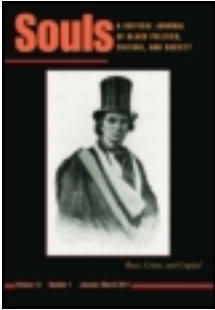


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# Revolution in Babylon

## Stokely Carmichael and America in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>

Peniel E. Joseph

*Stokely Carmichael fundamentally transformed American race relations in the 1960s as a local organizer, national political mobilizer, and international icon. In doing so Carmichael both scandalized and helped to reshape American democracy, first as a local organizer in Washington, D.C.; the Mississippi Delta; and Lowndes County, Alabama and then as SNCC chairman and a Black Power advocate. This essay argues that the boundaries between the civil rights and Black Power eras have been too sharply drawn at the expense of a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of both periods. Civil rights and Black Power are rooted in distinct, yet overlapping origins that share a common history. Carmichael's evolution from a civil rights militant to Black Power revolutionary uncovers buried intimacies between the two eras while providing eye-opening new details about radical efforts to transform American democracy in the 1960s.*

Keywords: Black Power, black radicalism, democracy, internationalism, Pan-Africanism, Stokely Carmichael

### Introduction: In Search of an Icon

Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) is one of the most important political leaders of the postwar era, yet remains one of the most obscure icons of his generation. A civil rights militant turned Black Power revolutionary, Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in Greenwood, Mississippi during a late spring heat-wave in 1966 sent shockwaves throughout the United States and beyond. Black Power represents one of the most controversial, enduring, and pivotal stories of the twentieth century. Individuals and groups that played major and minor roles in this movement—which range from Malcolm X, William Worthy, Lorraine Hansberry, The Black Panthers, Lyndon Johnson, Black Muslims, FBI, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Huey P. Newton, Kathleen Cleaver, Fidel Castro, and the New Left

to name a few—make this period nothing less than a historical epoch that encompasses the tragic and heroic character of the postwar global era. Spanning continents and crossing oceans, Black Power's reach was global, stretching from urban projects in Harlem to rural hamlets in Lowndes County, Alabama, to poor Black neighborhoods in West Oakland out to the revolutionary cities of Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, Conakry, Guinea, Algiers, Algeria, and the cosmopolitan internationalism of London, Stockholm, and Paris.<sup>2</sup>

Stokely Carmichael possessed a nuanced appreciation for the everyday struggles of poor African Americans in the rural south through shared experiences in civil rights struggles and personally witnessed the soul crushing poverty that contoured the lives of too many northern Blacks. Travels to Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, which included intimate moments with icons such as Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Kwame Nkrumah, allowed Carmichael to imagine the world as a global stage wherein political leaders—no less than Black sharecroppers—played pivotal roles in determining the course of history. Carmichael's unusual biography as a Caribbean born, Bronx raised, and Howard University-educated activist who traveled down south to register Black sharecroppers to vote only to unexpectedly emerge as a mainstream leader, world traveler, and international icon, allows for a panoramic view of postwar freedom struggles. Unglamorous everyday people—ranging from men and women, teenagers, schoolchildren and trade unionists—participated alongside of preachers and street speakers, politicians, and political leaders, intellectuals, and artists comprising a freedom surge that ranged from gritty Harlem neighborhoods to Detroit's industrial shop-floors to Dixie's cradle, Birmingham, Alabama, and out west to Oakland's postwar boom town. Internationally, events in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Caribbean turned much of the postwar era into a global age of decolonization where millions staked humanity's future on the spreading of unprecedented freedoms to far corners of the world.

Black Power would scandalize American society and the national media quickly turned the slogan into a national Rorschach test: One wherein Blacks viewed Black Power as righteous and whites interpreted the term to be filled with violent foreboding. Newspapers brooded over Carmichael's words, quickly forming a consensus that judged the slogan to be at best intemperate and, at worst, a blatant call for anti-white violence and reverse racism.

For the next decade Black Power would reverberate around the world, galvanizing Blacks, outraging whites, and inspiring a cross-section of ethnic and racial minorities. A civil rights militant turned Black Power revolutionary, by 1969 Carmichael abandoned the United States for Conakry, Guinea, and claimed Pan-Africanism as the highest stage of Black political radicalism. For the next thirty years, Carmichael remained a diligent political activist, a throwback to the heady years of the 1960s who remained defiant in his belief that a worldwide revolution was still possible if not imminent. Yet Carmichael's iconography obscures as much as it reveals. Carmichael's role as an advocate of radical democracy and tireless civil rights organizer during the 1960s remains too often buried beneath the celebrity that would engulf him by the summer of 1966.

Carmichael belonged to the small fraternity who literally bled for American democracy during the early 1960s. By Carmichael's own recollection, between June 1961 and June 1966, he was arrested twenty-seven times while participating in civil rights activities. For Carmichael, the decision to endure physical violence, personal discomfort, and economic uncertainty was part of a disciplined commitment to radical democracy in service of racial equality, economic justice, and Black community empowerment. As a young student activist at Howard University, Carmichael helped transform American democracy by participating on the front lines of social and political upheavals during the civil rights movement's *heroic years*.<sup>3</sup> From Cambridge, Maryland to Washington, D.C. through Mississippi's Delta region to the backwoods of Lowndes County, Alabama, Carmichael helped organize poor, unlettered, Blacks. Dreams of self-determination



*“Demonstration for Adam Clayton Powell Outside the Capitol, Washington, DC” January 10, 1967 © Bettmann/CORBIS*

bumped headlong into traditions of white supremacy, random violence, and economic retribution. Carmichael’s growing realization that political power, rather than legal redress or moral suasion, was the key to racial justice in America would lead him to preach a politics of Black Power that, in his mind, reflected democracy’s best face and last hope. By 1966 Carmichael would emerge as a national leader of an insurgent Black Power Movement and help inspire the creation of militant groups such as the Black Panthers (who Carmichael would serve as honorary Prime Minister for a little over one year). An icon to a generation of young people who hailed him as a new Malcolm X, Carmichael would search for common ground with Martin Luther King Jr., experience harassment at the hands of federal authorities, and enjoy the company of international revolutionaries.<sup>4</sup>

Carmichael’s political activism during the 1960s provides a unique prism to view issues of race, war, and democracy in the United States at the local, national, and international level. Tall, handsome, and charismatic, Carmichael burst onto the American political scene in 1966 as the leading proponent of Black Power radicalism. A Renaissance man equally comfortable in sharecropper’s overalls, business suits, and dashikis, Carmichael projected the passionate temper of a street speaker, the contemplative demeanor of an academic, and the gregariousness of a Baptist preacher; traits that helped turn him into an international icon. The political equivalent of a rock star during the late 1960s, Carmichael’s historical significance dimmed over time. In contrast to Malcolm X, Carmichael’s political exploits remain both less documented and revered. The publication of Carmichael’s posthumously published autobiography along with the spate of new scholarship that I have elsewhere called “Black Power Studies” has ignited a long overdue process of historical investigation and analysis of Carmichael’s political thought and activism.<sup>5</sup> Carmichael represents arguably the most important bridge between civil rights and Black Power activism: a grassroots organizer whose unparalleled courage made him at home among sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta and urban militants in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, bold enough to trek through Cuba’s *Sierra Maestra* with Fidel Castro and denounce Lyndon Johnson as a war-monger, and compassionate enough to share unscripted moments of friendship with

Martin Luther King, Jr. Ultimately, the controversies and contradictions of Carmichael's political activism complicate narratives of civil rights and Black Power by recovering buried intimacies of the larger postwar freedom struggle.

## Bleeding For Democracy

In June 1961, one month after completing final exams for spring classes at Howard University, Stokely Carmichael flew from Washington to New Orleans to join an integrated group of Freedom Riders traveling from Louisiana to Mississippi. He was nineteen years old and he was not alone. Groups of interracial volunteers embarked on an experiment in democracy that spring, placing political principle ahead of personal safety by challenging ancient restrictions that barred Blacks and whites from interstate travel. Carmichael arrived in New Orleans at 3AM, met by a nervous escort, hopeful that their early morning rendezvous would throw off suspicion of civil rights activity. The sight of strange trees glittered with Spanish moss evoked images of a gothic south teeming with lynch mobs. A large mob outside the New Orleans train station forced Carmichael's fellow freedom riders onto the train for Jackson through a blur of concentrated violence that left them too exhilarated with the relief of survival to dwell on cuts and bruises sustained during the frantic boarding.<sup>6</sup> On June 8 Carmichael and the Freedom Riders entered a white waiting room in Jackson, Mississippi, were quickly arrested and, after a short stint in Hinds County jail, sent on a two hour drive to Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary. Cattle prods pressed against the naked flesh of prisoners welcomed inmates to Parchman farm. Ringed by barbed-wire fences and defended by shot-gun-toting sentries, Parchman's warden added to the tension by evoking the specter of the prison's "bad niggers," including death row inmates with predilections for random violence.<sup>7</sup> Freedom Riders in Parchman, which now included Congress of Racial Equality leader James Farmer as well as a yarmulke-wearing young preacher named James Bevel, responded to small and large instances of brutality with prayers, freedom songs, and a hunger strike. Carmichael celebrated his twentieth birthday, June 29, in Parchman farm, eventually spending more than five weeks in prison before his release on July 19.<sup>8</sup> He would cherish the memory as a rite of passage and preparation for dozens of future arrests.<sup>9</sup>

May Carmichael would spend a tense evening listening to the radio before learning of her son's predicament. Stokely had braced May for his incarceration before heading to Mississippi, gently telling his mother not to worry, that he was "going to jail" and to be "proud," not ashamed. Responding to neighbors who asked, "Is that your boy Stokely they've got down there?" she responded as her son had instructed. "Yes, that's my boy and I'm so proud of him I don't know what to do!" Adolph Carmichael frowned upon his son's activism, but took Stokely at his word that he would earn a college degree before devoting his life to the movement. Immigrants from Port of Spain, Trinidad transplanted to the Bronx, May and Adolph Carmichael learned early on to compromise with Stokely, who seemed more willful, mischievous, and political than his two sisters. If May Carmichael identified with her son's independent streak, Adolph retained a stubborn faith in God and hard work. Adolph's hope in the promise of America's immigrant roots contrasted with Stokely's ingrained skepticism. After Adolph's premature death in 1962, Stokely would come to view the American dream as a cruel joke played at the expense of honest men like his father who worked himself to an early grave.<sup>10</sup>

Time in Parchman farm transformed Stokely Carmichael. But in ways that could hardly be expected. Mississippi provided Carmichael a chance to see a landscape teeming with beauty where others saw poverty. The Mississippi Delta's wide spaces punctuated by

flatlands dotted with decrepit shacks, simple one-story churches, and historic plantations featured an impoverished landscape that most Americans chose to ignore. The region's dense black soil, dark wetlands, and large plantations formed an almost surreal physical environment. Mississippi exposed the young Carmichael to the "pain and joy of struggle" as well as the sometimes melancholy "brotherhood of shared danger within bonds of loyalty."<sup>11</sup>

The delta hid untold potential in the faces of obsidian-eyed sharecroppers who toiled in anonymity; including those whose birth, life, and death would never be officially recorded. These same sharecroppers held the power to alter the course of American history through an individual act of self-determination—the vote—that expressed the collective will of Black communities in the south who bore no chains yet still lived in bondage. Black sharecroppers in Mississippi distilled the very meaning of citizenship in their resilient, patient, and courageous folkways and their example earned Carmichael's undying respect for the inhabitants of the rural delta. Carmichael held more than just admiration for sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. Stokely Carmichael loved them; developing a lifelong sensitivity to the rhythms, customs, and folkways of rural southern blacks that made him a particularly effective organizer. Older residents viewed him with respect and admiration and he fiercely guarded their trust in return.<sup>12</sup>

But Carmichael's sensitivity could cut both ways. Carmichael could be temperamental, brash, and arrogant; a know-it-all whose easy smile masked a nervous energy that left him, by the age of twenty-two, with an ulcer. A larger than life personality meant, at times, an outsized ego. The ability to make split second, life-saving decisions in the field could, in other settings, come off as impetuous, intemperate, and reckless. In the face of dangers seen and unseen, Carmichael—by turns bold and compassionate, belligerent and contemplative—inspired hope and confidence among fellow activists in the field who looked to him as a leader among equals. If Carmichael's aura of uncompromising certitude attracted scores of admirers in the movement that made him a sort of minor celebrity among certified organizers and activists, it would serve as a major repellent once amplified by media projection that cast him as a dangerously charismatic heir to Malcolm X.<sup>13</sup>

Mississippi also housed the grotesque. In 1964, three years after his first trip to the delta, Carmichael served as project director of Mississippi's Second Congressional District during the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee—(SNCC, pronounced "snick") led Freedom Summer. That summer Carmichael plotted strategy, coordinated the deployment of resources, and tried to stay alive. SNCC's Sojourner motor fleet featured modified cars designed to help civil rights workers outrun local vigilantes, Klansmen, and law enforcement officials and Carmichael's skills behind the wheel earned him the nickname the "Delta Devil."<sup>14</sup>

The next year Carmichael rode the wave of Martin Luther King's Selma-based voting rights campaign into clandestine organizing in the rural woods of Lowndes County, Alabama in the late winter of 1965. Roaming for safe territory on mules and attracting rural people daring enough to talk to civil rights activists (and sometimes brave enough to provide shelter), Carmichael poured all of his organizing energies into one of Alabama's most obscure regions.

## Black Power

"We are trying to build democracy," Carmichael wrote Lorna D. Smith in 1966, a white SNCC supporter who would remain a steadfast ally. "And we have dedicated our lives to that task." Carmichael's letter discussed SNCC's recent opposition to the Vietnam War, his organizing efforts in Lowndes County, Alabama, and his personal dedication to transforming society. Sacrifice, expressed in the shared willingness of civil rights workers to

bleed for democratic principles, continued to animate Carmichael's political activism but the deaths of colleagues—both Black and white—made him impatient for enduring justice that transcended legal and legislative boundaries. "Our commitment is to man not to a plot of earth or even our country," wrote Carmichael, confessing appreciative relief for Smith's support in the face of being dismissed by critics as "beatniks or communists." Carmichael resurrected hope in language that found kinship with Martin Luther King's notion of political transformation through heroic witness against historic miseries. "It is the human contact that we make, while suffering that will make the difference."<sup>15</sup>

Racial demons encountered down south served as Carmichael's point of departure in the *New Republic*, where he expressed measured hope for expanding American democracy, holding up African Americans as a metaphorical battering ram, the prickly conscience of a nation too often content to look the other way as if the abject misery of its Black sisters and brothers provided an unacknowledged but much needed safety net. Substituting the painful details of organizing in Alabama with passing references to anonymous martyrs, Carmichael directed his gaze toward an impoverished American political landscape. "The majority view is a lie," wrote Carmichael, "based on the premise of upward mobility which doesn't exist for most Americans." Blunt candor gave way to a roll call of grief, an indictment of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society as "preposterous," and then, finally, a hard earned faith that poor, unlettered sharecroppers represented democracy's best face. Legislative and legalistic racial breakthroughs inspired hope even as they magnified the tragedy of white supremacy's stubborn refusal to regard Blacks as fellow citizens. The disenfranchised, declared Carmichael, would "redefine what the Great Society is," imparting meaning that would soar above rhetoric. "I place my own hope for the United States," he wrote, in the ability of Black sharecroppers who had shown through quiet determination that "they can articulate and be responsible and hold power."<sup>16</sup>

On May 3, 1966, nine hundred Blacks in Lowndes County seemed to justify Carmichael's faith in local people's ability to govern themselves by attending a nominating convention at the First Baptist Church of Hayneville, a half mile from the county courthouse. Carmichael watched with unabashed pride as Lowndes County's African Americans voted to place a black panther on the ballot for the upcoming November election. The black panther inspired Black hope and white anxiety and, over time, would come to be seen as a symbol of revolution recognized around the world.<sup>17</sup>

Five days after Lowndes County's convention, Carmichael was elected chairman of SNCC. As chairman Carmichael sparked immediate controversy by declining to attend a White House civil rights conference and publicly describing integration as "an insidious subterfuge for white supremacy." Carmichael's remarks elicited swift rebuke from Martin Luther King Jr., who regretted SNCC's overt flirtation with Black nationalism. King's criticism belied what would become an enduring personal friendship. In fact, shortly after his election, King called Carmichael to offer congratulatory words and advice. Meanwhile, in tense meetings with SNCC staff Carmichael candidly admitted that he was losing faith in American democracy. Optimistic, now apparently mistaken, assumptions that America "is really a democracy, which just isn't working" had left Carmichael and SNCC reeling, anxious, and unprepared for the naked brutality that met each step toward racial progress.<sup>18</sup>

Carmichael and King's relationship grew that June during an almost three-week civil rights march that forged an enduring personal friendship even as it highlighted political differences. The shooting of James Meredith during his one man "march against fear" attracted major civil rights leaders to Mississippi. Marching side by side, Carmichael and King proved physical and temperamental contrasts. Tall, lanky, and restless, Carmichael laconically told reporters that he held no personal commitment to non-violence but saw it as little more than a political tactic. The slightly portly, more diminutive King

politely disagreed, retaining an outward appearance of self-control honed over a decade in the national spotlight. Behind closed doors, the two men enjoyed an easy familiarity and bantered like old friends. Just thirty-seven, King admired the soon to be twenty-five-year-old Carmichael's commitment to struggle, and Carmichael appreciated King's unassuming demeanor and earthy sense of humor. The march allowed Carmichael to see a different, less formal, side of King. "During those sweltering days Dr. King became to many of us no longer a symbol or an icon," he remembered, "but a warm, funny, likeable, unpretentious human being who shared many of our values." It also exposed a new side of Stokely Carmichael. "This is the twenty-seventh time that I've been arrested," Carmichael informed a large crowd on the evening of Thursday, June 16, 1966. "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!" By the time the Meredith March concluded ten days later, Carmichael, and not King, had become the most talked about figure of America's civil rights movement.<sup>19</sup> Three days after giving a rousing, combative speech in Jackson, Mississippi, that cemented his status as the new spokesman of Black militancy, Carmichael celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday.

### "The Magnificent Barbarian"

An *Ebony* feature story on the heels of the Meredith March opened with an appropriately cinematic scene that described Carmichael in high-speed pursuit of white toughs fresh from screaming racial epithets at a busload of Black SNCC workers. Historian Lerone Bennett's profile cast Carmichael as the avatar of a new movement; a handsome, brilliant, cosmopolitan who unnamed SNCC compatriots dubbed "the Magnificent Barbarian" in homage to his ability to inspire everyday people and alienate powerful figures in equal proportion. Civil rights lawyer Len Holt compared Carmichael to a "statue of a Nubian god," just as Bennett suggested a resemblance to contemporary movie stars Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier. Beyond the glamour of Carmichael's good looks and personal charisma lay an intellectual depth and sensitivity at times overshadowed by a brazen confidence and naked candor that, one anonymous civil rights leader admitted, "terrifies me and exalts me at the same time."<sup>20</sup> Invoking self-defense as a personal right beyond political debate, Carmichael offered Black Power as a strategy for self-determination not seen in the Black community since Reconstruction. White backlash merely amplified the wisdom in Black Power's rhetorical call to arms by revealing profound inequities carved in centuries old racial fault lines. Ultimately, Bennett concluded, Black Power would take the lead in society's transformation through the at times unsettling figure of Carmichael, a forward thinking visionary who represented the "most advanced social and democratic interests in America."<sup>21</sup>

Carmichael showcased an uncanny ability to impress the unlettered and elite. In front of a group of Harlem teen-agers, Carmichael presented himself as a dashing man about town, donning a fashionable blue suit, Italian boots, and striped tie to deliver a speech that played up the soft remnant of his Trinidadian accent. Before a mature, harder edged crowd in Newark, New Jersey, that included LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), the Black nationalist poet and Black Arts advocate, Carmichael disarmed participants with homespun wisdom packaged in a slightly exaggerated southern drawl—"Is it okay if ah take off mah jacket?" he asked at one point. From Newark Carmichael traveled to Glen Falls, Vermont, for a leadership institute where he starred as the young sage before an interracial group of middle-aged clergy, seasoned activists, and youthful hippies. Equally effective in all three settings, Carmichael simultaneously channeled a charismatic rage leavened by a playful sense of humor.<sup>22</sup>

In the spring of 1967 Martin Luther King Jr. eclipsed Carmichael's seasoned antiwar rhetoric with a speech that sent shockwaves across the nation. King's April 4 address at New York's Riverside Church lent international stature and moral clarity to antiwar speeches that Carmichael had steadfastly delivered for almost one year. At Riverside, King contrasted Carmichael's bitterness toward the failed promises of American democracy with weary hope. "The world now demands," pleaded King, "a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve."<sup>23</sup> Although King's words now resound with an authority that has swelled retrospectively, shortly after his Riverside speech he found himself in the uncomfortable position of "having to fight suggestions at every stop that his Vietnam stance merely echoed the vanguard buzz of Stokely Carmichael."<sup>24</sup> He needn't have worried. King's peace advocacy would be highlighted by historians as a daring rejection of the status quo, just as Carmichael's stridently eloquent antiwar position would, in the long term, be muffled by association with Black Power. More comfortable with Stokely as a youthful saber-rattler than a thoughtful antiwar activist, journalists and future historians would virtually ignore the SNCC chairman's meticulous criticism of American involvement in Vietnam as an example of the larger failure of the nation's democratic experiment.<sup>25</sup>

Carmichael's insouciance struck a chord in *Life* magazine photojournalist Gordon Parks. Parks (an equally adept writer, memoirist, and raconteur) and Carmichael bonded over shared reputations as mavericks. "Stokely gives the impression," Parks impishly observed, that he could "stroll through Dixie in broad daylight using the Confederate flag for a handkerchief."<sup>26</sup> Four months of shadowing Carmichael made Parks appreciate the nuances of a personality that was both outsized and earthy. In Parks' narrative, Carmichael ("complex, sensitive, and angry") popped off the page as a "spokesman not so much of a movement as a mood" that stood in contrast with the presumed passiveness of earlier generations. Parks "marveled" at Carmichael's "ability to adjust in any environment." Tracking Carmichael on university campuses, with hard-core inner-city militants, and rural Blacks in Alabama, Parks touted the young revolutionary as a new kind of Renaissance man; at ease among sharecroppers, intellectuals, and urban militants.<sup>27</sup> Flashes of humor over childhood reminiscences (the white kids at Bronx Science High School considered Carmichael, a self-proclaimed bad dancer, "their chocolate Fred Astaire") turned to grim recognition of his mother's long days as a maid and his father's premature death due to backbreaking labor. Perceptively, Parks described King's current antiwar stance as following on the heels of Carmichael, whose rage against Vietnam, the draft, and Lyndon Johnson served as a hallmark to his standard stump speech.<sup>28</sup> Carmichael's unshakable antiwar position evoked conflicting feelings in Parks whose son served as a tank gunner in Southeast Asia. Parks wondered which of the two young men's fight was more just. Finding "no immediate answer," Parks concluded that Carmichael's passion for justice gave physical risk a clear political purpose the Vietnam crisis lacked. For "in the face of death, which was so possible for the both of them, I think Stokely would surely be more certain of why he was about to die."<sup>29</sup> Stokely Carmichael had become, for Parks and millions of other Black Americans, a surrogate son.

In May 1967, with his tenure as SNCC chairman coming to an end, Carmichael made plans to resume local organizing. "This is sort of my last speaking engagement," he told an audience at a Sunday evening dance that capped off 'Stokely Carmichael Day in Chicago,' "cause after this I got two more to go to, and then I'm going to D.C., and we're going to sure enough take over that city and it's going to be ours, lock, stock, and barrel."<sup>30</sup> Two days later FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover released portions of his printed congressional testimony, taken three months earlier, to the news media. Bombshell allegations charged Carmichael with maintaining contact with communist front groups and FBI phone lines buzzed with reporters clamoring for more information, only to be informed that Hoover's

testimony stood “on it’s own two feet and we can add nothing.” Reporters confronted Carmichael in Grand Rapids, Michigan, fresh from an electrifying antiwar speech at Washington’s Lincoln Memorial Congregational Church. Instead of the expected fireworks, Carmichael calmly requested that Hoover prove the charges.<sup>31</sup> Southern University students sat transfixed, the next day, as Carmichael discussed political revolution by way of the radical psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose legacy ran past his premature death in 1961 through the publication (and translation) of a blockbuster book *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>32</sup>

The timing of Hoover’s news release coincided with FBI efforts to exploit “known weaknesses of Carmichael.” A search for personal scandal augmented the bureau’s efforts, coordinated with the justice department, to build a criminal case against Carmichael (complete with scores of affidavits from informers who attended his speeches) for selective service violations.<sup>33</sup> The FBI judged Carmichael to be a discreet ladies man who enjoyed the occasional drink, subsisted on income from lectures, and shunned fancy hotels in favor of home cooked hospitality. A frequent flier who favored no “particular airline” Carmichael exhibited a lack of routine that frustrated agents searching for pressure points found in behavior patterns.<sup>34</sup> Bureau surveillance of Carmichael’s private life paralleled frantic reports from Washington civic leaders suggesting that Carmichael’s planned residence in the city risked fiscal crisis in the form of cancelled business conventions and higher crime.<sup>35</sup>

But Carmichael’s status as a national leader complicated his return to grassroots organizing. Events in California would soon make it impossible. The Oakland based local activist Huey P. Newton’s decision to send an armed convoy of Black Panthers (BPP) to the state capitol in Sacramento on May 2, 1967 triggered bursts of panic and near hysteria that simultaneously burnished the young organization’s celebrity while jeopardizing its chances of longevity. Newton’s gamble poised the Black Panthers on a high wire between daring improvisation and reckless bravado that mixed threats of brooding violence with the exhilarating spectacle of street corner toughs as political revolutionaries. Like surrealist painters, the Black Panthers imagined a world not yet in existence, but one that they could will into being. Newton’s subsequent drafting of Carmichael into the BPP continued a pattern that marked the Panthers as defiant visionaries bold enough to invite Black Power’s chief icon and national spokesman to join their modest local group. Newton’s mandate conferred the rank of field marshal on Carmichael, with a public commission to “establish revolutionary law, order and justice” over the United States to the Continental Divide.<sup>36</sup> It was a most unlikely reward, conferred in absentia (Carmichael was out of the country at the time of Newton’s executive mandate), for Carmichael’s ongoing activism in Lowndes County, Alabama whose panther symbol had been eagerly snapped up by scores of militants, forming its most enduring beachhead in Oakland, California.

There was a whiff of desperation to Newton’s order, since Carmichael scarcely needed to lend his name to a group of revolutionaries who could easily be mistaken for misguided, if colorful, Black gangsters. An August, 1967 *New York Times* exposé resuscitated the waning buzz of the group’s Sacramento adventure by publishing “The Call of the Black Panthers” written by *Ramparts*’ assistant managing editor Sol Stern. The story was accompanied by a soon-to-be iconic photo of Huey P. Newton. With an open collared white dress shirt peering underneath a black leather jacket, Newton appeared pensive while sitting in flared chair holding a rifle in one hand and a spear in another, contoured by African shields carefully strewn on the floor across its pages. The image evoked poetic juxtapositions between the past and present, the modern and the ancient, that suggested forward thinking Black revolutionaries required a potent knowledge of history and politics. For Stern the Panthers’ limited impact on the Bay Area’s civil rights scene made them

less of a political phenomenon than a sociological one.<sup>37</sup> Against the backdrop of national civil disorders in urban cities, the Panthers—with their melodramatic statements, bombastic posture, and dead serious swagger—demanded attention. Stern’s profile contained all of the ingredients designed to turn the group into a household name. The article lingered over Newton’s good looks and smoldering intensity, showcased co-founder Bobby Seale’s common touch with everyday people, and documented the Oakland police department’s visceral hatred for the Panthers, quoting one anonymous officer’s wish that both groups engage in “an old-fashioned shootout.” With characteristic brio, the Panthers inflated membership numbers, spoke of mounting a global revolution against American imperialism, and convened sparsely attended rallies where their rage against the police drew more interest from curiosity seekers than new recruits.<sup>38</sup>

## The World Stage

Stokely Carmichael toured London, his first stop on a five-month international tour, as the Panthers captured local headlines. As critics fumed that he deftly recycled the same anti-American speech into “a first class, round the world airline ticket,” international and domestic supporters hailed Carmichael as a global emissary whose political platform spanned nothing less than the entire world.<sup>39</sup> Carmichael’s tour coincided with furious FBI investigations attempting to link him to the Communist Party and domestic urban unrest in cities such as Newark and Detroit that, Black Power activists argued, was a mere prelude to a more violent revolution to come. In London to attend the “Dialectics of Liberation” conference that featured well known radical intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse, Carmichael dazzled intellectuals and activists alike. Angela Davis, a recent Brandeis University graduate and perhaps Marcuse’s most precocious student, found Carmichael to be erudite and insightful. British newspapers described him as a “phenomenon” whose “slogan is Black Power” and whose skin color constituted “his country.”<sup>40</sup> Alternately quoting Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Carmichael mesmerized journalists with stories that mixed personal biography, raw political experience, and intellectual agility into a pungent mix that was both mysterious and revelatory. From working-class neighborhoods of Brixton, Hackney, and Notting Hill, Carmichael recounted how an early infatuation with Western civilization (in Trinidad and the Bronx) curdled with his new found knowledge of the Black world’s hidden history and the white world’s horrific transgressions. Calling Malcolm X his “patron saint,” Carmichael announced that urban riots in the United States were actually “rebellions” and predicted that domestic violence was inevitable in a nation birthed in bloodshed.<sup>41</sup> Carmichael dialogued with London’s militant Caribbean, African, and white students at Africa House, a headquarters for progressives of all colors. Michael X (nee DeFrietas), a self-styled Black Power activist, fellow Trinidadian, and self-proclaimed Malcolm X disciple, regaled Carmichael with his dark humor.<sup>42</sup> On July 18, 1967 Carmichael delivered a wide ranging speech that touched upon issues of race, class, and culture at the Dialectics of Liberation Conference. American cities, he proclaimed, would be “populated by peoples of the Third World” unwilling to tolerate cultural degradation and institutional racism.<sup>43</sup> Black urban youth represented the most potentially disruptive force to combat a global system of racial and economic exploitation. Untamed by the forces of racism, the inner city’s “young-bloods” comprised the “real revolutionary proletariat, ready to fight by any means necessary” for Black liberation.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after his visit, British authorities reacted to Carmichael’s volatile presence by promptly banning him from ever returning to England.<sup>45</sup>

Newark and Detroit burned just as Carmichael arrived in Cuba, where he held up the island’s revolution as a daring experiment in freedom and outraged American officials

with forecasts of a domestic race war complete with urban guerrillas. Carmichael's search for an international model for political revolution suitable for Black Americans would continue in Africa. After leaving Cuba, and with the State Department in hot pursuit, Carmichael lunched with Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, met with guerrilla leaders in Algiers, and arrived in Conakry, Guinea, in time to meet with three of Africa's most respected figures: Sekou Toure, Kwame Nkrumah, and Amilcar Cabral.<sup>46</sup>

Carmichael's meetings in Conakry would prove especially fruitful. In correspondence from Guinea, Carmichael admonished SNCC workers to resist the temptation of petty squabbles and infighting. "Our people are dying in the streets of Detroit, Vietnam, Congo . . . and all over," he wrote, casting the Third World in racial solidarity with Black freedom struggles. "I hope my trip and future trips make things HOTTER for you all," Carmichael insisted, since this would separate serious revolutionaries from pretenders. "I wish most of you would wake up and catch up with your people. They are ahead of you."<sup>47</sup>

Guinean president Ahmed Sekou Toure presided over a one party state that advocated a form of African socialism that retained indigenous cultural flourishes appealing to Black nationalists. An outspoken and charismatic proponent of Pan Africanism, Toure impressed Carmichael as a steadfast and unpretentious leader and the two developed a close rapport.<sup>48</sup> Guinea was also the residence of deposed Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah. Ousted in a coup the previous year, Nkrumah was a living legend among Pan-Africanists a status he retained in spite of his recent political misfortunes. Conakry's coastal surroundings, low rise buildings, and arid climate dotted with mango trees and coconut palms, reminded Carmichael of his native Port of Spain. Nkrumah's scenic coastal villa provided an ironic contrast to the reality of political exile. The *Osagyefo* (or redeemer of his native land) and Carmichael took an instant liking to each other. In wide-ranging, candid conversations, Nkrumah chafed at Carmichael's impetuous nature while Carmichael came away with renewed pan-African impulses. Even as he prepared for the next stop on his global tour, Carmichael made plans to return to Africa.

Carmichael's month in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, which served as the base for competing revolutionary groups with ambitions for sovereignty in far corners of colonial Africa, would prove controversial. Operatives from Europe, Africa, the United States, and other parts of the world trafficked in real and imagined adventures that made Dar es Salaam one of Africa's most dangerous and exotic cities. In Dar, Carmichael recorded taped messages to Black youth from Tanzania that stressed the need for pride in Black culture and an African identity as the key to a transcendent unity that bound together communities separated by oceans. "First we are African, living in the United States, but first we are Africans." Identification with Africa promised to restore ties that stretched from "South Africa to Nova Scotia" and prepare a generation of Blacks scattered across the world to struggle for self-determination no matter the cost.<sup>49</sup>

Carmichael's hope for Black unity contrasted with growing political divisions in Africa, whose reach soon spread to Tanzania. Frustrated opposition groups embraced Carmichael as a symbol of free speech even as nervous government officials and United States Information Service agents watched his every move. In picturesque Zanzibar Carmichael addressed an Afro-Shirazi Youth league rally soaking up spectacular indigenous sights that included clove trees. Carmichael's public criticisms of Africa's jet-setting guerrilla leaders "living in luxurious hotels, mixing with white people" upset rebel leaders who dismissed his charges as the naïve ravings of an amateur. Ripples from Carmichael's outspoken assertiveness swelled into flagrant displays of unsanctioned political activity by campus radicals, the press, and various activists. Carmichael departed Tanzania with painful lessons about African politics, where independence rested on fluid alliances, ancient

histories, and indigenous cultures that remained tantalizing incomprehensible to even the most sympathetic outsiders.<sup>50</sup>

## A Dangerous Year

In 1968 Carmichael's presence in Washington placed him at the center of the growing controversy surrounding Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's campaign. King's new organizing direction, announced the previous summer in his third book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* posited massive civil disobedience as the linchpin behind a national movement for social and economic justice. King's tactics, for different reasons, gave both his supporters and enemies pause. SCLC's full plans to stage a massive "live in" at the nation's capital struck Black Power militants as foolish, Washington politicians as quixotic, and local authorities as trouble. Journalists alternately described the campaign as a reckless stunt and a last ditch effort that anticipated the demise of non-violence as a force for social change.<sup>51</sup>

King's determination to organize a mass protest in the nation's capital renewed his combatively friendly relationship with Carmichael forged in the tumult of 1966's Meredith March. Twice during the first week of February Carmichael and King met to hash over disputes, discuss areas of mutual agreement, and massage political differences. During a closed meeting of two hundred activists at Washington's Church of the Redeemer, King disclosed more detailed plans of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's upcoming Poor People's Campaign. Carmichael expressed support for the campaign's goals while maintaining SNCC's organizational autonomy. Press reports glossed over the complexity behind these negotiations in favor of characterizing the meeting as part of King's effort to neutralize violent threats posed by Black Power militants.<sup>52</sup>

Behind the scenes Carmichael assured King that SNCC's intentions were positive. "Stokely, you don't need to tell me that," replied King. "I know you." Privately, King expressed reservations, confiding to advisor Stanley Levison that although Carmichael was now "sweet as pie," he tried to "pull a power play on us in Washington," in a coup thwarted only by a lack of support.<sup>53</sup>

Two days after meeting with King, Carmichael unveiled a more sensitive side at a conference of Methodist ministers in Cincinnati, Ohio. An astonished group of around 250 clergymen patiently listened to a bible-quoting Carmichael who held up Jesus' dual commitment to saving souls and eradicating poverty as the contemporary challenge facing the ministry. Quoting the book of Acts, Carmichael urged the ministers to "turn the world upside down" in pursuit of social justice and deployed snippets of Jeremiah to relay the message that social upheavals to root out injustice proved consistent with tenets of the Christian faith. Reverend James Lawson, chair of the National Conference of Negro Methodists, informed skeptical reporters that "Stokely has the basic compassion called for in the Christian faith," acknowledging Carmichael's presence as a lightning rod that carried a message that Black Methodists nonetheless needed to hear.<sup>54</sup>

On Thursday, April 4, Martin Luther King was shot by sniper fire while standing on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. King's assassination placed new pressures on Carmichael. Almost four months after returning from his international tour, Carmichael had attempted to return to local organizing in Washington. But efforts to forge a Black United Front with the city's militants and moderates stalled and activists inside of SNCC's Washington Field Office grew resentful over Carmichael's star power. Carmichael's growing alliance with the Black Panthers proved more promising and two public speeches in California in February on behalf of the "Free Huey Movement" left no doubt that he remained the biggest speaking draw among Black militants in the

nation. Carmichael's private life also attracted intense public scrutiny after he became engaged to South African singer Miriam Makeba. Almost ten years older than Carmichael, Makeba was an international star whose close professional contacts included entertainer Harry Belafonte. Critics charged Carmichael with entering into a marriage of convenience, ignoring the couple's genuine affection toward each other in favor of stories that chronicled Makeba's declining concert schedule after their announced engagement.<sup>55</sup>

As news of King's death spread throughout the city, Carmichael, along with SNCC workers Cleve Sellers and Lester McKinnie, led a group of angry protesters down Washington's U Street corridor of drugstores, supermarkets, and theaters, asking store owners to close. At one point Walter Fauntroy, one of King's advisors, practically dragged Carmichael by the arms pleading with him to stay calm. Small, attentive crowds gathered around transistor radios sifting information from repetitively breathless news stories recounting the details of King's death. As passersby shattered the windows of the Republic Theater, an unlikely diplomat emerged in the form of Carmichael who screamed, "This is not the way!" backed by a chorus of SNCC workers repeatedly chanting "Take it easy, Brothers!" Unable to control the crowd they eventually retreated a few blocks away, back to Carmichael's apartment. Bittersweet memories pulled SNCC activists through the night, with Carmichael leading tearful reminiscences of his friendship with King, intense revelations that caught his colleagues off guard.<sup>56</sup>

On September 5, 1968 Carmichael and Miriam Makeba flew to Dakar, Senegal from New York City. Over the next several weeks they made preparations to relocate to Africa and traveled to Conakry, Guinea, where Carmichael met with Kwame Nkrumah for the second time in a year. In conversations with Nkrumah, Carmichael presented the Black Panthers as a group of revolutionaries committed to the deposed leader's triumphant return to Ghana. With the entitlement of a former ruler, Nkrumah preached patience, reminding Carmichael that "without a base we can do nothing."<sup>57</sup>

Three days after Carmichael arrived in Africa, Huey P. Newton was convicted in Oakland, California of manslaughter. Both Newton's conviction and Richard Nixon's narrow presidential election two months later accelerated Carmichael's plans to seek a new political base. Carmichael's marriage to Miriam Makeba and hopes for the future collided with a palpable concern for his own safety. Always the public firebrand, in quieter times Carmichael confessed fear of being assassinated at the hands of the authorities. There were good reasons to be afraid. FBI surveillance of Carmichael had reached comic proportions. After an agent's inquiry into his travel itinerary resulted in a bomb scare following a miscommunication with a TWA flight clerk, Carmichael laughed off the incident, unfurling a huge poster of Che Guevara as he traded barbs with reporters, but the harassment exacted a toll.<sup>58</sup>

In November Carmichael publicly assailed white liberals during a speaking tour in California. At San Jose State he denounced liberals as poseurs interested only in reform and dismissed hippies as misguided and ignorant. At tiny De Anza College he struck down the question of white participation in Black Power and continued his assault on liberals.<sup>59</sup> Carmichael's speech would be a prelude to his public break from the Panthers. For Carmichael, Black unity trumped talk of interracial alliances; a hard lesson learned from his days in SNCC witnessing the deaths of Black and white comrades to advance democratic ideals that receded further from view the more they were pursued.

That December Carmichael continued his plans to move to Guinea.<sup>60</sup> Before leaving he made a series of controversial appearances at southern colleges where he openly discussed revolutionary violence. At North Carolina A & T Carmichael's address, "A New World to Build," announced that the period of "entertainment" had passed in order to introduce concrete strategies in service of a political revolution. Black people, he declared, suffered through both racial segregation and psychological colonization discussed in Frantz

Fanon's riveting treatise, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon's analysis of European colonization's damaging effect on the Black psyche had an American equivalent in an unspoken compulsion for white standards of beauty. W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of seeing the world through a veil, the possession of a double consciousness that gifted Blacks with prophetic powers yet burdened them with internal conflicts formed the basis of Carmichael's discussion of Black self-determination. Pathological behavior in the form of drugs, gangs, and criminal activity were the most visible manifestation of Black self-loathing. Denial of African identity and all traces to a continent considered uncivilized left Black Americans a people without a history who were ashamed of their own culture. The difference between Negroes and Blacks, Carmichael offered, was that the former clung to the antebellum era's notion of the good slave while the latter recognized contemporary symbols of bondage and set out to transform the society that produced slavery. Yet "every Negro was a potential black man," to be patiently converted toward an "undying love" for the community rather than privately ridiculed or publicly attacked.<sup>61</sup>

## Dreams of Africa

In 1969 a reporter for London's *Sunday Times* found Carmichael in Africa and in a playful mood, lounging with his wife Miriam and her 15-month-old grandson, a radical elder statesman at twenty-eight. Over dinner Carmichael candidly discussed his recent split from the Panthers, decision to relocate to Guinea, and search for new political strategies. If the Panthers represented a political dead end, Carmichael remained unsure of the proper vehicle for the political revolution he still hoped to lead. "I do not know how to begin to cope with the problems" in the United States he admitted, "so for me to stay there and to pretend that I do is for me to deceive myself and my people." On a hotel balcony in Algiers, Carmichael wistfully contrasted his friendship with the late Martin Luther King and newfound enmity with exiled Black Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver's open admiration for Carmichael in early 1967, which had resulted in a flattering essay in *Ramparts* titled "My Father and Stokely Carmichael," had turned sour after Carmichael's resignation from the Panthers. Shortly thereafter ad hominem attacks against Carmichael in the pages of *The Black Panther* newspaper became common. Political disagreements over strategy and tactics had turned personal and Cleaver targeted Carmichael in a baffling, highly publicized open letter that variously accused his one-time hero of being anti-white, a government spy, and a fool.<sup>62</sup> Asked if they could remain friends despite political differences, Carmichael answered, "With Eldridge maybe not," anticipating no end to a torrent of criticism already emanating from the Panthers.

As the conversation shifted to talk of the future Carmichael extolled Nkrumah as Africa's true leader, a statesman bold enough to encourage Pan-Africanism in a continent divided by ethnic and regional differences. The romantic side of Carmichael made it all sound so exciting that the reporter briefly joined the euphoria before stepping back and diplomatically noting that most African leaders did not share Carmichael's enthusiasm for Nkrumah's leadership.<sup>63</sup>

By August, both Carmichael and Cleaver claimed Africa as a political base for far reaching revolution. From Algeria (soon to be officially recognized by the government as the Black Panther Party's International Section), Cleaver plotted political insurrection in the United States by remote control and welcomed a fashionably eclectic band of exiles from the states that included Black militants, hijackers, and other colorful and questionable characters.

From the Congo Republic, Carmichael announced his intention to return Nkrumah to Ghana. "Dr. Nkrumah," he informed reporters in Brazzaville, "was the first man to realize

the urgency of forming an organization of African unity.” The declaration followed an earlier appearance on British television where Carmichael sketched the international make-up of political struggle and vowed to use Africa as a base for a world-wide revolution.

If Carmichael’s activities in Africa made him an icon in world affairs they simultaneously distanced him from the immediacy of domestic Black Power struggles. But in October 1969 he made a comeback of sorts, giving an interview to the Black press, and allowing Ethel Minor, a former SNCC news staff director and close advisor, to report on his international travails in *Muhammad Speaks*. Minor defended Carmichael from accusations of abandonment by militants with hidden agendas and openly dismissive white journalists. Real political organizing, Minor suggested, took place away from the glare of rallies and news conferences. Having concluded that he had taken Black Power as far as possible in the United States, Carmichael encountered political worlds at once larger and further removed from his past organizing. Carmichael’s new direction revolved around acquiring territory in Africa as a base for a political revolution that would assist Black Americans. Carmichael’s relatively low-profile throughout the year, explained Minor, originated in his quest to do “serious organizing” and culminated in a bombshell alliance with African statesman Nkrumah in an announced quest to return him to Ghana. To this end Carmichael steadfastly projected a sanitized version of Ghana’s recent political history that excluded details of the creeping authoritarianism that helped ouster Nkrumah for a morality play that indicted an international cabal of white racists and Black Uncle Toms.<sup>64</sup>

## A Revolutionary in Search of a Movement

Possessed with secrets imparted from the high priest of Pan-Africanism, Carmichael professed the evangelist’s prerogative to spread the word to the uninitiated and would spend the next three decades as perhaps the most robust spokesman of an international Pan-African revolution. The man whose great strength lay in an improvisational creativity that relied more on instinct than ideology, now embraced “Nkrumaism,” with the fervor of an acolyte. “I have,” he declared, “committed myself to live, to kill, and to die for the return of Dr. Nkrumah to Ghana.”<sup>65</sup>

By 1981 Carmichael had changed his name to honor his mentors Kwame Nkrumah (who died in 1972) and Sekou Toure to Kwame Ture, divorced Miriam Makeba, and remarried Marliatou Barre, a doctor, and had a son the next year, Boabacar “Bocar” Biro.<sup>66</sup> Specks of gray marked the now forty-year-old Ture’s hair, and he sported a more notable accent, a combination of francophone West Africa, Trinidad, and the Deep South. Ture snatched moments of domestic tranquility in between frequent tours around the world to raise money and political consciousness. Despite modest success recruiting new members into the All African Peoples’ Revolutionary Party, Ture’s dreams of mobilizing a political revolution through Pan-Africanism receded against a backdrop of a conservative resurgence in the United States and abroad.

Sekou Toure’s death in 1984 triggered domestic upheavals in Guinea that toppled the one party state’s ruling faction, the ironically named Democratic Party of Guinea. The coup left Ture in a kind of political limbo and for a while he was detained by the new ruling faction; an ordeal ended only by the timely intervention of old friends including Jesse Jackson and Chicago mayor Harold Washington. Like a soldier fighting on the front line of what many considered a forgotten war, Ture remained “the unrepentant voice of the 60s.”<sup>67</sup> In 1992, twenty-five years after its initial publication, Ture wrote a new afterward for *Black Power*, the classic manifesto co-authored with political scientist Charles Hamilton.

An analysis of race in America and around the world since the 1960s intermittently broke through sentences promoting a global Pan-African revolution. Black Power, Ture wrote, had been prophetic in many ways, most vitally in its demands for still unimplemented political reforms. Written two months after Los Angeles' massive urban rebellion in April, 1992 Ture posited an unbroken legacy of Black activism that stretched back to antebellum slavery and crossed oceans into Africa and far away nations. Creative, improvisational measures advocated in 1967 now gave way to "Nkrumahism-Tureism," and the belief that his two deceased mentors possessed secrets capable of changing the world.<sup>68</sup>

A diagnosis of advanced prostate cancer in 1996 would, in Ture's recollection, "bring out the best" in former colleagues and friends who raised funds for medical treatment in the states and abroad. Old friends chipped away at the mask of political certainty in interviews, conversations, and fetes to reclaim fleeting intimacies now buried by Ture's obsession to single-handedly ignite a political revolution. Charlie Cobb, a former SNCC worker and one-time confidant, found that, underneath his old friend's political vigilance lay "the old loose Stokely" full of energy and eager to laugh. More often than not, however, Ture remained inside a cocoon of political certainty, filled with catchy phrases (he routinely answered his phone with "ready for the revolution") and a coterie of loyal admirers.<sup>69</sup>

If Ture lived in a political reality of his own making, it was a world that grew larger as his illness progressed. Frantic efforts for treatment took him to New York hospitals, Cuban clinics, and a holistic healing center in Honduras. Further travels, for sentimental reasons, took him back to Guinea and then on to Ghana, Egypt, and South Africa. There were other trips as well. Perhaps most notable was Ture's return home. One June 12, 1996 Ture made his first public appearance (he had returned clandestinely before this) in Trinidad in three decades. Dressed in an aqua green robe Ture spoke to 200 students at the National Heritage Library and implored them to use books as a gateway toward the creation of a more just society.<sup>70</sup>

The race to tie up loose political ends included efforts assisted by former SNCC worker Mike Thelwell, to a complete a long overdue autobiography that would be published five years after his death. Old friends and ex-colleagues from SNCC and the Black Panthers called to inquire about Ture's health. The Nation of Islam provided financial assistance for medical treatment and an ad hoc committee of family and advisors provided treatment options in the United States.

Like his friend Martin Luther King Jr., Ture had made a career out of financial chastity. Annual speaking tours provided subsistence but his health crisis left him economically bereft and totally dependent upon the good will of the Black community he affectionately referred to as "my people." Jesse Jackson stopped by Ture's bedside and Louis Farrakhan kept in regular contact from Chicago. A visit by former Black Panther Communications Secretary Kathleen Cleaver and her two children was followed, coincidentally, by a phone call from Eldridge Cleaver, living his final lonely year in California.

Between 1996 and 1998 Ture spent more time in America than he had over the previous two decades. Ture's illness reunited veterans of the civil rights and Black Power movements in organized tributes to the man whose activism indelibly shaped both eras. On Friday July 5, 1998 Ture departed, for the last time, New York City on route to Guinea. Emaciated, weighing less than one hundred pounds, Ture died in Guinea, on November 15<sup>th</sup> on the west coast of Africa he called home.

## Conclusion

But Ture's death is not the end of this story. Indeed, far from it. If Martin Luther King Jr. is rightfully considered the avatar of the civil rights movement's heroic period, then

Kwame Ture represents, after Malcolm X, the embodiment of the Black Power era. Uncovering the ways in which Ture's legacy ultimately transformed American democracy (even after he long considered America's political system to be hopeless) fundamentally revises narratives of postwar African-American history. Moreover, chronicling Ture's political and personal journey allows us to break out of the confines of bottom-up versus top-down history. In both subtle and spectacular ways, Ture's story goes beyond the stark methodological and interpretive lines usually drawn between political and social history. This is to say that Ture's story encompasses both, allowing us intimate, unvarnished portraits of the poor and the powerful, a window into the world of Black women organizers who mentored Ture such as Ella Baker and Gloria Richardson, new insights into the relationship between Black and white activists during the 1960s, and fresh perspectives of key global powerbrokers—from Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon Johnson to Fidel Castro and Kwame Nkrumah—who helped to transform the postwar world.

New scholarship has underscored the need to complicate narratives of both the civil rights and Black Power era. Yet a search for a synthetic (rather than overarching synthesis) portrait of the postwar era remains tantalizing out of reach. A comprehensive and multi-faceted accounting of Kwame Ture and Black Power necessitates a panoramic view that contours the political, social, cultural, and economic spheres that encompasses history as it is made rather than written. Ture, perhaps better than any single postwar historical figure, provides a singular bridge that helps to better illuminate and understand the era's regional differences and racial scandals, gender controversies and class struggles, multi-racial make-up and challenge to white privilege, and the way in which ordinary people and powerbrokers (sometimes in unison and sometimes at cross purposes) remade America and much of the rest of the world.<sup>71</sup>

From beyond the grave Ture has managed to burnish his legacy via a posthumously published autobiography, *Ready For Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*. In many ways, this autobiography represents the most important book published to date about Ture. The autobiography's portrait of the young Stokely Carmichael as an incandescent figure during the civil rights era's heroic years goes a long way toward recovering Ture's indelible impact on postwar Black freedom struggles. *Ready For Revolution* represents the start of what will be a critical, long, and thoughtful reconsideration of Ture's political activism and contemporary legacy. Ture remained unable or unwilling to delve into precise details of debates, disagreements, and controversies that marked his life. For the historian, appreciating Ture's full complexity will ultimately require nothing less than a rigorously analyzed, meticulously documented, and critically interpretive portrait of the activist: One that will also serve as a comprehensive history of an era.

Through civil rights activism among poor sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta and rural woods of Alabama, Kwame Ture sought to extend America's democratic traditions to Black citizens who toiled in anonymity. Democratic breakthroughs collided with heartbreaking failures that assaulted Ture's youthful sense of idealism and turned him toward a pursuit of power that mixed hope and anger, rage and optimism in a quest for a new America, and over time, a new world. Near the end of his life American democracy's glaring contradictions seemed to pale in comparison with the crisis of African nation states that unfolded in the post Black Power era. But for Ture opportunities remained hidden beneath each setback and, even at its worst, Africa held untold potential. While such patience struck some as naive, Ture remained confident that his political path had helped shape a better world and to his final breath believed in, indeed remained ready for, revolution.

Ture's activism and influence spanned from Harlem to the Mississippi Delta out west to California's Bay Area and the wider worlds of Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the

Caribbean. Most often, however, Ture's presence (except for the obligatory recounting of the Meredith March) is either ignored or demonized in the increasingly vast literature on the civil rights movement. The young Stokely Carmichael's pivotal role in reshaping, scandalizing, and transforming American democratic traditions is, inevitably, lost. Ture's own reticence to acknowledge the depth and complexity of his political journey (even in his own autobiography) at times contributed to the lack of serious scholarly interrogation of his extraordinary life. But there were other reasons as well, most notably Ture's unapologetic commitment to a style of Black radicalism that made him seem out of touch with the political austerity that followed the heady years of the 1960s. Over four decades after the twenty-five-year-old Stokely Carmichael unleashed words sharp enough to cut through the thick humidity of a Mississippi evening, understanding the political experiences (and recovering the historical context) that led to this momentous declaration, and the events after, will transform our comprehension of not only the civil right and Black Power eras, but the larger postwar freedom struggles that inspired and shaped these movements.

## Notes

1. This essay is based on a larger, two-volume, in-progress biography of Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture. I would like to thank Manning Marable, Vanessa Agard-Jones, the *Souls* Editorial Working Group, Femi Vaughan, Daryl Toler, Larry Hughes, and Catarina A. da Silva for their thoughts and comments on this essay.

2. For a comprehensive examination of the movement see Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006). See also Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: Black Power and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006); Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspective on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985); Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the 1960s* (London: Verso, 1999); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Kathleen Cleaver, and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (New York: Brandywine Press, 2000).

3. I use this term to describe the years between 1954's Brown Supreme Court decision and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This time frame encapsulates the master narrative of civil rights—from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to Emmet Till's Lynching; from the Little Rock Crisis to the sit-in movement; James Meredith's efforts to enroll at Ole Miss to the March on Washington and the passages of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Of course a plethora of new scholarship, including my own work, has illustrated the shortcomings of this periodization (some which is cited in the endnotes of this essay). In a fashion, this period represents America's modern day Iliad, with Martin Luther King starring as the tragic hero. The cataclysmic events of the period, with its marches, demonstrations, political assassinations, and interracial cast of powerbrokers, lends the era a cinematic flavor that has made for powerful narratives (both media driven and scholarly) but in the process ossify the movement's contemporary legacy, downplay its ideological diversity, ignore its radicalism, and demonize Black Power as its ruthlessly destructive twin. However, I use the term purposefully to show how historians can transform its meaning by expansively redefining the era's main actors, organizations, geography, and contemporary legacy. See Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* and *The Black Power Movement*.

4. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 132–204; Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

5. See the special issues I edited on “Black Power Studies” in *The Black Scholar* 31(3–4) (Fall/Winter 2001) and 32(1) (Spring 2002); Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* and *The Black Power Movement*; Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*.

6. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, p. 192.

7. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), p. 483.

8. Carmichael was initially placed in the Hinds County Jail before being moved to Parchman Penitentiary. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 198–201, 210–211; FBIKT 100-446080-1166, “Stokely Carmichael: Correlation Summary,” February 29, 1968, p. 2.

9. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, p. 194.

10. Gordon Parks, “Whip of Black Power,” *Life*, May 19, 1967, p. 79; Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 247; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 124–127.

11. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, p. 277.

12. For Carmichael’s relationship with local people in the south see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 335; Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*. See also Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Random House, 1967) and Stokely Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* (New York: Random House, 1971).

13. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 149–161; Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 520–563.

14. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, p. 124. For Black struggles in Mississippi during the civil rights era see Carson, *In Struggle*; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Branch, *Parting the Waters, Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), and *At Canaan’s Edge*; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).

15. Stokely Carmichael to Lorna D. Smith, January 15, 1966, pp. 1–4. Stokely Carmichael Lorna D. Smith Papers, Green Library, Stanford University. Hereafter cited as SCLDS.

16. Stokely Carmichael, “Who Is Qualified?,” *The New Republic*, January 8, 1966, p. 22.

17. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, p. 130; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, pp. 462–465.

18. Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, p. 465.

19. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 132–147; Carson, *In Struggle*, pp. 209–211.

20. Lerone Bennett, Hr., “Stokely Carmichael: Architect of Black Power,” July 1966, *Ebony*. SNCC reprint of *Ebony* article, p. 1.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

22. Bernard Weinraub, “The Brilliance of Black,” *Esquire*, January 1967, pp. 130, 132–134.

23. Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, p. 593.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 603.

25. King had come out against the war as early as 1965 but was quickly pressured into silence. SNCC subsequently became one of the war’s leading critics and from June 1966–April 1967, Carmichael emerged as the Black freedom struggle’s most vocal anti-war critic. See Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, pp. 254–255, 308–309, 591–597; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 179–183.

26. Parks, “Whip of Black Power,” p. 78.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 80, 82. See also, Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*; “King Near to Stokely?” *Berkeley Barb*, May 19–25, 1967.

29. Parks, “Whip of Black Power,” p. 82.

30. FBIKT 100-446080-NR, “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Stokely Carmichael,” May 17, 1967, p. 2. FBIKT 100-446080-197, “Stokely Carmichael,” p. 2. FBIKT 100-446080-230, *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1967. For Carmichael’s plans to resume organizing see Stokely Carmichael to Lorna D. Smith, February 4, 1967, p. 1. SCLDS.

31. FBIKT 100-446080-240, Memorandum, “Stokely Carmichael: Director’s Testimony Before House Appropriations Subcommittee February 16, 1967,” May 17, 1967, p.1; FBIKT 100-446080-240X, “Proposed Appearance of Stokely Carmichael, Grand Rapids, Michigan, May 17, 1967,” p. 1; FBIKT 100-446080-205,

“SNCC: Stokely Carmichael,” May 17, 1967, p. 2. Bureau files reported Carmichael asserting that Hoover was in his “dotage and should retire.” One angry citizen wrote the FBI director pledging support and alleging that, according to news accounts, Carmichael had referred to the director as “J. Edgar Notetaker.” See FBIKT 100-446080-214 Teletype, May 17, 1967, p. 1; FBIKT 100-446080-215, Correspondence to FBI director, May 18, 1967, p. 1. In Grand Rapids, Cleve Sellers gave a brief speech before Carmichael, discussing his decision to resist the draft. See FBIKT 100-446080-486, “Stokely Carmichael,” July 24, 1967, pp. 1–4.

32. FBIKT 100-446080-288, Airtel, “Stokely Carmichael,” June 8, 1967, p. 6.

33. FBIKT 100-446080-277, Memorandum, Assistant Attorney General Fred M. Vinson, Jr. to Director Hoover, “Stokely Carmichael,” June 13, 1967, p. 1; FBIKT 100-446080-454, Airgram, “Stokely Carmichael—Sedition,” August 8, 1967, pp. 1–2; FBIKT 100-446080-455, Teletype, “Stokely Carmichael—Sedition,” August 8, 1967, pp. 1–4; FBIKT 100-446080-464, Airmail, From Seattle SAC to Director Hoover, “Stokely Carmichael—Sedition,” August 8, 1967, pp. 1–2 (plus eight interviews).

34. FBIKT 100-446080-238, Airtel, Director Hoover to Atlanta SAC, “Stokely Carmichael,” May 25, 1967, pp. 1–2.

35. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 182–183.

36. *The Movement*, July 1967. SCLDS.

37. Sol Stern, “The Call Of the Panthers,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 6, 1967.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Time*, December 15, 1967, p. 28.

40. FBIKT 100-446080, *The Observer Review*, July 23, 1967.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Carmichael with Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 573–577.

43. Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, p. 86.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

45. FBIKT 100-446080-521, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Special Memorandum, “Reportage and Comments on Stokely Carmichael’s Activities and Statements Abroad,” p. 24.

46. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 191–193; Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 572–582; Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 273.

47. Correspondence from Stokely Carmichael to SNCC, undated (probably Fall 1967). SNCC Papers, Reel 51, frame 14.

48. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 616–618, 622–632; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 195–197; Carson, *In Struggle*, pp. 276–277.

49. FBIKT 100-446080-1306, “Ndugu Stokely: From Africa,” pp. 1–8.

50. FBIKT 100-446080-1038, United States Information Agency, “Stokely Carmichael,” January 23, 1968, pp. 1–5; FBIKT 100-446080-1038, “Stokely Carmichael: Talk at Kivukoni College, November 6, 1967,” January 23, 1968, pp. 1–8; Carmichael with Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 635–638; “Stokely Irks African Rebel Leaders,” *New York Post*, November 20, 1967.

51. For King and the Poor People’s March see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*; Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); and Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

52. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 648–650; FBIKT 100446080, “Stokely Carmichael,” pp. 77–78; *Muhammad Speaks*, February 23, 1968, p. 22.

53. FBIKT 100-446080-NR, “Washington Spring Project: Racial Matters,” February 9, 1968, pp. 1–3.

54. Carmichael’s trip was unexpected and a surprise to even his closest advisors. FBIKT 100-446080-1173, “Stokely Carmichael,” February 26, 1968, pp. 1–12.

55. *London Observer*, March 24, 1968. SCLDS; *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 11, 1968, p. 21; *Muhammad Speaks*, May 24, 1968, p. 9; Carmichael with Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 652–656.

56. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 656–659.

57. Jules Milne, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Conakry Years: His Life and Letters* (London: Panaf Books, 1990), p. 261.

58. FBIKT 100-446080-1915, *Rocky Mountain News*, August 22, 1968, p. 70; Airtel, Denver SAC to FBI Director, August 22, 1968, pp. 1–3.

59. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, p. 240.

60. The State Department had returned his passport months earlier after he agreed to stay out of banned countries so he could honeymoon overseas. See *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 26, 1968 and *The Oregonian*, August 7, 1968. SCLDS.

61. For these speaking tours and the controversy that they elicited see *Greensboro Daily Times*, December 10, 1968; *Greensboro Record*, January 1, 1969; *Greensboro Record*, January 3, 1969; *San Jose Mercury*, January 3, 1969. SCLDS. *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 28, 1968.

62. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 246–247.
63. *The Sunday Times* (London), November 3, 1969, pp. 28–29, 31.
64. Ethel Minor, “Black Activist’s Activities in Africa,” *Muhammad Speaks*, October 10, 1969, pp. 35, 37–38.
65. *The Baltimore-Washington Afro-American*, October 14, 1969.
66. Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, p. 712.
67. *New York Times*, April 14, 1996, p. E9.
68. Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 187–199.
69. Charlie Cobb, “Revolution: From Stokely Carmichael to Kwame Ture,” *The Black Scholar*, 27(3–4) (Fall 1997), pp. 32–38.
70. Carmichael with Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, pp. 764–767.
71. The new scholarship on the postwar freedom era is dense. Important works include Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggle Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Scot Brown, *Fighting For Us: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*; Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “Strategies for Black Liberation in the Era of Globalization: Retronouveau Civil Rights, Militant black Conservatism, and Radicalism,” *The Black Scholar*, 29 (Fall 1999), pp. 25–47; Williams, *Black Politics/White Power*; Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*; Lazerow and Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party*; and Joseph, *Waiting Til the Midnight Hour*. Some key works that specifically address the way in which history is written and the need for scholars to expansively rethink master narratives of the postwar era include Peniel E. Joseph, “Black Liberation Without Apology: Rethinking the Black Power Movement,” *The Black Scholar*, 31(3–4) (Fall/Winter 2001), p. 217 and “Preface” and “Introduction: Toward a Historiography of the Black Power Movement,” in Joseph, *The Black Power Movement*, pp. xi–xii, 1–25. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, pp. 413–441; Jeanne Theoharis, “Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals,” *History Compass*, 4 (2006), pp. 1–20; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, pp. 1–10, 235–244.