Berkeley. "If you want to stop rebellion," he said, "then eradicate the cause." Carmichael then spoke of their responsibilities as leaders and intellectuals within the black community: "It is time for you to stop running away from being black. You are college students, you should think. It is time for you to begin to understand that you, as the growing intellectuals, the black intellectuals of the country, must begin to define beauty for black people."<sup>54</sup>

Carmichael continued speaking into the 1970s. His focus, though, became increasingly international and directed toward promoting Pan-Africanism, a world-wide movement to unify all blacks against white supremacy. Even while overseas, he continued to stay in touch with Black Power advocates in America, and he made several trips back to the United States to support the Black Power fight.

Carmichael abandoned his belief in absolute nonviolence because he believed that King's approach was no longer working. Whether Carmichael's more militant stance helped or hurt the civil rights cause is still debated. Moderate Civil Rights groups like the NAACP feared that Carmichael's rhetoric would frighten sympathetic whites and set the movement back. Others took inspiration from Carmichael's emphasis on black pride and heeded his call to celebrate black achievement and challenge oppression. Decades after Carmichael's Black Power

speech in Berkeley, cries – or at least whispers – of Black Power continue to echo throughout the United States. Individuals like Assata Shakur, given a life sentence in 1977 for a crime she says she didn't commit, and who fled to Cuba in the late-1970s, continue to be outspoken in gender and race issues.<sup>55</sup> Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former radio announcer and journalist remains a political activist and author from the confines of his Pennsylvania prison cell after being convicted in the 1981 shooting death of a Philadelphia police officer. His supporters contested his initial death sentence as well as the politics of his trial,<sup>56</sup> arguing that race created biases.

The 1991 beating of Rodney King and subsequent rioting in Los Angeles served as the impetus for a more recent revival of Black Power, as Louis Farrakhan and others took up the charge. Farrakhan, who is widely known for his powerful rhetoric and association with the "Million Man March" on the mall in Washington, D.C., may not have *literally* echoed Carmichael's call for "Black Power," but the sentiment was much the same. Like Carmichael, Farrakhan became known both for his charismatic delivery, yet some consider his rhetoric much more acidic, with attacks not only against whites, but also women, Jews, and homosexuals. Houston A. Baker, who on one hand describes Farrakhan's rhetoric as "a brilliant stroke of numerology, a masterpiece of symbolic politics,"<sup>57</sup> also labels the minister "a hate monger,"<sup>58</sup> a moniker not afforded to Carmichael.

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Kalen M. A. Churcher is an assistant professor in Communication Studies at Niagara University in western New York. She would like to thank Drs. J. Michael Hogan and Shawn Parry-Giles for their guidance and editorial assistance on this unit.

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### Notes

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